A GROUNDED THEORY OF ADULT STUDENT PERSISTENCE

by

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This grounded theory study investigates adult student persistence at a community college. Student persistence in college is a prerequisite for degree achievement, which correlates with higher earnings and overall better quality of life. Persistence rates remain low for adult students, who combine their college endeavors with responsibilities to families, careers, and communities. However, some adult students do persist despite their life circumstances. Understanding the perspective of persistent adult students contributes to the creation of college systems and policies that support adult student success.

Findings draw on four rounds of iterative semistructured interviews with nine adult students at a community college during three consecutive semesters, as well as a demographic survey, participant checks, and field notes. Concurrent data collection and constant comparative analysis led to the development of a substantive grounded theory, presented in the context of literature on student persistence, adult learners, and related sociological and psychological concepts.

First, the study describes persistent adult students’ experience. Participants maintained a constant balancing act, facing financial pressures, competing priorities, and for some, a language barrier. Second, the study analyzes influences from personal and institutional spheres that shaped participants’ persistence. Influences from the personal sphere included both help and hindrance through employment, material support, models and mentors, and religion. Influences from the institutional sphere were subtle but still
powerful, as teachers, advisors, and student peers contributed to a campus climate that participants perceived as supportive of their persistence.

Third, the study explains why participants persisted, using a grounded theory based on three core concepts: agency, development, and framing. The theory suggests that persistent adult students undergo a cyclical process. Because of the way they frame their identity and acceptable choices, they focus their resources, repeatedly reminding themselves that they are persistent and that college persistence is their only or best option. Through time and interaction with social networks and life events, their exercise of agency—choosing to persist—shapes and is shaped by their development. This grounded theory joins other psychological explanations for persistence but emphasizes the balance between individual and institutional responsibility for adult student persistence in higher education.
This dissertation is dedicated to Arlie Geoffrey Capps, my first, best, and toughest editor, to Mary Harston Capps, who helped me remember simultaneous practicality and wonder, and to Dave Kliwer, who performed heroic rescues for my car breakdowns and told me great stories about creative ways to solve problems.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Why do people do difficult things? And even more, why do some people continue in difficult endeavors over time, while others do not? I asked these questions of Paola, whose life is busy with family, job responsibilities, and the accumulated work of three semesters of community college classes:

R: But some [other students] face challenges with the language, and maybe relationship issues, and financial pressures, some of the things you talked about, and they look at school and say, “it’s too much, I’m not doing it.” And they stop. But you have all the same problems, but you’re still here. Why are you still here?
P: Because I’m a persistent person. Because I try to finish all that I begin.

Paola is a 28-year-old woman, originally from Mexico, studying photography at a community college in the intermountain west. Her response to my questions is telling, because her words portray what she believes about who she is and what she will do. For Paola, identity and acceptable course of action have everything to do with persistence. Her life as an adult student is a constant balancing act. She prioritizes, plans, and works hard to make sure that she can find time to go to class, do her homework in a language not her mother tongue, run her household, spend a little time with her partner, and keep up with her work as a photography assistant to her sister’s business. She has considered having children, but she decided that they would not fit in the picture right now as she nears the finish line of degree achievement at the college. She is quick to acknowledge the constant stress of life as it is for her right now. However, she does not seriously
consider taking a break from school, even if it would make things easier for her in other areas of her life. From her view, college persistence is part of who she is, and it is the only acceptable way she sees to achieve the kind of life she wants for herself. My questions to Paola, and her response about her identity and chosen path, encapsulate this grounded theory study in a nutshell.

Research Problem

Paola represents the largest group of students on today’s campuses of higher education: adult students (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). This group carries characteristic differences from traditional students: they may be working full time, enrolled part time, raising children, coming back to school after time away, supporting themselves financially, or have any combination of these characteristics (Ashburn, 2007; Hamm, 2004). Adult undergraduate students tend to have higher GPAs, better time management strategies, and better scores on aptitude performance and psychosocial measures than traditional-aged undergraduate students (Donaldson & Graham, 1999). Such positive indicators may lead to speculation that adult students should also have graduation rates higher than or at least equal to traditional students, with the attendant benefits of higher subsequent earnings, higher civic participation, and better health (Braxton, 2000; Kutner et al., 2007).

Unfortunately, though, adult students have lower rates of persistence and degree achievement. Many of them take developmental education classes, whether required or voluntary, which can mean delays of time and money, and higher risk of dropping out (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006; Dennis, Calvillo, & Gonzalez, 2008). Those who do achieve degrees take longer to get them and are more likely to stop out along the
way (Kasworm, 2003a). This can mean both cost to individuals as they pay for more credits and cost to institutions as they invest money in students who do not graduate or who transfer elsewhere. This also means intangible costs in terms of stress and time spent away from families and employment. Nationally, a majority of adult students are enrolled at 2 year or under institutions, which includes community colleges and technical schools (Kasworm, 2003d) which is why I chose to locate this study at a community college. This study proceeds on the assumption that persistence in higher education is a worthwhile goal, for both individuals and institutions, and that there are real costs to all stakeholders when students leave college. The other key assumption behind the study is that the process of persisting in college occurs with and because of the choices, contexts, and personal meanings of the adult learners who do so, and that an explanation of this process should be grounded in data from the perspective of these learners.

**Significance**

Adult student persistence is worth studying for two reasons. First, college degrees are increasingly seen as the gateway to full participation in the American workforce and society (Braxton, 2000). Persistence in college takes diligence and determination even with no other responsibilities, let alone when juxtaposed with work, family and community commitments. It is even more difficult for those who cannot easily navigate the reading on which 85% of college work is based when they enter college (Nist & Simpson, 2000) and are required to take developmental education classes (Cooney, 2004). Thus, it is a real triumph when such learners successfully juggle the multiple demands on their time and energy, achieve their degree goals, and see the fruition of their
persistence. Such persistent learners are worth learning from as an example of the maximization of human potential.

Second, the answers to these questions will help leaders in higher education fulfill their charge to design education that reaches out to and supports students who are underserved, as are adult students (Sissel, Hansman & Kasworm, 2001). To design programs and policies that work, leaders who wish to support college persistence for this group of learners must listen to the experiences and decision-making processes of the learners themselves (Roueche & Roueche, 1999). This is particularly important for community college leaders, given high rates of adult student enrollment and low rates of adult student persistence at community colleges (Kasworm, 2003d; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008). Policy and practice grounded in both experience and theory, also referred to as praxis, can be powerful tools for positive reform and social justice (Miller, 1969), and this study’s grounded theory focus on the voices of often-unheard adult students contributes to praxis (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001).

Research Questions and Purpose

The research questions that drive the study are as follows: first, what are the experiences of adult learners at a community college who start in developmental reading classes and persist over the course of an academic year? Second, how do influences in personal or institutional spheres affect their decisions about college persistence? And third, why do they persist? Stated another way, the purpose of this study is to understand the experience of and influences on college persistence for adult learners who start their community college career in a developmental reading class, and to develop a substantive grounded theory to explain this process.
Regarding Methods

In declaring this study as substantive grounded theory research, I position myself within a methodological research tradition that emerged from roots in sociology, constructivism, and ethnomethodology to become an important approach to understanding the world (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). Originally articulated as a method by Glaser and Strauss (1967), grounded theory has undergone evolution in the last 50 years, but it remains essentially an attempt to understand the world around us with sensitivity to social processes, an inductive rather than deductive approach, and a systematic, iterative, analytic move toward abstraction. Stern (2007) identifies the essential properties of grounded theory thus: it must make sense, spring from data, integrate components in harmony, apply with abstraction to the macro as well as micro world, and find a place within the work of other social scientists. I review the specific terminology and steps of the method in the third and sixth chapters, but I pause here to introduce it because my choice of method was a natural step forward from my research questions and a fundamental influence on the study, in everything from participant recruitment to the shape of this final report.

I chose grounded theory because I wanted to hear the answers to my research questions from those who know them through personal experience: adult students at a community college. I also wanted to move beyond description to theoretical explanation, and grounded theory allowed me to do so. I did not realize when I started the study that grounded theory’s emphasis on data-appropriate flexibility would take my study through surprising adjustments in focus as I searched for plausible explanations for what I learned from participants (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). Because of my personal and professional
background, I originally intended to study adult literacy as experienced by adult learners in developmental reading classes. However, as I listened to participants’ experiences, and specifically their own explanation for their persistence, I heard an unexpected emphasis on perceived identity. Seeking to understand this new aspect of persistence, I learned that reading was less central to these participants than developing the skills to navigate appropriately with the college and with other aspects of their social worlds. Eventually, I moved entirely away from a focus on reading, saving it for future research, because the emerging concepts and theory pointed in a new direction. Understanding Paola’s comment, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, and other such comments from participants became my most important goal for this study, leading me to focus on persistence instead of reading.

Overview

Any research effort occurs in the context of a larger community of researchers. Through the pursuit of description, prediction, explanation, or control, the research community creates knowledge that is then shared in order to solve real-life problems or build understanding of the human condition (Johnson, 2009). The sharing that makes these efforts possible happens in large part through the written word, as researchers read what others have done, write about what they themselves have done, and discuss how it connects and what it means to have done research. In the spirit of such sharing, I regard this dissertation as a report that participates in the long-standing scholarly conversation about what people experience and why people do what they do. Therefore, the chapters are titled and laid out accordingly, as follows:
In this brief introductory chapter, I describe the research problem and significance and orient readers to the overall format of the dissertation. In the second chapter, I provide “sensitizing concepts” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 16) to define major terms and set the context in which the study was developed and conducted, in effect positioning myself and briefly orienting readers as we join the conversation about persistence and adult learners. The third chapter contains a presentation of my methods in designing and carrying out the study. Next, the fourth chapter begins the presentation of data findings and relevant literature to the first two research questions, describing participants’ experience of a year of college persistence, and analyzing the influences from personal and institutional spheres that helped and hindered their persistence. This descriptive and analytic chapter provides a foundation for understanding from whence the grounded theory emerged. The fifth chapter contains the heart of the study: the theoretical explanation of why these adult students persisted at their college during the study year, grounded first in the words of participants themselves, but then compared and contrasted with relevant literature. In this chapter, I sketch the development of the theory through concepts and their relationship to each other. Finally, the sixth chapter turns to meta-reflective discussion about the process and product of this grounded theory study. Using the framework of Charmaz’s (2006) criteria for evaluating grounded theory, I critique my work in light of other persistence theories and examine it for credibility, originality, and implications for further research, policy and practice. It is my hope that this study provides thoughtful, careful, and worthwhile contributions to the scholarly conversation, and it is my intent to use it to participate in the research community’s efforts to understand and improve the human condition, starting with the field of higher education leadership and policy.
CHAPTER II

JOINING THE CONVERSATION

The careful work of many researchers and theorists informs this study and my thinking as a researcher. However, treatment of published literature in grounded theory studies differs somewhat from other designs. Within the grounded theory tradition, there are two camps in regards to the use of literature (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b). “Classic” grounded theory holds that one should eschew contact with the literature prior to data collection and analysis to avoid forcing the data to fit outside concepts or agendas (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 2007). “Constructivist” grounded theory holds that ideas from one’s own experience or from published literature cannot be completely set aside and can help develop theoretical sensitivity, especially in new researchers (Charmaz, 2006). Both camps consider it important to revisit the literature in detail after careful data analysis to see how the emergent theory fits with extant literature (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Kelle, 2007). Though many dissertations might contain a major literature review as the second chapter, I follow the constructivist grounded theory tradition and reserve this discussion for Chapters IV-VI, where I compare literature with themes from the data, the substantive theory, and implications for policy and practice. In this chapter, I provide context for the following chapters: the “sensitizing concepts” of student persistence in higher education, developmental education, and adult learners (Charmaz, 2006, p. 16).
Student Persistence in Higher Education

At the broadest level, this is a persistence study. The field of student persistence investigates whether and why learners stay in or leave college. Many terms are available to describe this phenomenon, including dropping out or stopping out, retention or attrition (from the institution’s perspective), and persistence or departure (from the student’s perspective) (Braxton, 2000). While recognizing that societal and institutional factors are very powerful, I focus on persistence because it aligns with adult learning theory, described below, in considering the effects of adult learners’ choices in shaping their experience. This focus on persistence drives my choice to gather data through individual interviews with adult learners regarding their perspectives on higher education.

To begin the discussion of persistence, I turn to foundational theories in the field of persistence and retention. Drawing on the work of Van Gennep in anthropology and Durkheim in sociology, Tinto (1993) developed one of the first longitudinal models of institutional departure. His model suggests that student behaviors of leaving or staying at an institution arise out of a process of interactions between the individual student and other members of the institution’s academic and social systems. Tinto suggests that a student’s background sets the stage for interaction with institutional systems, but it is the individual’s subsequent interaction with the systems that has the largest effect on persistence. Tinto’s model predicts that students who have more positive academic and social experiences become more integrated into institutional academic and social systems, and are less likely to depart. As Tinto uses it, integration refers to membership, where social integration is the “personal affiliation and day-to-day interactions among different members of society” and academic or intellectual integration is “sharing values
held in common by other members of society,” which in a college setting refers to mastery of academic content and achievement of good grades (p. 101). Integration is an interactive process, as individuals shape and are shaped by their community, whether it is a subgroup or the college as a whole. The model considers influences external to the institution, such as family and finances, to have an indirect impact on student departure, and thus the model deliberately focuses on interactions specific to the institution.

In contrast to Tinto (1993), Weidman (1989) developed a conceptual model of undergraduate socialization that gave more weight to external influences and individual decisions. Instead of integration, where a student might simply be folded into an existing system, Weidman suggests that students undergo socialization, a process of learning, interchange, and adjustments on both sides. He sees influences such as parental socialization, non-college reference groups, and student background characteristics as the context for the academic and social collegiate experience. He suggests that the process of socialization changes over time, such that a student’s college years are composed of experience whereby the student is exposed to various influences, assesses their impact upon personal goals, and decides whether to change or maintain the norms or goals that he or she had upon entering college.

Much of the research upon which these early theories were based was conducted with young, single, White, male, freshman college students, and much of it places the responsibility for retention or persistence with individual students, suggesting that they should take charge of their integration or involvement with learning (Astin, 1999). However, this profile does not represent the entirety of the college student body, so the theories may or may not apply to other groups of college students. Since the development
of the Tinto (1993) and Weidman (1989) models, work on student retention and
persistence has expanded the field to consider other students and influences, such as the
effect of economic concerns, psychological dispositions, climate, social capital and
reproduction, and culture, both of the institution and of the student’s heritage and
community (Braxton, 2000). In addition, though both Weidman and Tinto characterize
the retention process as interactive between institutions and individuals, some scholars
call for more responsibility and effort from institutions to prevent student departure
(Reason, 2009). Of particular relevance for this study is the work of Rendon (1994) on
validating culturally diverse students.

Rendon (1994) sought to identify how students become active, involved
participants in the academic community, and how out-of-class interpersonal interactions
affect in-class learning and educational goal achievement. She contrasts the concept of
involvement, which students enact for themselves, and which puts little responsibility on
the institution, with the concept of validation, which happens when a faculty member,
staff member, or administrator reaches out to students and defines them as capable of
success. Rendon suggests that the concept of involvement does not work for some
students, especially those who struggle with self-doubt because of marginalization or
negative experience with past schooling; they need someone to reach out to them first.
According to her theoretical construct, students must receive validation from some
source, in or out of class, or they will leave higher education. Her paradigm puts the
burden on faculty, staff, and institutions to “transform” a doubtful, passive student into an
excited, active one (p. 36). However, Rendon cautions that the point of validation is not
to reduce student accountability but to unleash students’ latent power and challenge students to perform well.

Whether the responsibility belongs to the individual student, the individual professor, or the institution as a whole, persistence remains an unresolved issue in higher education (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009). Research on student persistence and retention in higher education shows that attrition rates continue to hover around 50% as a national average, but this figure varies greatly by institutional type (Summers, 2003). Because this study is set in a community college, attrition rates may be higher (Metz, 2004). Student persistence is a complex phenomenon affected by influences from student backgrounds, institutional factors, and student choice (Dean & Dagostino, 2007), but there is an emerging consensus that students are more likely to leave higher education if they have no clear goals, work full-time, and attend classes part-time (Parkin & Baldwin, 2009; Summers, 2003). Financial concerns are closely tied to persistence or attrition; tuition increases have a negative relationship with persistence, and financial aid has multiple effects, as scholarships increase retention and debt tends to decrease it (Cofer & Somers, 2001). Both personal factors, such as life circumstances, emotions, and self-perceptions, and institutional factors, such as required classes and reading demands, influence students' experiences and behaviors in staying with or leaving college (Braxton, 2000; Parkin & Baldwin, 2009).

Cooney (2004) points out that one institutional barrier to student persistence is found in developmental reading courses. In his exploration of how student reading ability affects student success at an urban community college, he found that students with college level reading ability scores have higher GPAs and rates of retention than those
with lower scores, which supports the argument for helping students raise their reading proficiency before entering regular college courses. However, he also found that most students with low academic reading skills put off their developmental reading courses instead of taking them first. Grades for this group varied among general education courses by reading ability. Cooney concluded that this college's policy of allowing students to enroll in courses beyond their reading level creates higher failure rates and lower retention rates; thus, the policy allowing delay of testing and developmental education courses potentially hinders student success (Boylan & Saxon, 1999). This conclusion leads to a consideration of developmental education: what it is, and why it matters for student persistence.

**Developmental Education**

Narrowing the focus from persistence at a general level, this study looks at persistence of students who start their college career in developmental education classes. Developmental education refers to what many people think of as *remedial* education, that is, preparation for the demands of college level math, reading, writing, and other subjects (Roueche & Roueche, 1999). In practice, developmental and remedial education often concern the same group of learners. But there are important differences between the two (Kozieracki, 2002; McCabe, 2000; McCabe, 2003; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). The term *remedial* has had longer use and is more familiar to many people. It suggests that there was important information or training lacking in previous formal education. However, it also implies a medical mindset, as if a learner who does not have certain skills is deficient and must be fixed or cured before undertaking real learning or education (Klenk & Kibby, 2000). Once these “problems” are fixed, no matter their root, the person will then
progress normally and need no more remediation. Remedial education connotes classes designed to specifically target those skills or strategies that are missing, and it usually does not extend to college program models beyond skills classes (Boylan & Saxon, 1999).

In contrast, the term *developmental* is gradually finding greater use in the higher education field. It is based on the philosophy that learning happens over the course of a lifetime, at different rates for different learners, and that academic skills are constantly developing even past or outside of K-12 schooling (Bray, Pascarella, & Pierson, 2004; McCabe, 2000). It connotes respect for the learning and development a person has accumulated in the past, whether formal or informal. It also implies a specific college program design that is concerned with the development of the whole person, which may include a range of services beyond instruction such as entrance and exit testing, individual tutoring, academic counseling, student/teacher collaboration on goal setting, or pairing a developmental education class with a content class to support both academic and social integration (Juchniewicz, Dagostino, & Carifio, 2007; Kozeracki, 2002; Tai & Rochford, 2007). The college at which this study’s participants enrolled labels its preparatory classes as developmental, and I follow suit. As will be seen later, development also became an important concept in the substantive grounded theory in Chapter V.

Developmental education remains controversial because of its mixed effects on student learning and persistence. Students with low academic skills who do not somehow raise them are at risk for both lower GPA and higher rates of attrition (Perin, 2006). Though it makes sense to bolster the academic skills of underprepared students before
they enter more demanding college-level courses, Attewell et al. (2006) point out that developmental education courses can represent discouraging delays and financial drains for students, increasing attrition at 4-year institutions. Some studies find that students who take and pass these courses at 2-year institutions are slightly more likely to graduate than their peers with similar entrance test scores (Attewell et al., 2006; Oudenhoven, 2002), while other studies find no difference in graduation rates (Crews & Aragon, 2007). Adult students who are required to participate in skill development courses may have lower levels of motivation to participate and persist (Daehlen & Ure, 2009), even though making developmental education classes mandatory seems to increase rates of success in subsequent college level classes (Cooney, 2004). However, students who take and pass developmental education courses early in a college career complete significantly more of their enrolled credit hours than students of comparable entrance test scores who do not take such courses (Crews & Aragon, 2007).

Students from all backgrounds enroll in developmental education courses (Attewell et al., 2006), but a majority of developmental education students fit the “adult student” definition, with the attendant retention risks (Cooney, 2004; Guidos & Dooris, 2008). At this point, I narrow my focus again to persistence of the specific subgroup of developmental education students who are adult learners, found in increasing proportions especially at community colleges (Kasworm, 2003b).

**Adult Learners**

Status as an adult learner comes from life circumstances that point to age, maturity, developmental complexity, and responsible and competing sets of roles (Kasworm, 2003b). Adult learners are higher education students who have one or more of
the following characteristics: over 25 years old, financial independence, full time employment, part-time enrollment, delayed enrollment after high school, time away from college, commuter to campus, support provider for dependents, or single parent (Ashburn, 2007; Hamm, 2004). According to the U.S. Department of Education, roughly three quarters of all undergraduate college students have at least one of these characteristics, and a majority have more than one (Kasworm, 2003b; Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002).

Before further exploration of adult learners and retention, another clarification of terminology is in order. This group of students has sometimes been referred to as nontraditional because they differ from the traditional college student, who enrolls full time in college classes immediately following high school, lives on campus supported by parents, works part-time or less, and is not married or supporting dependents (Kim, 2002). However, nontraditional students are already a majority among college students, and the term nontraditional can be seen as marking this group with a negative or marginalizing connotation. For these reasons, many researchers are moving to the use of the term adult (Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001). In this study, I refer to this group as adult students, in keeping with the direction of the field, and also because it is consonant with the philosophical underpinnings of adult learning theory that recognize adults as agents for their own learning.

As with persistence and developmental education, theoretical paradigms also guide perspectives on adult learners. In this case, empirical evidence and common-sense assumptions that adult characteristics make a difference in learners’ lives gain depth when explored in the context of adult learning theory. Adult learning theory refers to a
field that draws on many other domains—cognitive psychology, sociology, education, and others. Emerging from these areas of research and theory are several frameworks that contribute to an understanding of adult learners. The best known of these is the concept of andragogy, introduced by Malcolm Knowles in 1968 (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Presented as “the art and science of helping adults learn,” andragogy is based on assumptions of maturation toward independence, the accumulation of experience as a resource, the relationship between readiness to learn and social roles, a shift in time perspective toward immediate application, and a progression toward internal motivation (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999, p. 272).

The concept of andragogy has been challenged as researchers question whether there are truly cognitive differences in the learning process that distinguish adults from children. However, if learning is acknowledged to be constructed and situated, then the affective and situational aspects of adulthood will affect adults' learning differently than younger learners of various ages. When we consider child learners, we acknowledge that their experiences vary—by gender, ethnicity, language, familial structure, socioeconomic status, ability, religion, and other factors—and these experiences make a real difference for learning, whether affective, cognitive, or behavioral (Au, 2000; Bernhardt, 2000). We make efforts to differentiate our teaching and administration to accommodate and support these differences for child learners (Au, 2000; Garcia, 2000).

Adult learning theory encourages us to do the same for adults, recognizing that adult roles are different from the context of childhood, adolescence, and even young adulthood in ways that affect participation in learning endeavors (Hansman, 2001). In addition, adult learning, especially through participation in formal education, is usually
by choice instead of mandated or socially expected as with children; thus, adults can be
agents for their own learning such that they decide whether and how to persist in a
learning endeavor (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Thus, adult learners have areas of
expertise and should be included as collaborators or agents in designing and carrying out
their learning experiences. Adult learning theory is explicitly aligned with constructivist
and humanist paradigms, which both focus on the efficacy of human actors as
participants in the creation and maintenance of knowledge, in and through social
interaction (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). Some models of adult learning parallel models
of student retention, considering factors such as self-evaluation, prior learning, life
transitions, and quality and type of information available (Cross, 1981). As of yet, the
higher education models of retention and the adult learning models of participation seem
to overlook each other, even though the populations and factors they consider overlap
(Reeder, 2000).

Adult students are a group with complex needs distinct from traditional students
(Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008; Sorey & Duggan, 2008), and
they have distinct patterns of factors that hinder and help their persistence. Factors that
hinder their persistence include role demands and enrollment patterns. Adult students
juggle multiple roles, which means that though they may truly value education and intend
to achieve degrees, they may choose to prioritize other activities because of the
competing demands on their time and attention (Ponton, Derrick & Carr, 2005). The
majority of adult students have at some point stopped out from and come back to college
and university participation (Kasworm 2003b). The more adult characteristics students
have, the less likely they are to be enrolled in a credential or degree seeking program
(Kortesoja, 2009). Despite high academic achievement, high psychosocial scores, and high average GPA, adult students depart colleges and universities at higher rates and graduate at lower rates than traditional students (Dennis, Calvillo, & Gonzalez, 2008). Factors that support retention or persistence for adult learners include flexible scheduling, early success with grades (if necessary, supported by tutors), strong cohort or peer groups (whether informal or institutionally structured), financial aid, family support, and clear goals for academic achievement or career trajectory (Harris, 2006; Hensley & Kinser, 2001; Hoyt, 1999).

These factors are consistent with application of the student retention models described earlier, and so are the persistence risks reviewed above (Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989; Rendon, 1994). But what is counter to the retention models is the finding that many adult students are not involved or integrated to the same degree as many traditional students, yet they report higher grades and satisfaction than traditional students (Kasworm, 2003b). Kasworm suggests three possibilities for why this might be so: personal engagement in a “connected classroom,” meaning-making in the classroom to connect real-world and academic knowledge, and adult perceptions of institutional characteristics (p. 12). Kasworm calls for adult student involvement theories that focus on the classroom and on personal or familial experiences rather than on collegiate out-of-classroom experiences. I believe that this focus should extend as well to theories of adult student persistence.

It was with these three areas of research in mind—student persistence, developmental education, and adult learners—that I came to the current study. Knowing about theories and empirical trends in these areas led me to ponder the experience of a
group of students who seemed to beat the odds, and to wonder what makes the process of persistence work for them. Sensitized by my reading to issues that have been important in other studies, I decided to go to the students themselves to see what I might learn from them about their persistence. Thus, my exposure to the literature led to questions and an approach to knowledge construction that, in turn, became a grounded theory study.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Rationale for Qualitative Research

Acknowledging adults as purposeful agents in their own lives means that we cannot conduct research intended to support persistence without directly seeking the perspective of those we hope will persist. To do otherwise—to base policy decisions on the perspectives of teachers, administrators, researchers, and the general public but exclude adult students—would not only be condescending but would also be ineffective (Wertz, 2005). Ultimately, adult learners make their decisions about college participation based on their own perspectives, not on policy briefs. As Marshall and Rossman (1999) put it,

One cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to those actions—their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds; the researcher, therefore, needs to understand the deeper perspectives captured through face-to-face interaction. (p. 57)

Qualitative research is the best way to understand such personal, individual perspectives.

Within qualitative research, there are many different possible approaches to understanding personal perspectives and lived experiences. The design of this study followed the research tradition of grounded theory, which was originally described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a method for “the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research” (p. 2). In the 40 years since then, grounded
theory has become one of the most widely used qualitative research methods in the social sciences (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a). However, grounded theory is not just another variant of the generic inductive qualitative method (Holton, 2007; Hood, 2007). The purpose of grounded theory is to move beyond description to discovery of how social processes work in context (Becker, 1998), and this aim is met through “iterative processes of going back and forth between progressively more focused data and successively more abstract categorizations of them” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a, p. 25).

The grounded theory method can be a tool for generating formal theory that applies in many social contexts. But my aim with this study was to create a substantive grounded theory concerning a social process people experience within a specific context (Glaser, 2007; Holton, 2007; Kearney, 2007). The two main contexts for the participants in this study were adult life circumstances and enrollment in a developmental reading course with subsequent enrollment in two more semesters of community college coursework. The process under study was persistence in higher education, in the midst of academic development and maintenance of adult roles and responsibilities.

**Foundational Paradigm**

All human action, including education and research, springs from beliefs about what is, what can be known, and what should be. Taken together, these beliefs and assumptions form the paradigms from which we operate, and they shape research in powerful and important ways. As a researcher, I operate from the paradigm of interpretivism. Because my paradigm affects my research, I include here a description of the interpretivist paradigm and some specific aspects of it: ontology (what is), epistemology (what can be known and how), and axiology (what should be).
Ontology

I designed this study based on the foundation of the interpretivist paradigm (Creswell, 1998; Purcell-Gates, 2004). This paradigm assumes that people act based on their perspective of reality, and that these perspectives will be different for each person, even to the point that individuals can never fully and completely understand or share another’s perspective. In social groups, people construct their knowledge together, creating a collective reality that is different yet again from each individual reality (Wertz, 2005). This ontology supports the use of qualitative inquiry like this study because the ontological extension suggests that hearing the voices of adult learners themselves adds a vital, valid, central piece to the growing collective understanding.

Epistemology

From an interpretivist paradigm, observable, measurable behaviors and personal, subjective descriptions of feelings, perceptions, and experiences are both equally important parts of understanding (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Purcell-Gates, 2004). Seeking to understand personal perspectives and social processes, I best knew participants’ experience through their own words. Knowing and understanding improved as I became socially and emotionally close to participants, treated them with respect, asked them questions and invited them to elaborate on answers given, and spent extended time with participants and the social process. As a researcher, my position was not that of expert; my relationship to participants and data was that of a learner to a source of knowledge, always open to find the unexpected (Star, 2007). I realize that by the very interchange of asking and answering questions, I acted with participants to create a new
understanding of the social process. However, as much as possible, I tried to get out of the way of participants’ views. I worked to re-present what participants shared with me, creating an explanation of relationships that helps me and others understand the social process and take positive action regarding it (Dey, 2007). Though some grounded theorists use this reasoning to label their research constructivist, I concur with Hall and Callery (2001) that my position of access to the data, the process, and the written report meant that I always had more control than participants, and thus I consider this an interpretivist study.

Axiology

Some research paradigms attempt to eschew involvement of researcher values, suggesting that anything less than neutrality taints research. In contrast, interpretivist paradigms and grounded theory processes acknowledge the inevitable influence of researcher values as potentially beneficial to the research process (Star, 2007). The very undertaking of this study came about because I profess the value of human potential and social participation, which are frequently linked to college education in our society. I asked questions about experience because I believe that it is worthwhile to afford respect to the experience of participants of any age, in this case specifically to adults because they are agents for themselves. I recorded the stories and feelings of adult learners in developmental education programs because I believe that these programs can and should be improved, which will only happen when we listen to all stakeholders in such programs. I realized that full objectivity is impossible, but I also realized that I could possibly overshadow or distort what participants shared. Thus, I tried to avoid leading questions or inappropriate interpretations, not because I wanted to be detached or entirely
neutral but because I recognized participants’ right to speak for themselves. Because I value the ideal of contributing to the body of useful resources (including research) for adult learners and other developmental education stakeholders, it has been my responsibility to make my study as clear and useful as possible such measures as participant checks and by including practical implications as part of my presentation of theory (Stern, 2007). These values provide positive support and impetus to my work; the study would have been lacking if I had tried to do it without them.

Such an underlying paradigm also influenced my choice of rhetorical structure for presenting the research (Charmaz, 1991; Star, 2007). Accordingly, the language of this report is informal and personal, using first person voice and frequently quoting participants directly. My intent has been to provide a thoughtful, reflective, thorough and useful analysis of the process of persisting through a year of college classes, as the process is experienced by adult learners.

*_Researcher as Instrument_*

Two aspects of the grounded theory method are directly tied to my influence as a researcher: prior knowledge of published literature and reflexivity regarding my personal perspectives, experience and motivation. These aspects combine under the interpretivist research principle of researcher as data collecting instrument, as follows.

*_Using the Literature_*

A controversial aspect of the grounded theory method is how and when to use prior knowledge, including published literature. Glaser and Strauss (1967) originally suggested that the researcher set aside as much prior knowledge as possible and not
review any literature prior to collecting data to avoid forcing an a priori theoretical framework onto data, which risks generating a plausible but not necessarily accurate explanation of the social process under study. Only after significant data collection and analysis, they said, should one turn to the literature, comparing the emergent theory with others’ findings and theories and discussing the fit between data, grounded theory, and literature.

One camp of grounded theory researchers still holds to this objectivist view (Glaser, 2007; Holton, 2007). Others take the more constructivist position that trying to completely set aside previous knowledge and literature when doing grounded theory is both naïve and unproductive, especially for new researchers (Charmaz, 2006). All researchers approach research with prior knowledge and theories which cannot be entirely set aside—thus, if we are to have a lens (as we surely will), we should make sure it is a current one so that we can participate intelligently in the academic conversation (Stern, 2007). Instead of coercing data to fit certain frameworks, literature can be used to provide “sensitizing concepts” that guide initial and theoretical choices regarding where to find data and what data to observe as meaningful (Charmaz, 2006, p. 16). In this way, published literature acts to develop the theoretical sensitivity that Glaser and Strauss identified as crucial; “the development of categories from empirical data is dependent on the availability of adequate theoretical concepts” (Kelle, 2007, p. 206). The process of memoing, concurrent with data collection and analysis, provides a space for critically comparing data and themes to literature as well as to other data and themes (Lempert, 2007). As Dey (2007) puts it, “the point is not to avoid preconceptions, but to ensure that
they are well-grounded in arguments and evidence, and always subject to further investigation, revision, and refutation” (p. 176).

Because of my interpretivist stance, I aligned myself with the latter group of grounded theorists. I found my thought process stimulated by on-going academic reading for conference papers, classes, and personal interest during the study’s early stages, but I worked to balance these influences by conscientious, frequent, thorough coding and memoing to preserve my immersion in the data. It was after completing data collection and a great deal of data analysis, when the core concepts were firm, that I returned to the literature in earnest to critique my work and situate it within the academic conversation. This process, combined with careful data collection and analysis, helped me to consider alternative perspectives and led me to questions beyond the substantive setting of community colleges and adult student, and even beyond the field of education. I look forward to further exploration of the best way to use conceptual tools from fields such as psychology, sociology, and anthropology as I continue to develop my grounded theory of persistence.

Reflexivity

Though grounded theory was originally developed in a positivist milieu, which still influences some grounded theory work, reflexivity is an essential part of grounded theory research (Hall & Callery, 2001; Mruck & Mey, 2007). Consistent with the interpretivist paradigm and grounded theory design described above, grounded theory researchers approach the process of learning from participants in a personal way, without trying to strip themselves of their backgrounds (Charmaz, 2001; Star, 2007). It is the researcher as a person, not a questionnaire, checklist, test, or computerized tool, that
elicits and responds to the data participants share in their stories. Kvale (1996) describes the researcher’s central role in the collection of data through interviews:

The interviewer must continually make quick choices about what to ask and how; which aspects of a subject’s answer to follow up—and which not; which answers to interpret—and which not….The interviewer should have a sense for good stories and be able to assist the subjects in the unfolding of their narratives. (p. 147)

Because my study relied on interviews as the main data source, I was the primary research instrument. Thus, I provide here a brief description of myself and my background, as well as how I approached my subjectivity so that I could best re-present the perspectives of the participants in a trustworthy way (Patton, 1990).

I came to this study through personal, academic and professional experiences of the last ten years. My introduction to teaching adults came while teaching English as a second language (ESL) as an overseas volunteer. This fueled my interest in adult learners and led to my pursuit of a master’s degree in teaching ESL. As a graduate student, I continued to teach adult ESL and started volunteering as an adult literacy tutor. I also learned of the struggles with literacy of several close family friends. I began to see similarities between these groups of learners, and I decided I wanted to explore the experience of adult learners in more depth. For my master’s thesis, I interviewed adult English learners and ESL teachers in a qualitative study of the factors in adult English learners’ successful English literacy acquisition. However, I found that I had generated more questions than answers, and so I began doctoral studies with an emphasis on adult learners, literacy, and higher education. Over time, I found that my interest shifted from literacy to persistence, and I adjusted my study focus accordingly. My previous experience, combined with my doctoral coursework, led to the genesis of this study.
Because of my close personal association with adult learners, I am disposed to a warm positive regard for them and respect for their opinions and goals. As described in the section on my underlying paradigm, this can be a great strength. It can also be a weakness, though, as it may have led me to overlook or ignore data that suggested that our values did not match. For instance, agency as a set of positive and beneficial beliefs and practices plays a huge part in my life, and I would not have made it to this point in academia if I did not place great value on higher education. I often assume that persistence in college is, by default, to be encouraged, and participants with different experiences and other priorities may have been overshadowed or intimidated by my enthusiasm for formal education, choosing to leave the study or tell me only what they assumed I wanted to hear. In addition, my religious background aligns with that of the majority of the participants, and this background influenced the way I looked at participants’ persistence, including my choice of terminology for concepts in this study. To some degree, such subjectivity is unavoidable and even beneficial, but it may have interfered with my goal to understand participants’ experience from their perspective as much as possible (Alvermann, 2000). In order to build trustworthiness into the process, I incorporated a peer research group and participant checks into my study, in addition to the memoing inherent in the grounded theory method.

