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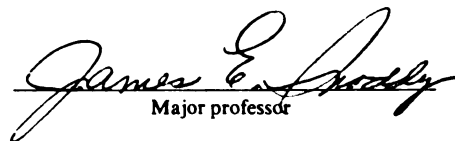
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**THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION:  
HOW LIFE AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES INFLUENCE  
NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT PERSISTENCE AT  
LANSING COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

**By**

**Joseph Russell Codde**

**A DISSERTATION**

**Submitted to  
Michigan State University  
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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION: HOW LIFE AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES INFLUENCE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT PERSISTENCE AT LANSING COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

**By**

**Joseph Russell Codde**

**This is a qualitative study of five men who enrolled at Lansing Community College (LCC) and who, during their first enrollment at a community college, failed to persist -- leaving the college for a period of five years or longer -- and then returned to accomplish their education goals.**

**The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a better understanding of how experience and the resulting affective variables influenced the persistence of these men. Why did they, after failing to persist on their first attempt at a community college, return later and succeed in accomplishing their educational goals? What is the role of experience in persistence? How does experience affect a student's values, beliefs, opinions, and motivation? Can the habits generated by experience be altered and subsequently affect persistence positively?**

**This study explores how community college students' experiences influence their values, interests, attitudes, beliefs, motivations, and other affective variables. Through the use of educational biographies, this research study focuses on understanding the phenomenon of persistence from the perspective of five men who failed to persist on their first attempt at a community college and returned later to succeed.**

**The primary questions for this research study are:**

- 1. Why do people (who fit the study group profile) ultimately persist and succeed in reaching their educational goals at a community college after an initial experience of non-persistence?**
- 2. In particular, how do the life experiences, values, beliefs, and habits affect the people in this group and their propensity to persist and accomplish their educational goals?**

**The results of this study demonstrate that each respondent's life and educational experiences did affect his first and last attendance at LCC. The primary theme which emerges is that of "intentions and commitments" and how they change over the course of the respondent's lives. The respondent's intention to attend college and the commitment they make to reach their educational goals changed between their first and last attendance at LCC.**

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1997

## **DEDICATION**

**I dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Mischelle, and my two sons, Christopher and Jeffrey. They sacrificed a great deal while I have spent the last eight years in graduate school completing my Master's degree and now my Ph.D. I also dedicate this work to several other family members including my mother, Ellen Reyer, my stepfather, Frederick Reyer, and my mother- and father-in-law, Betty and Dale Farhat, whose support helped make this effort a success.**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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Also, I would like to thank the other members of my dissertation committee; Dr. Mary Jim Josephs, Dr. Steve Weiland, and Dr. Ann Austin. Their support of my work has motivated me to succeed in this program. Support is a critical factor in the success of students at all levels and I can personally attest to that fact.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **THE PROBLEM**

*"In a certain sense every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is the very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience."*

*(Dewey, 1938, p.47)*

The purpose for this study is to explore how community college students' lifelong experiences influence their values, attitudes, beliefs, and how those variables may affect the students' propensity to persist in achieving their educational goals after initially failing to persist. Through the use of educational biographies, this dissertation focuses on understanding the phenomenon of persistence from the perspective of five men who enrolled at Lansing Community College (LCC), failed to persist, and later returned to earn an associate's degree. All respondents chosen for this study:

1. are individuals who began their studies at Lansing Community College, failed to persist, and later returned to successfully achieve their goals earning an associate's degree; and
2. were out of college for at least 5 years before returning to achieve their goals; and
3. are non-traditional community college students, ages 25 and above during the time of their last enrollment; and
4. are male.

Tinto (1993) reports that more students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay. He states that, "Of the nearly 2.4 million students who in

1993 entered higher education for the first time, over 1.5 million will leave their first institution without receiving a degree. Of those, approximately 1.1 million will leave higher education altogether, without ever completing either a two- or a four-year degree program” (Tinto, 1993, p. 1).

Nationally, 54.2 percent of all entrants to public community colleges fail to persist beyond their first year (Tinto, 1993; American College Testing Program, 1992). The reasons for this lack of persistence are varied and may be specific to the institution. Unfortunately, many students fail and/or drop out due to conditions and situations that may have a remedy -- but we often fail to recognize students with problems or provide assistance.

### **Need for the Study**

There has been a great deal of emphasis on methods for tracking community college student progress, assessing outcomes, and evaluating institutional effectiveness over the past twenty years. The development of “student tracking systems” is part of a response to demands for accountability and institutional effectiveness including Student Right-to-Know legislation, the Carl D. Perkins Act, Ability to Benefit, At-Risk Students, SPRE, Americans with Disabilities Act, accreditation requirements, and institutionally mandated reports. The focus of institutional research has changed from such questions as “how many students are enrolled?” to more telling questions as “what percentages of our students meet their educational goals?” (Palmer, 1989, p. 95).

Most research on attrition, retention, and persistence has been done quantitatively focusing only on degree seekers (Tinto, 1993). But are some students predisposed to not

persist by virtue of their life and educational experiences? Can the community college intervene and aid these students in succeeding? As Neumann (1985) noted, research on student persistence is marked by a conspicuous absence of qualitative research.

The results of this study provide those interested with a better understanding of why some students succeed while others fail to persist. With this understanding, they may be able to better target programs and services at students who are at a higher risk of failing.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this study is that many community college students begin or return to college and fail to persist in the achievement of their goals. By understanding how past life and educational experiences influenced those who initially failed and later succeeded, community colleges may be in a better position to aid more students in the accomplishment of their goals.

Historically, community colleges have had very low graduation and retention rates compared to their four-year counterparts. This is, however, an unfair comparison which is based on the assumption that most community college students begin their postsecondary education with the intention of earning an associate's degree after two years of full-time study. Unlike most students in four year institutions, many community college students enroll for reasons other than earning a degree. As an example, 35.1 percent of students enrolled at Lansing Community College will not earn a certificate or associate's degree to accomplish their goal and only 44.5% will take courses that lead to transfer or an undergraduate degree (Lansing Community College, 1994). Community colleges, in

addition to addressing the needs of 18 and 19 year old full-time, degree seeking students, also serve a wide variety of people, from displaced homemakers and workers, to people wishing to upgrade job skills, to people simply taking courses for pleasure. Community colleges have tended to avoid the issue of exactly what is meant by “student success,” but they are now being asked to document student success by numerous State and federal agencies (Aquino, 1991).

In addition to graduation and transfer, community colleges prepare students for employment, provide employment re-training, develop important life skills, provide students with courses for personal interest, and allow students to use college resources.

The community college student, along with having a wide variety of goals and objectives, is also significantly different than the four-year traditional student. Demographically they are older, are more apt to be employed, have a family, and have been out of school for a period of time. They may also stop-in and stop-out; enrolling for a period of time, leaving the institution for a period of time, and then re-enrolling. Although most community college student tracking systems normally track students for three years (150% of two year program), many students take longer to finish, some over ten years.

Many community college students also possess a wealth of previous life, work, and educational experience. For many non-traditional students, their first attempt at college was not successful. Non-traditional students may have had bad experiences in high school and are academically underprepared for college. All of these experiences, both good and bad, shape how the student views education today. They bring with them experiences and habits developed over a lifetime that affect their values, beliefs, and attitudes today.

As we examine the topic of student persistence, we should explore what the goal is. Is the goal to understand why individual students succeed or fail to persist? Is the goal to improve retention and reduce attrition? Or is our goal to improve the effectiveness of an institution thereby resulting in increased retention? Noel (1985) posits that if retention alone becomes the goal, institutions will find themselves engaged in trying to hold students at all costs. He suggests that retention is not the goal. Retention is the result or by-product of improved programs and services in our classrooms and elsewhere on campus that contribute to student success (Noel, 1985).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose for this dissertation is to develop a better understanding of how experience and the resulting affective variables influence student persistence. Why did students, who failed to persist on their first attempt at a community college, return later and succeed in accomplishing their educational goals? What is the role of experience in persistence? How does experience affect a student's values, beliefs, and motivation? Can the habits generated by experience be altered and subsequently affect persistence positively? My intent is to go beyond identifying risk factors (or variables) affecting persistence and explore how experience influences an individual's decision to stay in college or leave. Persistence is not new territory in educational research as many others have studied persistence, retention, and attrition (Tinto, 1993; Noel, Levitz, Saluri, and Associates, 1985; Cross, 1988; Bers and Smith, 1991; Walleri, 1981, 1988, 1990; Stolar, 1991; Abbott, 1994; and others.). This study is different, however, in that it explores

persistence from the student's perspective and the results may aid community colleges in the identification of students who may be at-risk of failing.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions for this study are:

1. *Why do people (who fit the study group profile) ultimately persist and succeed in reaching their educational goals at a community college after an initial experience of non-persistence?*
2. *In particular, how do the life experiences, values, beliefs, and habits affect the people in this group and their propensity to persist and accomplish their educational goals?*

### **Introduction to Research Design and Methodology**

This is a qualitative study of five men who enrolled at Lansing Community College, failed to persist, and later returned earning an associate's degree. All subjects chosen for this study are classified as non-traditional community college students, ages 25 and above during the time of their last enrollment.

Firestone (1987) states that "qualitative research is rooted in a phenomenological paradigm which holds that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective *definitions of the situation*." (p. 16) (Taylor & Bogdon, 1984). This qualitative research study is concerned with understanding the phenomenon of persistence through educational biographies. The biographies aid the attempt to learn how the respondents make sense of their lives, their college experiences, and the factors that affected their initial failure to persist and their ultimate success.

“Individuals,” according to Lawrence Cremin in *Public Education* (1976), “come to educational situations with their own temperaments, histories, and purposes, and different individuals will obviously interact with a given configuration of education in different ways and with different outcomes” (p. 37). An educational biography is, therefore, a record of that individual’s experiences and thoughts. The biography documents the inner, subjective reality as constructed by the individuals themselves, showing how they interpret, understand and define the social and educational world around them, but at the same time, the method is able to convey a sense of process (Armstrong, 1987).

The educational biography is a form of life history that focuses on issues relating to a specific person and how they relate those issues to their education. The educational biography focuses on the respondent’s beliefs, values, and attitudes. In this study, I use questionnaires, interviews, and conversation as a means of eliciting information. These methods have a lot of practicality as is noted by Armstrong (1987) and Kidd (1981). Kidd (1981) posits that “... what is needed is the utilization of research methodologies so that people who will be affected by research outcomes can participate in identifying the problems, obtaining the data, analyzing the data, and prescribing outcomes based on the research” (p. 6). This study allows the informants to become part of the process of investigation -- identifying problems and possible solutions.

### **Description of the Site: Lansing Community College**

Lansing Community College (LCC), located on a 30 acre campus three blocks away from the State Capitol Building in Lansing, Michigan, was formed in 1957 and is the

third largest community college in student enrollment in the State. Fall 1995 semester enrollment was 16,404 and during the 1994-95 academic year, 30,633 men and women enrolled at the college (Lansing Community College, 1995).

LCC offers more than 2,500 different courses in programs to prepare students in more than 500 areas of study. Approximately 42.5% of the students who enrolled at LCC during the fall 1995 semester plan to transfer to four-year colleges and universities upon completion of their associate's degrees. Other pertinent facts include:

- \* nearly three-fourths (73.9%) of LCC students attend part-time
- \* the average age of a LCC student is 27.9 years old and the median age is 24 years
- \* 26.1% of students enroll to obtain training in a specific occupational program
- \* 8.4% enroll to upgrade current job skills
- \* 9.1% enroll to gain new job skills in order to change occupations
- \* 44.5% enroll to take courses that lead to transfer or undergraduate degree
- \* 11.1% enroll to take courses of personal interest
- \* 64.9% of students will earn a certificate or associate degree to accomplish their educational goal (source: LCC Basic Information 1995)

Although most community colleges are similar in terms of the programs and services offered to the communities they serve, they are also unique because of those communities. Lansing Community College is located in a city that manufacturers Oldsmobiles for General Motors, is the State capital employing a large number of State workers, and has a major university located within the community. Also located in the community is Davenport College and extension programs for Central Michigan University



and Western Michigan University. This environment affects the programs offered and Michigan State University, in particular, makes the competitive environment very keen.

### **Delimitation**

This study will be delimited to five male community college graduates who enrolled at Lansing Community College, failed to persist, and later returned earning an associate's degree.

While it is recognized that many students succeed without earning a degree or certificate, this study focuses only on those students who earned an associate's degree -- a tangible measure of success.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **Attitude:**

According to Rokeach (1971), "an attitude represents an organization of interrelated beliefs that are all focused on a specific object or situation" (p. 453). Attitudes are created when there is an object or situation, there is an evaluative summary of the object, and there is an organization of knowledge about the object or situation and its evaluation (Douglass & Pratkanis, 1994).

#### **Belief:**

1) a state or habit of mind in which trust, confidence, or reliance is placed in some person or thing: faith. BELIEF signifies mental acceptance of or assent to something offered as true, with or without certainty. (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, 1966, p. 200).

Our personal beliefs help define who we are in the sense of what we believe, think, and feel and those beliefs also affect the way we react to other people, social groups, organizations, and situations. Beliefs are socially constructed and experientially based and dependent upon the individual person holding the belief. A belief is not more or less true in any sense, but simply more or less informed. Beliefs are alterable as are their associated “realities.”

### Experience:

Experience is defined as: knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events: practical wisdom resulting from what one has encountered, undergone, or lived through (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, 1966, p. 800).

In this study, experience results from an interaction between the respondent and his environment and these experiences prepare the respondent for later experiences by affecting the way he responds to life events and his environment. These experiences lead to growth and the acquisition of habits.

### Habit:

7b) an acquired or developed mode of behavior or function that has become nearly or completely involuntary. Syn. habitude, practice, usage, custom, use, wont: these all have in common the sense of a way of behaving that has become more or less fixed; in most cases they have the sense of such a way considered collectively or in the abstract. HABIT, usually applying to individuals, signifies a way of acting or thinking done frequently enough to have become unconscious or unpremeditated in each repetition or to have become compulsive. (Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, 1966, p. 1017).

**Persistence:**

1) the action or fact of persisting: determined or stubborn continuance (as in a course of action) in spite of opposition. (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, 1966, p. 1686). In the community college environment, persistence is defined as continuing enrollment from semester to semester (Tinto, 1993).

**Success:**

Student success reflects the goals and expectations students bring with them to college, the progress they make in courses and programs, and the educational outcomes they attain (Dyer, 1991). "Successful students are successful learners who identify, commit to, and attain their educational goals" (Dyer, 1991, p. 1). Thus, success is the accomplishment of one's personal goals, attaining the outcome one desires.

**Value:**

Something (as a principle, quality, or entity) intrinsically valuable or desirable. (Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged, 1966, p. 2530). Lenning, Lee, Micek, and Service (1977, pp. 58-59) define value as a "strong preference based on a conception of what is desirable, important, and worthy of esteem."

## **Chapter 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

*“Perhaps the most important [observation] is the implied notion that departure hinges upon the individual’s perception of his/her experiences within an institution of higher education.”*  
(Tinto, 1993, p. 136)

A brief history of the community college movement is an important place to begin. The first Associate of Arts degree was awarded in 1900 by the University of Chicago. Shortly thereafter in 1901, the first junior college was established in Mexico, Missouri and, in Joliet, Illinois during the same year, the public high schools began upwardly extending their programs. Thus, the community college movement began and was seen as a place where students, who would not otherwise attend an institution of higher learning, could prepare for transfer to a senior college or could “stop naturally and honorably” at the end of the sophomore year (AACC, 1988, p. 5).

Two-year colleges were referred to as “junior colleges” until the 1940s. At the second annual meeting of the American Association of Junior Colleges, in 1922, a junior college was defined as “an institution offering two years of instruction of strictly collegiate grade” (Bogue, 1950, p. xvii; Cohen & Brawer, 1989).

In the 1950s and 1960s, the term “junior college” was applied more often to the lower-division branches of private universities while “community college” came to be used for the comprehensive, publicly supported institution. In the 1970s, the term “community college” was applied to most two-year colleges and today we use the term “comprehensive community college” (Cohen & Brawer, 1989).

Since the 1920s, public community colleges have dramatically expanded in number of colleges and students served. By 1960, there were about 400 public community colleges in the United States, enrolling over three-quarters of a million students. By 1970, enrollments grew sixfold and new community colleges opened at the rate of about one a week (AACC, 1988). And by 1995, 1,086 community colleges enrolled 10.7 million students (5.7 million credit; 5 million non-credit); approximately 47% of the nation's undergraduates and 49% of all first-time entering freshmen (AACC, 1995) making community colleges the largest single sector of higher education in the United States.

### **Student Success**

A broad definition of student success is best presented by Dr. Thomas Angelo and the National Council of Instructional Administrators (Dyer, 1991). Their definition states:

Successful students are successful learners who identify, commit to, and attain their educational goals. They demonstrate the skills, knowledge, attitudes and self-direction needed to perform ethically and productively in society, to adapt to change, to appreciate diversity, and to make a reasoned commitment on issues of importance (p. 1).

Student success reflects the goals and expectations students bring with them to college, the progress they make in courses and programs, and the educational outcomes they attain (Dyer, 1991). The goal for this study is to better understand why students, who initially failed to persist, later returned and succeeded. How did their life and educational experiences affect their failure to persist and later succeed?

Traditionally, success has been measured in terms of graduation rates. However, in the community college, graduation may not be the only true measure of success.

Students attend community colleges for a variety of reasons including transfer, upgrading job skills, retraining, and enrichment. Rather than define success by graduation, we need to define success by goal attainment (Walleri, 1981). Walleri (1981) posits that, “because student objectives can change over time such a definition does present problems, especially in terms of measurement. However, given the complex nature of the community college, it is probably the most defensible” (p. 6).

### **Student Departure**

Tinto (1993) notes that in the study of attrition and persistence, it is first important to examine college entry. Nearly 77% of all first-time entrants begin their college (both 2- and 4-year) careers at the start of the fall semester (Tinto, 1993). In two-year colleges, the percentage of 1990 freshmen who are recent high school graduates is 85 percent (Tinto, 1993). But, as Tinto (1993) notes, “... of all entrants to higher education in a given academic year, approximately 17 percent will not enroll in degree-credit programs. Many will be part-time students who take a variety of course unrelated to any coherent degree program.” (p. 8). In the community college, the numbers are even higher. As an example, at Lansing Community College, 35.1 percent of students will not earn a certificate or degree to accomplish their goal (Lansing Community College, 1994). This fact makes research on departure difficult and most studies have focused on degree-seeking students (Tinto, 1993).