My peer research group consisted of several doctoral students from related but distinct disciplines who were also in the process of designing and carrying out research projects. Meeting once a month for 2 years afforded us opportunities for discussion and critique, chances to explore lines of reasoning, and a check for clarity of thinking and definition. Because of their different backgrounds, they brought fresh eyes and distance
to a process in which I was immersed. At various meetings, I received their feedback on methodological decisions such as constructing my interview protocols and schedules, reasoning in coding and categorizing, suggestions for literature to review, and theoretical decisions such as shifting away from my original focus on reading or establishing relationships between agency and development.

I also incorporated participant checks throughout the study year. At the end of each interview, I asked participants if there was anything they would like to add. Because I saw each participant about every 2 months, I transcribed and began analysis of each interview before the next one. Thus, I identified areas that needed clarification or further exploration and asked about those areas in the subsequent interview as part of the process of theoretical sampling (Morse, 2007). I also provided each participant with transcripts of their own interviews, either printed or emailed, and encouraged them to read it and let me know if anything needed correction or clarification. One participant did make a correction, and two others commented on the novel experience of reading and reflecting on what they had shared with me. Finally, after completing the interviews, I held a focus group for participants who completed the study, described my main findings, and invited participants to discuss or add data as they felt appropriate (Morse, 2007). These multiple participant checks provided trustworthiness and a focus on the voices of adult learners.

Study Design

Sampling

In this study, the goal at each stage of purposive sampling was “deliberate selection of participants who have information about or experience of the topic being researched” (Morse, 2007, p. 235; Patton, 1990). In addition, grounded theory includes a
stage of theoretical sampling, or deliberately shaping data collection to flesh out the emerging theory. For this study, this two-stage approach started with purposeful sampling of adult students at a community college who were taking a developmental reading course and anticipating taking further courses the following semester, such as introductory courses in history, psychology, and biology. As data collection and analysis continued, the coding and memoing process led to the identification of key concepts and gaps in my interview questions as important new directions for investigation. After the first interview, I began to use theoretical sampling, which included only interviewing those who had persisted into another semester, asking clarifying questions about previous interviews, sharing observed patterns in the data with participants and asking for their personal perspective. Theoretical sampling continued into analysis, as I focused my intensive coding on nine participants (described below) but still included comparisons with those I had interviewed who did not persist. I attempted another form of theoretical sampling by interviewing three more participants starting in summer 2010, but two of them did not persist to a second semester, and the other did not maintain adult student status.

Participants

Participants in the study were adult students attending a community college in a western city. At the beginning of the study, there were 40 volunteers, recruited during Fall 2008 semester from the developmental reading class designed to prepare students for college level, credit-bearing, reading intensive classes such as History 101, Beginning Psychology, or Introduction to Biology. Most were in the class because they scored below the cut-off level on the college placement test, making this class a prerequisite to
classes which fill general education requirements. Through initial interviews with all volunteers, I determined that 28 fit the adult student inclusion criteria for the study. Out of those 28 participants, 11 either did not enroll for a second semester or did not continue with the study, eight took classes two consecutive semesters, and nine took classes for three consecutive semesters.

In this report, I present findings focusing on analysis of interviews with eight of those who persisted through all three semesters (the ninth transferred to an out-of-state college). Table 1 displays focal participants’ characteristics in terms of age, ethnic background, and marital, parental, employment and enrollment status. The group included one man and seven women who chose their own pseudonyms: Lamar, Sunny, Joey, Andy, Sarah, Paola, Marilyn, and Lourdes. In addition, I included one woman, Marisa, who persisted through two semesters, stopped out for summer semester, and enrolled again in the fall semester. Including Marisa contributed to theoretical sampling,

Table 1. Participant Characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Enrolled</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lamar</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Navajo</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>FT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marisa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunny</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Latina (Mexico)</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>PT</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paola</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Latina (Mexico)</td>
<td>Partnered</td>
<td></td>
<td>FT</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marilyn</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Latina (Guatemala)</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lourdes</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Latina (Ecuador)</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td></td>
<td>FT</td>
<td>PT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
as her interview transcripts presented a striking example of the concepts of agency and framing in a way that other participants’ transcripts did not.

Recruitment

Obtaining access to these participants entailed working with the administrative and teaching structure of the community college. First, I met with the Division Chair of the college’s Developmental Education program to informally describe the study and to seek permission and support for access and execution. Next, I obtained institutional permission by complying with the application requirements of the college’s Office of Institutional Research and the University of Utah Institutional Review Board. I then returned to the Developmental Education program and contacted the faculty who teach the developmental reading class to introduce myself, describe the study, and schedule a time to visit their classes for recruitment. Roughly half of the faculty gave me permission to visit their classes, which were designed to build comprehension, critical reading, and study skills so that students who tested between ninth and 11th grade reading levels upon college enrollment could work successfully with college level expository texts after taking the developmental reading class. Class sizes varied from five to 25 students.

One month after the fall semester began, I visited each section taught by these faculty members, briefly introduced myself and the study (including compensation, described below), and passed out a handout consisting of a letter of introduction and a short survey with places to indicate name, age, gender, enrollment status, interest or disinterest, and contact information (see Appendix A). The primary function of this survey was to allow participants to volunteer their interest quickly and easily and to allow me to identify and contact adult students to explain the study more in-depth outside of the
class period. For this reason, other relevant demographics and information were elicited during the first interview rather than on the survey.

Only those students who were willing to participate in the study provided their contact information and returned the survey to the teacher after I left. Each teacher then returned the surveys to me so that I could contact volunteers for individual interviews outside of class. Thus, those who were interested in participation voluntarily provided their contact information, and those who declined to participate did so anonymously and with no risk of pressure for social or academic reasons. In addition, I requested that the developmental reading instructors send an email to all of their students on my behalf, explaining the study, inviting participation, and providing my contact information should any wish to participate. I also visited several class sections twice in an effort to remind those who may have missed class on my first visit or forgotten to return the survey.

At the end of the recruitment period, 50 students had volunteered for the study, and I contacted all of them by telephone or email. I interviewed the 40 volunteers who returned my messages, starting with those who appeared to be adult students based on the information they noted on their recruitment survey. I decided to interview them all after some turned out to be adult students because of characteristics that came up in interviews but were not included on their information sheets, such as marital status and family structure. When in the course of an interview it became apparent that a participant did not fit the adult student characteristics, I simply ended the interview early, thanked him or her for time spent, and paid him or her. Of the original group, 28 participants matched the characteristics for adult students.
Compensation

The interviews that formed the primary data source for this study were not only an investment of time and effort for me as a researcher; they also represented a significant amount of time and effort from each participant, involving not only the time for the actual interview but the logistical arrangements to work around employment schedules, family events and necessities, childcare, and travel. Recognizing that these demands imposed financially as well as logistically, I paid participants $10 for the first interview, $15 for the second, $20 for the third, and $25 for the fourth interview to help ameliorate potential costs such as missing an hour of work, paying for parking fees or bus fares, or negotiating childcare. Participants received payment following each completed interview, for a possible maximum total of $70 for those who completed all four interviews. This payment was not intended to unduly influence participation but instead to emphasize a respect for participants' time and responsibilities. Most participants were quite willing to receive the payments, and several made the relieved comment, “You have no idea how much I need this right now!” However, four participants refused to take the payments, insisting that they were glad to support this kind of research if it would help me or other students, or saying that they felt they had already received enough benefit just from being able to share their thoughts and experiences with a sympathetic and confidential listening ear.

Data Collection

In order to provide thick, rich description and robust grounds for understanding, the data collection for this study was designed around multiple interviews with participants over the course of a school year, a demographic survey, follow-up and
participant checks, and field notes. Using four sources of data and interviewing each participant several times over an extended period provided a solid foundation for analysis and allowed me as the researcher, and those who read the research, to place greater confidence in the emergent theory. This is consistent with the interpretivist idea that group understandings of reality grow richer and fuller with the inclusion of more individual perspectives.

**Individual Interviews**

The primary data source for this study was a set of qualitative interviews. As Charmaz (2001) points out that multiple sequential interviews form a strong basis for understanding nuances of social processes—they allow a researcher to hear about events as they happen rather than after, and they facilitate returning to participants for theoretical sampling as new areas are uncovered. She sees the grounded theory interview process as “shaped but not determined” by both the researcher and the participant (p. 683). In addition, Kvale (1996) explains, “The purpose of a qualitative research interview [is to obtain] qualitative descriptions of the lifeworld of the subject with respect to the interpretation of their meaning” (p. 124). This purpose supports the flexible, iterative encounters with data sources of grounded theory methods. To that end, I conducted semistructured interviews with each participant. Most interviews were held in classrooms, study rooms, and common areas at various of the college’s campuses. I also conducted interviews at a local library, at two local coffee shops, and by telephone. At the beginning of each interview, I spent some time getting to know participants in an informal way—introducing myself or catching up on general events since we last met. At the first interview, this included time for participants to read, discuss, and sign the
informed consent form (see Appendix B). I then transitioned into the researcher role, letting participants know that I would turn on the voice recorder and reminding them that the recording was to help me understand and remember what they would share. (I took notes at a few interviews but found that note-taking sometimes hindered my ability to engage as a listener and know when and what to ask next.) I also reminded them that they could choose to have me turn off the tape, stop taking notes, skip a question, or stop the interview at any time as they felt inclined. I asked if they had any questions before we began and did my best to answer questions that arose. The process to this point is known as an initial briefing (Kvale, 1996). Following the briefing, I turned on the recorder and started the interview.

Each interview was loosely based on questions derived from the study research questions—that is, interview questions focused on participants' experiences in developmental reading and subsequent college classes, and on the personal and institutional influences that affected their decisions regarding participation and persistence in college (see Appendix C for interview protocols). Consistent with the flexibility of grounded theory research, which is intended to let data emerge naturally, these questions were not given as a rigid, standardized protocol. Instead, they were designed to be modified and followed up on as necessary during the interview as one would follow up in a conversation. For instance, between each planned question, I listened to participants’ stories and offered questions such as Kvale (1996) describes: “Tell me more about that.” “Can you give me an example?” “What changed your mind?” “What happened next?” “Do you mean that . . . ?” “Do you see any connections between . . . ?” I avoided most “why” questions, choosing instead “what” and “how” questions in
order to encourage participants to share their experiences and decision-making processes. However, because I wanted to create a theory that would reflect participants’ own explanation of their persistence, I did ask participants why they persisted at the end of both the first and the last interview. The exact order of questions and words I used changed with each participant as necessary to best understand what they shared, and the pace and content varied because the purpose of a grounded theory interview is “to explore, not to interrogate” (Charmaz, 2001, p. 679).

At the end of each interview, I moved into the debriefing period by telling participants, “I don’t have any more questions for you. Is there anything you would like to add or ask about before we are finished?” (Kvale, 1996). I left the tape recorder running through any additions they made, giving my thanks, and any informal conversation. I made sure that I had the correct contact information for participants and discussed the general time line of future interviews, reminding them that I would call beforehand to confirm whether they were still interested in participating and to coordinate schedules.

Interviews lasted 20-70 minutes, with most lasting approximately 45 minutes. I interviewed each participant up to four times: once near the end of Fall 2008 semester (40 interviews), once near the beginning of Spring 2009 semester (20 interviews), once near the end of Spring 2009 semester (17 interviews), and once during Summer 2009 semester (20 interviews). Each interview was transcribed verbatim, either through my own typing or use of voice recognition software, or through the work of four transcription assistants.
Demographic Survey

I drew on demographic data in the form of an initial survey. One month after the beginning of the developmental reading class, I introduced myself, described the study, and invited students to fill out this brief survey and leave it with the teacher. The survey collected the following information: name, age, gender, information on classes planned for enrollment in the subsequent semester, interest in participating in the study, and contact information. The survey served a dual purpose as a recruitment and initial screening tool, allowing me to get a sense of participants before I met them for the first time and guiding my choice of who to contact and interview first. Considering that those in developmental reading classes may have been uncomfortable with or unable to quickly complete a form that required detailed reading and writing, the form was designed so that it included as little writing as possible (see Appendix A).

Follow-up and Participant Checks

Throughout the year, I had several points of contact with participants on a follow-up basis. Before each interview, I contacted each participant by phone or email regarding his or her enrollment status and interest in participating in another interview. If the participant was enrolled and interested, we scheduled a full-length interview; if the participant was not enrolled, we had a brief interview, discussing the decisions or circumstances that led to leaving college, sharing patterns I had found in the data to that point, and thanking the participant for his or her involvement and contribution. Participants who were not interested generally did not return my calls or emails.

Following the four rounds of interviews, I spent 6 months transcribing and analyzing data. I then held a final data collection event that served several purposes. First,
it was a luncheon I provided as a gesture of my thanks for participants’ contribution to the study and as an opportunity for closure for the friendly personal relationships I had developed with participants as we experienced the interview process. Second, it was intended as a gesture of reciprocity to contribute to participants’ persistence by introducing them to other persistent adult students, providing an opportunity for networking and validation. Third, it was a focus group participant check, at which I outlined my findings about the experience of and influences on persistence and presented my emerging theory, inviting participants to comment on the degree to which my interpretation of their collective experience reflected their individual experience (Morse, 2007). Morrow and Smith (2000) identify the focus group participant check as a particularly powerful opportunity to enhance rigor as “investigator and participants examine and revise the emerging analytic model or narrative” (p. 220). Barbour (2008) adds that focus groups can allow safe space for participants to address topics on which they may differ in opinion from the researcher but may not feel comfortable challenging the researcher’s powerful voice in a one-on-one interview setting, as could happen if participants were invited to revise the researcher’s findings.

When I invited participants to this event during the fourth interview and two follow-up emails, all but one expressed interest in attending. Unfortunately, only two participants attended, and one had to leave early for work. It is ironic that many participants could not attend this discussion of the experience of being an adult student because of adult responsibilities such as childcare and family events, work, and community involvement commitments, despite my scheduling it on a weekend during the semester break.
Field Notes

Following each contact with participants, whether in the class, over the phone, or in an interview, I took time to quickly record what happened and my impressions of it. This record of what happened, such as who spoke to whom, location, spatial organization, length of time, etc., is considered data. Other writings, such as analytic and self-reflective memos and journals, were part of the memoing process, described in the next section on data analysis.

Data Analysis

One of the essential characteristics of the grounded theory method is that the different parts of the data analysis process function more as facets than as stages—they happen iteratively and concurrently rather than in linear, predictable steps (Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). Here, I outline these facets of data analysis, by necessity presenting them linearly, but with the understanding that they proceeded concurrently.

Coding

Coding is a process by which each line or main idea is assigned a gerund or short phrase describing what is occurring in that line or piece of data. Holton (2007) characterizes coding as a way to move from description to conceptualization as the researcher constantly compares data to data, data to category, category to category, and data and category to the literature. I started with reading for themes during transcription and preparation of interview protocols. I began line-by-line coding after the second round of interviews, but the sheer amount of data made it prohibitively time consuming. Through consultation with my committee chair and a grounded theory expert, I decided
to switch to incident-by-incident coding with concurrent memoing (J. Corbin, personal communication, June 20, 2009). Rather than assign a code to each line, I identified meaning-chunks in the data comprising an incident or an idea that covered more than one line. I then wrote a memo describing my understanding of the incident and comparing it with other incidents, and I assigned a code as the title of the memo. In incident-by-incident coding, I still moved deliberately and comparatively through all of the data, but I wrote my way to understandable codes instead of assigning codes to pages of lines and then writing retrospective memos about my coding reasoning. This open coding provided a close and intimate familiarity with the data and led to ideas for theoretical sampling, the emergence of theoretical categories, and memo-writing on these ideas and processes—all three of which in turn led back to coding (Star, 2007).

As the comparison continued, I moved to increasingly more focused codes, subsuming similar open codes under more abstract headings or categories (Baker, Wuest, & Stern, 1992). Working with the first several transcripts, I generated many codes. As I coded the later interviews, I did much less code generation and much more code application from the list of existing codes. Based on my strategy of theoretical sampling, I coded some interviews more thoroughly than others. I did incident by incident coding for the fourth round of interviews for the nine focal participants. I also coded sections of the first three interviews with these nine participants, and I included sections of interview transcripts from other participants in my comparisons.

This facet of data analysis included the use of the computer as an organizing tool for data management, but the actual analysis took place through memoing, described below. I had originally planned to work by hand, and indeed, started my coding with pen
and yellow legal pad. Then I found Saturate, a web-based memoing and coding tool, and began to use it instead because it allowed for data storage, coding, categorizing, and memoing with convenient access (see www.saturateapp.com). I used this application, as well as standard word processing software, for the rest of my analysis.

**Categorizing**

Categorizing began in early Fall 2009 with an initial approach of grouping codes as operationalizations, assigning a nominal category title justified by etymology, and creating a conceptual definition to encompass the codes in abstract description and fit the assigned nominal title. My approach became more formal when I started using Saturate, which provided a structure that helped me manage the lists of codes under category names. At that point, categorizing became simultaneous with coding and memoing.

Some of my categorization process was inductive, as I built from data points to codes to successively more abstract superordinate categories. At other times my process was deductive, as I recognized useful ways to deploy concepts from other studies and theories. Kelle (2007) suggests that this is an appropriate time to bring in the sensitizing concepts from the literature as long as they serve as heuristic devices to generate questions for understanding. Dey (2007) points out that these questions can serve to send the researcher back to guided theoretical sampling, but they also work to lead the researcher to articulate relationships between core concepts: “When we categorize, we typically invoke theories of how the world works and, in this sense, our categories provide implicit guidelines for inference and prediction” (p. 178). At other times, my process was abductive (Reichertz, 2007), as when I took a break from data immersion to
turn my attention to mundane tasks and experienced sudden and unexpected flashes of insight about patterns in the data or names for new categories, or when I worked to write a memo on one aspect of the study and found that I had written my way into clarity on an entirely different aspect. This is an example of how categorization overlapped with and merged into memoing.

**Memoing**

Lempert (2007) sees memos as “uniquely complex research tools” and memoing as a methodological practice by which the researcher explores processes, organizes and interprets data, codes, categories, and theories, and discovers new directions for theoretical sampling (p. 246). Memos also provide the site for working through the abductive process, creating diagrams, or using prior knowledge in the literature. The intent of memo writing is not description but theory development, and “continuous memo writing, re-reading and re-writing, leads to progressively more abstract levels of theorizing” (p. 262).

Memoing for this study started with field notes during recruitment and continued throughout eighteen months of interviewing, transcribing, analyzing, and literature review. As noted above, I used computerized tools as supports, but I consider the analysis to have happened through memoing because it allowed me to capture a record of my thinking as I mentally processed data, constructed answers to the research questions, and developed the grounded theory. True to grounded theory tradition, I used memos to compare ideas, data, codes, incidents, and it was through memoing that the concepts and relationships emerged. Memos consisted of such variations as a few lines on my emotional interaction with the research, bulleted notes about theoretical sampling
directions, interesting pieces of data and my reasoning in coding them, extended essays exploring relationships in the emerging theory, explanations or questions about a tentative conceptual model, and any other pieces of writing concerning the research study. After writing memos, I frequently returned to my writing to re-read and rewrite. Thus, the memoing process allowed me to generate increasingly formal, refined and abstract drafts that became the basis for this final report.

*Integrating*

Lempert (2007) calls integration “the most difficult feature” in grounded theory research (p. 258) because of the demand to keep categories analytical, bring together only the best quotes from mountains of data, clarify and distill months of memoing, and discuss the emergent grounded theory in light of the published literature in a clear, accessible, useful narrative (Charmaz, 2001; Stern, 2007). This final report includes frequent participant quotes to illustrate the categories and the grounded theory, but the emphasis is on a conceptual analysis of the material, rather than presenting participants' stories as entire cases. Charmaz (2001) clarifies this relationship: “during data collection, …participants take precedence. During analysis and presentation of the data, the emerging grounded theory takes precedence” (p. 691).

*Data Management*

As a novice researcher, I learned a great deal about the process of doing grounded theory through conducting the study. One of the biggest lessons learned was that the logistics of concurrent data collection and preliminary analysis affected my preparation for and execution of each subsequent round of interviews. Each round of interviews took
about a month, with a month between rounds to digest 20-30 interviews, using the following process. Starting with the initial round of interviews in October 2008, I went through each interview as a data set at least four times: once during the interview itself, after which I recorded my very early analysis ideas as part of the field notes; a second time for initial transcription, during which I often stopped to make notes to myself about patterns or questions for follow up; a third time for data cleaning, in which I listened to the recording and read the transcript at the same time to correct errors, also stopping to make notes; and a fourth time to read the transcript and design the interview protocol for the second interview based on follow-up questions. (After the first interview, I personalized each protocol to continue exploration of intriguing or unclear comments from previous interviews as well as asking about general patterns from reading the entire data set.)

During this time, my main difficulty was data management. It was all I could do to get each round of interviews transcribed and cleaned before the next round started. I did little formal, intensive coding until May 2009, though I wrote about general themes in February and tried line-by-line coding in March. My memos were mostly informal impressions and ideas until June and July. My understanding of the data and my emerging analysis ideas came from writing informal memos and from discussion with my committee chair. Part of the struggle was that I did not have much time to analyze, and part was that I was still learning how to write memos in the grounded theory tradition. A more realistic plan would have been to conduct 5-10 interviews only, if scheduled every month, or leave 2-3 months between interviews, if still doing 20-30 interviews in each round. But my study was time sensitive, designed as much as possible to capture
participants’ experience and perspective as they lived it, not retrospectively. I did not know how many participants would persist, and I wanted to write a substantive theory, so I needed more rather than fewer participants. Thus, I put myself in a methods bind simply by the goals I set for my study when I designed it. I learned that purposeful sampling should include not only consideration of how to get the best data, from whom, and how many (Morse, 2007) but also the timeline and energy required to get that data.

In the strictest sense, this process was not concurrent data collection and analysis, in that I did not fully analyze each interview before proceeding to the next, armed with codes, categories, and an emerging theory sketch to guide my theoretical sampling. However, I still consider it a grounded theory study, for three reasons. First, I was aware of traditional grounded theory processes and made my data collection choices not from the position of avoiding rigorous work but from the position of balancing ideal methods with available resources of time and energy. For me, the difference between “methods slurring” (Baker, Wuest & Stern, 1992, p. 1355) and developing practice as a new researcher (Charmaz, 2006) lay in logical justification of pragmatic choices, combined with rigorous striving for the ideal. Second, I immersed myself in the data for over a year, largely letting go of the literature, to make sure that I could interpret the data and create a grounded explanation for it, rather than fitting my data to an existing theoretical model. Each pass through the data contributed to my theoretical sensitivity and served as a step in analysis because I continued to wrestle with concepts, connections, relationships, and contradictions in the stories participants shared (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Third, I continued my effort to move beyond description toward theoretical development. As I developed more skill with coding, categorizing and memoing, my
constant comparative analysis supported a gradual change in the level of abstraction with which I explained persistence, going beyond (for instance) writing about finding funds for college tuition and negotiating support from a reluctant spouse to writing about the characteristic drive of agency that spurred such decisions and actions. This is the defining aspect of grounded theory research that sets it apart from other inductive qualitative methods (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Ethical Considerations

Part of my responsibility as a member of the academic research community is to conduct research ethically, with full honesty, respect, and care for the well-being of those who participate in my research. This study was designed to uphold that responsibility. Before beginning recruitment, I obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at both the University of Utah and the community college where participants were enrolled, and I followed IRB accepted procedures for the protection of study participants. At my first meeting with participants, I explained the study, invited and answered any questions, and obtained written consent for participation. In addition, I reassured participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Throughout my interaction with participants and my writing of the final report, I maintained confidentiality of participants’ identities. I assured participants that what they shared with me would not be reported to their college instructors and would not affect their college grades. Data and records were stored in a locked filing cabinet and on password protected computers located in my work space, and these materials were accessible only to me as the primary researcher and to four transcriptionists. For the final
Before starting the study, I realized that my position as researcher, as well as my background of advanced education and my position as an adjunct instructor at the community college, placed me in a role of power and prestige relative to my participants. In an effort to alleviate feelings of discomfort or intimidation created by this power difference, I planned to fully answer participants’ questions about myself and the study and share my experience with them as appropriate, presenting myself as an interested and personable learner rather than a distant and impeccable superior. As the study progressed, I learned that these assumptions held true—but in ways I had not known to expect.

My choices about transparency in presenting myself to and interacting with participants affected all of us personally. I found that presenting myself as an interested, caring learner was both draining and inspiring when I responded to participants as a friend, a teacher, and a woman, not only a researcher. Just hearing about normal ups and downs of life took enough energy that I learned not to schedule more than two interviews in a day. In addition, several participants shared with me their respective experiences of gang rape, undocumented immigration, spiritual and religious conversion, miscarriage, and marriage dissolution over issues of drug addiction and child abuse. I always attempted to respond to such stories in a personal way, honoring the gift of sharing self that participants had given me. I chose to do this because of my personal and research paradigm of respect for the individual as a competent adult, which is why I felt it ethically necessary and appropriate to spend some time coming up from the depths of emotional memory, validating participants’ choices and feelings and sometimes sharing
my own experiences, instead of just snapping my notebook shut, dusting my hands, and ending abruptly once I had extracted the main issue from participants as if they were only subjects. But after such interviews, I found myself emotionally drained and sometimes could not even write field notes until I had gone home to live mundane life for 24 hours.

As well as affecting me personally, our interviews also affected participants. Some participants viewed interviews as a time for cathartic release of confidential information, a view expressed in comments like this one: “I am so glad [for the interview] because I tell these things to no one else.” Others saw it as an enjoyable process of self exploration, and several made comments such as, “I never thought about it until you asked me. I’ve enjoyed talking about this—no one asks me these questions.”

My choices about transparency in explaining the purposes of the study also affected participants’ views of higher education persistence and specifically about graduate studies. Several participants asked about the study, including one inquiry of “Does everyone in a PhD have to do this project?” This participant had a family member who was considering entering a doctoral program, and their discussion of my study became part of the family member’s decision-making process, even to the point that she called me for advice on the application process. In this sense, a basic principle of quantum physics (Heisenberg, 1927/1983) applies to higher education: “Observing” persistence changes it. Though participants did not say so, it may have been that the very experience of having phone calls, emails, and long interviews about persistence during this academic year contributed to participants’ consideration of and decisions to persist, especially for those who had little support for persistence from their personal network.
Literature on the effect of being in a study is mostly limited to participatory action research and to introductory qualitative research texts, with the focus usually on the researcher (Bergerson & Huftalin, 2007). Participants are usually left to themselves to make meaning of changes in perspective triggered by discussion in interviews, a sometimes difficult task (Skrla, 2000). Understanding impact on participants goes beyond IRB discussions of ethics and reciprocity, especially when participant/researcher relationships continue over time into friendship-like interaction, as they did in my study (Bhattacharya, 2007; Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & Steinmetz, 1995; Koro-Ljungberg, Gemignani, Brodeur, & Kmiec, 2007; Magolda & Weems, 2002). The measures described in this section demonstrate my efforts to treat participants as the capable, competent adults that they are, learning from them in ethically responsible ways, and recognizing both their struggles and their strengths as they pursued their goals in college and other endeavors.
CHAPTER IV

THEORY IN FOUNDATION

In this chapter, I first address the first two research questions, providing a description of participants’ experience of persistence, which centered around finances, balancing competing priorities, and for some, a language barrier. I then move to an analysis of the factors that participants identified as the most important hindrances and helps to their persistence. In the personal sphere, this included employment, material support, mentors and models, and religion. In the institutional sphere, this included both institutional agents like teachers, advisors and students, and institutional culture and climate.

The Experience of Persistence

The first research question guiding this study asks for description: what are the experiences of adult learners as they transition from developmental reading classes to regular college-level classes over the course of an academic year? The answer to this question is a familiar story to many. The main themes that emerged from participants’ lived experience were finances, competing priorities, and for some, a language barrier. Their persistence in higher education depended on their resourcefulness and creativity to find ways to persist in these three areas.
Financial concerns weighed heavily on participants’ minds and wallets, as they searched for multiple sources of funding, made difficult choices about whether to pay for education or living expenses, and developed a vision of what they could afford and why. Paying for life and school simultaneously became a matter of strategy and sacrifice, for some to the limits of exhaustion. Of this group, Sunny, Lourdes, Marilyn, and Joey worked full time, Lamar and Paola mostly relied on full-time income of a partner or spouse so that they could attend classes without working, Marisa and Sarah worked part-time as a hairdresser and a certified nursing assistant (CNA), respectively, and Andy oscillated between full- and part-time temporary jobs.

However, all nine drew on some form of additional financial assistance, as do many adult learners (Dougherty & Woodland, 2009). Joey's parents paid for her college expenses. Sunny lived at her parents’ home to get free rent. Lourdes cut expenses to a bare-bone minimum and took out a small loan to pay for summer tuition. Paola relied on her boyfriend’s fulltime salary, plus financial gifts from her sister in Mexico, so that she could take as many classes as possible and not work. Sarah and Marisa both drew on state assistance, and Marisa’s husband also got grants and student loan money. Andy paid tuition using the Pell grant and her occasional temporary job earnings. Lamar lost his job delivering parcels the day before the first interview and relied on his wife’s full-time income as a preschool teacher for about 6 months. Eventually, both he and his wife took additional part-time jobs to pay for tuition and school supplies. When even this was not sufficient, Lamar turned to his social network to find scholarships specifically for Native Americans.
Participants were constantly faced with the tension of paying for educational expenses versus paying for living expenses. Some decided that school expenses would have to wait, like Marisa who felt she could not pay rent if she enrolled in summer classes. Andy described the same feeling:

A lot of times I’ve had to like pay for my own books and wait on paying for classes, which has kind of put a damper on things sometimes. A hundred bucks for a book out of my own pocket is a lot more than I can afford sometimes. It was at the time, so…

On the other hand, other participants responded to the pressure by pushing forward with education. Marilyn said she would have loved to be a teacher, but she chose an accounting major because she felt she could not afford to live on a teacher’s pay. Lourdes dealt with both expensive car repairs and medical bills but continued to pay tuition despite getting her hours cut at work:

The thing is, I don’t want to buy a new one now because, I don’t like that, but I know that I have to buy car. Not now, later, I want later because I have two bills, and I am going to finish, medical bills, I’m going to finish in probably in August…but I have spent like, um, almost four hundred dollars [on car repairs]. Yeah and before was three hundred and now is almost seven hundred. And for that reason I think it not good idea to have a car like that.

Several participants expressed a feeling of doing the impossible, gripping a fragile financial hold, almost afraid to look closely at how or whether this financial stability would continue. As Sarah said, it was precarious enough that she just wanted to do as much schooling as possible while it lasted:

I don't know how I can do it, but I'm doing it. Because my thing is, I don't want to look back and be like, man, how do I do that? And go and try to figure out. I'm going to live with what I got in, just keep, you know.

I note here that participants who persisted either had one child or none, except Marilyn who had her stepsons every other weekend and Marisa whose older daughter
lived with her parents. Two female participants with three children each did not persist past two semesters. The exception to this pattern was a Korean man on a student visa with five children, and he and his wife both worked illegal jobs because they could not get on-campus jobs and would not have been able to survive on student wages even if they had gotten student jobs. This man did not persist through the summer semester but returned to classes in fall as required by his visa. It may be, then, that both financial concerns and persistence are related to parental status, but this possibility should be tested by further research.

Eight other participants told me about their decision to stop out for at least one, and for some, two or three semesters, because they felt they could not afford the expense. Indeed, research shows that more available financial resources are directly tied to greater persistence (Dynarski, 2003). Does this mean that those who persisted were richer or better at managing their money than those who did not? Not necessarily, though my view of their financial burden and resources came from their description rather than a formal audit. Perhaps they were better connected to government and social resources which could provide a safety net. For two men who stopped out, there was no such safety net because of their illegal immigration status. But Lourdes continued to go to school off and on even when she was in precarious legal circumstances—she either paid for it herself or found a scholarship for undocumented students. A partial explanation for persistence regardless of financial concerns may lie in participants’ framing of persistence decisions and of what resources they were willing to consider as viable options, a point that will be discussed at length later in this paper. This possibility is supported by the work of Paulsen and St. John (2002), who examined the influence of perceptions and expectations
of affordability on persistence and found that social class relates to persistence both
directly, through prices and subsidies, and indirectly, through the subtle power of
expectations about affordability, which are sometimes more influential than actual dollar
amounts. These expectations influenced whether participants felt they could afford
simultaneous educational and living expenses. In making finances balance, participants
also made choices about the ordering of priorities that all seemed to fight for first
consideration, as explored in the next section.

**Competing Priorities**

After finances, the next most prevalent experience was one of balancing
competing priorities. This included making decisions about allocation of resources,
responding to the emotional implications of prioritizing, intentionally and unintentionally
shifting priorities over time, and employing four main strategies to balance priorities.

*Decisions about allocation of resources.* The top priorities competing for
attention were family, work, and school, each of which could have demanded full time
and attention, but none of which took sole priority for these participants; thus, these three
priorities often interfered with each other. As Joey pointed out, “I've got to go part-time
[enrollment] because I have to work. But when I go full-time, we'll just have to find a
way to make it work.” Joey seemed to enjoy and find positive identity in her job, and she
emphasized that it was an important part of her family’s financial survival. Thus, her job
provided support for one paramount priority (family) while simultaneously interfering
with another high priority (school), but it was not an intrinsic hardship or barrier. When
asked about the biggest hindrance for her persistence over the school year, Joey identified
this simultaneous barrier and support:
Work. Just because, when you have a goal, but you have to kind of add another goal to it, like a full-time job, it makes you always think. I just wish, this is what I want to do, I want to go to school. But you know, we've got to pay the bills. And I wish I can do this. But you know, I've gotta work, gotta pay the bills. If I want a house, if I want a car, I need to pay for it. So it's one of those, well, if I didn't have to work, of course I would be in school.

Andy faced a similar situation in terms of allocation of resources. After describing constraints on her study time, she said that they had increased because “I went to an interview and was offered the job the next day. I accepted because it’s full time and I found out that I was pregnant so I’m like, I really need that.” When she first discovered her pregnancy, she considered leaving both school and work to be at home with her coming baby. She decided to take the job because of the accompanying benefits, and she decided to take twice the credits during the subsequent semester. The job thus supported the pregnancy and provided financial security, sustaining two important priorities, while simultaneously encroaching on her homework time, to the detriment of her academic priority.

Marilyn worked a demanding full time job as well as taking accounting classes, and she commented, “My biggest advantage is that I don’t have kids. If I had kids, I would not be able to do this.” But she went on to give an example of the lengths to which she went to make sure that there was a clean house for her step-children and husband, despite her school schedule. Her “advantage” of childlessness was only part-time, and she found ways to prioritize her family above school and work, and far above her own sleep:

Like, yesterday night after school, I knew they would be eating late so I ask my husband to give them breakfast a little later, lunch a little later, so I will be able to go home and cook some dinner for them, because I wanted to do it. So I went home [after class] and at nine o’clock I was serving dinner, I did fajitas and they all ate, and I think they liked it…but I didn’t have enough energy to clean up the kitchen. So, this morning I get up at 5:30 and run down to the kitchen and put all the dishes in the dishwasher. And the other thing that I think is important is that
they see that the house is clean and, or as clean as possible, even when people is busy.

Lourdes demonstrated the same prioritization of family. Recently married, she made time for a trip with her husband because she felt it would not be fair to him to completely sacrifice their relationship, but this choice was not without ambivalence:

But, he wanted to go to do something. The problem is, I was thinking, “it's okay, it's okay,” I didn’t tell him, but I was worried for, I need to prepare my paper I need to finish with the other assignment of the class of social work, but I was thinking “No. I'm going to give his time, or our time, and I'm going to do everything, everything, until tomorrow.”

Despite her prioritization, her worry remained, which demonstrates that every decision participants made about allocation of resources carried implications for emotional response (Dirkx, 2008).