The nationwide enrollment trends in 1993, as reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac (1995), indicated that 84.5 percent of students attend part-time; 55.9 percent of all students are 25 years of age or older; and, of the part-time students, 77.1

percent are 25 years of age or older (The Almanac / Chronicle of Higher Education, 1995). These figures demonstrate that a disproportionate number of adult learners are enrolled on a part-time basis. Tinto (1993) reports that late entrants to college were most likely to attend two-year colleges, slightly more than 70 percent. The differences in patterns of immediate and delayed entrance and of full- and part-time attendance is more than merely academic. Tinto (1993, p. 11) states,

It bears directly on the issue of eventual persistence. Students who delay entry to college and/or attend part-time are, on the average, much less likely to obtain their undergraduate degrees than are students who begin immediately after high school (Carroll, 1989). For instance, it is estimated that delayed entrants who enter less than four-year institutions and who enroll part-time are *five times* less likely than immediate full-time four-year entrants to obtain a four-year degree (Carroll, 1989, p.29).

These figures, however, may be misleading as many community college students have goals which are other than two or four year degree attainment.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Students leave college for many reasons. Tinto (1993) asserts that two attributes that stand out as primary roots of departure are described by the terms “intention” and “commitment” (p. 37). Each refers to important personal dispositions with which individuals enter institutions of higher education and can be affected by past personal experiences. These two attributes not only set the boundaries of individual attainment, but also serve to color the character of individual experiences within the institution following entry (Tinto, 1993).

Individual intentions are important predictors of success and, generally speaking, the higher the level of one’s educational and occupational goals, the greater the likelihood

of goal attainment (Tinto, 1993). Goals can change, however, as many students who have well defined goals may change those goals and individuals who were undecided will establish goals (Tinto, 1993).

Tinto (1993) also notes that, "Individual commitments, whether expressed as motivation, drive, or effort, also prove to be centrally related to departure from institutions of higher education" (p. 41). Tinto (1993) continues by stating,

Conversely, the lack of willingness or commitment proves to be a critical part of the departure process. The unavoidable fact is that college completion requires some effort. Even in nonselective colleges, it calls for a willingness to commit oneself to the investment of time, energy, and often scarce resources to meet the academic and social demands which institutions impose upon their students (p. 42).

Tinto (1993) asserts that departure from a community college appears to be less influenced by social events than by strictly academic matters (as compared to four-year residential institutions) (Zaccari and Creaser, 1971; Pascarella et al. 1981; Pascarella and Chapman, 1983; Pascarella, Duby, and Iverson, 1983; Pascarella and Wolfe, 1985; Williamson and Creamer, 1988; Stage, 1989; Schwartz, 1990; Staats and Partio, 1990; Webb, 1990) and more influenced by external forces which shape the character of students' lives off campus than by events internal to the campus (Chacon, Cohen, and Strover, 1983; Weidman, 1985; and Schwartz, 1990).

Community college students are more likely to attend part-time, be employed, and live at home than their counterparts in four-year residential institutions. They experience a wide range of external pressures on their time and energies and are not as apt to spend time on campus interacting with other students and faculty members (Tinto, 1993). This can negatively affect persistence as was noted by Neumann (1985) in an unpublished



dissertation. He found that social contact was a consistently expressed theme in the students' accounts of their own success (Tinto, 1993). Students who have contact with other students, faculty members, and advisors are more apt to reach their educational goals. By contrast, students who lack or avoid contact with other students, faculty members, and advisors report that they are not connected with the campus and less apt to accomplish their educational goals.

Community college students, non-traditional students in particular, experience numerous external pressures that affect persistence. These pressures, including family, employment, and non-student peer pressure, make college attendance a secondary event in their lives. Thus, as noted by Tinto (1993), what may appear to be voluntary withdrawal is in fact involuntary in the sense that it arises as a result of external events which force or oblige the individual to withdraw despite satisfactory academic performance.

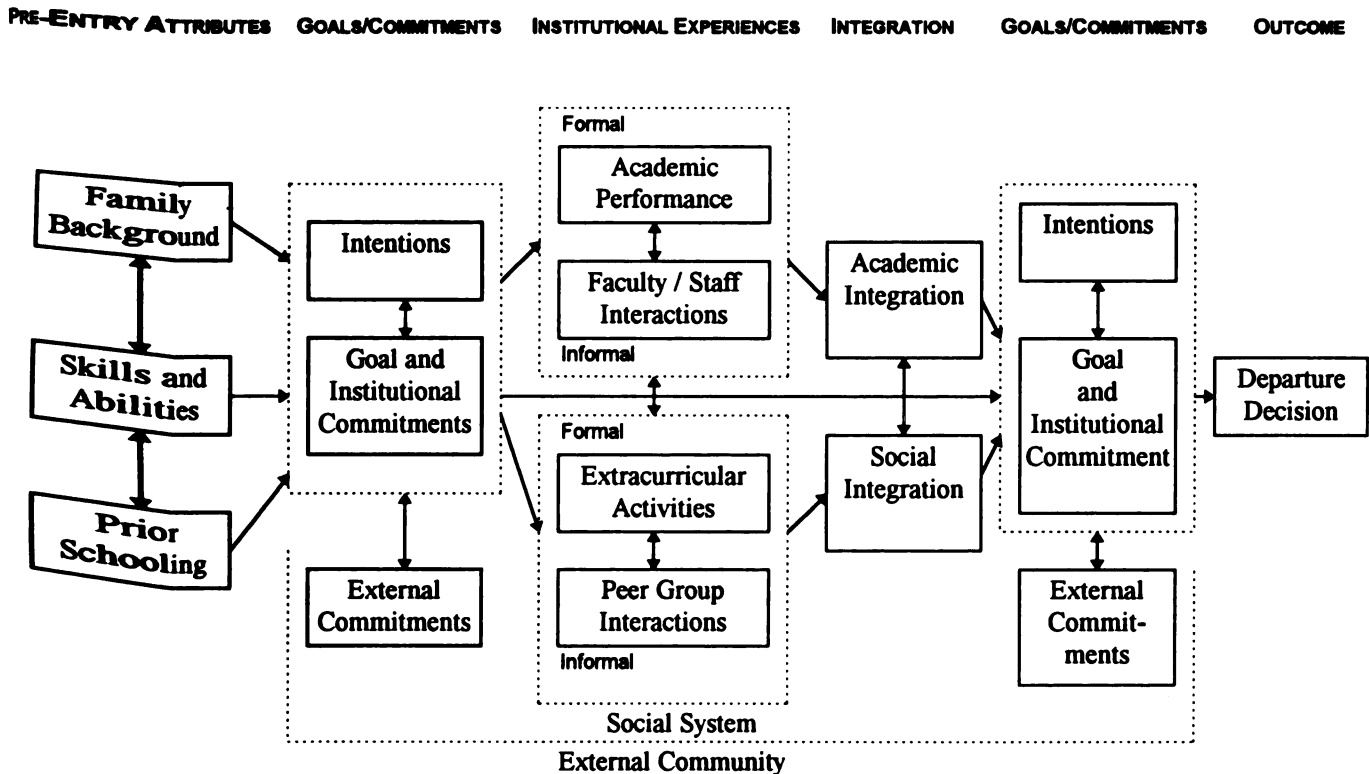
Tinto (1993) presents a longitudinal model of institutional departure that goes beyond academic and social integration and explains the longitudinal process by which individuals come to leave institutions of higher education. Elements of this model include “adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations or commitments” and how they influence differing forms of student departure (Tinto, 1993, p. 112). This model is depicted in figure 2.1. Tinto (1993) posits that, “Broadly understood, it argues that individual departure from institutions can be viewed as arising

out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior education experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution”

(p. 113). Tinto (1993) also notes:

The individual's experience in those systems, as indicated by his/her intellectual (academic) and social (personal) integration, continually modifies his or her intentions and commitments. Positive experiences -- that is, integrative ones -- reinforce persistence through their impact upon heightened intentions and commitments both to the goal of college completion and to the institution in which the person finds him/herself (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler, 1992). Negative or malintegrative experiences serve to weaken intentions and commitments, especially commitment to the institution, and thereby enhance the likelihood of leaving (pp. 113-115).

**Figure 2.1**



SOURCE: Tinto, 1993, p. 114 A longitudinal model of institutional departure

Another approach to student persistence is presented by Anderson (1985) who notes that there are numerous forces affecting achievement and persistence. Students who do persist and accomplish their goals must overcome steep obstacles that call upon students' preparation, academic skills, motivation, adjustment skills, and frustration tolerance. Anderson (1985) posits that, "Clearly, students who are underprepared and have weak academic skills will encounter more frustration and need to spend more time on their studies than those who are prepared. Accordingly, those with weak motivation and adjustment skills will be less likely to overcome the obstacles that the college experience presents than those who are highly motivated and adjust easily (p. 47).

Students must overcome negative internal and external forces including:

*Negative external forces:*

- lack of money to meet educational, living, and personal expenses
- work demands and conflicts that consume time and energy needed for achievement
- social demands, including personal relationships, involvement in organizations, or other social demands that might be distracting and detrimental to academic achievement
- rejection by family or friends because they do not value a college education or because they are threatened by the decision to go to college

*Negative internal forces:*

- procrastination and other self-management problems. These self-defeating patterns consume a student's most precious commodities: time and energy.
- inability to assert needs and seek help for problems
- self-doubt about their ability to succeed in college
- fear of failure
- fear of success
- fear of rejection resulting from success or failure
- value conflicts: As an example, students from low-income homes may experience conflict because college keeps them from working to help support their families.

- career indecision
- boredom (Anderson, 1985, pp. 48-50)

### **The Study of Beliefs, Attitudes, and Values**

There is an enormous body of literature on the study of beliefs, attitudes, and values. I am including a very selected number of references that seem useful for this type of research.

*Who* people are in the sense of what they believe, think, and feel, as individuals and as members of social groups, is a crucial concern for educational and other researchers of the human experience (Beidelman, 1986; Horton, 1973). Attitudes, according to Sherif and Sherif (1965) refer to the stands the individual upholds and cherishes about issues, persons, and groups and his or her “way of life” (p. 4). An attitude cannot be observed directly, but denotes a variable within the individual that affects his behavior in a pertinent situation (Sherif & Sherif, 1965).

This study seeks to find out how others go about doing, perceiving, knowing, and assessing phenomena from their own points of view, points of view that may be secret even from themselves. “Most educational research into others’ beliefs and thought, into their ‘conceptions’ and ‘misconceptions,’ their ‘reflections,’ and ‘their subject matter knowledge,’ etc. is, however, based on modes of inquiry that necessarily assimilate the ‘other’ into the researcher’s point of view, that assess the other against the preconceptions of academic discourse” (Singer, 1992, p. 215).

There are difficulties in collecting and analyzing data on beliefs. Belief is not primarily a cognitive activity; it is a symbolic one and can only be expressed in symbolic

**forms**, of which speech is the most prominent. Belief is normally expressed in reaction to **precipitating** events and varies in relation to those events (Singer, 1992). Singer (1992) **makes** the interesting and very important point that beliefs are context dependent and **variable**. The same person may hold inconsistent or even contradictory beliefs that come **into** play under different circumstances. As one example, an adult student may see the **value** of a college education while job seeking, but feel it unimportant once they are **employed**. Not all beliefs are as fleeting, however. We each hold many deeply rooted and **pervasive** beliefs developed over a lifetime and those beliefs may affect our educational **experiences**.

Singer (1992) differentiates between *beliefs, attitudes, and values*. He states that *beliefs* refer to the ontological dimension of cultures, to social constructions of what is **and** how it works. *Attitudes and values*, according to Singer (1992), refer to the moral, **ethical**, and aesthetic dimensions of culture, to notions of what is good and bad, proper **and** improper, likable and hateful, beautiful and ugly. *Beliefs, attitudes, and values* are **ab**stract words and can only be defined through metaphor, by reference to some other **ab**straction or to some more concrete entity which bears resemblance to it.

Terms like *values* and *attitudes* have multiple meanings. Values have been **s**pecified to be “preferences, criteria, or choices of personal or group conduct” (Jacob, **1** 957, p. xiii); “a cluster of attitudes organized around a conception of the desirable” (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969, p. 7); and a “strong preference based on a conception of what is desirable, important, and worthy of esteem” (Lenning, Lee, Micek, and Service, 1977, pp. 58-59; Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991, p. 269-270). Rokeach (1971) believes that “an attitude represents an organization of interrelated beliefs that are all focused on a

**specific** object or situation, while . . . values are generalized standards of the means and **ends** of human existence that transcend attitudes toward specific objects and situations” (p. 453).

A difficult issue plaguing research on attitude and value change concerns the **relationship** between an individual’s attitudes and values and their influence on individual **action** (Pascarella & Terrenzini, 1991). Is a shift in values and attitudes reflected in **subsequent** behavior? Can a shift in a student’s attitudes toward education and the values **they** hold affect their propensity to persist?

### **The Study of Life Cycles**

As with the study of beliefs, attitudes, and values, there is also an enormous **amount** of literature on the study of life cycles. Two of the more popular authors on this **subject** are Levinson and Sheehy. This study is not meant to be a study of life cycles so, **ra**ther than explore all the literature on the topic, I have chosen to use only Levinson and **S**heehy.

This study includes respondents who have been out of school for a period greater **th**an five years before returning hence the concept of “life span” or “life cycle” should be **a**ddressed. Levinson (1978) points out that the term “life span” is simply a category **r**eferred to the interval from birth to death. “Life course,” however, has more depth and **r**eferred to the flow of the individual over time--the patterning of specific events, **r**elationships, achievements, failures and aspirations that make up our lives (Levinson, 1978, p. 6). Levinson also explores the concept of “life cycle” which suggests that our **lives** have a specific character and follow a basic sequence: a life cycle (p. 6). This life

**cycle** has two key meanings: the idea of a process or journey and the idea of seasons -- a **series** of stages or periods. Each season, according to Levinson (1978), has its own **distinctive** character which is different from the one that precedes it and the one that **follows** it, but also has much in common with them. In this research study how the **informant's** life cycles have affected their lives, attitudes, values, beliefs, and their **propensity** to persist is considered.

According to Sheehy (1995), everything that happens to us -- graduations, **marriage**, childbirth, divorce, getting or losing a job -- affects us. She defines these as **"marker events"** (Sheehy, 1995, p. 12). These marker events may also affect our decisions **to** enter or leave college. Marker events are somewhat predictable. We can predict that a **marriage** may impact a persons decision to leave school and that the loss of a job may **trigger** a return to college. There are, however, **"untimely events"** (Sheehy, 1976, p. 31). **E**vents that upset the sequence and rhythm of the expected life cycle. As an example, **w**hen financial reverses prompt a young person to quit school and go to work, when **m**arriage does not happened at the hoped-for time, when a child is born unexpectedly, or **w**hen people simply can not seem to find themselves and their occupational achievement is **d**elayed (Sheehy, 1995). These untimely events can impact a person's decision to persist **i**n college.

However, as these individuals pass through the various stages of life, their views **and** outlook on life may change. Those who failed to reach their initial goal(s) during **early** adulthood may develop new and deeper commitments and flourish in mid-life.

### **Affective Variables: Psychological and Behavioral**

Astin (1991) defines affective variables as those that have to do with the student's **feelings**, attitudes, values, beliefs, aspirations, and social and interpersonal relationships. **A** problem with affective variables is that they are difficult to quantify and are too value-laden (Astin, 1991). They are, nonetheless, very important to the institution and outside **agencies**, such as those which provide accreditation. They also have a strong impact on **persistence**.

Astin (1991) breaks variables affecting persistence into two categories, **psychological** and **behavioral**, and then further separates them by the sub-categories of **cognitive** and **affective**. The following chart (Table 2.2) was adapted from Astin's (1991, **P. 45**) taxonomy of student outcomes and illustrates the relationship of cognitive and **affective** variables.

**Table 2.2**

<i><b>Psychological Category of Variables</b></i>		
<i><b>C</b></i> COGNITIVE VARIABLES	AFFECTIVE VARIABLES	NON-COGNITIVE VARIABLES
<i><b>S</b></i> Subject-matter Knowledge <i><b>A</b></i> Academic ability <i><b>C</b></i> Critical thinking ability <i><b>B</b></i> Basic learning skills <i><b>A</b></i> Academic achievement <i><b>G</b></i> Grade Point Average <i><b>P</b></i> Persistence	Values Interests Self-concept Attitudes Beliefs Satisfaction with college	Family support Employer support

<i><b>Behavioral Category of Variables</b></i>		
<i><b>C</b></i> COGNITIVE VARIABLES	AFFECTIVE VARIABLES	NON-COGNITIVE VARIABLES (DEMOGRAPHICS)
Degree attainment Vocational achievement Awards Special recognition	Leadership Citizenship Interpersonal relations Joining social or academic organizations Contact with faculty members Class attendance	Employed full-time or part-time Single parent First generation in college Economically disadvantaged Disabled



According to Astin (1991), cognitive variables include subject-matter knowledge **and** grade-point average. This category focuses on the transmission and attainment of **knowledge**. We can assess cognitive variables with tests of specific skills, general **education**, subject-matter competency, vocational and professional competency, pre-**testing** and post-testing.

Affective variables are implied in the mission statements of many colleges as well **as** in the notion of the liberally educated person, according to Astin (1991). Affective **skills** include interpersonal competence, leadership ability, critical thinking, and the ability **to** empathize with others. Additionally, affective variables include values, beliefs, and **motivation**: all critical in determining a student's propensity to succeed or fail.

### **The Study of Experience**

"Experience" is a universal word in education (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, **P**. 414). The word is found in homes, schools, higher education, and adult learning **i**nstitutions (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Webster (1966) defines experience as the **"**knowledge, skill, or practice derived from direct observation of or participation in events: **P**ractical wisdom resulting from what one has encountered, undergone, or lived through" (**p**. 800). Thus, experience includes participation in the event and the wisdom gained from **t**hat participation. However, Adler and VanDoren (1972) make the distinction that **"**experience" tends to function as a word, not a term (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). "It is mostly used with no special meaning and functions as the ultimate explanatory context: Why do teachers, students, and others do what they do? Because of their experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 414).