Emotional responses to balancing priorities. The project of balancing competing priorities involves more than logistical strategizing; participants also experienced the emotional and intellectual costs of a time crunch. Andy found that the summer term gave no relief from vigilance regarding assignments:

It’s the full summer semester. Yeah, [sighs] [laughs] Which, like I said, they go through things a lot faster. Last semester, I felt like it was set up like this semester, but I’d come to class, and think that, “Oh we have to take our test,” and I would still have another week to study. I’m like, “Oh what a relief!” And now it’s not that way [laughs] Now it’s, I really do have to take my test this week.

For Marilyn, the concern of the summer term was not so much the time crunch itself but the effect that it had on her learning. She felt it impaired her knowledge gain:

But other classes I have to take in summer, they just skip parts and peek at whatever is more important, from the class, and leave an assignment like, I don’t know, like read these paragraph and we’ll do and turn in an essay or whatever, so I don’t think it’s as productive. You don’t gain as much knowledge. I am hoping to gain some knowledge [laughs] after I finish every class, at least that’s how I feel. That’s what it’s supposed to be, right? Ah, but summer classes, I just don’t feel that they go that way. You are in such a rush just to get it done, to be done.
with it because you are running out of time, then concerned, am I really understanding these or am I just going through the class?

Sarah’s logistical balance, like her financial and academic balance, was a tenuous one, and her emotional experience was one of nervous anticipation, current stability but no guarantee for the future:

So far so good. I mean, I’m just hoping my babysitter’s not going to be like, “you know what, the heck with this. I’ve never had to do this with any kid, and I’ve been doing this for ten years, I don’t want to do it with you.” Because like, Mondays, I take her in at 6:00 [a.m.]. Wednesday, I take her in at 6:00. Tuesday, I take her in at 5:00. Thursday, I take her in at 5:00.

Despite Sarah's frequent declaration that she, herself, made the biggest difference in her own persistence, she could not have maintained this schedule, and thus her progress toward a degree, if she had not had childcare. The image that came to mind as she talked was one of crossing a river on a log jam, carefully testing each branch to see how much weight it would hold, always aware of the swift current beneath. She seemed afraid that she was finding not only her own limits—sleep deprivation set in and she could not work night shifts any longer—but also nearing the limits of her external supports—"I’m just afraid she's [the babysitter] going to be like, you know what, the heck with it." These emotional costs of balancing priorities in order to persist with college are important to consider, as emotional health has been significantly related to GPA and to intent to leave college (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). As Dirkx (2001) puts it, “emotions, then, give voice to our fundamental sense of irrationality. Through our emotional experiences, we recognize that our conscious sense of agency is often subverted by desire. In these situations, we experience a self that seems ambivalent, contradictory, and fragmented” (p. 65).
Adult learning theorists also acknowledge the role that emotion from social interaction can play in learning, suggesting that feelings evoked during a certain experience can linger and can either block or facilitate the learning available from that experience (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999). For adult learners, non-cognitive variables can sometimes be more important than traditional cognitive measures of persistence such as GPA (Dennis, Calvillo, & Gonzalez, 2008). Preliminary findings from a pilot for this study indicate that emotions can drive adult learners' participation and persistence in developmental reading classes (Capps, 2008). For instance, Jean, an adult student at a community college, originally experienced feelings of shame and embarrassment connected with reading when she was teased as a child because she stuttered when reading aloud and struggled with her weight. She connected the negative emotions with the experience of academic endeavors, and she completely rejected all academic experiences as soon as she could, dropping out of college after one semester directly following her high school graduation. She explained that it was not until years later, when she let go of the negative feelings about weight and academic work, that she could return to college, enroll in a developmental reading class, and learn to use the reading strategies necessary for her to succeed in her required courses.

**Shifts in balancing priorities.** Facing both the logistics and emotionality of competing priorities, participants negotiated varying weight for different priorities at different times, and some participants underwent major shifts in their approaches to and motivations for college persistence. Lamar demonstrated such a priority shift as he talked about how he chose classes. During his first semester, he took required courses for a hopefully lucrative engineering major, but by the end of the semester, he felt “stressed
out” and “despair” regarding school. With his wife’s encouragement, he changed from an extrinsic to an intrinsic approach to enrollment and choice of major. He gave priority to photography classes:

It was really kind of a breakthrough for me. Realizing what I really wanted to do…And what I like to, love to do is take photographs…And I understand that photography is probably not going to be a moneymaker. It can be, but I really want, I really feel like if I have the talent and the love to do photography I should try and hone that skill.

Lamar enjoyed his photography classes, but by the end of the spring semester, he had weighed love and duty and decided that his cherished photography was dispensable. Instead, he focused on getting a degree quickly. He returned to an extrinsic priority for choosing two general education courses for the summer term: “I just kind of figured which ones I didn't want to take during the regular school, like the, what is it, 12-week course, semester. So those are the ones I just wanted to get done quick.” His reasoning was to get them done quickly, a move to deliberately build momentum.

This shift was also apparent in Lamar’s self-identified motivations for persistence. He started the year avowing that his whole reason for coming back to school was to better support his family, but his position shifted over time to include a desire for school as a way to satisfy personal ambition as well. At the fourth interview, he went back and forth between the two, never fully comfortable with his choice when spoken out loud:

And you feel like, oh, I can, your motivation’s changed. “I want to be this” instead of “I want to do this for my family.” But in reality that's the underlying, kind of reason why I'm here. Why I'm here. It could be different for anybody else. But, you know, it is because I want to provide for my family…And I think when I've gotten to this point, right now, my priorities, not my priorities but my reasons for being here are more, I feel like they're more intellectual. Instead of just “I want to do this for my family.” Which I still do, but…
Joey experienced a similar shift, but in a more abrupt way. She started the year with her plans intact: degree goal set, a certain number of credits to take each semester, a perfect plan to move to degree achievement with the support of her husband and 6-year-old daughter. At the end of the second semester, she was shocked to learn she was pregnant after years of infertility. Instantly her school plans receded to the background:

For so long, my priority was school, but in the back of my mind I always wanted more kids. But now I'm switching the priorities, where now it's the baby. The baby and my daughter. And if I don't get to practice speech pathology for 50 years, than that's ok. You know, it's not the end of the world. This is something that I've also wanted too, and this is going to come first.

Just before the start of the third semester, Joey learned that she had miscarried. Amidst the pain of recovering physically, she also reeled emotionally, trying to decide whether to put family or school first:

I haven't really decided what I'm going to do for next semester only because, it, the whole, having another child is still up in the air for me. I still want another child…You know, I have no idea, right now, as of today. I have no idea what's going to be going on, because I would love to go to school full-time. But it's one of those things where, right now, talking about with my husband…because we're still shocked and blown away by what happened two weeks ago that we’re like, we just don't know.

In contrast, Paola underwent turmoil as she weighed the balance between two relationships, an internal “hurricane” entirely unrelated to higher education. Instead of a competing priority, school became for her a haven from having to worry about intimate relationships:

Yeah, I am taking my classes, I'm happy with my classes. I don't have any problem with those. And for a minute or for two hours that each class time, I forgot all and I say, “okay, I'm happy here, everything is okay.” And I just put my hand on my shoulder and said “okay okay okay, everything will be fine” but yeah, in the nights, I have terrible, how do you say, hurricane. . . inside.
These participants juggled early and late working schedules, travel time and housework, the pull of dreams versus pragmatism in choice of a major, finals that fell the same week a baby was due, renegotiation of gender roles within marriages, and the constant tension between time spent with partners or children and time needed for academic progress such as volunteer intern hours, completing homework, and being in class. Like other adult learners, their experience included gradual or precipitous shifts in the order of priorities they had set for themselves (Mercer, 2007).

**Strategies for balancing priorities.** To handle this constant tension, participants developed strategies that fit into four categories: planning (which includes knowing limits and strategizing both resources and enrollment), pushing past limits, taking advantage of any study time, and accepting satisfactory instead of ideal conditions.

When asked to give advice on succeeding and persisting in school, both Sarah and Marilyn immediately referred to finding a successful balance, which for them came from careful planning, knowing personal limits, and strategizing enrollment to avoid overload. Echoing research on why adult students persist at lower rates (Kasworm, 2003d), Sarah suggested that “the chances of you succeeding are less if you just cram everything, trying to go to school full time and work full-time and then raise your kids.” As Marilyn said,

> So look at very well, energy-wise how much you can handle, your time, your family, are you really going to be able to do such a thing. Start small, then if you can do it, you realize that you have more time, free time or whatever, you can handle more, go and take more classes, but if you think that you can’t, don’t go for it. [laughs] If you have a full time job, yeah, you got to measure very well what you’re able to do and what you’re not.

Marilyn’s quote is in contrast to Marisa, who described in her first interview how her parents repeatedly blamed her for poor planning and neglect of her children,
reminding her that she had not considered how to meet her family responsibilities before she returned to school. In her second semester, Marisa found that using extensive time management techniques boosted her productivity and lowered her stress:

I took a workshop, and they just gave us a few pieces of paper that already had kind of like a little time log, and you know, what little symbols to put in for your work or your homework or you know, time when you're in class, and then time when you're doing your personal things, and then when you have like your family responsibilities. So you just kind of put in little abbreviations in the little slots that you know you're going to have to be in class and be at work. And then you just kind of fill in the rest of the spaces of what hours you're going to, you know be doing your homework, and what hours you're going to do like your family time. And what hours you're going to sleep! Because that's also what you need to fit in...So, I just, I think it helps me a lot myself to keep myself organized, rather than being more spontaneous. And then I actually see my work being done instead of like, “Oh, I didn't finish it and I should've done it, and I have to turn it in tomorrow,” and then you're like really frustrated. And you can't really concentrate on your work, you’re like more concentrating about like “I need to turn it in.” And you know, kind of rushing yourself a little bit more.

But despite careful planning and knowing personal limits, sometimes the combined demands of school and life meant that participants decided to push past those limits. Sarah described a time when the combination of all of her commitments demanded more energy than she had to give, and more in time than was possible unless she gave up sleep. So she did give up sleep:

Well it’s, see, this is not something I should admit, but, last semester, when all those assignments were due, I decided to drink two energy drinks within I think two hours. And I was able to do the whole, I think two assignments in that night. I don't remember what I did or how I did it. All I remember is being so tired I went to sleep two days later, because I had to work the next day at 5:00 in the, 6:00 in the morning. So I got up at 4:00, got ready, went to work, and then came back home, and yeah. I fell asleep like around 1:00. So I was awake for about two days. [laughs]

With a little chemical stimulation, Sarah found a way to balance competing priorities. Unlike another participant in a similar high pressure situation, Sarah did not stop going to classes and give in to depression. Instead, she self-medicated and kept
going to school. She used strategies she acknowledged as intrinsically distasteful (“I didn't like them, though”) and harmful to long-term health (“right now that I'm young and I can do this, you know”) because they enabled short-term crisis management and progress toward her degree goal. She admitted to "planning on doing the same thing" the next semester because "I was able to do it."

A third strategy that participants used to balance competing priorities is taking advantage of any available time. As participants described their schedules to me, the image that came to mind was of the process of quilting. Some quilters plan out colors, shapes, and order of steps to achieve a regular geometric pattern; others come up with a general idea and piece together available scraps into a patchwork quilt. Similarly, participants varied in how they used pieces of time. Lourdes and Sarah scheduled blocks of several hours for homework, which Lourdes did late at night in the bathroom, “the warmest room,” while her husband slept, and which Sarah did on campus between early morning and evening classes instead of going home or picking up her daughter from the babysitter. Other participants used a more patchwork approach, as Marisa described,

“Go to school, go to work, and then I hurry and you know, find little spots and spaces in between all of it, and then I, you know, try and get duties around the house. Or try and be with my kids.”

Andy had moved to a new house, started a new job, and started summer classes just before the fourth interview. Asked how she did it, she replied:

I don’t know, [laughs] The little free time I’ve had, I mean with moving, too, it’s been madness, trying to balance everything. It’s been really hard, but my school is important to me, and I find the time to do it, I find a little free time on the weekends and, sometimes I can do it at work, or like on my lunch-break, is nice, they don’t mind if I’m not doing anything, I can do homework at my desk. That helps a lot too.
It may be that both approaches work, as long as they are applied consistently. The central issue is not whether the scraps are the same size or shape but whether the quilt is made. Finding time for school, in large or small blocks and despite ceaseless demands from other priorities, reveals participants’ inclusion of school as a very high priority.

Marilyn demonstrated that this approach works with course enrollment as well. In the spring, she told her husband that she would enroll in specific courses so that she could take the summer off and spend time with him. But when she went to register, the courses were full. She decided she needed at least one course in the summer in order to keep making degree progress. Her comment that she "sneaked this one [class] in" despite a disgruntled husband alluded to the urgency and deliberateness of her efforts with school. She is on the lookout for any way to move toward her degree goal, constantly strategizing, initiating action, and exercising agency.

The final strategy for balancing competing priorities lay in a willingness to accept a situation as satisfactory, despite some drawbacks. As Joey said in reference to her job at a home hardware retail store, "I don't love it, but it's a job." This pattern of attitude became apparent in all of my female participants. (It may be a gendered construct, but I do not have enough men in my sample to make that statement.) Women may decide that they are willing to be a less-than-perfect mother and student so they can be both: The job is not perfectly satisfying, but it will do. The house is not perfectly clean, but it will do. The time with partner or children is never enough, but it will do. The homework may not be A-material, but it will do. Marisa took this approach as she refused to accept her husband’s perfectionism:

And I would at least try and write an eight page paper, if that's all it took to pass it. And it's like he doesn't care about it. So it's really frustrating, because you
know, like I, I want him to try, you know, to get that grade... I mean, there's like kind of, you know, the way that you can do without having to fail it... I just did the extra credit to pull, you know myself if I get a lower grade on a different paper, then I'm not as, you know, like mad at myself because I was like “well. I kind of didn't do as well on that paper, but at least I got the extra credit. So it kinda, you know, makes my average a little bit better.”

Paola took this approach with housekeeping, to which her boyfriend did not contribute:

Because, for example, last weekend, I was working on an assignment, on an English assignment. And I don't have, I didn't have time to take care of the laundry. But he didn't take care neither. So the clothes are still there. Still there. And nobody take care of that. So the clothes will be wait for me till I take all and wash. You know what I mean? So, the same with the vacuum, and with all the stuff. If I don't go to the grocery store, he didn't go. So yeah.

Often, the reasoning of accepting satisfactory showed up when outcomes were better than expected. Sunny was surprised at her good grade in history: “I was planning on just passing, I would be happy with like a B- or something.” Andy was “totally shocked” by her good grade in math: “I thought I was getting a B, or a C, something to that effect, and when I gave her my test, and got it back, and she showed me my grade, I was like blown away, could not believe it.” Joey’s response to her history class was similar: “I was hoping that the highest I would get would be maybe a B+, you know, I thought an A might be stretching it. But apparently it wasn't. So, I was very, very excited about that. Yay!”

This trend is consistent with research on women managing jobs and family. Women do not have the monopoly on the felt stress of conflict between personal and professional roles; however, this conflict looks different for women than for men (Perna, 2005). In finding a personal/professional balance, women face challenges that men do not: Women do more actual labor in the responsibilities of childcare and housework (Perna, 2005), and they shoulder the greater burden of “mental labor”—the planning,
arranging, and worrying that accompany family responsibilities (Thorstad, Anderson, Hall, Willingham, & Carruthers, 2006, p. 232). Participating in more than one major endeavor at once often means less than perfect performance, but this also allows for continued participation. It is when women try to do more than one major endeavor perfectly that they burn out and leave the field, as did Faith, who would not cut back to part-time school or work, could not accept less than perfect grades or choice of major, and finally collapsed from sleep deprivation. This behavior also happens when one priority outweighs the others completely, as was the case for Elizabeth, who believed that “you get two [areas of focus],” and saw her “two” as husband and children to the exclusion of school.

This pattern of accepting satisfactory behavior and thinking is related to the idea of “satisficing,” a term originally from the organizational decision-making literature (Cyert & March, 1963; Simon, 1955). It appears that not only organizations but also individuals satisfice instead of optimize; they work with limited knowledge and resources to find the first acceptable solution to a problem, even though it may not be the globally optimal solution. Satisficing is an adaptive strategy that allows these participants to accept less than ideal conditions—at work, at home, at school—for a period of time as a step towards a truly satisfactory job, home environment, or degree. Satisficing may be key to persistence. Women (and men) must be willing to be less than perfect in their endeavors concurrent with higher education, or they cannot handle the combined load of material and perceptual responsibilities, and they do not persist. This pattern has implications for the concept and exercise of agency, explored at length in the following chapter.
In addition to the weight of competing priorities, Lourdes, Marilyn and Paola also experienced the challenge of a language barrier. Originally from Ecuador, Guatemala, and Mexico, all three were still not fully comfortable with English as an academic language. As Lourdes put it, “I know that it [working in academic English] is a challenge for me. I know that if the class has to walk just only one block, I have to run three blocks to be at the same level of them.” All three women had post-secondary education in their home countries. Because acquisition of a new language carries complications distinct from literacy development and socialization into successful college student behavior, I considered limiting my population of participants to native English speakers. However, the area in which these men and women live is experiencing an influx of immigrants, particularly Spanish speakers, and they often take developmental courses as a step between ESL and entry level courses (D. New, personal communication, March 7, 2007). Language barrier becomes a part of their adult student experience just as surely as learning disability, mental or physical health challenges, finding and maintaining employment, or raising a family. Because the study is about experience, I included participants from any language background.

Research on persistence for students from linguistic backgrounds other than English often overlaps with research on the effects of cultural, ethnic, and racial differences. Whether combined or separated, this research shows that college persistence is a complex and often discouraging journey for students facing the language barrier, with especially low persistence rates for Latinas (Harrell & Forney, 2003; Longerbeam, Sedlacek, & Alatorre, 2004). Among other influences, this points to the struggle of
negotiating higher education in a non-native language. For Lourdes, it meant that her responses in class were no longer quick and effortless:

Ehhm, the classes are not easy for me. I have to work a lot. For example if, I am taking classes in Spanish, I feel comfortable because that is my language, and I can give my opinion. But, here is different. I need to think before, to give my opinion.

For Marilyn, it meant that the developmental reading class made an important difference for her, not necessarily in the reading skills of identifying topics, structure, and logic, but in the extra time and practice of working with native speakers in the target language.

Asked what difference the developmental reading class made, she responded,

For me? A lot, and maybe because I am a second language student, um, not maybe, well I remind you I got a pass in that class when I left, so I did pretty well, not because um, I don’t know, um, the simple fact of being placed in a classroom, and be able to interact with other people and talk about, focus about reading or writing, it was important to me

Paola encountered the language barrier most when trying to deal with teachers who seemed to dislike her and other Spanish speakers:

And it happen to me with some kind of people. For example, that teacher that I mentioned before, that I have a [interpersonal difficulty], I can not speak in English with her. It's so difficult! She, her character, or her attitude make me block my ideas. And I try to speak fluently English and I cannot! because I think something in my psychology thing works in an opposite way. You know, for example, when I was working with…my tutor, my English was so fluent, and I don't have any problem, and I don't stop to thinking in a word, or nothing. It's just like regular English, but when I go and ask questions to that teacher, it's kind of, I don't know if it was with what, where, we, why, oh, ah! I just forget. I just forget.

Sometimes the language barrier became conflated with a cultural barrier, as Paola found when she confronted issues of difference:

One of the projects was a resume. And obviously I'm working my Mexican way, it is different. And I just get my curriculum vitae and translate into English. And I was thinking it's OK because it's how it works in Mexico. But here works so different! And from 50 points, I just get 10 from my teacher. And I say, why? If I just translate my, if I got in Mexico, and I ask for a job, this is what I show them.
And the teacher say, “yes, you know, but... here's America, it's different and you have to learn how to do a resume different.”

However, sometimes this barrier went beyond simple writing conventions to racism based on ignorance, as Paola pointed out:

You know, this semester I was dealing with a lot of discrimination things that I never think before, or never stop and think about it. And yeah. I learn a lot. [laughs]... Yeah, for example, how the American people think about Mexican, in specific my race. You know, and how Americans think about all Latinos, and how they feel confused about Mexican and Latinos. It's different, and is a big confusion for them because they think that all the people that speak Spanish is Mexican. And it's not true. You know? That kind of confusion and kind of things that you say, it's not possible that in the 2009 that we are living now, people still doesn't have enough information and education about discrimination.

Facing the extra emotional and intellectual effort of this language barrier, participants found ways to cope. Lourdes put in many hours of extra study time, acknowledging repeatedly that the language barrier will be a calmly faced fact of her life in college: “But I said, it doesn't matter if all of them are from here, I don't care, but I'm going to do the best of me.” Marilyn and Paola sought out Spanish-speaking advisors, enlisted native English-speaking friends and relatives to edit papers, and spent time in the ESL lab, where Paola found a sympathetic and supportive tutor. Their experience is in unfortunate contrast to the experience of Angelo, a 45-year-old first generation student from Mexico, who went to the college’s Latina/o student orientation, received words of welcome and offers of guidance, and then found no response when he tried to follow up with advisors and administrators. His biggest problem, he said, is “not having enough words in [his] head,” but this language acquisition barrier was compounded by his perception that no college personnel would help him. He had to learn the language and the system at the same time, and this, combined with financial and immigration worries, contributed to his choice to leave college after two semesters.
The experiences of adult students balancing many pressures are not only common sense but are borne out in the literature. The very reason for distinguishing this group of learners from traditional college students is that they learn and behave in different ways in higher education; the context of adult life cannot be disregarded in understanding their learning and behavior (Cross, 1981; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). This group is considered to be at risk because their defining characteristics (over 25 years old, financial independence, full time employment, part-time enrollment, delayed enrollment after high school, time away from college, commuter to campus, support provider for dependents, or single parent) are statistically significant in predicting lower rates of retention and degree achievement in higher education (Summers, 2003). Research based on more qualitative measures consistently supports the statistics, showing that priority, time, and energy constraints cluster around finances, family relationships, identity and employment (Eberle & Robinson, 1980; Hensley & Kinser, 2001). It is not only the logistical but also the emotional aspect of these priority, time and energy constraints that affects student experience (Capps, 2008; Dirkx, 2001).

**Influences on Persistence**

Though the experiences described above are powerful, they do not alone provide an explanation of why adult students persist. To move past description toward explanation, the second research question asks for analysis: how do influences in personal or institutional spheres affect these students’ decisions about college persistence? Research on student persistence suggests that both personal factors, such as life circumstances, emotions, and self-perceptions, and institutional factors, such as interactions with faculty, required courses, and college climate, influence students’
experiences and behaviors in staying with or leaving college (Braxton, 2000; Sissel, Hansman, & Kasworm, 2001; Tinto, 1993; Weidman, 1989). In this section, I consider the main personal and social influences that directly influenced participants’ persistence and then the institutional influences that influenced them in subtle but powerful ways.

**Personal and Social Influences**

In this category, I included influences that were outside of the control of higher education institutions. The strongest of these influences were employment responsibilities, logistical and material support, models and mentors, and religion. For these participants, employment and material support were not straightforward positive or negative influences on persistence; rather, they became constant sources of both relief and worry. In contrast, participants described only positive influences on persistence from models and mentors and from religion.

**Employment.** The constraints of employment showed up frequently in participants’ comments. Lamar and Andy, who worked short term temporary jobs, frequently mentioned strategizing to get jobs which supported their school efforts regardless of the intrinsic rewards of the particular job:

Andy: I accepted because it’s full time and I found out that I was pregnant so I’m like, I really need that…So, um I started that probably like a month or two ago, I would guess, and, I’m just a receptionist and I don’t really think of it as anything special, answer the phone, that’s about it. [laughs]

Lamar: It’s working very good. Um, super flexible, so if I need to come in late, or if I have something to, if I have things to do, it’s not a problem at all that I come in late. Or stay later if I need extra money.

Sunny, Lourdes, Marilyn and Joey worked full time on weekdays and could only take classes at night, while Marisa worked evenings and could only take day classes. Joey and
Sunny both had employers who were willing to allow schedule flexibility, so they could leave work a little early or arrange for a temporary day off if necessary. But Lourdes’ job was completely inflexible, and she described registering months in advance to build her class schedule around required courses first:

That class is only during the night. It’s just only one class in the social work area... because most of the classes are during the day, and I cannot take all of those classes. And just only one is during the night. And I have to look for the class during the night, and like the others class depend on the class of social work.

Marilyn’s experience with the constraints of employment was perhaps the most dramatic, as she shouldered the duties of two full-time positions while still taking two accounting classes:

Our company got sized down. We were sixty people that got retained, then everybody taking over whatever it was can’t get it right there, and it has been hard. And I’ve been taking work at home, and two nights ago I left the office at midnight…’Cause I need go back to the office and finish what I need to finish.

Beyond logistics, though, employment status and demands contributed to participants’ emotional and motivational considerations of college participation. In the first interview, Lamar described a feeling of near relief at losing his more-than-full-time job because it freed him to concentrate on school:

I've attempted to go to school once before this, here at [the college], but I was working a full, full-time job and so it was like I would get up at 5:00[a.m.]. Get ready, head to the airport at 5:30, start work at 6:00, work all day until about 7:00 at night. And then come home, get my bags, or just go from work straight to school. School suffered...I was kind of expecting [the job loss]...So no big deal, kind of glad, because now I can, I was kind of falling behind a little bit. So now I'm all caught up. So I think that's kind of a good trade.

Sarah started her college enrollment while working full time at a call center. After two semesters of full-time work and part-time school, she changed jobs and schedules because she was afraid she would never finish if she did not. For Sarah, even with her
new part time job as a CNA, long hours (sometimes 16-hour shifts) and poor working conditions spurred her to persist toward a degree that would provide a better job:

R: When did you make the switch, so you weren't doing Friday graveyard anymore?
S: About a month ago. I couldn't do it. I'm not a night person, at all. Because I was realizing that I was falling asleep, I was just telling them “wake me up for the three rounds,” and rounds means you go and check on them to see if they're still dry and that kind of thing, and I would go back to sleep for another two hours, and then wake back up, and go do it. Yeah. I'm like, I can't do it. Yeah, that's why I'm trying to get good grades in school so I don't have to keep doing this, anymore...Because I don't want to be wiping butts for the rest of my life, like a lot of people do.

As noted in previous sections, participants considered finances to be one of their chief concerns with college, which is why they worked while attending college. Research on student employment and persistence supports participants’ experience with findings that financial issues affect college choice, experience, and persistence (Dynarski, 2003; Paulsen & St John, 2002). In regards specifically to the influence of employment on student persistence, it appears that employment has differential effects depending on location, hours worked, and student perceptions of reasons for working. Working off campus and working more than 20 hours a week, as did the participants described in this section, are related to lower rates of persistence (Martinez, Sher, Krull, & Wood, 2009). Both circumstances can contribute to decreased time, energy, and concentration for scholastic endeavors, and to less involvement with on-campus influences that support persistence such as social events and face-to-face interaction with professors (Astin, 1999). Heiselt and Bergerson (2007) positioned this phenomenon in terms of development of capital and perception; students who work because they feel they must may spend so much time seeking economic capital (money to pay for tuition, books, and living expenses) that they do not develop the social and cultural capital (mentoring and
connections that build competence and comfort level within the college world) that is intangible but crucial for college persistence (see also Nora, 2004).

Sarah’s experience with sleep deprivation was interesting in comparison with Faith, who commuted an hour each way to work full time while taking early morning and late evening classes. Both women soon found that they could not maintain physical functioning on such a schedule. But instead of leaving school, as Faith did, Sarah became more determined to do well in school so she could leave her exhausting job. Faith had what might be called a safety net: a husband who supported her financially and family in the area who encouraged her to “crash on their couch” when sleep overcame her. Sarah had far less material support available, but she faced this conflict between work and physical limitations and decided “failure is not an option,” choosing instead the “option” of changing her work schedule and working harder in school. In the next section, I discuss the influence of such safety nets, or material supports, on participants’ persistence. The question of which options participants choose, whether in relation to employment or otherwise, is addressed in the next chapter.

*Material support.* The “safety net” described earlier came from various sources and in various forms, whether financial, logistical, or academic. Joey’s parents paid for her tuition, and she credited siblings as her “biggest help” during the previous school year:

I guess I would say my family, because if I would have any questions on things, I would ask them. Like my two sisters, one’s a lawyer, and another one’s a psychologist and so they know a lot about long-term things. So, I would ask them more about that. And I would talk to my brother-in-law about my history class, when I was writing my paper.
Sarah also relied on a family safety net. She described how her sister provided the contact through which she got a job that fit her school schedule and career goals, and also gave emergency support for academic, morale, and mental health benefits:

She’s the biggest help, because for my work schedule, or whenever I need a babysitter, she helps me. Or sometimes for me to be able to, like last semester, she took [the baby] for a whole week…. The week of my finals, so I could study, get all the stuff I, and because I told her I procrastinated, and to get all that stuff caught up, so I could turn it in, she took her for a whole week… And then I had a nervous breakdown, and she took her for a whole week that time.

Participants were quick to say that this practical support was invaluable for maintaining the performance and morale necessary to continue with enrollment; as Marisa said, “if I didn’t have a help, it would probably stop me.” In fact, those who could, seemed to use these safety nets to mitigate the effects of the life circumstances which originally led to their categorization as adult students, such as full time employment, maintaining financially independent households, caring for dependent children, and commuting to campus. One group of participants, five young single men, reduced so many of these characteristics by returning to their status as children in their parents’ homes that I could no longer classify them as adult students, despite their levels of employment or their time away from higher education as religious volunteers. Other participants who had no such safety net persisted in higher education as long as no huge challenges occurred in their lives, but when life events or emergencies overdrew their fund of resources, they did not continue with school. Divorce, job loss, battles with cancer, and the legalities of immigration proved too much for some participants to face concurrently with the demands of their classes, especially when they felt they faced those challenges alone. It may be that having a safety net, a social network upon which to draw,
is an essential key for success for most adult students—after all, it is adult student factors
correlated with low rates of persistence that lead to their classification as “at risk.”

However, even for those participants who had help available and used it regularly,
this help was not unproblematic. Participants were not always comfortable with the
implications of accepting the help, because it came at a psychological and social price
about which they had mixed feelings. The perceived price seemed to be one of expected
responsiveness, in which participants felt that the material help came only if they would
do their part, which might include a particular attitude or plan of study, time spent with
family members, displayed hard work, or expressions of gratitude for and agreement with
the judgment of those giving the help. For example, Lamar felt that his in-laws, with
whom he lived, only became “really super supportive now that my plans have changed”
to a major choice of which they approved. Paola, who took care of all housekeeping tasks
in her home with her boyfriend, expressed feelings of reluctance about financial
dependence, especially since her boyfriend asked if she needed more money if he ever
saw her stressed or depressed:

Now all my expenses are on my boyfriend. My sister still help me, but not too
much like the last semesters because she now bought a house. . . And my
boyfriend is okay with that. He say “no problem,” but I see the problem now,
because, and I'm not sure if I told you or not the last time, it is for me sometimes,
it is uncomfortable for me to just say, put my hand and “give me something”
because I'm accustomed to work and get my own money.

Marisa relied on her mother’s childcare for her daughters; her older daughter lived with
their grandmother and her younger daughter stayed with their grandmother while Marisa
was at work or in class. But though this support made persistence possible, Marisa
struggled not only with the logistics of getting her daughters to and from their
grandmother’s house but also the emotional strain of guilt, simultaneously wanting to
spend more time with her daughters and to be appropriately grateful for her mother’s help:

My mom still…wants to keep her there in the same school district. She wants to keep her with all her friends. And I want to get her out and have her live with me. And my mom’s like, with work and school, and like trying to pick her up from school, and then me going to school,…she doesn’t think I’d have enough personal time with her…I don’t know. Like I, I understand that she wants, like the best for her, and she’s really protective about her. But at the same time, it’s like, she’s right, but yet, you know, I kinda wanta have it turned around to where she can stay more with me….It’s frustrating.

A final aspect of the safety net that surfaced repeatedly was support from spouses and partners, a complicated influence on persistence. Several female participants named their husbands or boyfriends as “the biggest help” in their persistence, describing times when their partners brought textbooks to work, edited written assignments, helped prepare graphics for presentations, and told their wives and girlfriends they should and could persist. However, the same women described still carrying the full load of housework, receiving frequent teasing and complaining from their partners about when they would stop going to school, having to negotiate for emotional support, and giving up sleep to fit recreation to their partners’ convenience, as in these quotes from Lourdes and Marilyn:

Lourdes: Sometimes, like for example, I would like to take more classes to finish quickly, but I cannot do that…my husband said, “What is going to happen with that?” and make me feel like ah, guilty. But I try to explain him that I need to finish that. Because if he wants, really wants to finish, if really he decide, I’m going to support him, help him, but he’s no that kind of person, and for that reason [I tell him], “If you don’t want, let me do it. We don’t have kids. And we can save time.”

Marilyn: And plus my husband, he’d demand his time. So if I get home and he said like, let’s go to the movie, it could be 9:00 pm, but we’re going. And maybe I need to get up next morning at 4:00 to do something for school and for my job, but we’re going. So, it’s not that he’s inconsiderate, but I don’t like to say no because I think he doesn’t deserve for me to be completely shut down….That’s
why I don’t complain at home, like if I have issues at the school or if I have issues at work I just don’t complain because the first thing he gonna tell me is “Just quit! You are overwhelming yourself, you are getting burnt out, just let it go.”

Marilyn’s comment, though said with laughter, points to the ambivalent and powerful way that emotional connections shape persistence. When she described her husband’s comments, she frequently mimicked his face and tone of voice as gentle and loving, despite the oppositional content of his words. Her husband gave her material support, but sometimes opposition in the form of his teasing can be the hardest to resist, especially if it happens frequently. For Marilyn, it means that she could not express frustrations of work or school at home, because her husband would tell her to stop going to school. In another example, when asked what might bring her back to school after stopping out, Faith highlighted the importance of emotional support and material support:

I'm very independent, but I like people supporting me. So like my husband to say “yeah, you know, I think you'd be great.” Or, you know like “I'll help you find study time.” And so when I go to find study time, it's not what he wants, and so I feel like I'm putting him out, like in our relationship. So sometimes I'll just be like okay, I’ll do it later. And then later is never later [laughs]. It's always later.

Nanton (2009) positions the safety net in Bourdieuan (1977) terms of capital, suggesting that women with more social capital (more resources to call on from those within their social networks) are more likely to persist. Nanton points out that there is often a tension between relying on social networks and exercising autonomy, and that in some respects autonomy is constrained when individuals participate in the social network. This relates to the feeling participants expressed of reluctance to pay the price of support, and yet they still accept the material support. As Nanton explains, experiences within the “context of the social network [can] enhance, rather than diminish, the learner’s self determination and ability to self-manage” (p. 16). It may be that adult
students who are not willing to reduce some aspect of their adult status or independence, even when they can, end up departing from college—a possibility mentioned in the previous section as satisficing and explored in the theoretical explication in the following chapter.

This notion of reducing some aspect of independence becomes clearer when considered in light of the influence of models and mentors, frequently mothers or mother figures, which supported participants’ persistence by showing them how to persist and telling them they could and should persist. Though most participants maintained their own independent households and schedules, they drew great strength from the dependable mentoring of important people in their lives.

*Models and mentors.* One of the most consistent sociocultural predictors of student persistence is the education level of students’ mothers (Paulsen & St John, 2002). In addition, both mothers’ and fathers’ expectation of children’s educational attainment is related to children’s actual educational attainment (Flouri & Hawkes, 2008, McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Explanations for this pattern include speculation that higher educated mothers are better prepared to advocate for the educational opportunities of their children and that children with higher educated mothers grow up expecting college participation and degree achievement as a natural part of life (Denton, West, & Walston, 2003). This pattern holds for participants in this study, but with three variations: mothers who gain education later in life, mothers with no formal education but high expectations, and mentors who were not mothers yet provided a model of educational persistence for participants to follow.
Of the nine focal participants, only Lamar had a mother who held postsecondary degrees. As a young woman, she left high school to care for her children and spent most of their childhood working low-paying jobs. When her sons reached adolescence, she decided to return to school to set an example for them, and she earned a GED, a bachelor’s degree, and a master’s degree in quick succession. As Lamar went to school, she became his most vocal supporter, giving him not only encouragement but also practical advice. Thus, Lamar did not grow up with the college focus of other continuing-generation students, but by the time I interviewed him, he did not fit the familiar definition of a first generation student.