Dewey (1938) posits that experience is an *interaction* between the individual and **his** or her environment and that, in a certain sense, every *experience* should do something **to** prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality. That is **the** very meaning of growth, continuity, reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1938).

Experience generates *habits* that are available in and temper the character of **subsequent** experience; hence experience is *continuous*. Not all habits, however, are **manifestations** of *growth*, but a person may be said to be growing as he/she is securing **from** his/her experience *certain sorts of habits*. (Dewey, 1938).

What sorts of habits? Not those that thwart problem solution or create more **pressing** problems; rather, those that help one to clarify and cope with [the range of] one's **present** problems and make some contribution to the acquisition of additional habits for **understanding** and coping with [the range of] subsequent problems as they occur (Dewey, 1938).

Education is not infrequently defined as consisting in the acquisition of those habits **that** effect an adjustment of an individual and his environment. The definition expresses an **essential** phase of growth.

For Dewey (1938) *growth* is matter of having certain sorts of *experiences* or *transactions* with one's environment -- namely, those that result in the acquisition of *habits* that allow one to clarify and cope with present problems and which lead to the acquisition of further habits for dealing with subsequent problems as they arise. Habits are dispositions acquired from experience and include not only physical tendencies but ways of thinking and feeling as well. Indeed, knowledge in Dewey's view, constitutes one large

**class** of habits -- namely, those dispositions we consciously use in understanding what now **happens**.

Dewey's (1938) definition of education/growth is that reconstruction or **reorganization** of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which **increases** ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.

"What then is education when we find actual satisfactory specimens of its **existence**? In the first place, it is a process of development, of growth. And it is the **process** and not merely the result that is important." (Dewey, 1934, p. 4)

The term *education* has a number of uses in our language. Some of these uses are **descriptive** and others, **prescriptive**. One of the most general descriptive senses identifies **a** given person's education with all of the experiences he/she has had eventuating in **learning** on his or her part (whether or not these experiences have occurred in schools and **whether** the learning that occurred in schools and whether the learning that occurred is **adjudged**, on some standard, to be good or bad). In a prescriptive sense, of course, **Education** is employed to mark off those learning experiences which are regarded as good **Or** desirable -- those learning experiences a person **ought** to have (Ferree, 1990).

Clandinin & Connelly (1994) summarize by stating that, "methods for the study of **personal** experience are simultaneously focused in four directions: inward and outward, **backward** and forward. By *inward* we mean the internal conditions of feelings, hopes, **aesthetic** reactions, more dispositions, and so on. By *outward* we mean existential conditions, that is, the environment or what E.M. Bruner (1986) calls reality. By *backward* and *forward* we are referring to temporality, past, present, and future. To

**experience** an experience is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask **questions** pointing each way” (p. 417).

### Another View of Habits

Covey (1989) posits that habits are the intersection of *knowledge*, *skill*, and *desire*. “**K**nowledge is the theoretical paradigm, the *what to do* and the *why*. Skill is the *how to do*. And desire the motivation, the *want to do*. In order to make something a habit in our **lives**, we have to have all three.” (Covey, 1989, p. 47).

Habits have tremendous gravity pull and breaking deeply imbedded habitual **tendencies** such as procrastination, impatience, criticalness, or selfishness involves more **than** willpower and a few minor changes in our lives (Covey, 1989). This is significant **when** studying student success. Throughout the lives of students they acquire many habits **that** may or may not serve them well when attending college. But, breaking a habit that **negatively** affects student success will cause a student to take on a whole new perspective **of** their life and ultimate success.

Covey (1989) writes on the concept of dependence, independence and **i**nterdependence. “Dependence is the paradigm of *you* -- *you* take care of me; *you* come **through** for me; *you* didn’t come through; I blame *you* for the results. Independence is **the** paradigm of *I* -- *I* can do it; *I* am responsible; *I* am self-reliant; *I* can choose. **I**nterdependence is the paradigm of *we* -- *we* can do it; *we* can cooperate; *we* can combine our talents and abilities and create something greater together” (Covey, 1989, p. 49).

This concept is particularly significant in the study of student success. Research has shown that support is a key element in the success of students. Using Covey’s

**p**principles, interdependence implies that success is the result of support -- *we* can be  
**s**successful together. With the support of family and friends, a student can be  
**i**interdependent and successful. They combine their own efforts with the efforts of others  
**t**o achieve their greatest success (Covey, 1989).

### Chapter 3

#### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

*Firestone (1987) states that “qualitative research is rooted in a phenomenological paradigm which holds that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation” (p. 16).*

This study was conducted using qualitative research methods. Firestone (1987) states that “qualitative research is rooted in a phenomenological paradigm which holds that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective *definitions of the situation*” (p. 16). This qualitative research study is concerned with understanding the phenomenon of persistence through educational biographies. The biographies teach us how the respondents make sense of their lives, their college experiences, and the factors that affected their initial failure to persist and their ultimate success.

“Individuals,” according to Lawrence Cremin in *Public Education* (1976), “come to educational situations with their own temperaments, histories, and purposes, and different individuals will obviously interact with a given configuration of education in different ways and with different outcomes” (p. 37). An educational biography is, therefore, a record of that individual’s experiences and thoughts. The biography documents the inner, subjective reality as constructed by the individuals themselves, showing how they interpret, understand and define the social and educational world around them, but at the same time, the method is able to convey a sense of process (Armstrong, 1987).

### **Description of the Respondents**

The respondents in this study are five individuals who enrolled in a community college, failed to persist, and later returned earning an associate's degree. The respondents can be described as:

1. individuals who began their studies at a community college, failed to persist, and later returned to successfully achieve their goals earning an associate's degree; and
2. were out of college for at least 5 years before returning to achieve their goals; and
3. are non-traditional community college students, ages 25 and above during the time of their last enrollment; and
4. are male

As this study is limited to five participants, the decision was made to use only men. Although there are certainly many similarities between men and women, particularly with regard to adult development (Levinson, 1978), there are also many differences. Rather than analyze the differences between men's and women's success in a community college, I wanted to keep the focus on one particular group. I also have a more personal reason for choosing men. As a young college student, I also experienced persistence problems and did not succeed at accomplishing my educational goals until later in life. This is then, in part, a study to better understand my own life and the lives of my two teenage sons.

To select the men for this study, LCC first identified 38 men who fit the participant profile. They then sent each person an introductory letter and my letter describing this

study. Included in this package was a response form that allowed me to contact the respondent directly. As the researcher, I was not informed by LCC who were sent letters. If the respondent was interested in participating, they completed the response form and returned the form to me directly whereupon I then contacted them. Two mailings were sent to the 38 respondents and five ultimately responded. Those five respondents then became the respondents for this study.

I should note that, as the researcher, I had no control over selecting the 38 men originally sent letters or the five men who ultimately responded. To protect the confidentiality of LCC students, LCC identified those who fit the parameters I provided and then they mailed letters of inquiry. The five who responded may not be typical of college stop-outs, but were selected because they responded and fit the participant profile.

### **Experience and Narrative Inquiry**

The study of narrative is the study of the ways humans experience the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). “The educational importance of this line of work is that it brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experiences as lived” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) posit that, “The main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives” (p. 2).

Narrative is both a phenomenon and method: narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names patterns of inquiry for its study (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) say that people by nature lead storied



lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience.

Crites (1986) provides a cautionary note about the “the illusion of causality” in narrative research (p. 168) (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 7). Connelly and Clandinin (1990) report that Crites (1986) “refers to the ‘topsy-turvy hermeneutic principle’ in which a sequence of events looked at backwards has the appearance of causal necessity and, looked at forward, has the sense of a teleological, intentional pull of the future. Thus, examined temporally, backward or forward, events tend to appear deterministically related” (p. 7). This is a significant note for this study as I am not attempting to show a causal link between experience and persistence, but rather a better understanding of experience and its relationship to persistence.

No researcher ever goes into any research situation with a completely open mind as to what they might expect to find (Armstrong, 1987). We may have certain biases, and those biases may inevitably influence the inquiry making the findings *value mediated* (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As Guba and Lincoln (1994) state, the investigator and the object of investigation are assumed to be interactively linked so that the “findings” are literally created as the investigation proceeds (p. 111) and those findings can be affected by the biases of the investigator.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions for this study are:

1. *Why do people (who fit the study group profile) ultimately persist and succeed in reaching their educational goals at a community college after an initial experience of non-persistence?*
2. *In particular, how do the life experiences, values, beliefs, and habits affect the people in this group and their propensity to persist and accomplish their educational goals?*

### **Research Design**

The educational biography is a form of life history that focuses on the issues relating to a specific person and how they relate those issues to their education. It focuses on the respondent's beliefs, values, and attitudes. In this study, I use focused interviews, questionnaires, and conversation as a means of eliciting information. This method has a lot of practicality as is noted by Armstrong (1987) and Kidd (1981). Kidd (1981) posits that "... what is needed is the utilization of research methodologies so that people who will be affected by research outcomes can participate in identifying the problems, obtaining the data, analyzing the data, and prescribing outcomes based on the research"

(p. 6). This study allows the informants to become part of the process of investigation -- identifying problems and possible solutions.