In contrast, Lourdes and Marilyn came from family settings where educational achievement was highly prized but mostly unrealized. Both had mothers who attained very little formal education themselves but who impressed a specific message upon their children: that in education, the children must do what the mothers could not, and that it would be worth all efforts to do so. Lourdes’s mother brought her children to church at the beginning and end of each school year, teaching them to consecrate their educational efforts to God and ask for his help. Marilyn related the story of her mother’s lifelong efforts to participate in formal schooling, during a rural childhood in Guatemala, through a difficult marriage and divorce, and through raising five children and undertaking a transcontinental permanent immigration. Marilyn’s mother never attained a degree herself, but she still pushed her adult children to go back to school and achieve their degrees, as Marilyn said:

My mom always want us to go back to, I mean, she never want us to stop going to school. Unfortunately, because different situations, we haven't been consistent on schools. But she is, last Fourth of July she came, and she gave me a lecture [laughs]. And I was like, I'm turning my papers in!
Other participants described important people who were not mothers but who gave academic and emotional mentorship. Joey’s parents had some college, but Joey felt that more important to her persistence was the example and academic mentorship of her siblings and their spouses, several of whom held doctoral degrees. Sunny’s father was the only other member of her family with a degree; she drew support from his frequent encouragement and her perception that he would be pleased with her persistence because “he’s always wanted one of his kids to succeed.” Paola’s description of her sister’s support is similar to Marilyn’s experience above:

I receive the most support, economic and moral support from my sister because she works in the artistic environment, and she really wants to study more, but she cannot because she got a lot of work… and she say, “you know, I really want to study [because] I like it, but now I can't, so you go for it because you now are young, and you have the age and everything. So go for it.” And she support me a lot, a lot, a lot.

Sarah’s sister had been “like a mother” to her, and provided the example of college education in the form of a degree and career in social work. Sarah described her sister’s role in helping her start college and persist long enough to make it her own personal goal:

Like whenever I just started going to school, I just did it for her. I wasn't ready to do that. And . . . she was just kind of like, “well, get in school. You already graduated, you got your diploma, come on, let's get in school.” And I didn't want to. For me it was too soon. You know, I had been with this guy for two years, I'm a single parent, and if it had been me, I probably would have waited. But then, I thank her for that. Because I wouldn't be as far as I am right now in my classes. . . Like, I used to just want to be great because of her. But now it's like, I want to do it for myself.

The discussion of models and mentors in the student persistence literature usually centers on research on first-generation and continuing-generation students, as low parental education is consistently associated with risk of attrition (Somers, Woodhouse,
& Cofer, 2004). Indeed, of the 21 first-generation students in the original group of 28 adult participants, 15 did not persist through all three semesters, which matches nationwide trends (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). The logic of most explanations for this finding is that parents with no college experience cannot guide their children in preparing for and navigating college, and that they do not understand or fully support their children’s college endeavors (Bloom, 2008; Martinez, et al., 2009). Differences in definition of first-generation student status can make for measurement and comparison difficulties, and this is evident in the first-generation retention literature. Some studies define as first-generation those students whose parents have no type or quantity of college education (Somers et al., 2004), while other studies qualify this definition by counting parental education before the student was 18 years old (Martinez, et al., 2009), and still other studies allow for one or both parents to have experience in college but not college degrees (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005).

These definitions spring from studies of first generation students that are often focused on traditional-age students instead of adult students (Bloom, 2008; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Martinez, et al., 2009; Somers et al., 2004). But characteristics of “adultness,” like participation in long-term committed relationships with spouses and partners, add layers of complexity to persistence research, and may mean that the definitions should be expanded. Participants were no longer children, and so a parental guidance relationship would have been quite different than that which is assumed by other research on first-generation students. Marisa and Andy had no models or mentors within their families of origin, but both women had the example of a spouse or partner with college experience, which might lead one to speculate that their experience could be
similar to a student with a college-educated older sibling. However, this was not always the case. The interactions between these women and their partners were more complicated than the situation of a college-educated sibling giving advice, and both women ended up without mentorship, despite intimate association with college-student partners. Andy received infrequent math tutoring from her boyfriend, but their combined busy schedules and his attitude that she was “smart enough to figure it out” soon meant that she was left on her own in learning to navigate college. Marisa did follow the example and advice of her husband early on, transferring to the college from another school at his suggestion, taking the classes he had taken, and using his used textbooks. But because her career path and study habits diverged from his, she soon discarded his example:

I think [my husband] was the one that told me to take what classes, ‘cause he already took ‘em. So I just went along with him, ‘cause I was like, here, do you know the instructor, you know, was like, so you know…His other classes, he’s just like slacking. He has a test, he had a test today and he didn't even study for it. He was like, playing video games and, on the computer playing poker, and I was like, “you could be doing studying and you’re choosing not to.” And he's like, “well I already know the work.” And I'm like, I still would study…I'm like, just because you get a bad grade doesn't, you know, mean that you can't ask that teacher to give you, you know, some extra credit, or, you know, say how much that you're going to like really work on your paper and then ask them to help you. I mean, there's like kind of, you know, the way that you can do without having to fail it.

Though Marisa no longer considered her husband an academic mentor, his example was still influential in her day-to-day persistence by providing her a model of what not to do, an influence acknowledged in other research on family members as college models (Brooks, 2009). For the rest of the participants, as with other community college students, the encouragement and support of models and mentors from participants’ personal spheres was an important positive factor in their persistence, whether or not they were
first-generation students (Sorey & Duggan, 2008). In addition, other sources of powerful encouragement, such as religious and spiritual affiliations, also supported participants’ persistence.

Religion. Another influence on participants’ persistence that came from the personal sphere is the pervasive influence of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) on the regional culture in which participants live, work, and attend class. Not all participants were LDS church members, but more than half of the original participants were, and many of them spoke of the church as an influence on their decisions at work, in school, and in their personal lives. LDS church leaders at general and local levels frequently speak of persistence and agency as both doctrinally positive and personally applicable to all church members. They urge members to persist in difficult endeavors (Holland, 2010; Uchtdorf, 2010), to claim responsibility for the decisions and actions in their lives (Christofferson, 2009), and to obtain all the formal education possible (Hinckley, 2001). They promise members that persistent spiritual practice and divine providence will support efforts of persistence, particularly in matters of seeking formal education (Hendricks & Steuer, 2003; Monson, 2009).

Several participants took such pronouncements seriously as a support to their personal persistence in higher education. Lamar described how he drew on his spiritual foundations for not only daily efforts, such as class and homework, but also his overall belief about how to think and make decisions about education:

When I go to school, like before I came, I said my morning prayers, and I went and read my scriptures, and I prayed before I came to school to help me take in everything. To help me understand and organize things. And then when I go home, before I do homework, you know, that's just what I do, is I pray, and I think that's the foundation of my day. It's the foundation of my life, I think, my personal prayer, and I think that really helps me out. Because it's just what I
believe. I know. I know it helps me… [My wife and I] always talk about the foundation of our day, our life, everything, should be God. You know, why shouldn’t school be, you know, helpful. You know, why couldn’t Heavenly Father help us out. Why wouldn’t He, you know? For me. For anybody. I think it’s kind of, a foundation of…faith and knowing that your prayers are being heard, and you’re gonna study and you know that your life’s gonna turn out right. And you know when you’re making decisions, like going to school, it’s not because just because I want to do it, but it’s because I feel like it’s right to build my own family.

When asked why she persisted through the school year, despite health and other challenges, Joey attributed her persistence to faith. She believes that she is cooperating with God’s plan by persisting in higher education:

J: I was raised very LDS…I think part of why I'm so persistent is that, you know, I had, I did have a faith. And I just kind of kept my feelings of how I believe. So like, no, I don't go to church anymore, but I still believe that, you know, this is how I believe about God, …I think he's just, there are things planned out a certain way, and it's how you take it. If you take it with a grain of salt, then things will be okay. But you are too defensive of “why me, oh, God hates me,” then of course you're not going to be have life work out for you, because you're not trying your hardest to make it a good life…
R: And it sounds like going to school is trying your hardest to make a good life.
J: Yeah.

For Lourdes, one of her first contacts with the LDS church set the tone for all of her efforts at educational persistence, a powerful spiritual experience during which she was taught that the benefits of education continue beyond mortal life. She repeatedly affirmed her faith that God had helped and would continue to help her arrange logistics for her college persistence, including student visas, money for tuition, transportation to classes, energy to accomplish assignments, courage to speak in class, and contact with teachers, advisors, and classmates who touched her life in positive ways. When describing a challenge to her persistence, she frequently ended the description with comments like this one:
But I know, for sure I know it’s no like a accident, or something like that. No, I know that always God helped me. He give me the courage to do it. Because, there is a purpose, or a reason that I am studying. And for that reason, I am always feel that, His help.

Lourdes saw in her education a purpose higher than satisfying her own ambition or getting a more lucrative job. She drew an almost indefatigable drive for persistence from this higher purpose:

I ask God, yes. I ask God that, I want to study social work, because there is a reason. I want to study, I want to help people. And for me, it’s like receiving the training to help His daughters and sons. And that’s my main, my most important thing. Because now I am receiving the training. For that reason I say, like, help me find it [the way to persist]! Because I want to be an instrument in Your hands, and try to help, like a lot of people need help.

One possible reason Lourdes expressed such positive feelings about her education is that her educational path was congruent with her life path. Because of this alignment of purpose, she willingly sacrificed social life and money and applied church-based training and reasoning to her goal of graduation, all as part of her dream of a social work career.

Such quotes show the power of faith in supporting persistence for these LDS participants. This is not to say that the complex relationship between faith, religion, and persistence has been established as linear, unidirectional, or causal. In the context of spiritual or religious traditions, choices to leave college for time spent volunteering for missionary work or establishing a family can also pull students away from higher education. This may have been especially salient for adult students at this college because of the strong influence of the LDS church and the very high density of LDS church members in the area in which they lived. Participants who completed the study and persisted across three semesters saw religion (and the LDS church) as a support for their persistence; participants who left the study or the college may also have felt religious pressure, but as an influence that pulled them to prioritize noncollege options. For
example, five participants had stopped out at some point for full-time volunteer service for the LDS church. After completing their service and returning to college shortly before I interviewed them, three of these students did not persist through the course of the study; the two who persisted had returned to college many years after they stopped out for religious service. Another example is Elizabeth, who described herself as a member of a Bible-based Christian congregation and found that her faith led her to give less time to her education because she felt she should give more time to her husband and three children. After one semester at the community college, she transferred to an online, for-profit university because she could do more school work from home. But she was still ambivalent about persistence because she suspected that higher education was not in God’s plan for her, and she had not enrolled again by the time of the last interview.

Research on spirituality and student persistence suggests that spiritual development is an important part of student identity and development (Love, 2002), but one that is not often acknowledged or supported in academe (Rogers & Love, 2007). Saggio and Rendon (2004) identified spirituality as one of the most important influences in student persistence for a group of American Indian and Alaska Native students, and suggested that it may be particularly important for students who are marginalized in some way, as many adult students are. However, students from all demographic groups are increasingly interested in questions concerning purpose in life and transcendental meaning, and specifically in spiritual exploration, whether connected with formal religion or not (Higher Education Research Institute, 2005). As an activity of seeking and composing one’s identity and relationships (Love, 2002), spirituality is a powerful form
of meaning making, a process which is explored in greater depth in the section on framing in the following chapter.

The influences on persistence considered in this section come from the personal sphere; students’ employment responsibilities, material support such as rent and childcare, emotional support and modeling from family members, and religion and spirituality are all outside the direct purview of colleges and universities. Some theorists, reflecting the institutional perspective behind the term retention, develop theoretical frameworks that do not focus on the “individual processes of dealing with socializing influences,” on grounds that they are not “policy relevant” because they cannot be controlled by institutional policies (Reason, 2009; Weidman, 1989, p. 290). I believe that such individual processes are indeed policy-relevant, and that just because administrators cannot control them does not mean that they will not affect the way that students interact with higher education policy. It is important, of course, to consider the influences on persistence that come from colleges and universities because influences such as campus climate and culture may be more malleable by individuals from within higher education who seek to support students facing social and psychological barriers to persistence (Goto & Martin, 2009). This shift in focus from the personal to the institutional involved a surprising shift in perspective for me as the researcher, as I describe below.

Institutional Influences

The experiences described above frame participants’ college persistence in terms of personal rather than institutional influences. Participants who did not persist in the study or in college told me that they left college because of job loss, failing health or marriages. Those who did persist in the study said it was because of a sense of personal
or spiritual responsibility or a supportive family member. In the early interviews, participants rarely named the college or its social agents (teachers, advisors, administrators, or other students) as influences in their persistence. In subsequent interviews, when prompted, they related experiences with these social agents that deeply affected their feelings about and decisions during their college experience.

After noticing participants’ personal rather than institutional analysis of persistence, I asked participants about it: how they would characterize their relationship to the college as an institution, or (on a little less abstract level) if the college were a club, if they would consider themselves a part of it. As I listened to their responses, I realized that few participants directly attributed influence on their persistence to the institution or any of its manifestations. I was surprised because I came to the study fresh from doctoral classes full of readings in organizational theory and student retention research. Both areas assume that organizations affect their members, albeit in complex ways, and I was trained to look at higher educational organizations with this assumption as an a priori lens.

Indeed, the foundational theories in college student retention built on and inspired studies of college student behaviors to suggest that institutions both affect and have responsibility for their students’ patterns of leaving or staying in college (Tinto, 1975; Weidman, 1989).

In contrast to this assumption, participants saw their world, and their decisions, through a different lens, attributing the greatest influence to the personal sphere. They credited themselves and their families for their persistence, and most claimed “earned membership” in the “campus club” by dint of their own devotion of time and effort rather than an induction by an on-campus source. However, when describing their experience,
they frequently mentioned teachers, advisers, and other individuals on campus who deeply affected their feelings about and decisions during their college experience. This is consistent with literature on organizational culture generally and campus climate specifically, which suggests that climate and culture do influence organizational members—but often not in ways that the members themselves can easily recognize, or that institutional representatives desire to articulate (Fombrun, 1986; Gross, 2006; Museus, Nichols, & Lambert, 2008; Tones, Fraser, Elder & White, 2009).

In the section that follows, I step away from a focus on presenting participants’ experience the way they themselves saw it and turn instead to the interpretive consideration of aspects of their experience that fit with sensitizing concepts from the literature. I change my approach for this section because I believe that the institution’s role in promoting persistence, though it may be indirect, is still important to consider. Because I am removed from the immediate context and familiar with literature on the area, I can create a clearer interpretation of the institutional role based on participants’ stories than they can when asked about it directly. I will explore the role of teachers, advisors, students and others on campus as influences on participants’ persistence, and then consider their connection to the college as an institution.

Teachers. Participants had the most contact and meaningful experience with instructors on campus. Their descriptions of teachers led me to characterize this group of influential individuals as personally ideal and academically ideal. The profile of the personally ideal teacher emerged as one who invites students into the “club” of higher education by creating a feeling of comfort, support, and respect. Most of the teachers described in these quotes taught developmental education classes, which most students
took early in their college endeavors, and this is consistent with research about the impact that teachers can have during students’ first exposures to college (Engstrom, 2008). Math teachers figured prominently for four participants in helping them work through “a very sensitive, touchy” subject (Andy); these teachers respectively “felt like my grandma” (Marisa), “try to have a lot of patience, and try to explain in the way that the student have one option one way or other way to learn the same example” (Lourdes), and “didn’t overlook at the fact that the class wasn’t doing well there” (Marilyn).

Reading teachers also merited special mention. Andy described her reading teacher: “I think my teacher, in particular, she's great. She's really helpful in the way that she’ll talk to you about things.” Marilyn said that her reading teacher “created a lot of special memories” because “she put a lot of work into it…put her heart into her work,” and later an English teacher made a great impression on Marilyn when she described a class policy of confidentiality of student writing, creating a safe space for sharing sensitive, meaningful experiences. Sarah identified her reading teacher by name and without hesitation as the person who made the biggest difference in helping her feel at home on campus:

And just being patient and that kind of, just those, like for me, it's not big things that people have to do in order to help me. It's the small things, like being patient and just making sure that we get it no matter how many times we go over it, you know, or just being there, or sometimes going out of their way in order to see their students succeed.

Most of the teachers identified as personally ideal also received student appreciation and respect for their effect on student learning. According to Marilyn, academically ideal teachers are “fully prepared every time” for class, deliver comprehensible instruction and “take time to explain in class,” give relevant and
challenging assignments that are “not like killers, just straight to the point,” and are aware of where students are in their mastery understanding and review as necessary to bring the class up to speed. Sarah’s descriptions of her teachers are particularly vivid in exemplifying several participants’ views on the effects of good teaching. Academically ideal teachers teach and model skills and techniques that actually work:

She kind of explain it more so that I can understand what type of questions I should ask myself before I can say I liked it or I didn't like it or I understood it or didn't understand it. And so like those two classes [developmental reading and writing] combined together, kind of make me break down the idea or the sense that I couldn’t understand, so I can understand it better.

Academically ideal teachers find ways to make abstract concepts enjoyable, memorable and relevant. The same teacher who made Sarah feel welcome on campus also changed her perspective in these aspects:

What I love about all of my professors, but she's one of the examples, is that they make learning to where it's fun and makes you like put it into your daily life, so that way whenever you get hit with a question like “what is mitochondria,” you'd be able to relate, “oh, one of these days, I did this and that, and it relates back to this.” It's like, they make it so where you understand the concept, the hard concepts or something, to apply and to remember in your life.

It may be that such a question is not only rare to encounter in daily life but is also difficult for most people to relate to daily life. For Sarah, the point is not specifically about mitochondria but about her experience with a teacher who helped her feel capable, prepared, and comfortable with academic material, creating a sense of academic identity.

Academically ideal teachers also hold high expectations for student performance. For Sarah, this characteristic was as valuable as the kindness and patience of her reading teacher, even though it sometimes came with personally disagreeable behavior:

And then my psychology professor, he can be a total butthead. Because like, he has a Ph.D., like a doctorate degree and all that stuff, and he kind of feels like he doesn't like to repeat himself again. But I like it how, I like his teaching method…
In my opinion, some of those teachers are the best teachers. Because it's like, they don't just tell you “oh, it's okay, you didn't do your work” or you know, “oh, maybe next time you'll get a better grade.” They're just like, “you screwed up and you got to get better at it.” You know? And I don't know, for me that's always been better, because that way I give myself higher expectations that my teachers have for me.

The way that Sarah describes this brusque but valued professor stands in parallel to how she describes her sister, who was the most important model of college participation from her personal sphere: "because she kind of like, just she tells me how it is. She doesn't try to sugarcoat it or anything like that. She just tells me, you know, you just got to do it for yourself and for [your baby] because she's all you've got." Participants gave such teachers high respect and considerable weight of authority and spoke of them frequently. But most participants did not specifically credit their instructors as influences on their persistence the way that they credited their powerful personal mentors.

In addition, academically ideal teachers assign meaningful assignments. Class assignments led Lourdes to research President John F. Kennedy and Helen Keller; these two individuals became her heroes and reinforced her determination to persist:

And for me, that was a good example. There is no justification, I cannot say, “I cannot do this because I cannot speak English very well.” No, no. Because that is an excuse. If the other person which more difficult than me, can overcome more difficult challenges, then why I cannot do that? And that’s the way like, it help me to encourage me, by myself.

Not all participants’ experiences with teachers were as ideal, but those described here fit well with research on student engagement, which shows that interactions with faculty, particularly in regards to academic work, are very powerful in supporting and predicting persistence. This is especially true for adult students, whose contact with the institution may happen almost exclusively in the classroom (Tinto, 1998). Engstrom (2008) characterizes faculty as agents for building a positive, safe learning environment,
and points out that faculty with a passion for teaching and high expectations for student success, who knew their students well and gave ongoing encouragement, contributed to students’ motivation and confidence. Pascarella, Seifert and White (2008) found that the overall exposure to organized and clear classroom instruction significantly increased students’ probability of enrolling for the second year of study, even after controlling for academic achievement and degree plans. Large-scale statistical analysis shows that student engagement has a positive, statistically significant effect on persistence to the second year of college (Kinzie, Gonyea, Shoup, & Kuh, 2008; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008). Engaged students tend to receive higher grades, and higher GPA is also correlated with persistence (Miglietti & Strange, 1998). This engagement, fostered through classroom climate, faculty-student interactions, and meaningful assignments, comes in large part from the role of personally and academically ideal teachers demonstrating the fundamental philosophy of development: “the belief that every student can learn under the right conditions” (Kinzie, et al., 2008, p. 31).

Contact with personally and academically ideal teachers was an important part of participants’ perceptions of the college, consistent with research showing that student perception of faculty use of active learning practices has a positive impact on how students perceive institutional commitment to student welfare (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008). In other words, participants’ positive impression of their reading and math teachers contributed to their feeling of comfort on the college campuses. But this impression of climate came from other representatives of the college as well, such as advisors and student peers, to which I now turn.
Advisors. Besides instructors, participants also encountered the institutional influence of advisors as part of their persistence process. Reports of participant experiences with advisors were mixed. Many participants felt that the advisors were not helpful because they rushed students through short, confusing advising sessions. For example, Andy met with an advisor before her first semester, but she did not understand anything that was discussed and did not know what questions to ask. By the end of the year, she still felt that she “kind of fumbles my way through school,” finding most of her own information as she goes along. Marisa met with an advisor once but felt pressured her to take on school responsibilities that would interfere with her family and work responsibilities:

I know that the advisor wanted me to take a lot more classes. At the same time, like I wanted to take more classes, but it just, with my kids,…and I was just like, I work, so I don’t know when I have like time for all that. I think she was pushing more credit hours towards me to like finish at a certain time. Where I didn’t feel comfortable doing that.

The consensus seemed to be that advisors were of the most use for confirming the plans of those who already knew what they wanted, rather than helping undecided students find a direction that suited them. After Sunny realized that she was interested in forensic science rather than nursing, she said, “I talked to a counselor when I did the Criminal Justice, and they helped out a lot. So even though, maybe it depends on what counselor you get, but, if you kind of know what direction, it will give you, you know, guidelines.”

Participants felt that it was their own responsibility to know their preferred direction and ask lots of questions, and it was the advisor’s responsibility to take time to answer questions. Lourdes pointed out this difference of responsibility, claiming that experience with advisors depends on “your attitude. Because at the beginning, I supposed
that the advisor need to tell me everything in detail. And that’s not like, their responsibility.” She changed her approach to go to the advisor to catch any details she might have missed after extensive investigative preparation. Lamar identified the same pattern, agreeing that advisors are helpful but only

...because I make them help me out. You know, I think, I’ve been to different advisors at [the college]. Some will want to get you out as fast as they can so they can help the next person. Or you know, I think I noticed that. But I make them help me out. Just, “I want to do this, how are you going to help me? what's this? how do I do this? why do I need to do this? Okay, so this is the thing I need.” You know, those questions, and they'll help you out. I don't think, I think if you ask the questions that way, it just, they should know it.

Participants also emphasized that interpersonal fit was essential, as no amount of responsibility-taking made up for time wasted with a confusing advisor who does not care personally about students. Sarah spoke with several advisors before she finally found one who made her feel comfortable and whom she could understand. Marilyn related several lengthy descriptions of her family members' negative experience with advisors, summarizing thus:

It’s not necessarily that they are the advisor, and they are going to act or be a certain way with you...I think it depends on who you are talking to. And if that person is nice and kind and responsible and worry about students or whatever, that person will help you out. If not, tough luck.

On the other hand, several participants also described influential positive interactions with advisors. After Joey identified her interest in speech/language pathology, her next step was contacting an advisor:

I had emailed academic advisors [at the university] and said, okay, this is the field I want to go into... [I explained my academic history]...And what do you think I should do? And he said, look, just go get your generals, start from the bottom up. Go to the community college and then transfer to [the university], and that will help you.
Lourdes and Paola identified several advisors by name who reassured them at despairing moments that they could and would cut their way through the bureaucratic jungle—and then helped them do it. Lamar and Iris both identified the advisor assigned to work with Native American students as very helpful, though mostly with paperwork and deadlines regarding scholarships and interfacing between the college and the tribe as opposed to advice regarding scheduling classes or coping with pressures of school.

It appeared that advisors’ influence on persistence was mediated by student perceptions of caring and attribution of responsibility. Students who felt that advisors did not have time, care, or relevant information to share used this as evidence for why they could or would not continue at the college. Students who made a strong personal connection to an advisor benefited from the interaction, in both academic and emotional ways. Students who had taken responsibility for their own persistence did not expect much from, or give much time or credit to, advisors as an influence on persistence.

For participants who made positive connections with advisors, their advisors performed the role of what Museus and Quaye (2008) call individual cultural agents, who translate, mediate, and model for ethnic minority students along their academic journey. This is consistent with Rendon’s (1994) theory of validation, which suggests that expectations of college involvement, which is student-initiated, might not work as well for some students as validation, which is initiated by teachers or advisors who reach out to students with the specific message that students can do well and persist in college, and that students and their cultures of origin are valuable. However, as seen above, the desire for validation from teachers and advisors was counterbalanced by participants’ sense of responsibility for involvement in their educational planning. Similarly, participants’
descriptions of student peers demonstrated varying levels of contribution to their sense of belonging on campus. Some participants said very little about student peers, while others readily provided instances of beneficial social interactions with student peers.

*Student peers on campus.* In addition to teachers and advisors, student peers also provided invitations to “join the club,” helping Paola, Sunny, Lamar, Andy, and Marisa feel comfortable and competent at the college and supporting their learning in a social context (Hansman, 2001). Paola was paired in a class project with a student with whom she built a strong affinity based on common experience—both were older than the other students, both worked and ran households, and both had little patience for anything superfluous in class. These two adult students began to offer each other mutual academic help:

> So [she] helps me to make my resume, American resume, not Mexican resume. And yeah, that kinds of things that for her are okay to do and easy to do. And she asks me some advice about how to take photographs and put it in her portfolio. And I just give her the ideas and everything and I say, “okay, if you cannot take the photos, tell me and I go and take it for you.” It’s like, *toma y daca*. I don’t know in English. Yeah, it’s kind of, okay, I give you some, you give me some.

Andy met a friend the first day of class, when both nervously went to the wrong classroom and realized their mistake together:

> It was already a little awkward because we had been walking next to each other. [laughs] So we just started talking and then we just kept talking, and then we hit it off. And we’re friends since then. But, I think she really helped to kind of ease me in, ’cause there was someone that I could sit next to and you know, ask if they understood what was going on, or partner up with, or something, so that made me feel welcome.

Marisa’s connection with peers on campus came in a student-formed study group, women who met weekly for several hours to help each other conquer a math class that had blocked Marisa since high school. All of the women passed with good grades, and they
were close enough as friends that they went out to dinner to celebrate after the semester.

Marisa’s grade, however, was the lowest, at which she was disgruntled, because she felt that she had participated fully in the group:

But to come out with a B+, it was still good, but then when they’re all like jumping around, “I got an A,” and you’re just like “What! I helped you!” Like they were struggling on it and then you were struggling on it but then by the time you learned how to, you know, after a couple times that you did some problems like then you started helping them, to help them understand it and then you’re just like, “I helped you.” I sat there and studied with them and gave them like little quizzes and stuff.

On one hand, the friendships that Andy and Marisa described could be seen as personal connections, because the students were not assigned by the college to fill this role. But I choose to categorize them as institutional agents because their contact came through class enrollment, was originally focused on academic purposes, and was mostly carried out on campus. I present these examples to demonstrate the presence of what Tinto (1998) would call out-of-class engagement in meaningful academic behaviors. They point to the role of social support networks in persistence, especially early in a student’s college career (Skahill, 2002), and to the importance of classroom-based social integration or membership, as discussed in Chapter II, in supporting persistence of mature students (Dennis, Calvillo, & Gonzalez, 2008).

According to student retention literature, these students were integrated socially and academically, which would have contributed significantly to their persistence (Braxton, 2000; Tinto, 1993; Tinto, 1998), especially for those like Andy and Marisa who had little or no college support or modeling system at home. But though they appreciated the friendship and academic support of their student peers, they did not attribute persistence to their integration. Rather, they perceived more important influences for
persistence in their familial networks and in their own personal identity work. It may be that those who do not have support at home must find the support at school, and if they do not find it either place, they leave college.

Tierney (1991) says that leaders matter in creating institutions that support persistence. So with that in mind, I spend some time considering the institutional influences on persistence, even though my participants did not include the institution in their conceptualization of their own persistence. What is the role of the community college itself? I started by looking at the connection between individual participants and the college.

*The college.* In the third interview, I asked participants if they would consider themselves a member of the “campus club” as a way to understand whether and how they had a sense of belonging on campus (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). All nine participants said yes, they would consider themselves members—but they immediately qualified that answer by complex considerations of effort, time, money, and social or organizational involvement. For Lamar, membership was an expected right, almost, that comes to those who put in enough work, time, and money, as demonstrated by good grades.

Yeah. Like you can come in and get your tuition, pay for it, and not go to school, or not do a lot of work. And you know, what do you expect from not doing a lot of work, you would expect no grade or a really poor grade. But if you do work, and you put work into it, and you're one of the hard-working students here, you deserve to be a part of the membership if there was one.

Sarah differentiated between membership as manifested through activities, which she did not attend, and membership in general, which she earned by "working hard enough in order to...be worthy enough to be a club member." Similarly, Andy’s idea of her membership specifically did not include social integration:
R: So if [the college] were a club, would you consider yourself a member?
A: I guess, because I go here. But not like a participating member, you know. It’s like the people who go to church on Sunday, or people who say that…they’re whatever religion, and then don’t practice it kind of thing. [laughs]…I mean, I would think I would feel more involved if I attended, like our sports activities. Or got involved with something else that the school offered. I would probably feel more involved with the community college that way, but because I come here and leave, I come here for three hours and go home, twice a week, I don’t feel like a part of [the college].

In these statements, participants demonstrated their belief that they were connected to the college by academic but not necessarily social participation. However, though they may not have felt the emotional connection that shows in fans who attend college parties and sports events, they were connected to this particular institution in other, less obvious ways.

The clearest connection between participants and the college showed up when they compared it to other institutions. Asked how their experience might have been different elsewhere, participants described an imagined university setting of lecturers using a projector at the front of a huge, crowded auditorium, where students are “just one of the masses” (Andy) and are pressured to “put in more than a hundred [percent of effort]” (Paola). As Sunny described it,

I just know that universities are a lot bigger, so that would probably intimidate me a lot more. And the teachers here, that they have here, they’re really nice…I’ve heard, you know, universities, they don’t really care, just kind of throw stuff out there, but these ones, they actually care. So I like that part. And the smaller classes is always god. I’m kind of a shy person, so going up in a class that just has hundreds of people, or maybe a hundred people, I’d get super nervous, I think.

Participants reiterated their ideas of what a university would be like to highlight what they saw as their main connection to the college: a feeling that teachers care about students, an aspect of culture that they assume to be specific to the college. It was the feeling of being cared for personally instead of intimidated and nervous that leads to their
satisfaction with the college, which demonstrates that faculty members can influence student connections to the college through campus climate (Baumgartner & Johnson-Bailey, 2008).

Were participants connected to the institution? In their eyes, not much. Were they connected to individuals on campus? Absolutely. This is consistent with literature on organizational theory, which suggests that individuals are deeply affected by the institutions in which they participate, often in subtle but powerful ways through culture and climate (Schein, 2000). These participants saw their relationship with the college in terms of contact with individuals, not units within an organization such as the math department or the advising office. But the actions of the social agents of the college—administrators, faculty, staff, and even other students—are shaped by the official and unofficial structure of the college, which in turn flows from decisions of administration and policy makers (Tierney, 1991).

As noted previously, Tinto’s (1993) theory of student departure set the tone for the field in concentrating on the structural-functional aspects of departure behavior patterns. Baird (2001) undertakes an expansion of Tinto’s (1993) model of student departure from higher education, specifically considering departure decisions in light of psychological climate. He emphasizes the importance of student appraisal or perception of their environment in establishing perceived climate, or the global construct of “anthropomorphic characteristics that the individual attributes to the organization” such as friendliness, indifference, or condescension (p. 67). He points out that climate can be changed by both direct and indirect means and that adjustment of climate toward the
welcoming, supportive, and expecting of excellence is likely to support student persistence in higher education.

Empirical investigations on climate have found that “climate does, in fact, influence student persistence and degree completion,” (Museus, Nichols & Lambert, 2008; Rhee, 2008). Museus and Quaye (2009) highlight the connection between student-perceived campus climate and persistence. They discuss the role of collective and individual cultural agents, who translate, mediate, and model for students to support their persistence in the culture of higher education. They find that the efforts of individual cultural agents on campus can be more important than any student organization or peer group. Though their discussion looks specifically at ethnic minority college student persistence, they suggest that it may also be useful for other nontraditional student groups, and I believe that it applies well to the adult student participants in this study. Campus climate matters for persistence, and it is expressed through the actions and interactions of individual people on campus who represent the college—faculty, staff, and administrators.

In this chapter, I have explored data and literature to answer the first two research questions, which ask about the experience of persistence at the college for adult students and how influences from the personal and institutional spheres affect their persistence decisions. So far, this is a descriptive study. But the question more interesting to me is one of explanation: why do these students persist?

As I moved through analysis, I encountered hints that it is not the specific details of everyday experience but the meaning that participants felt behind those details that made the most difference. Hearing participants reflect about what is enough money to go
to school and why, or about whether to change a work schedule or quit school when the two are in conflict, I sensed an unspoken process of weighing and eliminating options that participants felt they should justify. Wondering why participants sometimes chafed at their perceptual and material safety net, or why they said the college did not exert much influence on their persistence despite their frequent stories of supportive teachers, I became aware of the tension between crediting others and crediting self for actions and decisions, and of what it means to attribute responsibility. Changes in the way participants talked about themselves, their lives, and their college experience over the four interviews led me to speculate about agency, development, and framing—conceptualizations of identity and relationship that go beyond descriptions of schedules and grades. The next chapter moves up another level of abstraction to theorize about the social processes at work in these students’ persistence, creating a substantive grounded theory.
CHAPTER V

THEORY IN DEVELOPMENT

In this part of the study, I move beyond description and analysis to synthesis and generation of theory. The theory I present comprises concepts in relationship to each other that help explain the process of persistence in higher education. Each concept and relationship is grounded in data and emerged through coding, memoing, and repeated passes through the data to increase levels of abstraction. In this chapter, I will present three core concepts (agency, development, and framing), explore the ways that others have used these concepts, and describe their relationship to each other in the grounded theory. For each concept, I have chosen one or two participants whose experience most clearly illustrates the properties of the concepts. This does not mean that the concept did not appear in the words of other participants. On the contrary, the three concepts attained core status because they appeared repeatedly throughout all interviews. The strategy of using one or two focal participants simply supports clarity of illustration.

In most cases, as in the previous chapter, I quote directly from participants’ words, choosing blocks or lines of particularly powerful text to illustrate concept development or relationship. However, as qualitative researchers know, people do not always speak in easily quotable ways. Some participants shared valuable insights but were neither articulate nor concise in their speech. Rather than discard such data or exclude those participants from the development of theory, I used a compression or
summarizing approach to present the essence of their experience (Kennedy, 2009). I then included three of these lengthy but theoretically significant passages, and their accompanying codes, as Appendix E so that interested readers can see examples of how I use the data to support the emerging theory.

Another note is in order about what this theory is meant to do and what it is not meant to do. This is a substantive grounded theory, which means it is an explanation of a social process constructed from data collected from a specific group of participants. This report provides the theory as “perspectival knowledge based on the lived experience of participants” (O’Connor, Netting, & Thomas, 2008, p. 30). It is meant to explain persistence from the point of view of these participants, and it is meant to be used as a tool to support understanding of these participants, including how to serve or understand them in relation to other groups who might experience or explain persistence differently. It is also meant as a platform for future research into persistence in higher education, in other arenas, and for other groups of people. In its current state, it is not meant to be a formal grounded theory that explains behavior on a wide-ranging, generalized, statistically significant scale. It is one piece of the larger research venture puzzle, one side of the academic coin, one tile in the mosaic scene that builds our understanding of why people do what they do. Further theoretical adjustment, operationalization, and theory testing will provide valuable refinement.

Finally, a note here about concepts from the published literature. The concepts I present here are similar to concepts already published and in wide use, such as agency (Giddens, 1984), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995), development (King, 2009), and narrative framing (Czarniawska, 2004). However, I identified and developed them through
working with the data, before encountering them in the literature, so I count them as emergent and grounded rather than a forced fit or an overlay on the data. These unplanned but clear parallels lend strength to both the published literature and to my grounded theory. The usefulness of this theory lies not in entire originality but in thoughtful arrangement of ideas, in original insights on perennial problems, in cross-disciplinary application, and in recognition of data that suggest new directions for research and practice.

The third research question guiding this study asks for synthesis and explanation: why do adult students persist? Patterns emerging through constant comparative analysis suggest that persistence is a process of exercising agency, undergoing development, and framing options. Because of the linear nature of academic writing, these concepts are presented sequentially, but in lived experience they happen simultaneously. I discuss them here in the order they emerged to show how the theory developed.

Core Concepts

Agency

The first pattern that emerged from the transcript data showed up as students gave themselves credit or blame for their college experience. I noticed frequent repetition of phrases like “I’m just like that, I guess—I plan things out” (Joey) or “I finally decided that I wanted it and nothing was going to stop me now” (Lamar). As coding continued, more and more codes piled up with terms like “blaming self” or “learning from past mistakes” or “framing self as responsible.” I used the concept of agency to encompass these codes.
Properties of agency. My concept of agency comprises four properties. Participants exercise agency (1) when they claim responsibility for the decision to persist in higher education, and for the actions, planning, negotiation, and energy by which participation and persistence happen; (2) when they initiate these decisions or actions; (3) when they assign blame or credit to themselves for consequent events following the decisions or actions; and (4) when they attribute control of their college persistence to themselves. These adult learners claim agency. By their own account, they help or hinder their own cause more than any other person or influence. They are not just participants or doers, obedient to the dictate of parents, teachers, or tradition. They are the driving force, the guiding intelligence, the steering travelers in the vehicle of higher education toward their degree destination. This concept, whether stated or implied, guides the way that they attribute control and assign blame or credit. In this section, I will address each of the four properties of the concept of agency.

First, participants spend a great deal of time and energy focused on responsibility: claiming it, enacting it, reflecting on and comparing times when they felt it or did not feel it, fantasizing about relief from it, reinforcing assumptions that they will or should claim it, and taking it on it because it appears that no one else will do so. They make themselves personally responsible for understanding, learning from their own and others’ mistakes, and expecting hard work. At one point, Sarah experienced a “breakdown,” overwhelmed and discouraged by the demands of the end of the semester in addition to her job and her role as a single parent. It was through her sense of responsibility and a rearticulated expectation of hard work, she felt, that she recovered:

I kind of just got myself out of it. Because I called my obstetrician/gynecologist to get a prescription of antidepressants, and I thought that that was going to help me,
and I started trying to modify my diet, and just kind of, even making it worse. And I just decided that, you know what, I'm not the only one that's, you know, raising a baby by herself. And that I need to do this, and that I don't really have the option to fail…. [Laughs] I just got myself out of it.

Second, participants go beyond talking of responsibility; they also initiate action to support their claimed responsibility to persist. They plan for academics far in advance, sometimes with the help of advisors but often on their own. They register early, arrive early to class, put in hours of homework, ask teachers for academic help, confront teachers on unfair grades, and explore the college website to answer their questions. They negotiate with family members, employers, teachers, and others in their lives who may have priorities other than supporting their persistence. They strategize employment, enrollment, relationship time, and discussions of logistical or priority negotiation, knowing their limits and looking for ways to push forward without getting overwhelmed. They network for information and resources. When one source does not work, they try an alternate modality such as an online class or a phone consultation, and sometimes they simply push past their limits because they feel they must persist. Other times, they find out the acceptable minimum in all areas of their lives and aim to meet that standard, accepting “satisfactory” instead of “excellent” because it means conserving resources for another day’s persistence. One of the most important ways that they initiate action, albeit psychological action, was through framing, discussed later as a separate concept.

Though she frequently fantasized about relief from work or parenting responsibilities, Sarah claimed responsibility for and initiated the actions by which her participation and persistence happened, in this case learning when and how to register for classes for coming semesters. The previous semester, she had not thought to sign up early, and by the time she checked, the classes she needed were full. She ended up taking
what was available, not convenient, and she registered early the next semester, determined not to repeat that oversight:

R: How did you know that, about the credits and about when you could register early?
S: [laughs] That’s the good thing about me. I always ask. I just went around asking, and somebody told me something, and somebody else told me something. I’d go and ask another person, and if they told me the same thing as this one, then I’d go ask a third person. And if three people told me the same thing, then that’s what I took. And...I looked up on the computer, because the guy that works at the lab didn’t know jack squat, so I had to look it up, and I actually showed him how the semester…So yeah. Yeah. I’m a researcher. I don’t know it? I’ll go find out.

Sarah claimed credit for this success by a direct statement asserting her proud identity:

“That’s the good thing about me…I’m a researcher.” She made herself personally responsible for accurate information, thereby owning and learning from past academic mistakes.

In another incident, she described getting what would be decent grades by many standards: A-, B, and C. But immediately, she started listing reasons why they should or could have been better, reasons that she should or could have controlled: “I procrastinated.” “I thought it’s easy but I learned [my error].” More specifically,

My psychology class, I, I could’ve gotten an A in that class, but I got a B instead, because I decided not to study. And the teacher pretty much gave us the exam, we just had to find the answers. And I decided, hey, let’s go to Florida. And they even did it as a, as a um, whatchamacallit, class assignment, that they went through all of the answers. But I decided, hey, I’d rather go to Florida, a week before the semester’s gonna end. So, yeah, I bombed that test and it brought me down to a B. [laughs]. . . Not worth it, because I got sick there.

Her tone of voice said, “Dumb me, I was the silly girl that got my funny priorities mixed up!” This is an example of Sarah as agent for her life, claiming responsibility and control instead of blaming hard teachers, low wages, an abandoning boyfriend, a pushy sister, or
poor health. It is a position of considerable pressure: In her own eyes, there is no one but Sarah to blame, and no one but Sarah gets the credit.

Third, following the actions they initiate, participants blame or credit themselves for specific instances of what happens subsequently, even if an outside observer might attribute differently. Participants blame themselves for any academic delay or low performance, citing their own procrastination, disorganization, indecision, immaturity, or laziness. This self-directed blame is consistent, despite what I saw as burdens of onerous paperwork, poor advising or teaching, spousal sabotage, bureaucratic inefficiency, deficient high school preparation, inexperience, or simply too much to do in life’s circumstances. On the other hand, participants also credit themselves for academic progress and high performance, for finding the desire and time to do homework, getting to class early (or even on time!), getting good grades, putting in hard work, being prepared for exigencies, persisting despite lack of help, and refusing to abandon family and goals despite being overwhelmed. Participants were quick to say that they consider themselves members of the college “club,” as it were, because they had put in the time, money, and work—they had earned a deserved membership, for which they gave themselves credit. This self-directed credit was far more common than credit given to others, though the difference was not as striking as between blaming self and others. When asked about who or what helped their persistence, participants gave credit to a whole social network: parents, siblings, spouses and partners, children, in-laws, peer mentors, teachers, advisors, friends, babysitters, employers, the government, and God. But they reserved the ultimate credit for their persistence to themselves.
Sarah blamed herself for what she considered procrastination and low grades, when I would have blamed academic underpreparedness based on high school experience:

I mean, I sometimes do study but not as much as I should. Because the teacher is like “you have to, have to, study two hours a day, or you're not studying at all.” I'm like, wow, I have issues then. [laughs] It's a hard class, especially since I only took earth science in ninth grade, and then I took a biology in tenth grade. You know, so there's only like two sciences. So for me, it's hard.

But Sarah credited herself for resisting the temptation to leave school, a move she equates with shirking other major responsibilities through a negative comparison:

And then, I have a sister that decided that, you know what, I’m going to have a nervous breakdown because I’m severely depressed, and I’m just gonna go lose weight and be a stripper. Leave my two kids and my husband, and the heck with them. So yeah. It’s all great. [laughs] So I’m proud of myself that at least I didn’t do something that drastic, you know. Yeah. It’s great.

Though Sarah also struggled with formally diagnosed depression, she faced the pressures of life and refused to crack. Her assumptions of agency showed when she said her sister "decided" to react as she did to depression. It speaks to Sarah's value of meeting responsibility that she was proud of herself for not shirking the responsibility of work, parenting, and passing her classes, even though she did break down temporarily.

Fourth, this definitive self-credit became a larger pattern, going beyond specific instances to attributing control of their overall persistence to themselves. This attribution started with a repeated belief that it is the participant’s action that makes the difference in what happens, which is akin to the concept of internal locus of control (Rotter, 1966). Participants continued to reinforce assumptions of agency in the form of beliefs that what they do is efficacious, similar to the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1995). Continuing to the other side of self-efficacy, participants declared their agentic identities through a
repetition of beliefs regarding themselves and the state of being they embodied. They reveled in feeling the possibilities before them, recognizing that desirable ends were now within reach, and demonstrating their emotional investment in persistence. This feeling of being in control of their own persistence—beliefs and emotions about identity and ability—led to certain kinds of action, such as rationalizing academic shortcuts, as Sarah did when she skipped class and relied on energy drinks to complete assignments. It was as if participants felt that they knew they could handle the task, so they also knew when and how much they could afford to not do or be the best. This approach could be seen as either dangerous overconfidence or wise conservation of resources.

For Sarah, the emotional experience of attributing control to herself developed gradually but became very strong by the end of the school year. A year after returning to college at her sister’s insistence, she found that her motivation had changed. Along with her dawning desire for responsibility came a vision of job and education possibilities:

I guess I can say it kind of just dawned on me. Like why do I always have to have somebody, you know, micromanaging my life. Why can't I do that and have the same results. Why can't I push myself to be somebody in life, so I don't have to be doing what I'm doing now. Why can't I do that? And also my job, working at my job. You know, looking at all of the RNs, and you know, like why can't I do that? You know, because I was thinking about, I'm still debating about being here, my nursing here, or you know, the University of Utah. And I'm like, you know, if I have to go on a waiting list here, why don't I just get good grades and all that, and go up to the U. But it's like, I don't know, I just looked, I'm tired of envying what everybody else has because I'm too lazy to work for it, I guess is the best way to say it. And I just wanted to do things for me now. Because, I mean, I'm still young, even though I have a baby, and I mean, life goes on, with or without me.

Sarah believed that she could persist, no matter what: “But you know, the thing that I remind myself is, I'm not going to give up. Because if I've been going along my merry little way for a year, why can't I do it for the next four years, or however long it
takes me to get my degree.” Her assumption was that since she could do these things, she would. She set it as a goal to not stop, a determination for persistence explicitly stated.

It appears that a persistent student, exercising agency, repeats positive messages to herself about her identity and about her actions or abilities that lead to persistence. She not only believes that she can persist, and that persistence is in consonance with her identity, but that she wants to do it. Thus, ability, identity, and emotion all align within her perception. She manifests this attribution in her plans and actions, justifying cutting corners at times. In Sarah’s mind, it seems, the test was not whether she can persist but whether she will. This view came up again and again, as if to say it does not matter what drives you; the point is the doing it, the action taken. This is one of the key aspects of my concept of agency: initiating action and claiming responsibility for it.

*Related concepts and research.* The agentic connection between beliefs, actions, and personal responsibility is related to a long tradition of sociological theory focusing on agency. Such philosophical and sociological greats as Locke, Kant, Dewey, Parsons, Bourdieu, and Giddens wrestled with definitions, applications, and implications, creating a rich and complex exploration of the role of agency as “purposeful social action and overcoming obstacles” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Lieblich, Zilber, & Tuval-Maschiach, 2008, p. 615). A full review and application of this sociological tradition is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, I turn to a well-developed concept more familiar to the education field, with considerable empirical support for connection to persistence in higher education: Bandura’s (1995) idea of self-efficacy, from the field of psychology.

Bandura (1995) claims that beliefs of personal efficacy are central to the exercise of human agency. Sources of efficacy beliefs are mastery experiences, vicarious
experiences, social persuasion, and attribution regarding physiological and emotional
states. Each source matters not inherently but as perceived and interpreted by the
individual. Bandura sees optimistic efficacy beliefs to be a benefit, not a flaw of
misjudgment, because they allow individuals to try things they would never otherwise
attempt. Bandura discusses the role of self-efficacy beliefs in such varied applications as
the changing structure of family systems, intellectual development, and career
development and pursuits. These applications support my interpretation of agency as
crucial to persistence, as Bandura demonstrates that success in these and other areas is
more influenced by self-efficacy beliefs than by available financial resources, domain-
specific knowledge, or the range of opportunities available through an organization, such
as a slate of career or college major options. This may help explain why finances, though
an acknowledged difficulty for participants, were not what I would call a determinant of
persistence. More important, perhaps, were participants’ beliefs about what they could
afford and what were appropriate ways to spend their money—a matter of what might be
called financial self-efficacy.

Applying the concept of self-efficacy to adult learners, Flammer (1995)
differentiates between “controlling (i.e., the actual regulation of a process), control (i.e.,
the potential to control or regulate a process if necessary), and control belief (i.e., the
subjective representation of one’s capabilities to exercise control)” (p. 69). Flammer’s
model of development of control beliefs suggests that even very young children take
success and failure on simple tasks as personal achievement, which is echoed in
participants’ blaming or crediting themselves for academic mistakes and triumphs.
Flammer reviews research to illustrate that people tend to overestimate their personal
control in many situations, which may be why participants attribute control of their persistence to themselves and perhaps why they are so shaken or frustrated when events such as job loss or physical illness interfere with that persistence. Self-efficacy beliefs at the general level, a “traitlike general sense of confidence in one’s own capabilities to master different types of environmental demands,” correlate positively with healthy adaptation to major life transitions, which may be because such beliefs act as a buffer for high-stress life events (Elder, 1995; Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995, p. 177). If self-efficacy beliefs are similar to the claim or exercise of agency as I define it, they might help explain why some participants continued with their scholastic endeavors despite stressful events in their personal lives, while others did not.

Self-efficacy also has implications for higher education. Strong efficacy beliefs in students contribute to higher retention rates (DeWitz, Woolsey & Walsh, 2009), and various studies point to possible mediators for this relationship. Zimmerman (1995) defines perceived academic self-efficacy as “personal judgments of one’s capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performances” (p. 203). He establishes that academic self-efficacy, an internal belief, plays a causal role in important external actions such as goal setting, time planning and management, self-regulation, and strategy use, and in outcomes such as academic achievement and college persistence. For adult students returning to higher education, higher self-efficacy has been tied to stronger orientation toward meaning rather than memorization in their learning (Ronning, 2009), which may contribute to deeper engagement, which is significantly predictive of persistence (Kuh, et al., 2008). Beliefs about one’s efficacy in occupational choice, decision-making, and the ability to balance
multiple roles directly predict career-related trajectories through college and beyond, such as choice of major, though academic efficacy is a better predictor of academic achievement (Hackett, 1995). These studies support my operationalization of agency as participants’ initiation of actions such as reminding themselves to do homework, finding ways to connect with teachers and advisors, and making themselves responsible for completing extra credit assignments and for choosing classes that will simultaneously fit their schedules and satisfy graduation requirements. Lourdes provided a near classic definition of self-efficacy after I commented that her efforts to get a job in her field of social work would be quite a distance from her home in another city. She calmly said, “I know. But when you want something, nothing is going to be easy. You have to pay the price. And I know that. And I know that I can do it. We are going to see.” She articulated the self-efficacious belief that doing a target activity would be worth the effort, and that she can actually do the target activity.

What is the difference between what I have developed and existing theories of self-efficacy and agency? As I see it, there is something that leads some learners to go beyond beliefs and statements to actions consistent with their beliefs. Research shows that the desire and even the intent to participate in higher education do not necessarily lead to the action of participating (Goto & Martin, 2009). There is evidence to suggest that making “declarative commitments—goal-oriented public, voluntary, explicit, and nonretractable messages comprising a term, an objective and a focus”—supports finding solutions to problems and reaching the explicitly stated goal (Chiocchio & Lafreniere, 2009, p. 296). In other words, students who outright state their goals are more likely to achieve them. That has face validity, especially in light of statements from Sarah and
Lourdes. But it does not fit the stories of other participants who were also adamant and specific in their persistence goals in the first interview but left the college without completing another semester. The desire to persist, the belief that persistence is important, the belief that one can persist, and even the statement of intent to persist are all necessary but not sufficient conditions for actually persisting (Ponton, Derrick, & Carr, 2005).

The question of what is sufficient to produce persistent action has been under discussion for centuries (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), and unfortunately this study does not fully answer it. However, it does provide a concept of agency to aid in ongoing discussion of the question, one that is both grounded in data and carefully reasoned. Another question may be whether agency or self-efficacy can be taught: is it nature or nurture that dictates whether a student will hold such beliefs or exercise such actions? Interviews and analysis for this study suggest that some students may come to higher education with agency already in place, or may have developed it in other settings prior to college enrollment. However, the data also suggest that these skills can be learned and taught, because several participants developed it over the course of the study. This possibility connects to literature from educational and developmental psychology, but this literature will not be reviewed here because it is beyond the scope of this study.

The concept of agency discussed here encompasses both the internal beliefs of self-efficacy (claiming responsibility, assigning credit or blame to self, attributing control to self) but also the external actions that flow from these beliefs—specifically the initiation of action that supports persistence. My choice of words in naming the concept is deliberate, aided by Merriam-Webster (Mish, 2003). I thought of describing each
participant as an *actor*: one who acts, a doer, one who takes part. This word shares a common Latin root with *agent*. They both are connected to *agere*, which means “to drive.” But *actor* also relates to a neutral Latin word meaning “a record of a thing done.”

These persistent participants are anything but passive or neutral in this effort. Instead, I preferred the term *agent*, which is related to words in Latin, Greek, and Old Norse that mean “to drive, lead, act, do; to travel in a vehicle.” Modern usage of *agent* includes such definitions as “one that acts or exerts power; a means or instrument by which a guiding intelligence achieves a result” (Mish, 2003, p. 24).

An agent is also responsible, subject to being held to account: “liable to be called on to answer;…being the cause or explanation;…able to answer for one’s conduct or obligations; able to choose for oneself between right and wrong” (Mish, 2003, p. 1062). The aspect of the agent as responsible or accountable is useful in higher education. It appears that shifting primary responsibility to college students for designing their learning and initiating actions to carry it out, and then holding them accountable for these responsibilities, can be an important part of developing life-long learners—and one that students identify as crucial to their pride of ownership and investment in what they learn (Wiersema & Licklider, 2007). Thus, the concept of agency as I have developed it here is related to linguistic and theoretical concepts that open doors for more development as analysis continues, especially in future research connected to sociological conceptions of agency (Giddens, 1984).

Agency, with its properties of claiming responsibility, initiating action, crediting or blaming self, and attributing control to self, played a key role in persistence for study participants. But participants did not persist in a vacuum. Their exercise of agency
happened with, through, and during the actions of other people and the unfolding of life events, which also influenced their persistence. Participants described these influences frequently, and Lamar in particular articulated the perspective of other participants about what he called “doors opening” to him during his college participation. This happened when participants’ agency set events in motion and returned not only expected rewards but new and previously unimagined opportunities. Changing in response to these opportunities and to people around them, participants experienced development, the second core concept in my grounded theory.

Development

This concept emerged after I noticed that students framed their persistence in terms of individual choice. What they described as their choice, though, appeared differently to my eyes as a teacher and an educational administrator. Many of their choices would not have been available to choose if they had not over time become familiar with college skills and behaviors and had help from teachers and advisers. Sometimes events happened to them that profoundly and immediately changed their perspectives. They began to choose things that they had not known they could choose, and they began to change their beliefs about themselves and about college.

Here I point out that the changes discussed in this section are perforce attitudinal and perspectival; I did not administer surveys or pre/post skill mastery tests. Also, it can be difficult for individuals to see or reflect on changes within themselves because the immediacy of the present can change the memory of the past (Hackett, 1995). However, one advantage of iterative interviews comes into play here, as I raised similar topics in each round of interviews to allow comparison across time. The developmental changes
discussed in this section, then, show up in the ways participants talk about themselves, their families, their approach to and feelings about higher education, or the perceived ease or difficulty with which they navigate the college. In the last interview, I asked participants about these kinds of changes, and most were surprised by their own words.

Properties of development. My concept of development comprises three properties. Participants experience development (1) when they change their ideas, skills, emotions, or behaviors to match ideas, skills, or behaviors to which they have had repeated exposure; (2) when they master skills through directed practice or through trial and error; and (3) when they experience life changing events that require a new perspective. Participants may or may not be aware of these changes, or deliberately choose them, but the changes affect them in profound ways nonetheless. The main difference between agency and development, between agentic changes and developmental changes, lies in the choice to change for which participants are responsible. Often, development lays the foundation for agency.

First, development happens when participants change through repeated exposure to ideas or skills. Participants who had been nervous or unsure about the college, their role on campus, or their motivations for higher education began to speak about the college as a comfort zone, describe increasingly savvy handling of complex educational bureaucracy, and to report the satisfaction of “intellectual” mastery (Lamar) rather than just anticipating a better job. Participants who had earlier been vague about the requirements of their goals could later describe detailed class sequences and accurate estimates of time to degree achievement. When asked what role their developmental reading class had played in this change, eight of the nine saw it as a nice review, a
practice, a semester of socialization into how to perform the role of a college student rather than a catalyst for change in their reading skills. It may be that the exposure to another semester or two of contact with a caring teacher in a small class environment did more to developmentally prepare them for general education classes than the developmental education curriculum. Joey articulated the feelings of other students when she described how her confidence built over time:

I see my hope in my future schooling, that it, I see that I can probably handle it better. Like I can see myself a little better in that picture. I'm not as timid. I'm a little more assertive that, okay, I can do this. If I've been doing good so far, then I'm sure I can do just as good in the other harder classes, as long as I've still got my supplies and the people that can help me with it. Then, you know, I can do, I can still keep going at it.

Other important changes that fell within this category came when participants relied on the words of others to define themselves as capable or persistent students or to undertake the actions necessary to go back to school. This pattern of obedience to an agentic other, which I call developmental framing, is discussed in the next section under the concept of framing.

Second, development happens when participants change through mastery of skills, whether by trial-and-error or directed practice. As a first generation student, Andy commented, “it’s funny, the things you figure out as you go along…Kind of fumble through school.” Most of her socialization as a college student happened by “trial and error,” as when she learned about the unofficial best timing of textbook buy-back:

A: Yeah, and selling books back? I haven’t figured that out either. [laughs] Apparently after a certain time frame you do that and if you don’t get it in soon enough, they have too many and don’t want yours. [laughs]…Yeah, I’m finding these things out.
R: …That’s what happened?
A: Yeah, [laughs] I’ve sold one book back so far, and that’s it. I have two, I have three books counting the one from this semester. So I’ve learned now that before your final is the best time to sell it.

It is unlikely that anyone from the institution would give Andy this tip. This informal strategy on how to perform the student role is the kind of socialization that Nathan would learn from his older college student siblings, and Lamar would learn from his college student mother. In a way, this incident is similar to Sarah’s account of learning how and when to register early, but by the time I interviewed Sarah, she had not only determined she would not let it happen again but she had also gone searching to find the official registration date. By contrast, in this interview Andy was still at the point of laughing at her predicament and swallowing the cost of the unsalable books. She was learning from her experience without yet taking action to change that experience, which makes this developmental rather than agentic change.

One example of developmental change through both repeated exposure and skill mastery comes from Joey’s experience. During the first interview, she described her negative impressions of a philosophy teacher who had expected a specific kind of reading of his students:

It would just be just the readings, and he would want us to psychoanalyze it, and it’s like, we don’t know how to psychoanalyze it. We haven’t been taught how to psychoanalyze it. And that got, that just added on the frustration.

The following semester, Joey took the developmental reading course. At the time, she described it as “dependable and really easy.” Reflecting on it later, she said:

Maybe it was too simple, maybe it didn't really help explain, okay this is how you open your mind… You know, like he kind of just said, “these are the things that you should do in order to try and be a better reader” but he didn't exactly say “okay, now in step one, when you do this phase, this is what you really should be doing. And this is how you do it and this is why you do it.” You know like it, you know, it was a little too simple and it wasn’t one of those make-you-think.
From my experience teaching other sections of the class she described, I know that the textbook actually does contain detailed discussions of critical analytic reading as a process with justified steps (Cortina & Elder, 2008). However, whether because of the teacher’s delivery style or her own level of readiness to learn, Joey did not feel any closer to being able to “psychoanalyze” readings based on her time in the developmental reading class.

The next semester, Joey took a history class in which she was required to do comparative analysis of two very different accounts of a controversial event in local history. In two passages worth quoting at length, she described how modeling from the teacher and other students helped her change her perspective and embrace her role as an analytic reader:

And we even had a discussion on it. So that kind of helped me see, okay, now, on our topics, he was helping open our minds about, here is a situation. But what are the viewpoints? Like how many viewpoints are there? And then we’re realizing there's a lot more viewpoints than just the people that are involved. There’s everyone surrounding. So it just kind of opens up your view on what's really going on and what happened and makes you realize, you know, history may not have it completely right. So it's interesting, it's really interesting.

That moment, that night when we were sitting there, discussing the two books, was when I realized, how are these people knowing, thinking these things about these books? How are they doing that? Like yeah I love to read. But how are they getting this information when I read the same book? And I got, okay, maybe that’s what I need to do. I need to think differently about what I read. Not just sit there and let, you know, hope that I get inspired to write or to understand. I’ve got to actually, you know, get in there, understand, try and get into what the reader, the writer is saying, trying and get in their mind. So it was that moment when I thought, [slaps desk] how did they get that from that book? I don't understand that! I read the same book, and I don’t, how did you, you know I’m looking at them like, how did, how did they think that? How do other people think? Maybe that's how I need to think, too.
The next semester, now three semesters after her philosophy course, Joey took a writing course that covered critical analytic thinking.

So it makes, you know, kind of pointing out, when you're reading, don't just sit and hum along and hm, okay, I guess I agree with that. Like, analyze it... And that's what this chapter was talking about. Like reading in between the lines of what the writer is saying, and try and think about what it is they're saying and what they're not saying about it, and things like that. So I thought that was, that was good. Something nice to, oh, okay. That made me open my mind and go, okay, alright, I need to do that. Note to self: That's what I need to do when I read and write!

In this class, Joey made the decision to shoulder the responsibility of critical thinking. As stated here, it was her choice. But this “choice” came after at least four semesters of exposure to the idea and process of critical thinking. Time, repeated exposure, and skill mastery through practice made the difference between indignant, frustrated rejection of analysis and competent, capable embrace of the skill as part of her identity as a reader and writer.

Third, development happens when participants change in response to life-changing events that require a new perspective or plan. Examples might be a job loss or offer, a birth or death in the family, a marriage or divorce, or a change in immigration status. Not every participant experienced such events during the course of the study, though all participants described such events as part of the life path that had led them to enrollment and persistence at the college. However, though otherwise very different individuals, Joey and Andy experienced some of the same turning points that contributed to their development as college persisters. Both women decided to enroll based on a flash of sudden inspiration: While watching a television special that mentioned a speech language pathologist, Joey said “the lightbulb went off inside” and she knew it was the career for her. Andy had reached a personal and professional low point:
I kinda came to this point. Like, I had gone through so many jobs, and I was just like, I hate this. Like, I would like something steady in my life. Something I can rely on, you know, like something solid. So get a job, go to school, get my head on straight. Like, it’s just something that I want, and I don’t know, it was kind of like, just one day I got up and decided that I needed to start working on getting my paperwork together and whatever else to go.

Halfway through the study, both women learned they were unexpectedly pregnant, and later Joey miscarried. For both women, this precipitated a distinct change in their approach to college. Joey had created a detailed multiyear plan for degree achievement, down to the course names for each semester, but at the fourth interview she had entirely set this plan aside, unable to maintain it physically or emotionally:

So it might be one of those things still up in the air, I may not decide until right before the semester starts. So that's one thing that does suck, but you know, if it means figuring out my life a little easier, then that'll be okay. So, you know, you got to take care of what needs to be taking care of sometimes, you know.

“Up in the air,” dealing with enforced ambiguity, uncomfortable with uncertainty, Joey at last came to terms with “just taking each day” as the only feasible persistence strategy instead of focusing on long-term structure and measured progress. In contrast, Andy had started the school year with an openly stated plan of non-planning:

I haven't decided like, what classes I'm going to take next semester. I'm always that way with anything, it's just kind of like, when the time comes, I'll make my decision. But I don't put a whole lot into it before so when I do sign up for my classes for next semester, I'll, whatever I choose, like whatever I feel like I need to go into next…I have always been that way. I just kind of do what it is that I'll do when the time comes.

For a brief time after learning she was pregnant, Andy considered leaving school. But by the fourth interview, she had created a persistence plan that accounted for the coincidence of finals week with her due date, how to postpone starting to repay student loans, a choice of major, reenrollment with a teacher who was a particularly good fit, juggling a new job
with three classes, and registration as early as possible to “steal the spots before they are
gone.” When I pointed out this shift and asked her about it, Andy laughed and responded,

I don’t think I had a lot of an idea of how to go about choosing the classes….So [laughs] now I understand what guidelines I need to go with, and what classes fall
in those guidelines. So now that I understand that, I know, I have some idea of
how I want to put the courses together…. With all the new information that I’ve
discovered and I feel like I understand things more. It’s a recent shift…. I don’t
think it was conscious, I think I just started thinking a bit more clearly when I
understood it more.

Andy’s “recent shift” in understanding came when she decided to stay in school during
pregnancy and after her child was born. Realizing the timeline necessary, she began to
search the college’s website for advising information, and she undertook intensive
planning as her persistence strategy. The catalyst for this development of agency was the
turning point of her pregnancy.

Related concepts and research. The concept of development used here springs
from the experiences of participants in this study. They experienced development as their
ideas, skills, emotions, or behaviors changed to match ideas, skills, or behaviors to which
they had repeated exposure; as they mastered skills through directed practice or through
trial and error; and as they experienced life changing events that required a new
perspective. This conception of development has parallels in several bodies of literature,
to which I now turn for perspective. However, in this comparison, I encounter one of the
perennial difficulties with integrating several lines of research: definition of terminology
is rarely consistent, and other authors assign properties to the idea of development
differently than I. The first property echoes the ideas of assimilation and acculturation,
which happen when individuals mold to the expectations of the groups in which they are
members, a phenomenon of sociology and anthropology (Czarniawska, 2004). This
relates to the tension between individual agency and societal influence, alluded to earlier in the discussion of literature on agency, of which a full review is beyond the scope of this study.

The second property connects to student development literature, especially when focused on the role of faculty and student affairs professionals in helping students master skills such as time management, academic content, or test taking (Baxter Magolda, 2009). The third property relates to adult learning and development theory on the role of phases and transitions on the choices and identities of adults in general life settings rather than education (Creel, 1996). Because this study was set in higher education, I turn first to student development theories and then to literature specifically on adult development to fill out areas of weakness.

Discussions of development for college students often focus on development of some facet or variable, such as identity, moral judgment, or decision-making, rather than on development itself (Torres, Jones, & Renn, 2009). Transcending this focus on content, King (2009) provides an analysis of principles of development common to cognitive and moral development theories that is very useful in comparison to the properties of my concept of development. King differentiates between development, change (difference in attribute), and growth (increase in attribute), and defines development as:

… evolution of skills (defined broadly to include abilities, capacities, and ways of understanding) over time, where early-level skills are reorganized into higher level skills that allow individuals to manage more complex units of information, perspectives, and tasks. (p. 598)

This reorganization allows for a change in world view and, importantly for this study, “provides the individual with a broader repertoire of possible responses” of both structure and content (p. 599). King specifies development as increasingly more complex and
adaptive skills and ways of thinking, in contrast to my proposed concept which includes the possibility of both progressive and regressive change. King identifies three principles of development: active construction and organization of interpretation of experiences, discernable age-related patterns in organization of thinking, and the omnipresent influence of context on development, such that it is highly variable from individual to individual. These principles seem useful for all groups of learners, including the adult learners studied here. However, King applies the principles only to adolescents and young adults, a shortcoming common to theories of student development (Torres et al., 2009).

Baxter Magolda (2009) positions student affairs professionals, who are most often the target audience for student development literature, as explicitly concerned with the development of the whole person. Integrating models and theories of development from psychosocial, cognitive developmental, maturity, typology, and person/environment interaction perspectives, Baxter Magolda proposes a holistic framework, presenting development as a cyclical movement from following external formulas, through crossroads of identity and authority, to self-authorship. As with King’s (2009) developmental principles, this framework has face validity. However, Baxter Magolda focuses her application on students 17-30 years old, which excludes many adult learners. Advice to admissions counselors about how to use Baxter Magolda’s theory in practice often assumes that counselors will be working with college students who are in the late adolescent or early adult stages of development (Walczak, 2008). However, this assumption may not hold true for adult learners, many of whom may be at more advanced developmental stages because of age or experience. Some effort at connection and
application to other learner populations is evident in Baxter Magolda’s reference to the Adult Development Research Group, hosted by the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (The Adult Development Research Group, 2001). This research group has begun to build bridges between the historically siloed fields of adult education and student development in higher education as they seek to extend student development theories to populations very different from those upon which they were developed, and to refine those theories as necessary.

The stage- and status-focused theories of student development described above are complemented by work which acknowledges the effect of major life transitions on adult learners, which I identified as the third property of development. Creel (1996) summarizes the work of Levinson, who extends stage theories to include middle and later adult years and their attendant tasks, and Sugarman and Schlossberg, who foreground the role of major life events that cannot always be controlled as adults pursue their life tasks. Both camps emphasize that adults spend most of their lives in transition, whether they are moving through a predictable age-related sequence or a cluster of changes triggered by personal or social events. Both camps also acknowledge that these transitions involve major perspective shifts for the adults who experience them, shifts which directly affect their learning and their decisions about participation and persistence in learning endeavors, which include higher education, as Creel points out. These perspective shifts also have implications for what learners believe about themselves and their options.

Returning to the self-efficacy literature, Flammer (1995) hypothesizes that control beliefs continue to develop throughout adulthood, with one of the most important adult control belief stages being contemplating and prioritizing values, which can be especially
difficult when there are several tasks or projects that are considered “indispensable or even morally required” (p. 81) as was the case for participants in this study.

The theories of student development and adult development described above have complementary parallels to my concept of development. Student development theory brings the notion that experience and performance in higher education are both affected by the growth of individual psychosocial, cognitive, moral, and other intrapersonal aspects, but it lacks extension past the traditional college student age group. Adult development theory has not usually been developed in the context of higher education, but it gives guidance on what kinds of tasks and tensions adult students might encounter as they move past traditional college age during their college career.

_A caution._ Before moving to the third core concept, I pause to point out a caution inherent in the presentation of the first two concepts. Taken to the extreme, both agency and development are dangerous ideas. If persistence is only a matter of individual choice, assuming pure meritocracy, then we blame those who leave college as victims of systemic neglect or mistake for something they did not cause, a trend which often leads to systemic discrimination based on race, class, gender, or language background. But if persistence is only a matter of institutional programming or good teaching and advising, then we can give no credit to those who do persist through more challenging circumstances than the average traditional college student. We must use the concepts of agency and development concurrently in order to both respect the dignity of students as capable adults and continue to work to improve our services to those students.

Whether acknowledged or not, development made persistence possible for these agentic participants, as they moved from developmental reading classes into more
reading-intensive courses and learned how to perform well in the role of college student. They mastered skills, revised their college plans based on life events, and began to see themselves as exercising agency to deliberately further their college careers. However, what about those like Victoria or Faith, who could have just as well performed the necessary skills to keep taking classes but did not? Persistence does not make Sarah, Lamar, Lourdes, and the other participants somehow better, but at the end of the study year, they were more developed in ways that nonpersistent participants were not. Those who did not persist chose to focus their time and resources on endeavors other than college, in many cases because they felt they could not do everything at once. Perhaps the test of adult persistence, alongside whether one will, is also what one will, which leads to the question of how participants chose their paths from among their many options.

**Framing**

This concept emerged when I noticed that participants frequently mentioned encouraging and reminding themselves to help themselves stay positive about college, a pattern I originally coded as “self talk” and categorized as an agentic initiation of action. I then found that they would describe a set of events or an experience one way, but later recharacterize it in a different way so that it carried meaning in a manner more consistent with the current version of their story. It was as if they were choosing a frame in which to display a picture, and the size, shape, and placement of the frame determined what is visible and accentuated, despite the existence or content of the rest of the picture.