The value of the life history method is presented by Hillary Graham (1982) who states that the life history method, as a reflection of the traditional way both men and women have recounted and recorded their experiences, is "story telling." According to Graham (1982):

... story-telling rejects the individualism of survey research. Social surveys encourage respondents to reduce their experiences to fragments which can

be captured in a question-and-answer format. Stories, by contrast, provide a vehicle through which individuals can build up and communicate the complexity of their lives. While surveys tear individuals from their social context, stories are pre-eminently ways of relating individuals and events to social contexts, ways of weaving personal experiences into their social fabric.(Armstrong, 1987, pp. 14-15).

Graham (1982) asserts that stories do not demand that experiences and activities assume an object-form. Instead, stories illuminate the dynamic quality of experience, being themselves a process by which individuals make sense of past events and present circumstances (Armstrong, 1987).

### **Data Collection and the Focus Interview**

Initial interviews were conducted with five respondents. The methods employed to gather information includes a comprehensive questionnaire (designed to collect information including demographics, family histories, individual characteristics, and prior educational experiences), focus interviews, and conversation. Through the use of focus interviews and conversation, the student's high school and college experiences and their relationships with family, faculty members, classmates, staff, and employers were explored. The interviews were recorded in field notes and also audio-taped. Follow-up interviews were conducted when necessary to expand and clarify information.

The educational biography, a form of life history, can be collected through "focus interviews." Neumann (1985) reports that the "focus interview" is an instrument for sociological research developed by Merton and Kendall (1946) in research they did on American soldiers during World War II (Neumann, 1985, p. 83). The focus interview is designed to collect in-depth "subjective" information on fairly specific topics or

experiences and generally focuses on the specific topic or experience under study (Neumann, 1985, p. 83). Questions are open-ended and non-directive allowing the respondents considerable freedom in forming responses and encouraging them to express their perceptions of experiences, events, and ideas in their own words (Neumann, 1985).

Merton and Kendall (1946) suggest employing certain interview techniques (Neumann, 1985). These include the use of unstructured questioning, the support of an interview guide, the encouragement of retrospective introspection by respondents, and the exploration and articulation of respondents' "feelings" about the topic or experience under investigation (Neumann, 1985).

Unstructured questions are designed to give the respondent the widest possible latitude in responding to a fairly specific topic (Neumann, 1995). The "interview guide," as reported by Neumann (1985), is essentially an outline of the specific topics or areas of interest to be covered in the interview (p. 85). In this research, I use an interview protocol (see appendix H) that includes general questions on areas of interest and more specific questions -- all focused on eliciting information on the respondent's life and educational experiences and the values, beliefs, and opinions they possess.

The protocol begins with a very general, but important question, "Tell me about yourself." The purpose of this question is to first, use an unstructured question that gives the respondent wide latitude on how they may respond and second, to use a question that will show what they feel is important in their life. The other questions are more structured and focus on the respondent's values, beliefs, and attitudes towards education and their views of life. From their answers it is possible to get a more informed picture of the respondent's lives and how their experiences have impacted their lives and education.

### **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

In the very act of constructing *data* out of *experience*, the inquirer singles out some things as worthy of note and relegates others to the background (Wolcott, 1994). As the inquirer, my account of the respondent's experiences will be filtered through my own perceptions, although every attempt will be made to make them free of bias. Wolcott (1994) notes that data which was initially thought to be objective may be tainted with an analytical or interpretive cast in the very process of becoming data.

Webster's College Dictionary (1991) defines *analysis* as a "method of studying the nature of something or of determining its essential features and their relations" (p. 49) and *Interpretation* as: "1) to give or provide meaning of; 2) to construe or understand in a particular way; ... 4) to bring out the meaning of" (p. 705). Therefore, analysis in this study is the process of studying the essential characteristics of each respondent's construction of persistence and the interpretation will be the process of giving each construction meaning.

There are multiple ways in which to analyze and interpret the results and each are used to varying degrees in this study. The hermeneutic approach has been described as the interpretation of texts or transcribed meanings (Polkinghorne, 1983; Rudenstam & Newton, 1992). Each respondent's session is recorded and transcribed in addition to taking notes. The hermeneutic approach is used to derive a better understanding of the context and meaning of student success.

Another approach to data analysis is described by Patricia M. Cole in "Finding A Path Through The Research Maze" (1994) published in the electronic journal *The*

**Qualitative Report.** Cole describes the “Chenail Qualitative Matrix” which pulls the ideas about research analysis and reporting into a simple conceptual framework. The four main concepts of the matrix are; central tendencies, ranges, expected, and unexpected. The constructions developed by each respondent are examined for emerging patterns and coded. This system organizes these patterns into central tendencies and ranges:

1. Central tendencies describe how the data fits into common themes or categories.
2. Ranges allow for the differences within those categories to be discussed.

The matrix also provides a map for reproducing analyzed data into an organized pattern that connects the findings of research with the review of the literature. The terms “expected” and “unexpected” are used to organize the data presentation:

3. Expected refers to data that confirms the ideas of the authors in the literature review or the researcher’s assumptions.
4. Unexpected refers to data that departs from the authors’ ideas in the literature review or the researcher’s assumptions.

A third approach to this study is **thematic analysis**. In thematic analysis, interviews are recorded and transcribed with the focus on identifiable themes and patterns. The researcher should note patterns of experience from direct quotes or paraphrasing common ideas and then combine and catalogue related patterns into sub-themes.

Themes can be identified by utilizing the following (Love, 1994):

1. **Repetition within and across interviews.** Ideas, beliefs, concerns, and issues that group members discuss repeatedly throughout the interview and/or are

brought up at least once in an interview and are then again noted in other interviews are considered significant.

2. Levels and nature of affect. This includes emotion that is evident through nonverbal cues such as a sudden rise in vocal volume, change in facial expressions and other bodily movements all noted concomitantly with particular content lend significance to that content or theme.
3. Historical explanations, descriptions, and interpretations. Stories of the past that explain and justify present behaviors and meanings are considered significant.
4. Explicit and implicit interpretations. These require connections between thoughts and activities and meanings ascribed to them whether they be obvious and direct or implied and metaphoric. These interpretations are considered significant.
5. Serendipity. Behaviors and expressions of the respondents that are different from what was expected, based upon my reading and experience. These unexpected surprises are significant since they allow the researcher to recognize ideas which have not yet been published.

### **Trustworthiness -- The Goodness Criterion**

Trustworthiness is a general term representing what positivist's think of as internal and external validity, reliability and validity, and objectivity (Rudenstam & Newton, 1992). Qualitative researchers need to examine the "goodness criterion" which includes truth/value (internal validity), applicability (generalizability), consistency (reliability), and

neutrality (objectivity). We need to establish “truth” in our findings in relation to the context we are studying.

In qualitative research the criterion for truth/value is credibility. This can be established by conducting member checks. By returning to the field after a period of time, member checks with respondents are conducted to check and reconsider interpretations of the data made by the researcher (Rudenstam & Newton, 1992). The second criterion is applicability which is measured by transferability of the inquirer’s results, comparisons with other studies, and purposive samples -- people with a wide range of experiences. Consistency, the third criterion, concerns the replication of the study under similar circumstances. Rudenstam and Newton (1992) suggest that the naturalistic investigator derives consistency through coding the raw data in ways so that another person could understand the themes and arrive at similar conclusions. And last, neutrality is related to confirmability. As the inquirer, a community college adjunct faculty member, a community college alumnus, and student who experienced persistence problems, I bring my own understandings of persistence, success, and also possible biases. My neutrality in this study is essential.



## **Chapter 4**

### **THE RESPONDENTS: THEIR STORIES IN FIVE VIGNETTES**

*“Individuals come to educational situations with their own temperaments, histories, and purposes, and different individuals will obviously interact with a given configuration of education in different ways and with different outcomes”*  
(Cremin, 1976, p. 37).

The purpose for this study is to explore how the life experiences, values, beliefs, and habits affect the respondent's propensity to persist and accomplish their educational goals. The respondent's stories and their voices yield vital information useful in understanding why they initially failed to persist and, after being out of school for a period of five years or more, returned to college and succeeded in accomplishing their education goal.

This is a study of five men that graduated from Lansing Community College. Each respondent has a unique story to tell yet each story has similarities. The purpose for this chapter is to first, profile each man and his story as these stories generate the data needed for this study and second, to provide an analysis of how his life experiences affected his college persistence. Each respondent is identified by a pseudonym.

All of the respondents in this study are white males over the age of 25. Four of the five respondents are over 40 years old.

#### **The Respondents' Stories**

##### **“PHIL”**

Phil is 52 years old, divorced, and has two adult children. He has had Parkinson's Disease since 1985. The interview began with a general question asking Phil about

himself. Phil immediately responded by relating how his brother and sister are smarter and have achieved more than he has. "My sister is probably the smartest one of us three but she has no degrees. But my brother has three degrees" according to Phil. Interestingly, on the pre-interview questionnaire where Phil was asked what colleges he had attended, he first wrote down the colleges his brother had attended. Phil's mother did not attend college and his father attended Michigan State University for two years.

Phil graduated from a Lansing, Michigan high school with a 1.89 grade point average. He described himself as a loner in high school and said he studied very little. Phil did not have any plans to go to college nor did his friends.

Phil discussed his health throughout the interview. When he was in the third grade Phil said, "I grew so tall my leg muscles could not keep up with my bones" and, when he would play, his right leg would "kick out." In 1985 he was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease and in 1989 broke a leg resulting in the loss of his job as a salesman.

Phil felt that college was "a waste of time" when he graduated from high school and had a rather negative opinion of those who attended college. He said,

I was in the belief that who you know is better than what you know. I followed that throughout my years and I never really liked college because I had talked to a lot of college people. And they never seemed to be any smarter than the other people I knew who were not.

The first time Phil enrolled at LCC he took various courses including arc welding, real estate, and labor relations. Prior to enrolling in 1991 Phil had broken his leg which he feels caused him to lose sales job that he had held for 25 years. At the time he enrolled he did not seem to have any concrete goal. He took arc welding because he liked to work on cars, real estate because he thought he might want to sell real estate, and labor relations

because he thought he might be a “labor relations person.” Phil did as many other students do -- he just took some classes. I asked Phil if he had talked with an advisor or faculty member about his studies or setting goals and he said that he did not. He was not successful in these courses and said that, “... each one just kind of fizzed out.” Phil said, “I was excited and energetic but after the one class I said, ya know, I’m not really learning nothing and I can’t apply it to anything that I was doing at the time so I let it slide.” Interestingly, Phil said that he attended LCC the first time just to “please everybody.” “Everybody” includes his mother, father, and in particular, his brother.

When Phil left LCC he had a job in sales. He said that he sold file folders, color coding labels, and shelving. Phil took a civil service exam to be a postal worker and passed the exam, but did not follow up as he felt could earn more in sales. “That was a mistake” according to Phil.

Phil re-enrolled at LCC after being out of school for seven years. The second time he said that he “actually went to learn.” He said,

When I went the first time I think I had a feeling I could learn something... But, I would just go along just to get the degree and please everybody. The second time around I actually went to learn. I wanted to learn... I gave them \$164 for that course and I wanted to learn something. I was there to learn... not just get a grade.

Phil had a specific goal the second time which was to earn an associate’s degree in management and he succeeded at that goal. After earning that degree he has now enrolled at Northwood University with a goal of earning a bachelor’s degree. His Parkinson’s disease has affected the type of work he can do and Phil cited his health as one reason for returning to school. He did indicate that he intends to apply for Social Security Disability. However, when Phil talks about returning to work or career goals related to his degree his

expectations seem quite unrealistic. Phil said that he wants to be a manager so that he can sit down while working. I asked Phil to describe where he would like to be a “manager” and he responded,

I would like to be a, ah, fifteen to twenty people that work in a, ah, I would like to be a foreman in like, ah, Oldsmobile. I would enjoy that. Or, ah, ah, I really enjoy sales and I would love to get sales because I think one of the most important things managers do is train new people.”

He continued by saying he would like to work as a manager with the State of Michigan so that he could get a retirement and then said, “I would love to get a job at Sears as a manager of some... like a sports department or something ya know.”

Phil’s work history has been quite diverse. After high school he worked for an uncle for four months and then a gas station for two months. He then worked for Oldsmobile for eight or nine months and then went into sales for two and one-half years selling real estate. After that he sold cars for 10 years at two different dealerships. Following this he sold hospital supplies, labels, and water softeners. Today, Phil is unemployed and relying on support from student loans and his family.

### **“JOHN”**

John is 51 years old and married with three grown children. Growing up on a dairy farm near a small town in Mid-Michigan, John went to a one-room school house until the eighth grade. John has one brother and two sisters. His grandmother, whom he describes as a “very dear lady,” also lived with them while he grew up.

John’s father has a high school education and his mother’s highest level of education is the ninth grade. John’s brother’s highest level of education is the ninth grade

and both his sisters graduated from high school. John's wife has a bachelor's degree and a master's degree.

Growing up John worked hard on the family dairy farm. His dad's idea was that "we came home and milked the cows" after school. John said,

My parents, ah, don't get me wrong, they're dear people. My dad's focus was on the farm. My mother hadn't graduated from high school and my dad's idea was that we came home and milked the cows. You focused on makin' a living.

John said that his dad was a real "black and white" person. "If there was a 20 acre field of corn that had mustard weed growing in it, we went out and we pulled every mustard weed out of it." John said his dad was a very domineering person. He related a story where, when he graduated from high school, he and a friend had planned to go to the friend's grandparent's home in the Upper Peninsula. He told his dad they were going to the U.P. and his dad said they were going to bail hay that day. John told his dad, "I'm not gonna be here." His dad replied, "I'll tell ya what. You and Bill go to grandma's and grandpa's in Marquette, but when you come home, we'll have your bedroom cleaned out because we can't let you live here for nothin'." John stayed home and bailed hay. He said that's the way his dad was. "He had a job to get done and he's going to do that job."

And John reports that he has that same work ethic today.

In high school John was an average student -- "No great ball of fire." John enjoyed school and "socialized a lot". A very successful athlete, he became a high school state champion in an individual sport his senior year. John said that his athletic ability was only average, but he could over achieve because his coach would bring out the best in him. John also said,

... when I was young and in high school I could do enough to get by pretty easy. I wasn't stupid, but I could do enough to get by and manipulate the system. Now, I'm paying [college tuition] for this. I'm going to go to class and I'm going to listen and I'm going to learn and I'm going to get the best grade I can. It's just a matter of maturity in my opinion.

After high school John's parents did not encourage him to attend college and he did not feel college was important. John said that he graduated from high school in the '60s. "Back then you could get a good paying job doing about anything." John went to work for Chevrolet. He worked there for three years and then quit to join the state police force. John's father chastised him for that decision and said, "You're nuts!" His father valued pay and job security, neither of which his father felt would be adequate with the state police.

John became interested in law enforcement while in high school. His girlfriend's neighbor was a sergeant in the state police force and John said,

I would say that probably the person that had the greatest influence on me when I was in high school was my wife's [then his girlfriend's] neighbor. He was a sergeant in the State Police and, ah, that had a significant influence. I mean, as a practical matter, you can say it's the reason I'm sitting here... Because of that little seed that he planted in mind. So, he had certainly been a strong influence.

The girlfriend is now his wife and he credits the neighbor's influence for his success in law enforcement today. John spent 22 years with the state police force, 14 years as an undercover narcotics officer, and retired as a lieutenant. He retired in order to run for sheriff of a mid-Michigan county and has now been sheriff for eight years.

John first enrolled at Lansing Community College in 1971 and attended only one semester. He said that there was government money available to attend school and decided to take advantage of that opportunity. However, he said it "wasn't a good

experience.” The problem, according to John, was not school, but rather his employment as a state trooper. He changed shifts every seven days and found that he was “scrambling” to get somebody to cover for him and constantly telling instructors he was going to be late or miss class. “I just gave up on it” according to John. He said that this was his “best excuse.” Interestingly, he used that same phrase in the questionnaire filled out prior to the interview. When asked about his choice of words, John said that we “justify our inadequacies any way you want.” He said that other factors for justifying his departure from LCC included young children at home and money.

John reported that he never talked with an advisor or faculty member outside of the classroom during his first enrollment. When he left his family supported his decision to leave and he did not feel college was important at the time. However, while out of college his perceptions of college changed. His current and previous undersheriffs have graduate degrees. As John expected his subordinates to have an education, he felt he should have an “educational agenda” also.

Other influences on John’s decision to attend college include those around him during the period of time he was on a local school board. He said,

I got on the school board... and it was apparent to me that from the people I was hanging around with -- the world was changing. Ah, the industry was changing. There would be less and less people and more and more technology. And, if you wanted to get ahead, that you needed to -- to get some education. Now, at that point in my career, I was already a lieutenant in the State Police and I could also see that the people that were moving up faster had the degrees. And, I decided that I had better go back and I did.

When John returned to LCC, after an absence of 21 years, his goal was to earn an associate’s degree in business administration. He choose the business curriculum because

he felt that degree would have more value later in life, particularly if he ever changed careers or when he retired. John was very focused on earning a degree and had no thoughts of leaving. The second time he attended LCC he talked with an advisor and also met with faculty members outside of the classroom. After earning an associate's degree, John has continued his education by enrolling at a Michigan university. He has set a bachelor's degree as his new goal and expects to complete his program shortly.

I asked John what motivates him. He responded by saying that his dad is responsible for his strong motivations. John said he never gives up or leaves a job half-done. As an example, John discussed his election as sheriff. He said the election was a battle but he had a goal in mind and did not give up. John won by only 1/10 of one percent of 110,000 votes cast. John feels he has developed a habit of finishing projects he starts successfully. "If I start something it's going to get done."

John gave another example of work ethic and his commitment to finishing jobs that are started. During the mid-1990s, John was invited to attend the FBI National Academy in Quantico, Virginia. He said that only two of the over 250 participants were older than he was at age 50. In addition to the classroom experience, they were required to participate in the physical exercise part of the program. This part of the program was *very* rigorous and at the completion of the program participants had the opportunity to run the "yellow brick road." This included running nine miles over tank trails, a Marine Corps obstacle course, repelling up and down the sides of mountains, and running through rivers. During the physical training John had sprained his ankle, yet he was committed to completing the "yellow brick road" and bringing home the trophy for doing so, a yellow brick. Both of his previous undersheriffs had brought home the yellow brick and he was



determined to do so also. So, with a sprained ankle, John finished the course, albeit last, and he proudly points to the yellow brick on the shelf as one example of his commitment to finishing what you start.