My concept of framing is a process by which participants define an event or a perception in a particular way because of the words they use. From a variety of possible meanings or decisions, they eliminate most options from consideration based on word
choice. Sometimes framing or reframing happens at the urging of another person, such as a parent, advisor, spouse, or mentor whose words carry special weight or authority. Sometimes framing or reframing happens because of monumental personal events that suddenly and irreversibly alter perception, like pregnancy, miscarriage, job loss, or death of loved ones. In these instances, framing is part of development. Sometimes, it happens when a participant uses self-talk to deliberately keep a certain perspective and avoid other perspectives. In this instance, framing is part of agency. Framing can be a challenge; it does not always happen consistently, and it takes time to build, but it is a powerful influence on persistence. The process of framing, through defining, selecting, and eliminating choices, and the sources of framing, through development and agency, appeared in all participants’ experiences.

The process of framing. Participants began the framing process by naming what they considered to be their options. For instance, Lamar suggested that he had three possible schools to choose from (his current community college, or one of two possible out-of-state universities to which he may transfer) and two possible motivations for persisting (supporting family or satisfying intellectual ambitions). He did not mention the possibility of other motivations, of transferring to any of the in-state colleges or universities nearby, or of working part- or full-time in his current area, his home town, or other areas.

Participants also framed themselves, labeling their identities in such a way as to support their current actions in regards to higher education. Many of these self-descriptors were negative (Lamar: “it’s my laziness,” “kind of taking things really slow, and being very careful. It's kind of a downfall for me sometimes”) even when other
interview passages portrayed the same participants as working diligently or making 
judicious, timely choices. Other self-descriptors were more positive, when participants 
gave themselves credit for agentic moves. This was one way that participants dealt with 
events in their lives that could be seen as problematic. Assigning meaning such that the 
person, event, or circumstance was defined as “good” or “the only choice” gave them 
justification and encouragement for persistence.

A specific type of self-framing occurred when participants related what I called 
oral histories, reviewing a series of past events that led up to or contrasted with their 
current situations. For instance, Lamar told the story of his mother’s return to higher 
education at different times to showcase various ways that she had influenced him 
through this experience. He also told the story of his several attempts at college and 
described distractions, changes of major, burnout, and drop out. He contrasted that 
experience with his current enrollment, saying that, this time around, he has matured and 
now wants to persist for his own satisfaction and development. Both accounts took the 
same form with each retelling and served to articulate an identity vision of maturity and 
agency: Lamar in the past as unsure, unfocused, immature, ineffective, but Lamar in the 
present as focused, mature, effective, and responsible.

As seen above, participants used framing to define an event or perception in a 
particular way that supported their actions. Directing attention toward one definition or 
course of action means directing it away from other possible choices, and for many 
participants this was an integral part of their use of framing. Participants supported their 
persistence by framing away from certain options.
The most frequent examples of this use of framing came when participants framed the chosen option as the only option. From my perspective, they had many choices: employment or education or neither or both, full time or part time for either or both. But participants said often that college is “the only way,” “the only option,” “the only way to get where I wanted to go,” and that “failure is not an option.” Lamar related that “I just got fired from my job. And so I automatically thought, well, how am I going to make a lot of money. And it’s like, the only way to do it is to go to school” instead of getting a better job, or getting more jobs, or sending his wife back to school, or just accepting it and living off of his wife’s income.

This showed up in Lamar’s choice of classes as well. At the time of the third interview, he was enthusiastically taking photography courses. He told me that he had found his career and planned to take several more photography courses in the summer term. However, in the fourth interview, it came out that he was taking prerequisite courses for a business or philosophy degree instead of the much-anticipated photography courses. Asked why, he justified his choice by saying that the schedule did not work out, and he did not prefer the instructor of record, and he did not know about another option, and thus it just did not work out. But he also said that “the two courses that I really wanted to take and get done with, which were these courses that I have now, there just wasn't any other availability for it,” which suggests that his priorities had changed and photography no longer held preeminence. Later he related that he had decided not to pursue photography but instead major in something that would prepare him for a law degree. Suggesting that the photography classes “just didn’t work out” made it easier for
him to accept and discuss the move away from photography as a major, so he used framing to eliminate it as a possible choice.

One way that participants eliminated possible options from their mental radar was to rationalize or minimize their experience, particularly if it was negative. This strategy redirected their energy away from discouragement and consideration of stopping school. Joey, Sarah, Lourdes, and Lamar all practiced this kind of framing. For Lamar, rationalizing or minimizing possible discouragements more frequently meant resisting the meanings that other people applied to his school efforts which were different from his own meanings. He said that his wife’s parents did not approve of his choice to change his major to photography because they were worried that he would not be able to support their daughter and grandchildren. They frequently asked questions about how much money he would make in various possible majors and suggested that he would of course choose a major because of the financial rewards. He was frustrated with this pressure, and he responded by disputing their misconceptions and pushing back “to spite,” reframing his ideas to majors he knew they would not approve of.

The way the in-laws [and] I talk, when they say, “what do you want to do besides photography.” “Oh, I want to be a lawyer.” “Oh that makes a lot of money,” and it's like, yeah, I'll make okay money. But that's not why I want to become a lawyer. And I have to say, “well, I want to get a bachelors in philosophy,” and “What? Why?” So I can become a lawyer. “Oh that makes a lot of money.” No. That's not really why I want to do that, to make a lot of money… I’ll just tell them things, sometimes just to spite, just like that. I say “I'll probably work, I want to work for the government. You know, they don't get paid a lot,” and they're like “oh.” [laughs] Just to, I don't know. It's kind of annoying sometimes.

These coping mechanisms provided Lamar with a way that he dealt with pressure regarding choice of major, a coping mechanism that allowed him to persist in a degree
track that he likes, that will make enough money but not put him in despair about college.

When all else failed, he shrugged off their disapproval by telling himself it did not matter:

I've always wanted to do something into either teaching or something into, I don't know. We'll see [laughs] It’s just, I think that's another thing my in-laws don't like, because I'm always changing what I want to do, which is OK, I don't know. I think I can be frustrating for them sometimes…But oh well…At least I know they love me.

Yet, when Lamar finally did settle on a major of which his in-laws approved (pre-law), he described their change in support in terms of getting to know him, with no mention of his own change of plans in response to pressure:

In the beginning it was my in-laws. They didn't want me to go do photography. Which I still enjoy doing, and if I could do it, that would be great. But in the beginning it was them, but they've really come through, and seen different sides of me, and they’ve been really supportive.

*Developmental framing.* Framing can be divided into two types: developmental and agentic. Developmental framing happens when words from powerful others or personal experiences alter learners’ perceptions, actions, or interpretation. Participants frequently described words of people who carried special authority for them, either by example or emotional connection, that set their expectations about what higher education is about, whether it is worth the work, and what kind of people persist or do not persist. In an ironic turn, it was sometimes the words of other people framing participants as agents that led them to frame themselves as agents, and thus make choices that led to their persistence. In this case, framing allowed for both development and agency.

In an example of developmental framing, Lamar’s definition of himself as a learner changed over the year. He took the developmental reading class during his first semester back after two failed attempts at college, interspersed with periods of full time work. He tested into an entry level English class but doubted his academic ability in the
first interview: “It’s like, well, because my wife's like, are you sure, because I don’t want you to fail. And I’m like, I don't want to fail either.” So he decided to take the developmental reading class. Three semesters later, after time and skill mastery, he had an entirely different view of himself as a learner:

I feel like I'm still figuring that out, but, I feel like, it's not like “I'm only smart enough to do this.” It's not like that….Which it kind of was in the beginning. It was kind of like, “well, I'm not sure if I can really do that, because if I don't know how good I'll be in math, or how good I'll be in English.” But it's not anything like that. It's more, you know, what do I want to do. It's like open to me now….When you finish a semester, you feel, wow, I did that. I did it…Sometimes I'm like, wow, I didn't ever think I would be in [English] 2010….Because, I mean, I feel like I can do anything.

Here Lamar demonstrated an articulation of the shift to agency that is possible with increased confidence and skill mastery. If "I'm not sure how good I'll be" then there are some choices I will not undertake. But now "It's not like that…What do I want to do? It's open to me now." This is an identity statement, related to self-efficacy and action, a frame of self as agent, able to choose, and it is important to recognize that it is about perception, because he is pointing out how his own feelings changed within him, not how an outside view would see him after a mastery or skills test. Instead of feeling the weight of education as an adult learner, such a prevalent perspective for participants in the last chapter, Lamar was feeling the possibility of newfound confidence.

Other examples show the powerful effect of hearing voices of authority cast higher education as a positive, feasible goal or participants as capable of exercising agency. When things get rough, these adult students go back to sources that support the paradigms or beliefs that have gotten them through this far. The most powerful influence on Lamar’s return to college was his mother, he said. She set an example that grew to near-legend proportions in her son’s eyes when she returned to college to complete first a
bachelor’s degree as an adult distance-learning student and then a master’s degree with a full ride scholarship for which she moved her whole family across the state, “a life-changing experience” for Lamar. She then provided a steady stream of college persistence encouragement to Lamar:

My mom has helped me a lot, given me kind of the drive, “you can do it” kind of attitude, and “if I can do it” attitude, that's been really encouraging. And that's been really helpful, in times when I was just like, why do I need to do college, I can go find a good paying job somewhere. If I look hard enough. But yeah, she's been really a big motivation for me.

Not only did his mother steer Lamar toward college and away from other options, such as “a good paying job,” she also gave him practical advice about resources and behaviors necessary to make that option a reality, such as how to get scholarships and interact with teachers. She framed higher education as both important and possible, and her mentorship supported Lamar’s development until he was willing and able to act as agent for his own education.

Lamar recalled college-graduate friends who also framed college persistence as difficult but feasible, with the good life as a reward following graduation:

I have tons of friends that said “I had three jobs, and I went to night school,” and now they are, they just bought houses, you know, they're living really nice. But they went through struggles, and I think that's, I always talk to them, and I say, how did you do it? And they say, “well, it wasn't easy. It wasn't like I had everything handed [to me].”

Here, Lamar compared himself to others, reinforcing expectations of hard work and temporary struggle. Like self-talk, this is another form of coping, only it is seeking out a particular form of other-talk that will support the view that college persistence is possible.

Agentic framing. In contrast to developmental framing, agentic framing happens when participants shape their own attitude toward certain actions or interpretations and
away from others. Sarah and Lourdes used self-talk in this respect, whether explicitly stating their persistence goal or repeating phrases like mantras to keep themselves on track: “Failure is not an option” and “I know I can do it, and I will do the best of me.” Lamar also used framing as a deliberate exercise of agency. Throughout the year, he spoke often of his desire to keep momentum by the way he talked to himself about his college experience, exemplified in comments like the following:

> You know, because when I first started I just wanted to be done. It was like, oh man, two years, it's going to be 2011, 12, 13. But even those things, you can't discourage yourself that way. Because there's just different things that can do that. I kind of try to stay away from all the things that could discourage me, or think about them.

Lamar recognized that his impatience could lead to discouragement and leaving college and decided not to "do that" to himself. He deliberately shaped his own attitude, “building momentum.” This is related to but not exactly the same as the original “self-talk” code that I used in that stating encouragers and avoiding discouragers works in tandem to support persistence.

Another way that participants frequently shaped their own attitudes was framing by contrast, in which participants would compare themselves with a negative example from a family member or compare their experience at the college with negative (sometimes hypothetical) experiences at other educational institutions, as if to throw their own experience or progress into positive relief. Lamar, Sunny, Andy, Sarah, Paola, and Lourdes framed their choice of enrollment and experience of persistence at the college as positive in specific contrast to what they imagine it might have been like at a university, a large, impersonal, foreign environment. They saw the college as the opposite, exemplified by Lamar’s comment:
And here it's, you can actually talk to the teacher after class. Not saying that you probably, you probably could, can at universities, but here it seems more personal. It seems more, “I want to help you,” like that kind of attitude. And that's the attitude that I was looking for, because there was times when I needed help.

It is as if participants could feel good about the level of personal attention they received at the college, even if they do not credit that as a major part of their persistence, because they imagined it would be far less at the university. This point struck me as surprising because of my own experience: I have never taken a class at a university with more than 30 students, and my average class size has usually been 10-15 people. However, I started at a community college and transferred to a private university. It may be that participants based their negative vision of other institutions on stories of students who started at a public college or university and experienced the crowded classrooms and disorientation of lower-classman years.

An extended example. One of the most interesting patterns of framing is what I call reframing, in which participants changed the way they framed themselves or their persistence over the course of the year. Marisa provided the strongest example of reframing to agency as a key to persistence. Charmaz (2006) states that grounded theory reports are different from case studies because the report is about the theory, not about the story of the participants. However, in Marisa’s case, we can see the theory unfolding with the story over the course of the school year.

At the beginning of the school year, Marisa came to the first interview in very casual dress, smiled and laughed very little, and seemed angry and stressed during the interview. She was starting her first semester at the community college after attempting several classes at an online for-profit university, which she had originally chosen because it would allow her to stay home with her children. She talked about her husband’s
pressure for her to attend this particular community college, and her frustrated compliance with that pressure:

I can’t think of, you know, what he’s really pushing me for... Why would I wanna be going back into school?... I don’t know, it’s just, like the thought of going back to school, you know, I’ve already did my cosmetology, I already obtained my license, I already went through you know school, and just like the thought of like going back after you know, ten years, where you’re not as fresh, and you’re like you know all that what you learned in high school is pretty much like you know, like the huge gap. You just don’t remember things that you did from back then, and you’re just like, OK, if I have to take a test, ... you’re just like, this is not really possible, you know, for me to come back to school ...I didn’t wanna go back to school.

At this point in her education, Marisa felt helpless about education. She framed her husband as the agent who drove her enrollment, even against her will, and she saw no value in what he advocated for her. She did not claim responsibility for the decision or the actions, she did not credit herself for the actions, and she did not attribute control of her persistence to herself.

With such a strong position of nonagency, it seemed counterintuitive that Marisa would participate in higher education, let alone persist. I returned to the point and asked her to clarify—if it was not what she wanted, what brought her back? Her reply was full of clues about her motivation for education and her struggle to reframe towards the positive. The first part of her response was negative: "the thought of going back to school" after years of enjoyable work as a hairdresser was not a happy one. She repeatedly said "I already did my education," and she articulated a feeling that "this is not really possible" and "I don't have two years." It seemed that she had no emotional investment in returning to college. On the contrary, her emotional inclination was away from it; she felt it was redundant and she had low or no self-efficacy, or belief that school success was possible and that it was feasible for her to achieve it. Suddenly she changed
directions in her description, reminding herself that “I just didn't wanna get that thought in my head.” She vacillated for a short while, alternately stating “I need to push myself” and “I didn't wanna go back.” But then she evoked the rhetoric that supported her choice to return to college as the only or best choice, first in her husband's voice and then in her own voice, and she focused on the idealistic issue of personal development and the pragmatic issue of financial provision. (See Appendix D for the entire passage and the accompanying codes.)

With her repeated statements of resentment and ambivalence, I did not expect that Marisa would persist, either in the study or at the college. To my surprise, she not only participated in all four interviews, but she continued to take and pass classes for the next three semesters, persisting beyond others who had less tension at home, more nominal and material support, and a lower emotional cost for that support. What changed was her perspective on herself, not her logistical or emotional barriers. It appears that she stayed because she initiated action and took responsibility for her education; she exercised agency for her education. By the third interview, Marisa was cheerful and stylishly dressed, and her framing had changed. She talked frequently about her power to affect her own grades:

I'm like, just because you get a bad grade doesn't, you know, mean that you can't ask that teacher to give you, you know, some extra credit, or, you know, say how much that you're going to like really work on your paper and then ask them to help you…I just did the extra credit to pull, you know myself if I get a lower grade on a different paper, then I'm not as, you know, like mad at myself because I was like “well. I kind of didn't do as well on that paper, but at least I got the extra credit.”

Contrary to her original words, she attributed her return to school to her own desire for advancement:
I mean, um, you know, when I was in school for like my profession now, at the end of high school. I wasn't looking to go into any more school, because I thought, well I already have my dream future career. But then I went back because I realized that I can actually, you know, go up that step on the ladder in my profession and still keep doing what I like doing. But just make that jump to go back into school and like teach myself the business part of it, because I don't know that much of it.

By the fourth interview, her attitude and her framing of her own agency continued to be positive:

And you know, now that I’m in school and um, you know seeing how well I’m doing and got like good grades, and um kinda pushing myself to um to like educate until I can get my own, I don’t know, my main goal is to get like my own business, but I’m already feel like where I want to be here instead of my husband just pushing me.

The cooperation between agency and development was evident in a discussion of her experience in a difficult English class at the end of her second semester. To her proud surprise, Marisa got an A in her class and did well on her final paper. She demonstrated agency in two ways: She initiated action by revising the paper, taking it to different writing tutors, and by doing extra credit in the class. And she proudly claimed credit for the paper’s high quality, because she worked so hard on it. However, she also demonstrated aspects of development. She mentioned repeatedly that the teacher said it was good, which seems to be an important frame for her—after all, he has the authority to define what is good. It also appears that she started to master writing skills during this process. This was agency and development working together. (See Appendix E for the entire passage and accompanying codes.)

In the first interview, Marisa’s interactions with her teachers at the online for-profit university seemed marked by helplessness: She could not make the computer work right, she could not get in touch with the teacher when she needed to, she could not take
care of her child while trying to work on school projects, she felt she had wasted her money, and she did not even want to return to school in the first place. Eight months later she exuded confidence and satisfaction with her progress in school, and her attitude about school had changed so much that she was eager to attend classes during the summer term. She had already chosen her classes based on both required content and favorite teachers: “I was already researching the instructors before the semester, the other semester ended. And um, there’s like two teachers, two math teachers that I was looking into.”

Unfortunately, she and her husband decided they could not afford the financial expense, so she did not take any summer classes. Because of her previous expressed feelings, I expected her to describe it as a relief not to be in classes anymore. Instead, she said it was “really hard” and repeatedly expressed her preference to be in classes: “So I kinda like almost regret not taking the summer…I think it’s been hard to take this semester off, because I wanted to go to school.”

By the end of the year, Marisa’s words depicted an entirely different person—one who not only could and did successfully participate and persist in higher education, but also did so willingly, with positive emotions and strong self-efficacy regarding her identity as a persistent student. She persisted because she reframed herself as an agent and then acted as such. She reached this reframing through a combination of agency and development. Reframing served to support consonance within Marisa, a sort of psychological survival, perhaps because it was much easier than the alternative of pursuing a course of action believing that one is not the agent for it. Though reframing takes time and is not always consistent, it allows participants to regain a position of power as they perceive themselves to be exercising agency. This may be particularly
important for adult learners who are returning to higher education because of the sudden loss of previous sources of identity assumed to be stable, such as a job or a marriage.

*Related concepts and research.* Framing allows participants to tell a coherent story, with themselves as protagonist, in which the original motivations, the subsequent actions, the current state of affairs, and the end results align. Rarely does real life unfold like that, but telling this kind of a story helps us make acceptable meaning of what we experience (Davies & Harre, 1990). As Czarniawska (2004) puts it, “in order to understand their own lives, people put them into narrative form” (p. 5). The idea that we tell a specific version of our stories that showcases our preferred explanation, rather than just relating events that occurred, is a recurring theme of the fields of philosophy, linguistic and literary analysis, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology, and influences qualitative research in general (Czarniawska, 2004; Sermijn, Loots & Devlieger, 2007). The concept of frame has been used before (Goffman, 1974) but as a noun, denoting a definition assigned to an actor or role, instead of as a verb, denoting a process that individuals enact. Sermijn, Devlieger, and Loots (2008) demonstrate that participants in qualitative research do create narratives for themselves in ways consistent with my concept of framing, that is, defining, selecting, and eliminating selves by the words they use. Sometimes that story takes the traditional story grammar form, but other times it is a complexly structured presentation of pieces of the self that are meaningful, despite being fragmented or contradictory. In either case, the researcher must realize that “one is not presenting the participant’s true self but merely one of the many possible context bound, co-constructed presentations of the self” (Davies & Harre, 1990; Sermijn, et al., 2008, p. 644).
This realization lends strength to the idea that participants’ claim of agency is not incompatible with their seeking the support and validation of important others in their lives. It also suggests that taking up a position regarding one’s identity and options, such as “I am a persistent person” (Paola) or “school was the only way” (Lamar) or “failure is not an option” (Sarah), means that one will “see the world from the vantage point of that position” and choose courses of action that appear natural from that position; “among the products of discursive practices are the very persons who engage in them” (Davies & Harre, 1990, p. 2). Additionally, it suggests that changing one’s explanation, shifting from obeying the agency of others in college persistence to exercising agency for one’s own education, is perhaps part of the human experience. We present ourselves as we believe ourselves to be, which may be different from who we believed ourselves to be in times past.

This shift in explanation is not always conscious, but that does not mean it is duplicitous (Sermijn et al., 2008). Sometimes, though, it is a conscious, deliberately strategic agentic effort (Davies & Harre, 1990), as when Lourdes frequently encouraged herself. With Lieblich et al. (2008), I do not claim that people framing their options and identities are concerned with their theoretical positioning; rather, they are usually working with and toward their own realities in a pragmatic instead of philosophical effort. But despite being a subtle and sometimes unrecognized process, framing is still powerful and can contribute to the beliefs we hold about what we can do in comparison with others—which leads back to research on adult learners in higher education.

Kasworm (2005, 2010) found that adult learners at both community colleges and research universities judge themselves in relation to what they believe about faculty, younger
students, and other adult students as presumed homogenous groups. Consistent with Davies and Harre’s (1990) notion of co-constructed positioning of the self, Kasworm’s participants positioned their academic identities in relation to an age-appropriate ideal student image, framing themselves by comparisons that gave them structured guidance about what to do, how to do it, and who they were because of it.

As discussed here, the concepts of agency, development, and framing are grounded in the data and situated within the academic conversation. They provide tools with which to understand the experience of and influences on persistence for adult learners at the community college. I turn now to a further exploration of how they work together as a theory to explain this persistence.

**Relationships Between Concepts**

A theory is a set of concepts that are related to each other. In the previous section, I introduced the core concepts of agency, development, and framing. These concepts are merely interesting if isolated; they gain power and provide usefulness when they are arranged in relation to each other, as follows. Agency and development are two distinct but related processes, like the outside strands of a double helix (see Figure 1). Everyone

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**Figure 1. Relationships between development, agency, and framing.**

experiences development, but not everyone exercises agency. To whatever degree an individual experiences development, changes and events happen to them and within them. To whatever degree an individual exercises agency, they exert influence on what happens to them, because of them, and within them. Development lays the foundation for the exercise of agency; that is, some choices an individual makes would not have been available as options at an earlier stage of development, either in perspective or ability. They would not have thought to choose, or been able to choose, until they had developed to a certain stage. Likewise, agency makes possible further development; that is, an individual who decides to persist and then persists in a certain endeavor will be changed and developed in ways that individuals who do not persist will not be developed. The reciprocal flow of influence between agency and development is also apparent in work on self-efficacy over the life-course (Elder, 1995) and growth experienced by mature students returning to higher education (Mercer, 2007).

For example, Andy said that she had been at the same low level of math proficiency since her early high school years. If she had not chosen to persist in taking math classes and working with the teacher (who turned out to be a strong positive influence on her attitude about and skills in math) she never would have developed better math skills. Andy also chose to explore the college website, looking for answers to her advising questions, and developed a much more accurate idea of her degree path. This is an example of how agency lays the foundation for development. Because she took action to explore the website, she now knows what plan to use as she is choosing classes: “I’ve felt like I’ve fulfilled a lot of questions that I’ve had. I felt like I’ve kind of started to understand a bit more how things work. And how I’m supposed to do them.”
Framing is the equivalent of the connecting rungs in the double helix. Framing makes possible the effective use of agency by defining the meaning of events, the identity of the individual, the feasibility of possible courses of action, and the degree of congruence between all three. Some options are mutually exclusive, and others fit together with more or less adjustment. Framing is the process of winnowing possible courses of action, without which development and exercise of agency could not proceed. Framing justifies the exercise of agency; that is, it helps an individual feel settled or right about what is happening in the college experience. It becomes a matter of psychological survival, as if to say, if I did it, then it must be consistent with my goals, and I am satisfied in my identity as a competent adult. Persistent students use framing, both developmental or agentic, to narrow their options, either by dismissing options, defining options as feasible, or defining their own identity as a persister. Eventually they frame persistence as the only or best option, and then they exercise agency to choose it and make it happen.

Agency is ultimately what makes for the persistence. Agency only becomes crucial in the face of competing priorities. Especially for those who have no safety net, but really for all adult students, there is already too much demand on time and energy to do everything at once. They must choose their priorities, and school effort is one priority that is not mandatory for adults. Care for a family is mandatory by law and strong emotion; efforts to hold a job are enforced by the desire to pay for a place to stay, food to eat, and other basic needs. But persistence in higher education is a social maneuver and not mandatory as it is for children. And thus we return to the original reason for distinguishing between adult and child learners. For these adult learners, the central
concern in their persistence is agency, and it is resolved through framing. These relationships, illustrated by the double helix in Figure 1, are foundational for the theory in the following section.

The notion that agency, rather than development or framing, is the central concern for persistence can be seen in other work on adult learners in higher education. Mercer (2007) studied the experience of mature students returning to higher education in the United Kingdom, exploring the relationship between academic and personal growth not as mutually exclusive but as interrelated categories. In her grounded theory, she suggests that this age cohort in particular experiences a re-negotiation of self because of the interaction between academic and personal growth. She makes the point that development in academic knowledge or skill also changes one’s perception of one’s self as the owner of that knowledge or skill, leading to personal growth. For example, her participants demonstrated that academic mastery leads to confidence which leads to sustained endeavor which leads to further mastery, and so on. This same idea is evident in the experience of my participants, represented in diagram form as the double helix.

Mercer points out that external supports may not be sufficient to sustain persistence. She suggests that the learner must deal with the challenge of transition and persistence using strength from within, and “the self becomes…a facilitator, regulator, and motivator for change and development, as was evidenced…in the narratives constructed around transforming the self academically and transforming the self personally” (p. 30). It is agency, or the behavioral and psychological action of “the self,” that drives framing and development.
A Grounded Theory of Persistence

Soulliere, Britt and Maines (2001) observe that many grounded theory researchers create diagrams or conceptual models as organizing devices to show the nature of important concepts and the nature of the relationships among these concepts. The point of conceptual modeling is not just to make a diagram but to help the researcher keep asking appropriate questions and organizing tentative answers regarding concepts and the relationships between them, constantly cycling between data and emerging theory. King (2009) notes that our models demonstrate our implicit metaphors, such that models of stages that fall along a line suggest linearity and sequentiality, while helices connote motion, iterative change, and interrelation. The conceptual modeling I use in this chapter serves both of these purposes, showing the process of persistence as explained by three concepts in interpenetrating relationship to each other: agency, development, and framing. Figure 1, above, demonstrates that persistence is a process that occurs over time as agency and development mutually support each other, and Figure 2 shows how the properties of each concept, as well as the experiential themes from the previous chapter, fit together in the recursive process of persistence.

This is a model of student persistence, which starts by assuming that adult learners are in college, having already completed the college choice and enrollment process. Adult learners are at a certain stage of assumed development, indicated by their roles as employees, spouses and partners, parents, and community members and based on growth and changes through exposure, skill mastery, and life experience. Along with these roles, they usually have a framed identity of themselves as capable, competent, responsible, because they must be so to function to whatever degree in their adult life
Figure 2. A Model of Persistence through Agency, Development, and Framing.
tasks. Their developmental stage lays the foundation for their choices, in that they are capable of many different kinds of endeavors, not just educational, and that they are able to choose what they will do with their time and resources. They survey the choices before them: employment? education? family? full or part time? Which job, and which school? Which major? How to organize logistics? They ask themselves, which resources and relationships are available and important, and how will I develop them? Where will I put my time and mental/emotional focus, and why? The array of choices before them may exist because the individual has sought them out (an exercise of agency), or they may exist because of unexpected life circumstances or the unpredictable choices of other people (an experience of development).

If adult learners stay at that point of facing options, they will either do many things poorly or else nothing at all, a point supported by self-efficacy literature (Flammer, 1995). They feel impelled to act, so they begin to narrow their choices, dismissing options through framing them as not necessary, feasible, or desired. They choose the option of persistence in higher education either by framing themselves as persisters or by framing persistence as best or only feasible out of all the options. This narrowing of options is an exercise of agency, and leads to more development, more options, more framing, and more choices. Eventually they build a pattern of agency in both identity and in actions. I refer to the former as perceptual agency, which has to do with how one perceives oneself in relation to others, along a continuum from fully controlled by others to controlling oneself and one’s decisions. This includes the properties of claiming responsibility for persistence decisions and actions, blaming or crediting self for the subsequent events, and attributing control of persistence to self, as discussed in previous
sections. For instance, a student may perceive herself as going to college simply because her parents are demanding it and paying for it, or she may perceive herself as going to college because she desires it and is making it happen, no matter what support or opposition comes from other people. I refer to the latter as *material agency* which has to do with actions and material circumstances. This includes the property of initiating action, as discussed in the previous section, as well as the behavior of reenrolling each semester through which persistence can be measured. For instance, a student might live with his parents, paying neither living nor educational expenses, or he might live on his own, working to pay for both living and educational expenses and demonstrating that he believes in his identity as a persister by taking and passing classes every semester.

Reaching a new level of material and perceptual agency, and the accompanying development, only means that more options appear as potential choices, and the process begins again, illustrated by the recursive arrows in Figure 2 and the double helix in Figure 1. If it were possible, I would use three-dimensional superimposition to show that framing, development, and agency happen at the same time, each shaping and being shaped by the others. Unfortunately for the purpose of modeling, this collection of lines and arrows on a two-dimensional page can never fully represent simultaneity, but it will suffice until further theoretical refinement can improve the concepts and the diagram.

At any point along the model, adult learners are affected by the words, expectations, and examples of important others who guide their framing, support their development, and respond to their agency, illustrated by the long box at the bottom of Figure 2. The experiential context of financial pressures, competing priorities, and developmental framing from social networks on and off campus always affects
participants’ framing, development and agency. They are always in tension between maintaining full perceptual and material agency and negotiating or relinquishing some autonomy in exchange for emotional or material support in accomplishing their goals. Both kinds of agency are similar to the continuum between dependence and independence but they also include an aspect of responsibility. For example, it might be an agentic move to accept financial help from parents and emotional help from a spouse, even though it seems like giving up perceptual agency, because this move allows a student to use personal time and resources for school work, which ultimately furthers his or her persistence toward educational goals.

As more choices become available through development, persistent students make the decision to continue in college, initiate action to support that decision, and take responsibility for subsequent events and challenges related to persistence. Students who persist are those who claim agency, whether they start out claiming it or shift over time to claim it. This is not to say that students who leave college are not agents. They too may see their options and choose the path that appears to fit them best. But students who persist continue to use framing to focus their efforts on persistence and away from other possibilities, gradually redefining their options until the choice to stay in college is seen as clear and almost inevitable.

*Potential for Formal Interdisciplinary Theory*

At this point, I find myself speculatively extending my theory of student persistence toward a theory of human action. The temptation to move from substantive theory to formal theory is heightened by my reading of theoretical pieces that use qualitative cases and discourse analysis to answer such questions as “what moves life
“forward, for better or worse?” (Lieblich, Zilber, & Tuval-Mashiach, 2008, p. 614).

Lieblich et al. offer a model to guide exploration of how individuals as social actors narrate the direction and motivation of their lives. They draw on four concepts from psychology, sociology, and feminist theory—agency, structure, communion, and serendipity—as tools to help explain human action. They acknowledge the multiplicity of these four constructs in human experience, such that one might experience any of the four singly or in combination at different times in life. They propose an integrative model using the four constructs on two levels: at the existential level, individuals exercise agency while working within the constraints of social structures and the caprices of serendipity, while at the motivational level, individuals choose between enhancing self (agency) or others (communion).

Lieblich et al. use Giddens' conceptualization of agency, in which agency means "both to act purposefully or intentionally, and to monitor these actions reflexively" (Lieblich et al., 2008, p. 616). This combination of observable and intangible fits better with my concepts of agency and framing than the internal belief-focused work on self-efficacy, even though the self-efficacy literature has been better connected to educational settings and topics. Their three concepts of structure, communion, and serendipity are subsumed within my concept of development, which groups external influences no matter the source. Of great use is the Lieblich et al. notion that agency and communion are independent dimensions instead of two ends of a single continuum. If this is so, then it is possible to have agency in communion, and possible that one moves toward one’s goals better in relationship to others than in isolation. With this possibility, it makes sense as to why participants who have and accept a certain level of help, whether material or
emotional, are more persistent than those who either do not have or do not accept that help from those around them. However, the Lieblich et al. model does not include the progression of time as mine does, which is an important aspect of explaining persistence in a learning endeavor instead of discrete acontextualized actions.

The comparison with the Lieblich et al. (2008) model illustrates the potential for connecting my model to other fields of research and theory, which is a valuable attribute in a grounded theory. However, to be true to the original intent of this project, and to lay a solid foundation for further exploration, I will refrain from further broad theorizing and instead return to the substantive focus on persistence of adult learners at a community college. In this chapter, I have presented the core concepts of agency, development and framing, and explained how they relate to each other to explain the process of persistence in higher education for a group of learners that have many reasons not to persist. In the next chapter, I will evaluate the grounded theory using Charmaz’s (2006) criteria of credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness, which includes analysis of the theory’s strengths and weaknesses, comparison to other theories of persistence, and discussion of its implications for theorizing, research, policy, and practice.
CHAPTER VI

THEORY IN DISCUSSION

As O’Connor, Netting and Thomas (2008) observe, grounded theory research is becoming increasingly common in the qualitative research sphere, especially in dissertation studies. However, they are concerned that many studies that claim to do grounded theory work are of poor quality and rigor. To offer something of worth in the report of a major research effort, there must be more than an interesting topic and compelling quotes. In other words, if I expect my description and grounded explanation of adult student persistence to bear weight, either for my own degree achievement or for future contributions to the field, it must undergo evaluative scrutiny. Such evaluation suggests that there are standards for grounded theory research by which we can tell if a study or a theory is acceptable. Traditional understanding of the function of theory includes description, prediction, and control (Johnson & Kruse, 2009), and by these standards, my study would have major weaknesses because it does not yet allow for reliable prediction or control of the phenomenon of adult student persistence. However, evaluative validity depends on comparing a product to the measure upon which it was generated, so I turn to grounded theory standards for evaluation, reviewing early standards first to ensure clarity on why I use the standards I eventually chose.

Standards for grounded theory have been as contested as its methodological specifics during its evolution. In the seminal work on grounded theory, Glaser and
Strauss (1967) call for the requisite properties of fit, understanding, generality, and control, and Glaser (1978) later revised that list to focus on fit, work, relevance and modifiability. Both lists emphasize that a theory must fit the data from which it emerged, provide insight that people can use in real life application, and allow for extension through further research. However, Glaser (2007) insists that these goals cannot be met unless the researcher enacts each particular methodological step of the classic grounded theory camp, and thus he would not consider my pragmatic, constructivist grounded theory study to be acceptable grounded theory work.

In my own defense, though, I return to O’Connor, Netting, and Thomas’s (2008) argument that differential standards are appropriate for the two camps of grounded theorists. Because I chose early to work within the constructivist grounded theory tradition, in particular drawing on Charmaz’s (2006) guidelines at each stage, it makes sense to use her criteria of credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness when reflecting upon my work. Using these standards, I can make a strong claim for my analysis of the personal and institutional influences on adult student persistence, and my theorizing about agency and framing becomes a valuable contribution with important implications for the field.

Credibility

The first of Charmaz’s (2006) criteria is credibility. This criterion covers soundness of data collection, data analysis, and presentation such that a reader can trace the logic of each step, from data to claims, and accept the final product as reasonable. Charmaz includes such considerations as intimate familiarity with the setting or topic, the range, number and depth of observations, systematic comparison between observations
and between categories, and logical links between the data, the analysis, and the final argument. For my study, much of this is already contained in the methods chapter and the presentation of findings. For instance, the amount of data collected and analyzed contributes to the credibility of my study: I conducted 97 interviews lasting 20-70 minutes, of which 77 were transcribed. Interviewing 17 of the participants four times over the course of the year, I built upon previous interviews until I understood participants’ lives as intimately as possible. I asked them about topics such as what a typical day looked like in each of the three semesters, where, when, and how they usually did homework, what their bosses, spouses, in-laws and children thought about what they are doing with school, how they felt about their own grades, and why. I coded 15 interviews incident-by-incident so that I could thoroughly ground my theory in data collected from the 9 focal participants, and I repeatedly reviewed other transcripts to keep a clear context for the focal participants. Finally, as appropriate for grounded theory research, I used theoretical sampling to select transcripts that contained data that could best help me develop the emerging concepts and theory (Morse, 2007).

However, credibility has to do with more than just amassing the right kind and amount of data, or even being well familiar with it (Morse, 2007). To move from data particulars to an abstract theoretical statement of any worth, the links of inductive inferential reasoning spanning the distance between the two must also be sound. In writing this section, I went back to look for such soundness in my own data analysis, and I appreciated once again what Charmaz (2006) meant in her constant reminder that grounded theory work is iterative, not linear. Like Charmaz, I had not created an architectural logic by moving unilaterally from data to code to memo to concept. Instead,
also like Charmaz, I explored the data transcripts, following my train of thought as it led me to through the jungle of data, constantly writing memos both short and long to keep track of where I had been and why I went to each new idea or incident, as if piling rocks like trail markers but more to help myself find my own way than for anyone coming behind. This meant that I moved back and forth between participants, between rounds of interviews, between topics, and I moved up and down between concrete data, intermediary codes, and abstract concepts. To researchers expecting systematicity in terms of sequential progression along a numbered or lettered outline, this adventurous approach might sound too haphazard to be credible. But systematicity can be circular as well as linear, which was the case in this study as demonstrated in this section.

Credibility also has to do with thoroughness of analysis and integration in the final product. I met the criterion of thoroughness by immersing myself in the data for months, making sure that I had cycled through each of the 15 focal interviews for entire coding. It was through this cycling through the data that I met the criterion of integration, one that was important in Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) original discussion of grounded theory evaluation. Integration has to do with blending or coordinating of parts into a unified, functioning whole. It connotes solid joining or knitting together of the pieces during the process of production, as well as completeness and soundness of the final product. One disadvantage of presentation in this written format is that there is simply not room to draw a tree or pyramid diagram showing the content and reasoning behind each inferential leap. By necessity I showed only the tip of the iceberg when presenting themes and concepts in Chapters IV and V, choosing a very few illustrative quotes from the many available. But I cannot assume that seeing the tip means that readers can envision
the vast amount below the surface. To demonstrate the integration that grounds my theory in data, in this section I move through one final example, starting with data and progressing from incident, to code, to comparison, to category, to concept. I use my memos like field notes as a source of data about my analysis of the data.

In my fourth interview with Sunny, I asked her if and how she saw herself differently after the three semesters she had been in the study. She reflected on the change:

More focused. I think the last few years, I haven’t been really like, focusing on homework, or anything like that, but the more I go, the more I realize if I do my homework and actually do what I’m told, then it’s a lot better. Because I would like slack off. I’d rather go hang out with my friends. And now it’s the other way around.

I wrote the following brief memo about the incident, and decided to code it as “attributing control to self:”

2/6/2010
Sunny claims the same kind of control as Marisa: It is my action that makes the difference. "The more I go, the more I realize that if I do my homework and actually do what I'm told, then it's a lot better." She had several options, including doing homework or hanging with friends, and she has focused her attention and intention on the option of doing her homework [because it is through homework that she can make it “a lot better”]. She attributes control to herself, an aspect of agency.

More than a month later, working on a different transcript, I continued my comparison between incidents by expanding on the memo to point out that the attribution of control to self was one of several possible attributions:

3/11/2010
Marisa tells herself to go to class and work hard so that she won't fail as she has before, essentially claiming that she can make the difference between failing and passing. This is interesting given her account of failing the class at the [online for-profit university] because of a computer glitch that made it so that she couldn't submit her online final.
These memos are fairly short, basically the articulation of my reasoning only about a code and two incidents. However, after accumulating eight incidents within this code, and then adding this code to six other related codes, I created the category of “attributing control to self,” essentially elevating the code to a broader, more abstract and central status. To develop the category, I wrote a four-page memo to scrutinize and compare each data incident and code within this category, ending with this summary:

3/16/2010
So the category is: attribution of control over persistence to self
Subcategories:
- Attributing control to self: It is my action that makes the difference in what happens.
- Rationalizing academic shortcuts: Comfortable self efficacy leads to cutting corners.
- Feeling the possibility: An emotional investment in what happens with my persistence (seeing options and desiring them, not just believing I could take them).
- Declaring identity as agent: Repetition of beliefs about myself
- Reinforcing assumptions of agency: Repetition of beliefs about my actions/abilities.

So what do I think about this?...I think that it is shaping up differently than I expected it to, and keep writing, keep writing, what is different than you expected? Well, I expected that there would be more distinction and more easily made distinction between the phrases, and also it is disheartening to see that this concept lines up pretty well with an existing one, so why give it a new name? What is the difference between this and self-efficacy? It appears that a persistent student, exercising agency, repeats positive messages about her identity and about her actions or abilities that lead to persistence. She not only believes that she can persist, and that persistence is in consonance with her identity, but that she wants to do it. Thus, emotion, identity, and ability all align within her perception. She manifests this attribution in her plans and actions, justifying cutting corners at times. So the difference between this and self-efficacy is the addition of emotion and the extension into action. It appears that my categories overlap and blend into each other. I don’t think I will use a new name because it is not a central category.

This memo moved my analysis toward abstract generality and provided me with a piece of the explanation for the concept of agency in Chapter IV. However, it left me wondering whether it was necessary as a property of agency. So I returned to memoing to
compare the four categories I had tentatively assigned as properties of agency, which included checking my reasoning against the data:

3/16/2010
What’s the difference between “Self-directed credit/blame” and this category? It is that this category is an attribution of credit for overall persistence, and “self-directed credit/blame” is an attribution for what happens after a certain decision, events more specific, pieces of persistence.

It overlaps with “initiating action” because it prompts a certain kind of action: not doing all the work all the time. This fits for Sunny, Andy, Sarah, Lamar, Marisa. It doesn’t fit for Lourdes. I don’t know whether it fits for Joey.

It doesn’t as much overlap with “claiming responsibility for decisions and actions.” The attribution is belief: emotion, identity, ability. The claim of responsibility has more to do with power to decide, the propulsion behind past decisions, who made it happen? I did. Because even if I want it, believe I can do it, and believe that my doing it will be efficacious, I still might not do it (overlapping with “initiating action” here). …ah, personal bracketing here… So claiming responsibility has to do with the distinguishing characteristic of agency, as seen in the word root. Who made it happen? Who drove? Who held the reins that turned the team that pulled the cart? Who pushed the rock off the lip of the steep incline? Who provided the force that pushed the change from inertia to motion? Perhaps this is the difference between responsibility and accountability. I am responsible for X, but I am not necessarily accountable, which means that the consequences or payment can/should/will come from me.

Finally, after establishing that the properties of agency were each useful, despite some overlap, I examined the concept of agency itself, and attribution of control as part of that agency, to see whether it could serve to discuss a wide range of circumstances apparent in the data.

2/9/2010
Glaser and Strauss talk about the development of properties through comparison. I've said a lot about when a person is an agent, is in control, is driving their vehicle. When are they not in control? Who is not an agent and why? One example comes from what I coded as “just taking each day” as Joey reels from the effects of her miscarriage. She couldn't think or plan and didn't know what would happen. Marisa bowed to her husband's pressure when she had a young baby and was frustrated beyond belief at her online school, and she did not go to school in the summer because her husband said they could not afford it. Faith dropped her classes at her husband's urging when she was sleep deprived. But this is different from when Lourdes and Marilyn decide to give their husbands time for dates. Of course, I can't really know who made the decision for Faith to stop and Marisa to
persists but then not go to summer classes—it is all framing because it's how they describe it to me. It is a perception of where to attribute or place responsibility. I think this is why I will talk about exercising agency instead of being an agent. It is something that they perform, and someone else will perform it differently. Anyway—the spectrum of agency. I am thinking about the way that people reduce adult student factors when they can, and it makes school easier. They use their safety net to do this. Those who have no safety net continue in school as long as no huge challenges come along, but when life events or emergencies overdraw their fund of energy, they stop. Perhaps the spectrum of agency has to do with both a perceptual and a temporal element. Temporally, I can be more or less dependent, as I earn my own money, get financial help from parents, live with parents, use parents or siblings or a spouse for childcare, etc. Perceptually, I can also be more or less responsible, as I say "he made me go to school" or "I chose to come to school" or as I blame the teacher/advisor for not telling me about a requirement or blame myself for not finding out about the requirement. How would this look in a diagram? And how do I balance along the sliding scales, giving up some temporal responsibility but all, allowing some perceptual responsibility (credit) to others but not all?

This memo raised questions, clarified terminology, and shaped the pieces that appeared in the final theoretical diagram, as well as providing passages of text for the chapter presenting the theory. It is quite a distance from the incident first quoted, in which Sunny described the changes she had undergone and attributed control of “a lot better” situation to herself and her persistence. In part, the apparent distance is because the later memos also incorporate data, codes, and memos not included here. However, I believe that the inferential leaps between each step are reasonable, which builds credibility of the final theoretical product. As can be seen from the dates on each memo, I did not write them in the order I present them here. Instead, I produced them during the looping, adventurous data exploration described earlier. Eventually, though, I wove them into a unified, coherent whole, integrated vertically from particular to general and back again.

I described this vertical integration process not to render my methods and findings chapters redundant but to clearly explicate the standard to which I adhered in attempting
to create a credible grounded theory. Standards of credibility relate not only to the process but to the final product: the grounded theory presented in Chapter V. This is a point of much discussion among grounded theorists who decry the increasing number of studies, especially dissertations, that claim to be grounded theory studies but produce only description, concepts, or taxonomies (Becker, 1998; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1996). While not all grounded theory studies must reach the level of formal grounded theory, they should at least produce a substantive grounded theory, a point important enough to warrant several chapters in the SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory by grounded theorists who disagree on other methodological points (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Glaser, 2007; Hood, 2007; Kearney, 2007; Stern, 2007). With this in mind, I consider it part of my study’s credibility that I moved beyond description and interpretation to theorizing, integrating the parts horizontally.

A theory is a set of concepts, assumptions, and relationships, logically connected and bounded, which together explain a phenomenon of interest, which in this case is adult student persistence (Johnson, 2009). The theory I presented in Chapter V has each of these elements: three core concepts (agency, development, framing) in relationship to each other (described as a double helix) that explain why these participants persisted at the community college. Its strength lies in the tight connections, even sometimes interpenetrations, between how the concepts work individually and how they work as a group. An example is the way that agentic framing and developmental framing happen simultaneously but perform a sorting function to help narrow options, separate from other aspects of agency and development. This is horizontal integration.
The theory’s weakness relative to this definition is that the underlying assumptions are not explicitly identified as such, though they are present in the second chapter’s discussion of sensitizing concepts and in the third chapter’s discussion of ontology, epistemology, and axiology. Another possible weakness lies in the concept of development, which was more evident in what participants did not emphasize than in what they did emphasize, and which was conceptualized in order to balance the strong agentic focus as the theory emerged. Finally, it may be seen as a weakness in credibility that the grounded theory is still not fully developed to cover a wider range of possible circumstances (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Considering such possibilities during the process of establishing relationships between concepts led me to think of further questions for developing concepts, with this and other data sets.

A few such questions, about only one of the concepts, include the following: How does agency show up in the lives of subgroups, such as veterans, returned missionaries who quickly slip out of adult student mode, or women for whom motherhood changes everything? Under what circumstances would one exercise agency or claim or develop agency faster rather than slower? How does agency work when one is part of a unit, such as a marriage, a family, an office or company, a study group, or a community organization? What role does experience play in agency? What role does time play in agency? How is agency different when one can make a choice as compared to when one must make a choice? Who does not exercise agency, and why? When might a person who claims agency put off making a decision, deliberately keeping options open? What is the difference between those who exercise agency to choose an option that seems a natural choice without having seriously considered or lived other options, and those who exercise
agency to choose an option that seems natural, the only way, but who have lived or seriously considered other options? Under what circumstances would perceptual agency and material agency develop? What is the relationship between them, and how is it weighted?

Had I returned to the collected data or used theoretical sampling to gather more data to answer these questions, the theory would undoubtedly be more robust and truly substantive. However, feeling that the grounded theory was acceptable for my current purposes in its current state, I decided to let the weaknesses stand until I could address them in future work, discussed in the section below on usefulness. But first, I address Charmaz’s (2006) criterion of originality which involves moving beyond absorption with my own data to careful comparison with the work of others.

**Originality**

The second of Charmaz’s (2006) criteria is originality. This criterion includes both the creation of fresh, new insights and the meaningful extension of current work. I count it a strength that my categories offer both confirmation of other research and a new conceptual rendering of student persistence. The findings that answer the first two research questions, regarding adult learner experience and the influences on their persistence, echo and reinforce previous empirical and conceptual work on this population and topic: we know that adult learners make a complex balance of balance logistical, financial, and role priorities (Kasworm, 2003b), that the very sources that are most hindering to their persistence can also become their best inspiration (Hensley & Kinser, 2001), and that the out-of-class, on-campus socialization that is so important for many traditional students does not compare, for these students, to in-class and off-campus
influences (Kasworm, 2003b; Tinto, 1998). As well, the concept of development has long been a part of the discussion in regards to college students, whether adult or traditional, and their persistence (Baxter Magolda, 2009).

Agency, while clearly part of the philosophical and sociological tradition, has not been a major focus of student persistence literature. Such a strong emergent theme of agency was a surprise to me and offers the possibility of moving toward balance in our understanding of who is responsible for persistence, departure, retention and attrition. Instead of laying the responsibility solely on individual students or on institutions, my study suggests that we should recognize that both contribute to the situation, for good or ill. This aspect of my work aligns with recent shifts in higher education research and theory. Historically, the field has undergone pendulum swings from focusing on the responsibility of the student (Tinto, 1975) to focusing on the responsibility of the institution (Tierney, 1992). Recent work (Museus & Quaye, 2009) has begun to acknowledge that blaming one or the other exclusively is not productive. Neither institutions nor individuals alone can solve college persistence and retention problems, but both could be doing more to contribute to college persistence and retention success.

The main strength of my theory is in extending and refining current theories of student persistence. Here I compare and contrast my work with three other explanations or models relevant to adult learner persistence: Bean and Eaton’s (2001) psychological model of college student retention, Rendon’s (1994, 2002) theory of validation, and Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) model of college outcomes for adults. Each has parallels to my theory but leaves some questions still unanswered.
As a general psychological model of college student retention, Bean and Eaton’s (2001) work is an appropriate starting place because, like my theory, it takes the perspective of the individual student as a psychological being and assumes that “the social environment is important only as it is perceived by the individual” (p. 58). Bean and Eaton suggest that the primarily sociological approaches to explaining college departure, such as those by Tinto (1993) and Weidman (1989), can be enriched and illuminated by a psychological approach. They review literature on four theories: attitude-behavior theory, approach/avoidance coping behavioral theory, self-efficacy theory, and attribution of control theory.

Bean and Eaton’s (2001) approach is similar to my theory in several respects. Their theoretical synthesis suggests that it is not what happens external to the student but the psychological effects and perceptions of those events that determines whether a student will persist in the face of health, time, or financial limitations. This suggestion matches well with my concept of framing, through which participants define their experiences and identities in specific ways that support their persistence, regardless of other available interpretations. The four theories they review as psychologically central to persistence fit the properties of my central concept of agency, including approach behaviors (initiating action), self-efficacy (blaming or crediting self), and attribution of control (claims of responsibility for and control of one’s persistence). All contribute to intent to persist, a relatively good predictor of actual persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2001).

In addition, Bean and Eaton include entry characteristics and institutional environment in
their model, which is similar to my concept of development in allowing for the changes students experience because of external factors.

However, Bean and Eaton’s (2001) model also contrasts with mine in some respects. First, their model was generated through deductive extrapolation of principles from a review of literature on students in general, primarily traditional and at all institutional types, while mine is grounded directly in data gathered from adult students at community colleges in particular. The similarity between the two models strengthens both, but it would have been inappropriate to apply Bean and Eaton’s model to the adult student or community college population without first establishing their particular perspective. Second, my concept of using agency to frame college as the only option, and then to act on that framing to persist, spans the gap between beliefs or intentions, which are not always carried out, and behaviors. Bean and Eaton do not address this gap, ostensibly relying on the correlation between intent to persist and actual persistence. It is true that those participants who did persist had strongly intended to do so. However, several participants told me in the first interview of their strong intent to persist, but by the second or third interview they had departed college, citing job loss, major illness, family disintegration, and the unmanageable burden of simultaneous unbending pressure from family, employment, and college. Their intent to persist was mediated by the complexity of juggling adult life circumstances that traditional students do not face. For this reason, my theory emphasizes the importance of framing choices, narrowing options so that intent to persist can actually be translated into persistence.

In focusing on what happens within a student, the psychological approach may be perceived as ignoring the influence of important social influences, particularly from
individuals closest to the student. To fairly consider the influence of others, while still keeping the focus at the student level, I turn to research that explores the role of faculty and staff within the institution.

Validation and Persistence

Rendon (1994, 2002) contrasts Astin’s (1999) concept of involvement, in which students initiate institutional connection for themselves and put little responsibility on the institution, with her concept of validation, in which someone at the institution initiates connection with students and defines them as capable of success. Rendon sees validation as particularly important for non-traditional students. Barnett (2007) operationalized and tested the concept of validation, providing empirical support for Rendon’s proposition that validation influences persistence—but as one piece of Tinto’s (1993) retention model. Using Tinto’s model, Barnett suggested that validation is a type of faculty/staff-student interaction that predicts integration, which predicts intent to persist, which predicts persistence. She found that validation has four subconstructs: students known and valued, good instruction, appreciation for diversity, and mentoring. Higher levels of validation (both overall and sub-constructs) significantly predicted higher levels of integration and intent to persist. Barnett concluded that students’ sense of integration, or competent membership, directly predicted intent to persist, while validation influenced intent to persist indirectly by promoting integration.

Rendon’s (2002) explication of validation both complements and contradicts my theory. Rendon differentiates between academic and interpersonal validation, which directly correspond to my categories of the academically and personally ideal teacher. She also identifies specific properties of validation, most of which parallel the experience
of my participants, though they did not articulate their experience in the same way. She acknowledges that validation can occur both in and outside of class, both on and off campus, which shows in my participants’ experience as they credited family members and friends for helping their persistence. Validation builds a sense of self-worth and academic capability, which is similar to the developmental framing through which several participants came to believe that they could do better in college than they had assumed, and they could enjoy it. And validation is most important early in one’s college career as a prerequisite to student development, especially for those who would not have entered or continued with higher education if their doubts had not been countered by teachers or family members.

However, in agreeing that validation is a means, not an end, I open the way for my ambivalence about Rendon’s (2002) central assumption: that the responsibility for validating contact lies with institutional agents, not with students. Though I believe this personally and try to practice it as a faculty member, it does not match the data on participants’ explanation for why they persisted. Rendon’s participants saw involvement as when an institutional agent reached out to them first, which prompted her to conceptualize validation, but my participants claimed that they got themselves academically involved despite busy advisors or brusque teachers, and that they did not care about getting socially involved, which prompted me to conceptualize agency. This claim is consistent despite their ready descriptions of teachers and advisors who did reach out to them. This apparent conflict between my data and the published concept left me hesitant to use the concept, but also unwilling to say that institutional validation does not apply to this population’s persistence.
I resolve this tension through the double helix relationship, described in the previous chapter, between agency and development. It may have been that all participants started out as doubtful, uncertain, unsure of their path and potential as college students, whether at the beginning of my study, like Marisa, or years earlier in their first attempt at college, like Lamar and Joey. All of them received developmental framing about their identities and options that validated them as capable of not only participating but persisting in college, whether from individuals in the personal sphere, like Lamar’s mother and Joey’s extended family, or from individuals at the college, like Andy’s math teacher and Lourdes’s Spanish-speaking academic advisor. In that sense, Rendon is right: validation was initiated by someone other than the student, validation was the prerequisite to student development, and validation was especially important at the beginning of participants’ college careers.

However, Rendon (2002) was also right that validation was a means, not an end. Participants may have started by relying on others’ definition of their identity and options, but that is not where they finished. Development laid the foundation for agency, and students’ persistence over time depended on whether they could reframe themselves as agents and then exercise that agency, whether during the year of the study, like Marisa, or years before, like Lourdes and Sunny. If colleges and universities aim to support this trajectory, it will require them to consider long-term patterns of both behavior and student psychological development. The concept of validation describes an important kind of interaction between students and others in their institutional and personal worlds, but it does not explain persistence as a longitudinal iterative process. My theory argues that
adult students who persist must eventually, with varying degrees and sources of validation, develop to the state of being agents for their own education.

Rendon’s (2002) concept of validation was developed from qualitative data collected from what she refers to as nontraditional students at community colleges, including students of color, adult students, and women students. This makes it comparable to mine in groundedness, population, and setting applicability. However, as explained, it does not look specifically at college outcomes such as persistence, and it does not provide other concepts and relationships between concepts. In the next section, I consider a theoretical model of college outcomes for adults that aims to fill this gap.

A Model of College Outcomes for Adults

Like Bean and Eaton (2001), Donaldson and Graham (1999) base their model on a synthesis of prior theory and research on adult learners in college. They distinguish between open and closed theoretical models of college student development and outcomes, suggesting that for adult learners, the most important parts of learning and persistence happen in context of their “real” life, off-campus, as partners, parents, employees, and community members. Their model uses six components that are more or less analogous to the components of my model.

Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) first component, prior experience and personal biographies, was a part of my discussion with participants, but it did not figure much into the model of persistence, as I chose to focus on what participants experienced after entering college. The second component, psychosocial and value orientations, is similar to the psychological or internal aspects of agency and framing, as participants define what they believe about themselves, what college is for and what priority it receives, and
what ideal students do. The third component, adult cognition, is especially apparent in the
metacognitive and self-regulatory skills that adults bring with them, affecting their self-
efficacy and thus their exercise of agentic framing. The fourth component is the
connecting classroom as the central avenue for social engagement on campus, for
defining the collegiate experience, and for negotiating meaning for learning. I did not
include this component in my model because it did not emerge as central to participants’
explanation of their persistence, but it does appear in their descriptions of the personally
and academically ideal teacher and in their experience of feeling the time crunch when
attending classes and doing homework. The fifth component, life-world environment,
takes into account the contexts of adults’ everyday lives, including the work, family and
community roles in which they learn and develop in ways different from their learning
and development in the classroom. This component is similar to the concept of
development in my model, as participants develop and change in response to framing
from those around them and to the vicissitudes of adult life. The final component is a
consideration of college outcomes, which for Donaldson and Graham includes variations
such as mastering new material for intrinsic satisfaction or community service,
completing credentials or certificates to meet job requirements, or the traditional goals of
good grades and degree achievement. In contrast, the outcomes component of my model
focuses specifically on college persistence, regardless of the purpose to which that
persistence is put.

The differences apparent between outcomes as defined in Donaldson and
Graham’s (1999) model and mine raise important questions for further research on adult
learners in college. Is there a difference between success in learning and success in
college? Why do we use persistence as a measure of success? Measuring college success by persistence makes sense when viewed as predictive of degree completion within a certain timeline, but as Donaldson and Graham and others point out, not all adult learners put that kind of highest priority on either degree achievement or a specific timeline. Instead, perhaps it is important to value adult learners by also valuing their experiential histories, including periods of time and energy focused elsewhere than college. As I noted in the previous chapter in the explanation of the theory, adult learners can and do exercise their agency not only to persist, but also to take noncollege options when they frame such options as the best or only way for them to go.

Donaldson and Graham’s (1999) model of college outcomes for adults is useful for explanatory purposes, as it helps explain how adult students compensate for lack of time as well as the variation in their college experiences. It also suggests that studying time spent on campus as a measure of involvement is not the most accurate measure for this group. As a deductively developed model, it is complemented by the inductive process of my theory development, with the similarities between the models strengthening our theoretical understanding of adult students. In addition, my study extends their work, answering their question about what adults see as the most powerful influences on their learning.

As demonstrated in this section, my grounded theory has both strengths and weaknesses in regards to Charmaz’s (2006) criterion of originality. As a psychological model of persistence, based on adult students at a community college, grounded in substantial data, with concepts clearly defined and positioned in relationship to each other, it bridges the gap between intent and action, allows for individual agency in the
context of others’ validating influence, considers the process of student evolution toward agency over time, and answers the question of what adult learners perceive as the most important influences on their persistence. In addition, my theory explores the possibility of different kinds of agency (perceptual and material), which no theories of persistence mention. However, it is still untested, it adds to the proliferation of terminology in describing phenomena that have already been given different labels, and it does not include components such as past experience or the role of the classroom environment. As a platform for future research, it leaves much room for improvement. However, by extending current theories of persistence and seeking to clarify their gaps, it proves itself theoretically original, meeting Charmaz’s second criterion for an acceptable grounded theory.

A strong combination of credibility and originality lays a foundation for a grounded theory that makes sense to several audiences, including the participants or those who share their circumstances and the policy-makers or practitioners in place to affect those circumstances. Though I did not obtain extensive participant checking, my theory did resonate with the participants who reviewed early versions of it, and it does help explain several of the puzzling data patterns reported in Chapter IV. Before moving to final implications, I spend the next section considering Charmaz’s (2006) third criterion of resonance.

**Resonance**

Charmaz (2006) considers resonance to be a function of whether the theory fully portrays participants’ experience, reveals liminal or taken-for-granted meanings, links individual lives to larger collectivities when appropriate, and makes sense to the people
upon whose experience it is based. In a way, this criterion is similar to Glaser’s (1978) criterion of relevance, as he felt it was important that grounded theories be concerned with a real-life problem that actually matters to people in their day-to-day existence.

This study is immediately relevant to both adult students and to college administrators and policy makers, both those concerned with adult students in developmental education and those concerned with adult students in general. Adult students face the question of persistence every day, asking themselves when they are tired and overtaxed why they persist, and frequently hearing spouses, friends, children, and employers asking them when they are going to stop so they will be more available again. For these students, the persistence advice participants shared is very practical: mute discouraging voices and thoughts as much as possible, strategize carefully far in advance about use of resources, and be willing to satisfice in the near future for long-term benefits. Likewise, it matters greatly to college administrators and policy-makers whether their adult students persist at higher or lower rates, especially when adult students are the majority as at community colleges, and especially when lean budgetary years force consideration of whether to keep programs like developmental education. Faculty members who teach adult students find, as I did, that many adult students who have been so active in arranging for persistence are similarly active in the classroom, and are a delight to teach. As a faculty member watching my adult students work within their many constraints, I appreciate any research on persistence that helps me create a classroom that supports these students’ persistence.

This study portrays the main themes of participants’ experience, by emphasizing the commonality of balancing competing priorities and making choices about identity and
appropriate action. However, it does not portray the fullness of participants’ experience, which is one part of Charmaz’s (2006) resonance, because of limited time and room. In developing concepts and categories, I simply could not include everything. I chose not to explore such important issues as gender and cultural differences, comparisons between older adults and younger adults, the difference between and influence of parenthood and partnership, expectations about work and debt, and orientations toward the purpose of college. The advantage of focus is clarity, but the disadvantage is lost detail, and just as my participants did, I framed the meaning and focus of my study by eliminating some options in favor of others.

However, the move from description to theorizing did reveal “liminal and taken-for-granted meanings” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 182). Liminality has to do with being barely perceptible or on the threshold, and all three core concepts were liminal in this sense. Participants did not announce to me when they were about to frame a circumstance a particular way, nor did they point out that a certain event showcased their exercise of agency, and most of them were unaware of their developmental changes until I pointed them out. However, these taken-for-granted meaning patterns, when articulated as concepts, helped explain some of the more puzzling descriptive findings.

For instance, Joey, in a household with two full-time incomes, felt that she could only go to school if her parents helped pay for it “because if I had to pay for it myself, I probably would have to quit. I wouldn't be able to do it. I just, there's no way I could afford it.” Sarah, paying for full-time enrollment with her earnings as a part-time CNA and supporting her daughter with state assistance, felt that she could keep going financially: “I don’t know how I can do it, but I’m doing it…I’m going to live with what
I got.” Why was school financially possible for Sarah on an income that for Joey would
have been financially prohibitive? And why did other participants depart college, citing
financial barriers, when several of my most persistent participants made far less money?
If framing is a process that actually happens, it may explain this phenomenon:
participants who hold set beliefs about who they are, what money is for, and what priority
to place on college will use their money in accordance with those beliefs, and they will
justify this use by saying it was the only possible way rather than by saying that they did
not feel like paying for an eliminated option.
Another example appeared when I wondered why participants seemed to chafe at
the safety net that facilitated their college persistence. This ambivalence about accepting
needed help appeared when people or circumstances challenged participants’ frame of
themselves as agents. For instance, Sunny confirmed that she lived in her parents’
basement to save money: “Yeah, they say as long as I go to school, I don’t have to pay
rent, which that’s always good. But I don’t, I don’t know, I don’t think I’ll be staying
there too long.” She saw the benefit “that’s always good” of her parents’ conditional
offer, which was based on her progress toward a worthy goal. The inclusion of “but” and
“I don’t know,” though, signaled that she was not fully satisfied to rest in that safety net.
Sunny was the most consistently agentic in her framing of herself, and it rankled her to
have to relinquish some of that perceived agency as she accepted material support.
This attitude in Sunny and others was explained by the relationship between
framing and the two kinds of agency, perceptual and material. Participants’ perception of
themselves was closely tied to their degree of reliance on others, and negotiation of one
affected the other. Participants who had worked hard to frame themselves as agentic still
had to accept a certain degree of collaboration in order to navigate their life circumstances, in both personal and institutional spheres. This led me to wonder if the presence of a safety net reduces framing oneself as an agent because one can always fall back on others—and just knowing of that possibility would both reduce stress and complicate one’s agentic framing, even if one never took advantage of it. Conversely, if participants felt that they must assume material responsibility because no one else would do so, they would be more likely to perceive themselves as agentic, as Sarah did: “Because, I mean, life goes on, with or without you, that’s what I’ve learned the hard way [laughs].”

A third example of revealing liminal, taken-for-granted meanings is my finding about the importance of campus climate, which became visible only after I put the analytic spotlight on why participants did not give institutional influences the weight that I expected. This inclusion of developmental institutional influences also meets Charmaz’s (2006) principle of linking “individual lives to larger collectivities” (p. 183). Participants did not problematize their interactions with institutional agents, and none of them articulated the concept or influence of climate directly. But their experiences and feelings were full of implicit references to issues of climate, which played an important role in whether they felt comfortable and capable enough on campus to persist.

Finally, Charmaz (2006) joins other qualitative methodologists in pointing out the importance of the theory making sense to the people upon whose experience it is based. My theory is weak in this respect because most of my participants did not get to review it in its finished state; they did not see the double helix model or hear how the concepts related to each other. Only two participants attended the final data collection event, and at
that time I only had the basic themes and concepts to present to them. Refining my study by discussing it with participants, or others in similar life circumstances, would be an appropriate subject for a future study, a move toward constructivism, and a move forward in the cycle of theory development and testing, which also contributes to Glaser’s (1978) criterion of modifiability.

Usefulness

Charmaz’s (2006) final criterion is usefulness, which has to do with generating implications for future research, policy, and practice, and with contributing to the construction of knowledge and a better world. Other standards also hold that theories should function to describe, explain, and predict phenomena, and they should provide taxonomies and heuristics to organize our understanding and guide our problem solving (Creswell, 2003; Miller, 1969). The theory I developed serves the descriptive and heuristic functions, with the possibility of prediction after more refinement. However, as a psychological theory, it does not so much contribute guidance for direct control of student experience and action; rather, it provides ideas for indirect influence through the creation of climate and culture. In this section, I discuss several applications of the usefulness of this theory in research, policy, and practice.

Future Research

This area is perhaps the strongest for this study, as the study acts as a springboard for exciting possibilities for future research. The first step is to continue to develop the theory through theoretical sampling of other populations, as Glaser and Strauss (1967) direct for moving to formal grounded theory. I would start with more participants from
the same group (adult learners at community colleges who started with developmental reading classes), and then vary selection criteria as directed by the developing theory, comparing the original group with groups such as non-persistent adult students, adult students who do or do not stop out during their college endeavor, adult students who started in other developmental levels or classes, adult students who started with regular college level classes, traditional students, students at other types of institutions or in other regions, male and female students, students from various racial, ethnic or regional backgrounds, other persistent adults who are not students, members of adults’ familial or community support networks, or various staff and faculty from the institutions at which adult students are enrolled. These comparisons could lead to new definitions of persistence, clarification of the way various adult characteristics mediate the student experience, and refinement of the concepts, assumptions, and relationships in the theory.

In addition, I plan to continue to build interdisciplinary bridges, bringing to bear on higher education conceptual tools from social science fields such as sociology, psychology, organizational theory, philosophy, and anthropology. This is appropriate because education as a distinct research field evolved from roots each of these disciplines (Foucault, 1969). In particular, I see rich potential in the parallels between the population and theory in this study and the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977) on social reproduction theory, Anthony Giddens (1984) on structuration theory, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi (1990) on optimal experience and persistence, Joseph Campbell (1949) on the archetypal hero’s journey, and Malcolm Knowles (1968) on andragogy. Bourdieu and Giddens wrestle with the concept of agency in relationship to institutions and macrosocial traditions, a dilemma that I faced in the tension between my concepts of agency and
development. Csikszentmihalyi explores the question of why people persist in pleasurable activities, often at great expense or effort, which I see as a useful key to understanding persistence in any difficult activity over time. Campbell’s work suggests that people need to tell their life story positioning themselves as agentic heroes on a mythic quest, which is why so many cultural myths contain the same basic plot. I find this idea intriguing in light of the concept of framing that emerged from my data, and it may also be useful in understanding the symbolic aspects of culture and climate in higher education institutions. And finally, Knowles’s work would bring me back to education, seeking to develop a theory of adult learning that extends the concept of andragogy into a system of concepts and relationships tested and applied specifically in the context of higher education. Using these theories would not be incompatible with my methodological inclination toward grounded theory. Instead, as components in wide reading and creative theorizing, they would increase the sensitivity and sophistication of my skill in coding, memoing, and categorizing patterns in the data, an essential skill for grounded theorists (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Morse, 2007).

Finally, I would revisit reading as both a contextual factor and a main focus of research. Specifically, I would like to better understand the influence of developmental reading classes, which is an issue of both research and policy. Comments from all 17 students who persisted past the first semester suggested that developmental reading courses work—but perhaps not in the way that administrators had hoped. The adult contexts of participants’ lives affected the order and timing of their classes and often interfered with the optimal effectiveness of the developmental reading class. Developmental reading classes are intended to equip students with the habits and skills
necessary to succeed in the reading required for their subsequent college classes. Because they are primarily skill-oriented rather than content-oriented, they perforce require practice and application to be effective. However, because of work or family demands which constrained the schedule or number of classes participants could take, or because of the requirement of other developmental classes such as writing or math, not all students moved directly from their developmental reading class into the reading-intensive classes for which they were preparing. By the time they took classes in which they could directly apply the skills from the developmental reading class, many had been out of practice for a semester or more, and few saw strong connections between their developmental reading class and their subsequent classes.

This fits with a study in which Bray, Pascarella, and Pierson (2004) found that literacy development throughout college years is significantly predicted by credit hours completed, number of assigned books read, instruction perceived as effective, and number of natural science and engineering courses taken, all matters of time and practice more than explicit literacy instruction. Developmental education is not on this list, which could be because the study sampled a cohort of incoming freshmen and did not include returning or transfer students. However, it may be that developmental reading courses play a key role in students’ socialization into successful college student behaviors, if not ensuring stellar reading comprehension with a passing grade. Simply by being in classes, getting used to deadlines, interacting with particularly dedicated, inspiring, caring teachers, and completing assignments, participants in this study benefited developmentally from their time in a developmental reading class. From a research perspective, it would be helpful to tease out which aspects of developmental reading
classes promote reading development as opposed to just socialization, in terms of curricula, pedagogy, and configuration.

Miller (1969) suggests that good theory springs from and ultimately returns to practice, which is consistent with Charmaz’s (2006) inclusion of usefulness in her criteria for judging grounded theory. Accordingly, I turn now to considering what this study has to offer in terms of interpretations that people can use in their everyday lives, through policy and practice. Policy and practice overlap in complex ways and can be difficult to tease apart. I distinguish between the two thus: Practice refers to the part that students can see, the everyday behaviors and approaches taken by faculty and staff. Students may assume that practice varies by personality, as when Marilyn asserted that advisors will be “nice and helpful” if they feel like it, but “if not, tough luck” for the student. Unfortunately, this is all too often true, as individuals in any bureaucratic organization bring their own personal style to the enactment of their assigned roles. In contrast, the role of policy is to ensure the continuity and observance of good practices so they are not based on personality or happenstance. Because students generally do not read policy documents and may interact with only a handful of faculty or staff, they may not see patterns of behavior in various roles or connect those patterns to an institutional agenda. However, policies lay the foundation for the overall direction of the institution and the individuals who represent it. In considering this study’s implications for solutions to real-life policy, I look first at policy because of its foundational role and then turn to practice because of its day-to-day significance to participants in their final assessment of the college.
Policy

There are many policy implications from this study’s findings, but I choose to focus on three: mandatory developmental education placement, combining developmental with college-level content courses, and student-centered class scheduling. First, the controversy between mandatory versus recommended developmental education placement refers to how colleges respond when students test low on entrance exams. Some colleges recommend that students with low reading, writing, or math scores take developmental classes but still allow them to register for any course, on the reasoning that students have what is sometimes called the “right to fail” along with the opportunity to transcend possibly inaccurate test scores; this policy has been identified as an institutional barrier that is significantly related to lower grades and retention in college-level classes (Cooney, 2004). Other colleges require that students who test below a specific cutoff score take developmental education classes before college level courses; this policy is significantly related to higher grades and retention for those who complete the course, but it is also related to delays in graduation and difficulties with financial aid limits (Attewell et al., 2006; Crews & Aragon, 2007).

Based on the findings from this study, I recommend mandatory developmental education placement, or at least mandatory placement in some type of student success course, for those who test low on entrance exams. Though participants in the course attributed little change in their reading skills to the developmental reading course, they did report connections to other students and to supportive faculty, and they experience the development of a college student mindset and approach, which supported their exercise of agency with subsequent persistence.
Second, in order to address the problem of developmental education classes causing delays, I recommend combining developmental education courses with college-level content courses, in what is sometimes referred to as learning communities (Tinto, 1998). The college at which these students were enrolled uses a centralized developmental education model, which is why students could take developmental reading courses separately from content courses and benefit from them as described by my concept of development in the previous chapter. Other colleges use mainstreamed models, in which students enroll concurrently in a developmental reading course and a content course, and the respective teachers plan together so that students practice reading skills on the content material they need to know for the class, thus benefiting more directly in their reading development. Though this policy requires more coordination between faculty and departments, students in higher levels of developmental education particularly benefit academically from having the developmental classes connected to the content classes (Perin, 2006). Benefits of this model extend beyond academics to retention and success rates in technical programs as well (Jenkins, Zeidenberg, & Kienzl, 2009). In addition, this approach would allow for connections with student peers, as Marisa and Paola described, that would support both their social and academic integration to the college. But adult students, like those in this study, may not be able to take such courses unless more content classes were offered in the evening to accommodate those who must work during daytime business hours.

This employment-related constraint on adult students’ time leads to my third policy recommendation: increased scheduling of classes, including learning communities, and student support service office hours during weekends and evenings. As noted in the
section on participants’ experience, the constraints of family and employment meant that participants often could not take classes during the day or visit student support services such as advising because these offices are normally open only during business hours. To get around this barrier, Andy resorted to repeated phone calls to student services offices during her lunch break to get explanations of what she saw on the college’s website, while Lourdes built her entire schedule around the one class from her major that was offered at night, even traveling to a different campus to attend it. The college could better match the efforts of students like Andy and Lourdes by shifting from a faculty/staff-centered approach, offering services and classes at the convenience of instructors, to a student-centered approach. Just knowing how adult students differ from traditional students challenges the assumptions evident when scheduling classes and programs during the day as if all students can participate at that time (Philibert, Allen, & Elleven, 2008)—and if a majority of students on campus and in developmental reading classes are adult students, campus scheduling should shift to accommodate.

These kinds of shifts would represent changes in campus culture and climate, a sometimes lengthy process. However, campus climate matters for adult student persistence, and policy makers should keep this in mind when devising key documents such as mission statements, codes of conduct, employee trainings that define roles and responsibilities, curricular development directives, crossdepartmental efforts, and strategic planning initiatives. To understand why, policy makers should return to the apparent paradox of policy and practice described above: Participants claimed responsibility for their own persistence, and saw little connection between their lives and the institution outside of the classroom. This complements the institutional purpose
identified by John Gardner, former U. S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare:
“The ultimate goal of the educational system is to shift to the individual the burden of
is not that we as college and university educators should leave students to their own
devices, but that we should do what we can to help all students develop into agency. It
matters less whether individual students are initially agents or non-agents than whether
they start to see themselves as agents and develop the skills or attitudes that open doors
for their exercise of agency in learning and pursuit of a degree. As this study’s
participants demonstrate, both students who start with low agency and those who start
with high agency can persist—especially with the validating help of individuals around
them. This leads to my recommendations for practice.

Practice

As with policy implications, practice implications from this study could be
numerous. In this section, I concentrate on recommendations for faculty because faculty
members are the institutional representatives who have the most contact with adult
students. Specifically, I recommend knowing students personally, performing the role of
faculty-advisor, and using early alert systems appropriately.

First, faculty should get to know students personally, putting Rendon’s (1994;
2002) principles of validation into practice. Participants’ stories about institutional agents
centered on incidents in which faculty and staff took a little extra time to know,
encourage, and advise students in personally relevant ways. This is important especially
in light of findings that validation, as a type of faculty/student interaction, significantly
predicts persistence (Barnett, 2007). Such validating practices might include learning and
using student’s names, telling students about and encouraging them to use on-campus resources, listening to students’ concerns and hopes, and directly framing students as competent learners, capable of overcoming barriers and persisting in higher education. If faculty and staff will encourage the active initiation of students already inclined to agency, and also make an extra effort to reach out to those who may be more reticent, they will contribute to a campus climate of welcome, support, excellence, and persistence. Though subtle and indirect, the influence of this kind of climate is powerful (Rhee, 2008). And though it does not replace the primary influences of family and life circumstances on persistence, it can complement them by supporting students’ personal support systems, especially when such an effort is part of official policy initiatives.

Second, faculty members should go beyond the role of personally ideal teacher and seek to be academically ideal in a long-term way, as faculty-advisors who can help students plan a course sequence, choose a major and meet major requirements, and even prepare to transfer to other institutions. Graduate students at research universities and undergraduate students at elite or private liberal arts colleges already enjoy this kind of mentorship, and many faculty members at community colleges do perform the role informally, but the practice should be more widespread, especially at community colleges and with adult students who may not have college models and mentors readily available in their personal lives. If faculty members were familiar with their own departments’ major requirements and generally familiar with deadlines and requirements for other local colleges and universities, they could open these doors of opportunity for students who may not be comfortable enough or able to visit traditional advising offices or hours (Tinto, 1998). The importance of this application of developmental framing is borne out
by my own experience teaching other sections of the developmental reading course, as I
was approached repeatedly by adult students wondering what classes they should take
next or how to learn more about a potentially interesting major.

The practice of faculty advising may be most immediately relevant to students
who are already engaged with classes, but faculty practices can also extend to support
students who struggle to connect academically and socially. For this reason, my final
practice recommendation is to vigorously implement the policy of early alert systems.
Early alert systems are designed so that colleges can reach out to students who are
struggling before it is too late for those students to make up any lost ground—and faculty
members are the key link to the rest of the student support systems on campus. At the
college where participants were enrolled, this system is already in place by policy.
Faculty members receive an email within the first two weeks of class each semester,
asking them to refer students who are missing class, already getting low grades, or appear
distressed to counseling, tutoring, or advising services. Reminder emails come later in the
semester. The intent is to help students get the help they need early enough to keep up
with the class, or to help them withdraw from the class in time to avoid a failing grade
that will permanently affect their GPA and their transcripts.

That the policy is in place is a good step, but unfortunately it is not always
practiced. If it had been, it may have benefited participants who left the study more than
those who completed the study. For instance, Faith dropped out a month into the second
semester because of sleep deprivation and discouragement about her math class; Yi
mistakenly took a statistics course that was far beyond his English level, but simply
suffered through the course to a failing grade because he thought there was no other way
to keep his credits at the level required by his student visa; and Amanda did well until a
car accident, financial pressures, and the stress of addiction recovery triggered a
depressive episode after midterms, when she simply stopped coming to class. None of
these participants turned to advisors or counselors at the college to weather these
academic and personal storms, and each continued to go to class for some time after their
struggle started, which means there was a window of time in which a sensitive faculty
member’s outreach could have made a difference—whether in facilitating a withdrawal, a
transfer to a different course, or an incomplete, or in referring these students to
appropriate student support services.

Fully institutionalizing these practices will likely require additional policy shifts,
including considerations of restructuring the current academic reward system so that
faculty can and will sustain the efforts required over time (Tinto, 1998). But these
practices hold potential for a valuable payoff in terms of higher retention for adult
students, with its attendant benefits to individuals, institutions, and communities.

**Conclusion**

In this metareflective final chapter, I have reviewed my work in light of standards
for grounded theory, demonstrating credibility through careful vertical and horizontal
integration, originality in comparison with other persistence theories, resonance with the
daily challenges of stakeholders in the adult persistence process, and usefulness in
stimulating further research, policy, and practice. The study provides a voice for a group
of stakeholders too often ignored, and evidence and reasoning to support the growth of
"developmental" instead of "remedial” programs. It also helps policy-makers think more
carefully about how to make decisions regarding tuition, credit, assessment, placement,
structure, and other controversial aspects of developmental reading programs. In research, it provides an in-depth longitudinal investigation in a field that has not often followed students over time and a move toward theory in an area that has relied mostly on description and proscription. In addition, it builds bridges between disciplines that parallel each other conceptually and even overlap in target population but do not refer to each other and thus miss the possibility of valuable enrichment and expansion.

At this point, I confess that more than sound research practices or compelling policy implications, it is the people involved that make this study live for me. Through speaking with them again and again in the course of the year, I learned to understand their experience, their concerns with finances and language barriers, the way they balance competing priorities. They showed me how their personal and social networks influenced their persistence through employment responsibilities, logistical safety nets, models and mentors, and religious and spiritual commitments. Contrary to my initial assumptions, I discovered that they felt the influence of these personal networks much more strongly than influences on persistence from people on campus. However, I also came to understand that individuals on campus influenced whether participants felt comfortable, welcome, and capable, or uneasy, unwelcome, and overwhelmed when they come onto campus. Though intangible and often unrecognized, the climate that faculty and advisors created became a powerful influence on participants’ persistence.

Finally, I return to the interview transcripts, to an interchange in my fourth interview with Andy. At that point, she was expecting her first baby, settling into a new house with her partner, adjusting to a new job, and (to her own surprise) getting good grades in her third consecutive semester at the college, even in her former “kryptonite”
subject of math. I asked her the same questions I had asked Paola earlier, and like Paola, her answers were significant:

R: But some of them, you know, face the same challenges that you’re talking about. A couple of them had pregnancies come up and, um, you know, financial things, or time, or getting back into school. And actually a lot of people said that they were their own biggest obstacle [as you did]. And they ended up looking at school and saying “no, I’m not going to do it.” But you’re still here and you’re planning on coming back next semester.
A: Right.
R: Why?
A: …It’s important that I’m here, like I said, I feel good about coming to school. I feel like I’m doing something with my life…and you know it’s just, a new way to open your life up to a new experience. And like I said, being in school just makes me feel good about myself. And that’s probably why I’ve stuck with it. And the people behind me, encouraging me. And now I have, you know, I have this drive towards a something. I don’t know quite what that something is, just yet, but I have drive towards a something to better myself.

Andy’s words sum up my theoretical argument well. I argue that adult students’ persistence is a complex process of growing into agency. Like her peers, Andy persisted in college because she framed persistence in education as “by far, the most important thing you can ever do,” even though it is not mandatory for her. She exercised agency in beliefs and actions, commenting that persistence “makes me feel good about myself” and crediting herself for having “this drive” through which she has “stuck with it” while still maintaining other important priorities such as family and work. She acknowledged that this process took place in the developmental context of people who shaped and responded to her agency, “people behind me, encouraging me,” and life events that changed her perspective as she “open[ed her] life up to a new experience.” I still do not fully understand why some adult students undertake this agentic framing and action and others do not, and I look forward to pursuing the answer to that paradox in further research.
APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT LETTER AND SURVEY
Dear student,

I would like to invite you to participate in a study about students' experiences with Reading 990 and other classes at Salt Lake Community College. I am a graduate student at the University of Utah, and I am doing this study because I want to understand how students make decisions about staying in college.

I would like to ask you to complete the survey attached to this letter, and indicate whether or not you are interested in participating. Please return the survey to your Reading 990 teacher, who will return it to me. After you return the survey, and if you indicate interest in the study, I will call you to give you more information about the study and set up an appointment for an interview. I would like to interview you up to four times during the 2008-2009 school year. Each interview will last an hour or less. I will ask you questions about your experience with Reading 990 and other classes you take at SLCC and about how you make decisions about college. You will be paid $10 for the first interview, $15 for the second, $20 for the third, and $25 for the fourth.

All information and data collected as part of this study will be confidential and will not affect your classes, grades, or relationships with teachers at SLCC in any way. All names will be changed in the final report. Information collected as part of this study will not be reported to government or immigration officials.

If you have any questions or if you would like more information about the study, please call me at 801-864-9219 or email me at r.capps@utah.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this study. I look forward to talking with you about your experience at SLCC.

Sincerely,

Rosemary Capps
A Study on SLCC Students

Name

Date

Age

How many semesters already completed?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender:</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you:</td>
<td>Working PT</td>
<td>Enrolled PT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Working FT</td>
<td>Enrolled FT</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Which classes are you planning to take next semester? (Please list.)

☐ I am not interested in participating in this study.

☐ I am interested in participating in a study about the experience of students at Salt Lake Community College. I am providing my name, address, phone number and/or email address so that Rosemary Capps can contact me and give me more information about the study.

Signature

Mailing address

Phone number

Email address
A Study on Adult Learners at Community Colleges

BACKGROUND
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether you want to volunteer to take part in this study.

The purpose of the study is to learn about the experience of students who take a regular college class immediately after they take a developmental reading class at Salt Lake Community College. The developmental reading class will be Reading 990, designed to prepare students to read at or above an 11th grade reading level. The researcher in the study is Rosemary Capps, a doctoral student at the University of Utah. In the study, the researcher will explore students’ perspectives about reading and decisions about college participation. The findings of the study will be shared with teachers and administrators at Salt Lake Community College and the University of Utah so that they can use the findings to better serve their students.

STUDY PROCEDURE
In this study, you will be interviewed once during the Fall 2008 semester and three times during the Spring 2009 semester. You will be allowed to choose the scheduling and location of the interviews. The researcher will ask you questions about how you make decisions about college participation and about people or influences that help you or create barriers for you in college. The interviews will last approximately 30-60 minutes. With your permission, the researcher will record the interviews. The researcher may contact you following the interviews to clarify parts of the interviews.

RISKS
The risks of this study are minimal. You may feel upset thinking about or talking about personal information related to reading and college participation. These risks are similar to those you experience when discussing personal information with others. If you feel upset from this experience, you can tell the researcher, and she will tell you about resources available to help.

BENEFITS
There are no direct benefits for taking part in this study. However, the information from this study may help develop a greater understanding of how to help future students in developmental reading classes do well in the rest of their college classes.

CONFIDENTIALITY
Your data will be kept confidential. Data and records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet or on a password protected computer located in the researcher’s work space. Only the researcher will have access to this information. During analysis, your name will be kept with your responses from the interview. In publications, your name will be removed
to protect your identity. Information that identifies you personally will be destroyed after its useful life.

PERSON TO CONTACT
If you have questions, complaints, or concerns about this study, or if you need more information, you can contact the researcher (Rosemary Capps) at (801) 864-9219 or at r.capps@utah.edu. If you feel you have been harmed as a result of participation, please call Rosemary Capps at (801) 864-9219 during regular working hours (8a.m.-5p.m.).

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant. Also, contact the IRB if you have questions, complaints or concerns which you do not feel you can discuss with the investigator. The University of Utah IRB may be reached by phone at (801) 581-3655 or by e-mail at irb@hsc.utah.edu.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION
It is up to you to decide whether to take part in this study. Your decision will not affect your classes or grades at SLCC. If you decide not to participate, or if you decide to withdraw from the study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. This will not affect your relationship with the investigator.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION TO PARTICIPANTS
There are no costs to you in this research. At the end of each interview, you will be offered a small stipend: $10 after the first interview, $15 after the second, $20 after the third, and $25 after the fourth.

CONSENT
By signing this consent form, I confirm I have read the information in this consent form and have had the opportunity to ask questions. I will be given a signed copy of this consent form. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.

___________________________________  ______________________
Printed Name of Participant     Date

___________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Participant     Date

___________________________________  ______________________
Printed Name of Researcher

___________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Researcher     Date
Interview 1 Protocol

Directions: Start with informal conversation and introductions. “I’m now going to turn on the tape recorder and start taking general notes. The tape and notes are to help me understand and remember what you have to share. Remember that you can choose to have me turn off the tape, stop taking notes, skip a question, or stop the interview at any time if you feel like it. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

Follow-up questions:
1. Tell me more about that.
2. Can you give me an example of . . .?
3. What changed your mind?
4. What happened next?
5. Do you mean that . . .?
6. Do you see any connections between . . .?

- **General information (establishing adult student status)**
  - What’s your name?
  - How old are you?
    - Follow up (if 20 or older): How long have you been out of school?
    - What brought you back to school?
  - How many credits are you taking?
  - How many hours a week do you work? Nights/days?
  - Tell me a little bit about your current living situation.
    - Probe: family situation (married, supporting dependents, etc)
    - Probe: How do your family members feel about you being in classes?

- **Developmental reading**
  - Tell me about when you decided to take Reading 990.
    - How and where did you learn about it?
    - What did you think about it?
    - How did you feel about it?
    - Has it been what you expected?
    - Probe: connections with previous reading/school experience
  - What do you read for school? Where do you do your reading and homework? How does that work for you? What about reading outside of school?

- **Persistence in higher education**
  - Tell me about your goals for college.
  - Which classes are you enrolled in currently?
    - How are they going for you?
  - How do those classes fit into your goals for college?
    - Probe: how do those classes fit with your Reading 990 class?
(If already taken classes) Tell me about the timing of the classes you've taken.
- Why did you take them in that order?
- Looking back, is there anything you would change about the timing of your classes?
- (be sensitive to the role of reading failures in other classes in deciding to take Reading 990)

Tell me about the classes you are planning to take next semester.
- Probe: How does Reading 990 fit with those classes?

- **Personal and institutional factors that support or hinder persistence**
  - What or who helped you the most getting this far in your reading?
    - In your classes?
    - At the college?
    - In your everyday life?
    - You mentioned that your [spouse/friend/parent/teacher/etc] was a big support for you.
    - Can you tell me about a specific time he/she helped?
    - Can you give me an example of specific ways he/she helps?
  - What or who was the biggest challenge in getting this far in your reading?
    - In your classes?
    - At the college?
    - In your everyday life?
    - You mentioned that your [marriage/job/finances/memories/college experiences] made it difficult to read or attend college.
    - Can you give me a specific example of that?
  - Some students take the classes you take and end up dropping out, but you are still in class. What keeps you going?
  - Tell me about your interaction with professors.
    - In class?
    - Out of class?

- **I don't have any other questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to share about our discussion today?**
Interview 2 Protocol

Informal catching up and chatting, how was your break, etc.
Give informed consent form to those who have not yet signed it yet
Remind that I can and will turn off or stop at any time, just tell me.
Any questions or thoughts come up since the last interview?
Give a copy of the transcript—“for you to read and comment on whenever you have time.”
So how is this semester going for you?

Academic
- How did last semester end up? What do you think about your grades from last semester? From 990? How does that make you feel? (positive/negative, especially in light of previous reading/school failures) How does that play into what you chose or are doing this semester?
- What classes are you taking? How did you choose them (probe: counselor, friends, spouse, parents, catalog, instructor recommendation, etc?)? How are they going so far? (Why did you decide not to take the ones you had planned? The ones that required reading skills from 990?) Full time or part time? Any more satisfying or fulfilling?
- What’s the reading like for those classes? What you expected? How is it going?
- What kinds of things do you use from 990? Was it the brush-up you needed? What were the most useful and least useful parts of the Reading 990 class, now that you have the perspective of reading in another class? What do you wish they had taught you in 990? Described benefit of cornell notes, SQ3R. Still using? How is it going?
- What is your schedule like? A typical school day?
- Extracurricular reading: Reading online? Continued with wide reading? Progress on business plan?
- Plans for your major or college goals: Changed? Stayed the same? Why or why not? When? What changed them?
- Where/when do you study? Where/when do you read? Where/when do you write?
- Tell me about your professors this semester. How are they—positive/negative/as inspiring/more discouraging/accessible/distant. If your teacher is an especially shining example, what does that look like—what does she do or say that makes it like that for you? How does that relate to your past experience of teachers?
- Any use of tutoring or counselors or learning center or other campus resources?
- Interaction with students: He talked about filling somewhat of a mentor role for younger or less experienced students—does he see that still as he moves out of DE into GE and major classes? Still filling the role of mentor to younger students?
- Advice to a reading 990 student: save for third interview

Social
- Extracurricular activities: Did you ever get involved with sports?
- Who pays for college? Why? If financial things are a big barrier, what do you do to get past them?
• Tell me about your work schedule this semester. Changed from last semester? How many hours? When/why/how? What do the people at work think about what you are doing with school? If not working, why not, and what doing instead? How supporting family? Might lead into questions about loans and debt. Is this situation the way you want it? Job has tuition reimbursement? Is he using it? How and why and how much? Is it available with only part time?
• How does the current economic situation affect plans, motivation, logistics, deployment, etc?
• Living situation same? Changed? Any plans to change? Why or why not?
• Tell me about your home schedule—when do you spend time with family? When do you do housework? Who does the housework? Arrangements for childcare same as last semester? If changed, when and why? Time spent with kids increased or decrease or stayed constant and why? If balancing time is a big barrier, what system did you figure out that makes it so that you are still doing it? How are you doing with the overwhelmed feeling?
• Spouse: Education progress? Tutoring help? Emotional support or detraction? Time demands? Work or school schedule? How does this affect your time with family, your expectations, perceptions, etc.
• Transportation mode and schedule and cost?
• What’s the biggest help this semester? What’s the biggest hindrance this semester? (save for third interview)
• Significant others: the opinion and influence of parents-in-law, friends from the mission, wife, kids,
• Big decisions: Most often a choice about children vs. education, or about marriage and divorce
• Volunteer work in the community?

• I want to follow up on a few things you told me before, to help me understand your experience.
• Getting past the barrier—how does it work? "you said that your kids are a major motivation for you--tell me a little bit more about what that looks like and how that works in your life."
• Inner motivation
  o How do you tap into it?
  o Why in school now instead of at another time, sooner or later?
  o These things happened to you, and now they are the lens through which you see things
  o Is (X) still a motivator?
  o What benefit keeps you here if you don’t want it?
  o What tools will you use to keep going?
• I don't have any other questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to share about our discussion today?
Interview 3 Protocol

So here’s the next transcript for you. So talk to me about reading the first transcript. Any new thoughts come to mind? Anything you want to add or clarify?

   Lucy: How has it been with husband home? How long does he get to be home?
   Any new plans with working?
     • Define reading
     • The kind of experience with academic advising—what made it helpful?
       What would have made it more helpful?
     • Reasons for being in school: for pleasure now or for future plans/pragmatic reasons?
     • Definition of self as a learner
     • Turning points

   How’s the semester ending up? How are your classes? Have they been what you expected? Assignments or projects that were easy for you? Why? Assignments or projects that were hard for you? Why?
   What grades do you expect? Why? How does that fit with college goals? With next semester?
   Choice of classes for summer? Why did you decide to go/not to go during the summer?
   Is there anything you wish had been in the 990 class? Since it was not in the class, how did you learn that strategy? How have you used it in other classes?
   If taking the final early, when taking it? How did you set that up with the instructor? How planning to prepare for that? When taking it?

   I don't have any other questions for you. Is there anything else you would like to share about our discussion today?

   Chris:
     • “a little more in-depth reading”—changed?
     • How working out the early finals? The prep for them?
     • Current classes “pertaining to life”?
     • Sister graduating: what kinds of family celebrations? Your thoughts on that?

   Sarah:
     • catch up or read ahead (reading comprehension)? Assignments? Test?
     • “haven’t been to school full time since I was 6”? (06)
     • Done with CNA course?
     • Ask about Dad?

   Sunny:
     • keeping up with online class?
     • Got MPA license?
     • “great American Dustbowl” book report?
     • Love writing?
     • Moved in with parents?
Lucy:
• Biology still the main challenges?
• Math still an unexpected joy?
• How handling the break for the wedding?
• Working still?
• How did it go with Molly off track (weight watchers)?
• Depression, the “mental health breakdown” last semester
• Why at Jordan instead of Redwood?

Lourdes:
• Still planning on a loan?
• Warnings of burnout—coping? Changes? Stamina? How’s husband holding up?
• Still cutting hours at work?
• Husband still in classes?
• Line 7: name spelling
• Line 31: “help me [with scholarship]”
• Line 54: “had to accept [working swing shift]”

Randy:
• UPS? Cutco? Discover card? FT?
• Tuition reimburse: does it mean you have to stick around?
• Desire to “better in scheduling” studying? Change study habits?
• Retaking financial class? Incomplete?
• School affecting social life still?
• Cutco demo: No.

Angelo:
• English 1010, Math 1010
• Reading daughter’s recommendations
• Vocab improve? Enjoyment? When finding time?
• Work schedule changed?
• Tutoring?
• Organization helping with memory problems?
• Daughter prepping for summer college still?

Andy:
• Math tutoring with boyfriend?
• Report on mathematician?
• How’s the teacher turning out?
• Job status
• Picking a major?
Marisa:
- Extra credit math
- Scheduling hour by hour
- Husband’s semester
- Possibility of a new job

Joey:
- Spring semester “experiment” referred to several times
- Rotating day off?
- “Utah’s diverse history”
- Still on track to finish [college] spring 2010?
- Work: Tuition reimbursement

Paola:
- You’ve been very busy! How’s the schedule?
- Still looking for a job?
- Uncomfortable with boyfriend paying for school
- Check spelling: No me cantara la vida?
- Hurricane: turmoil over two relationships school a refuge
- Struggling with a little depression maybe (boyfriend asks, you ok?)
**Interview 4 Protocol**

1. How did the semester end up? Expected? Unexpected? Feelings about it—proud, disappointed? Grades?

2. Taking classes this summer? Tell me about how/when you made that decision.  
   a. If so, which classes?  
      i. Note repeats of teachers, why or why not  
   b. If not, what doing instead?  
   c. How does your family/boss feel about that decision?  
   d. How does it compare to taking classes in the fall/spring semesters?  
      i. Probe for length of term/semester, schedule of class meetings, general summertime activities

3. Planning to take classes in the fall?  
   a. Why or why not?  
   b. Which classes?

4. Follow up on family, job

5. Follow up on major, goal, or timeline changes

6. Helps and hindrances: Influences just this year  
   a. Who or what helped you the most in college since we started talking last fall semester?  
   b. Who or what hindered you most during that time?  
   c. Turning points, either in events around you or in your own self?  
      i. Follow up: talk about what part 990 had in that change.  
   d. Some students take the classes or experience the events you take and end up dropping out, but you are still in class. What keeps you going? Why are you still here?

7. Looking back over the year:  
   a. If you were to give advice to another Reading 990 student about reading in college, what would it be? Tell me about an example of your experience with that.  
   b. If you were to give advice to another Reading 990 student about taking general education classes, what would it be? Tell me about an example of your experience with that.  
   c. If you were to give advice to another Reading 990 student about succeeding in general education classes, what would it be? Tell me about an example of your experience with that.  
   d. If you were to give advice to someone contemplating taking Reading 990, what would you say about the timing or order or combination of classes? Tell me about an example of your experience with that.
e. When you started 990, did you ever picture.expect that you’d be giving advice like this?

8. I notice a change from last fall—do you see a change? (use quotes from the 1st and 3rd interviews)

9. Patterns: Part of the purpose of this study is to make things better for other students, and so I’ve really thought about what affects your decision to go or not go. Sometimes we can more easily talk about what IS when we compare it to what IS NOT, so some of these questions will ask you to imagine if and compare it to what really happened.
   a. You’ve told me a lot about what influences you in your personal life. Let’s take a look at what role the college plays.
      i. Tell me how you see your relationship with this institution.
      ii. Do you think the college as an organization affects you? If so, how?
      iii. Do you think your experience would be different at a different university? Imagine that you had gone to [one of several local colleges and universities]. How would your experience be different?
      iv. If you thought of the community college as a club, would you consider yourself a member? Why or why not?
      v. Talk about people who have made you feel like you belong or don’t belong. Tell me about the specific experience.
         1. Probe for faculty, staff, students, tutoring/student services, schedules

10. I don’t have any other questions for you. Is there anything you would like to add?

11. What comes next:
   a. Last payment
   b. Choose a pseudonym
   c. I will finish transcribing and email transcripts to you
   d. Check to make sure mailing address is current
   e. OK to contact by phone/email to follow up briefly (to follow persistence etc. and to send summary of the theory when it is written as such.)
      i. Invite to focus group luncheon
   f. I will write and defend as a dissertation, graduate next May, and then that will be the springboard for several published articles and the foundation for my research agenda. Intent is to write good policy that works for students like you.
   g. Thank you so much!
APPENDIX D

FOCUS GROUP HANDOUT
Adult Learners’ Persistence at a Community College
Rosemary Capps
University of Utah
r.capps@utah.edu

RQ1: What are the experiences of adult learners as they transition from developmental reading classes to regular college level classes over the course of an academic year?
- Finances
- Competing priorities
- Language barrier

RQ2: How do influences in personal or institutional spheres affect their decisions about college persistence?
- Personal/Social network influences
  - Employment responsibilities
  - Logistical “safety nets”
  - Models and mentors
  - Religion
- Institutional influences
  - “Social agents” rarely named directly, but often described
  - Relationship to the college? Not really.
  - Member of the club? Yes.

RQ3: Why do they persist? (Develop a theory to explain persistence for this group.)
- Agency
  - Claiming responsibility for decisions and actions
  - Initiating action
  - Self-directed credit or blame for subsequent events
  - Self-attributed control of persistence
- Development
  - Changing to match skills, behaviors, or ideas through repeated exposure
  - Mastery of skill through directed practice or trial and error
  - Life changing events that require new perspective
- Framing
  - Define an event or perception by word choice
  - Eliminate many options in favor of one particular meaning or option
  - Developmental or agentic

Relationships between agency, development and framing: Persistence is a function of…
- Agency exercised: I chose it.
- Development experienced: I learned to do it.
- Options framed: It was the only option (as I told myself again and again).
APPENDIX E

SAMPLES OF CODED TEXT
Marisa, Interview 1

R: So you were saying earlier, it made you wonder, Why would I wanna go back to school? Why would you want to go back? What brought you back?

M: I don’t know, it’s just, like the thought of going back to school, you know, I’ve already did my cosmetology, I already obtained my license, I already went through you know school, and just like the thought of like going back after you know, ten years, where you’re not as fresh, and you’re like you know all that what you learned in high school is pretty much like you know, like the huge gap. You just don’t remember things that you did from back then, and you’re just like, OK, if I have to take a test, and you know, get into the areas that they place you at, then you’re kinda like already learning, even though you’re just like, this is not really possible, you know, for me to come back to school and just, you know, study something where your, you know your major is in, and you’re just taking the under classes that you need as electives just to get a, just to obtain that, and you’re just thinking, two years? I don’t have two years. I’m getting older, and my kids are, you know, being almost like high school, junior high, you know, I just don’t have the, you know, I just didn’t wanna get that thought in my head. I need to go back and kind of push myself to get my children’s future. I didn’t wanna go back to school. I think it’s just, ten years, you know, after you graduate you kinda feel like you’re done, you know, you didn’t wanna go back to school, and I think if you wanna like make more money you’d have to. Which is why my husband started to go back to school. He’s like trying to get me to go into school, because he was, you know, saying, with your, with what you’re doing, you’re not gonna make it in this life. Even if you were to live by yourself, of if you didn’t have your children, what kinda life would you be having right now if you didn’t go back? Would you still be in your, you know, low paying job, or would you wanna go to you know, school and see if you know, if you can you know, invest yourself into making more money for, and then where would you be? And I kinda said, well, yeah, I’ve got my kids, I need to, you know, I do have my kids, and you know, I want to provide for them, and also myself, and it’s just like, you know, what would I keep doing? Would I keep renting and keep living the cycle, the repeat cycle of how you know my life is now, or would you wanna go to school and you know, maybe like in two years you can you know, plan for your kids to have like a better home to live in, you know, like, be able to provide you know, them without just you know, staying with what we’re doing now, just, you know, living by paycheck by paycheck, and

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you can’t buy this toy because, you know, we gotta pay bills, and
we can’t afford braces right now, and you can’t, you know,
you’re just kinda limited in what you can do with you, yourself
and your kids.

Marisa, Interview 1

M: Um, [laughs]. My mom, she just thinks I’m going to
school because he, you know, was persuasive enough to, you
know, talk me into school and then you know, just that if I
like, pushing my kids and you know, and like have them
watch them all the time. And they’re just like, you know, you
have a young baby. You have an older daughter, and you
know, you kind of didn’t really think things over. Like where
would they be going, and how much school would be, you
know, a stress on your life. They kind of think that, you
know, just, it’s a good decision, but then yet, they were just
kind of like, I didn’t really think, you know, like all the daily
things to it, from, you know, like going in to school. And
they’re kind of supportive in a way because they’d have to,
you know take care of my kids while I’m going to school.
Plus they, you know, have to, you know, try to make their life
change, so they can help me. I think that they’re excited that
you know, I want to do something further in my career, and to
go for it. But yet, it’s just the challenge, the challenge it faces,
that, you know, I kind of didn’t think it through so much. Just
put more, I don’t know, more of a burden on my family to
help me to, you know, be able to go to school. And then when
I was on my online classes at home, it was also hard to, you
know, be a computer for two hours and have a newborn baby
and be out of the hospital. And just try to be on a computer
for two hours, and she’s crying and you know, I have my
mom, you know hold her, try to like you know, help me at the
same time, because I didn’t have a teacher to really ask when
I was doing it you know, later in the evening. They’d be, you
know out of their office and then you didn’t get to your, you
know studying until like, you know, six or seven o’clock and
you’re trying to make dinner [laughs] and then you’re just
like, I’m stuck, I don’t know what I’m doing. And then they,
you know, they are just like, you wanted to go to school
[laughs]. You know, my mom was just like, you have a, you
know, a brand-new baby, and you need to help [laughs].
Think of what you’re, you know, think of what you’re doing
with it, so. I think my parents are just, you know they’re
supportive, but then they want me to look at the challenges it
brings, too. And like you know, now we’re babysitters and
providers because you needed to go to school.
Marisa, Interview 4

M: And then I got an A in my um my Writing 990…I, like, worked really hard on that paper, so. I just wanted to see what he gave me on the letter, you know, on my final grade, I got the A, but I just wanted to see what he gave me like score-wise, on the last final paper, but I didn’t get a chance to see it…it was about, like videogame violence with children. And it was kind of like really lengthy. And he only wanted it, like, a couple pages, and I made it a little bit longer, but. He said it was really good, so. He didn’t cut it out…I think it was like, eight pages.

R: I remember when we talked, you were talking about taking it to the writing lab, and then you took it here, and you had somebody read it for you, and then you revised it again,

M: I had it like, reviewed a couple times. And then, you know like, I think I struggled on trying to make it shorter cause at first he said he wanted it shorter. And then, when he took a look at it, he was like, “No, I like it. Just leave it.” And then, um, he said that he only wanted like a couple of quotes, and then, you know, like I had a lot of references, of you know, some interesting facts of like, you know, percentages, and numbers, and statistics, and stuff, and so, I just trying to take that out, too, and he’s like, you know, if you take it out, just, it’s hard to like, continue to the next paragraph, so just leave it, so I just, ok. So it turned out really good. And I was proud of it.

R: Did you expect that grade?

M: Yeah, I worked, I worked really hard. And I did some extra credit papers, so if I was off a couple points in the other assignments, then I’d be able to pull it out, back up to the grade I wanted.
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