### **“FRED”**

Fred is 47 years old, divorced, and a single parent with custody of a four year old daughter. He describes himself by saying, “... I don’t feel successful at all because I’m definitely not where I want to be. I’m still working towards that. So for the interim I’m working at [a clothing store] up here. Ah... not by choice, but by necessity.”

His childhood was “not comfortable,” according to Fred. He said, “I don’t find many pleasant things to relate... I was raised with much hatred of Blacks, Japanese, Chinese from an overbearing father.”

Fred reports that he did not like high school and skipped every other day. “I didn’t care much for school.” He continued by saying,

In fact, I was kicked out of high school. Kicked right out! Silly thing as blowing up a toilet. I cherry bombed that. In fact, this was the sixties, you have to remember, this was a high volatile time of our history. Lots of riots, lots of race problems, lots of racial issues... I was a senior when I blew up the toilet, was kicked right out. I guess that year I had a lot of negatives going for me in terms of school. I skipped every other day. I didn’t care much for school.

Immediately after leaving high school Fred volunteered for the draft and joined the Army where he passed the GED exam. He spent his 18th birthday training to go to Viet Nam and his 19th birthday as an infantryman in Viet Nam. His job was to go into tunnels searching for Viet Cong -- he was a “tunnel rat.”

Fred's Viet Nam experience has had a profound affect on who he is today. In Viet Nam Fred said he struggled to stay alive. "You bury your friends" which was something he never anticipated. After seven months he was injured and returned to the U.S. as an ambulatory patient. He spent six months in the hospital learning to walk again. Fred's brother was in the same hospital during a part of this period, but Fred said his brother never came to visit him during that time. He used this example to illustrate how disconnected his family is. His brother and sister currently live in the Lansing area but he is not on speaking terms with them.

At this point his enlistment time ended and Fred left the Army. When he returned home Fred said people were pointing fingers and calling him a "baby killer," "a raper," and "a druggie." He said his friends "despised the fact that I was home." As a result, Fred turned to what he called an "outlaw biker lifestyle." He worked for GM at Fisher Body for two and a half years after leaving the Army. But, due in part to his Army experience, Fred did not like being "bossed" and quit to start a motorcycle business.

Fred first enrolled at LCC in order to take welding courses. He said,

I just wanted this course and that course and any course that was related to my field. I didn't want to go and learn math, I didn't want English, I didn't want a lot of government or basics. I didn't care anything about that. I just wanted something to help me right now.

He felt the welding courses would help him with his motorcycle business. Fred attended LCC for almost two years and left when his business started growing. "I had enough education" according to Fred.

Fred closed his business and went to work for a company that promised him a journeyman's card. He worked there for four years and, when the promised card did not happen, Fred left moving from job to job.

The second time Fred attended LCC he studied business and earned an Associate's degree. Fred said his career had changed course and he now wanted to have his own real estate business. His current goal is to earn a bachelor's degree, but he has not made any further progress towards that goal since graduating from LCC.

During his second enrollment at LCC Fred talked with an advisor and also with faculty members in and out of the classroom. His grades were good and he said that school was the "most important" thing to him. His attitude had changed significantly and he said,

Before, I was just a 24-25 year old kid and I was ticked off at the whole world. I mean I didn't want to socialize with anyone. Everybody was my enemy. You know, this was the attitude that was instilled in me through the war and through society. But now my attitude has changed. It took 15-20 years to change it. And it's even an effort today to continue. But, my attitude changed.

School was tough, according to Fred, as he was the "old man" in the class. "All these young kids that are laid back in their chairs with their sneakers and their shorts on -- I couldn't relate to that."

Fred is currently working as a salesman in a clothing store. He reports that he works there out of necessity and would prefer to have his own real estate business. Fred does have a real estate broker's license and talks about running the business from his home.

**“STEVE”**

Steve is a 56 year old man with three children, two who are adults and one living at home who is 14. On the pre-interview questionnaire Steve indicated he was a widower, however, he has not been married. The woman who died was his long time partner.

[NOTE: As Steve always refers to his deceased partner as his wife, I will also use that reference.]

Steve reports that he did not have a normal childhood. “My childhood to me -- I was more like a slave than I was anything else.” He states that

I love my parents. We get along fine today although I was very regimented. I mean I wasn't -- I didn't have a normal childhood. I mean, at the age of 12 I was cooking dinners for the family. My mother had her own business. My father worked. Um, my summers were spent baby-sitting and doing household chores. Um, um - I was very confined. I gotta -- just very confined -- very controlled childhood. It had a great affect on me in school.

This regimented life style led to rebellion and defiance in school according to Steve. “School became senseless to me and I quit doing the work.” His grades were poor and he got into trouble. As a result of causing “chaos” in gym class he was kicked out of class and assigned as an aide to a tough disciplinarian teacher. This teacher taught photography and Steve established a good relationship with him. Steve said that this teacher was his greatest influence while in school.

After graduating from high school, Steve's parents “talked” him into going to a technical institute in Indiana to study tool and die engineering. Steve lasted three months and, to his parent's dismay, quit. He returned home and said, “I'm home! I quit! We aren't gonna discuss this any further!!”

At this point he reports his life was in turmoil and he tried LCC for awhile. Steve said he was not ready for school and was not disciplined enough to do the homework. After one semester he quit and joined the Marines.

Steve felt the Marines would teach him what “livin” was all about but, instead, he found another form of regimented life. This again threw his life into turmoil and he even considered going AWOL to Canada. But he stuck out his two year enlistment, was assigned as a photographer, became a corporal, and then received an honorable discharge.

Steve attended LCC a second time without graduating. He studied math and science and had “dreams” of being a mathematician. He then changed majors to marketing because he wanted to get involved in corporate sales -- “That’s where I wanted to go.” Steve blames his poor study habits for failing both times and when he left the second time his GPA was 0.5.

The second time he attended LCC his family also influenced his decision to leave. “I was working at the shop -- plus I was carrying -- taking 16 to 19 credits.” Getting by with only 3 hours of sleep a night his wife finally blew up and said she had had it. Steve said, “that’s where it ended.”

After leaving the second time, Steve said he endeavored and is still endeavoring to run his own business. He is self-employed and employs several people who work as “lumpers.” A “lumper,” according to Steve, is a person who unloads trucks. They unload produce and other products for major warehouses in the Lansing area.

The last time Steve enrolled at LCC he enrolled full-time. Steve said that everything he does now he does full time. Steve majored in electronics communication and bio-medical electronics earning an associate’s degree in both majors. He choose those

majors because he had a fascination with electronics. Steve did have a goal the last time but he also had problems. He said:

I was going through a time that I really -- was lacking a lot of worth inside myself. I mean -- I wasn't feeling like the man I thought I should be or -- should feel like. Um, I had pretty much been a failure at everything I had done -- I can't say a failure. I didn't -- I -- I never had to file bankruptcy or nothin' like that -- but I wasn't a success. Um, I was lookin' at myself at 40 years old. I couldn't write a resume on myself -- I mean today even it's hard for me to go to somebody and try to get a job. Um, I don't know what I'd put on paper. I -- I -- for the last 25 years worked for myself in one form or another. I -- I don't have -- I mean there's nothing that can be traced back on me. I mean, everything I've done I've done for awhile and quit doing and ventured into something else.

Steve was successful in completing his LCC program. He attended full-time for three years, including summers, and had the normal fears he said anyone his age would have. Steve noted he was older than a lot of his instructors. But this time he met with the faculty members and became friends with them. He considered himself a good student and, even with a 0.5 GPA to start, he graduated with a 3.0.

### **"MIKE"**

Mike is the youngest of the five respondents at 31 years old. He is now married for the second time and has two children; one from his first marriage and one from his second. Growing up he had a great relationship with his mother but not with his father. "My dad was a self-businessman and didn't have a lot of time to spend with me..." Mike said that, "My father was not home very much, we still don't get along today." His relationship with his mother was better and he said,

I was really close to my mother... she took me on trips and things that she knew pushed the right buttons, I'd want to go finish and find out more

about it... She still does that with me now... She knows how to get me going on something...

Today, Mike's parents are divorced. He proudly said that his mother went back to college and received her degree at the same time he did. Mike said they even sat in on classes for each other if one was unable to be there.

Mike's high school experiences were not good. He said that he did not like high school but he did like the social aspects. "It was more of a social trip for me than it was an educational experience." Mike reported that he did not study at all. "I got through high school without studying with a 2.3." His friends are all now dead according to Mike. "They've died of drug overdoses, traffic accidents -- they didn't seem to quit having fun after they got out of high school."

Mike reported that a teacher was a role model for him in high school. This teacher is now a high school principal. He said,

I took that class [this teacher's distributive education class] cuz it was in the afternoon, I thought it was a bunch of screwing off, and you get to meet a lot of people that way, and cuz of it being a store and everything, I ended up being the manager of the store there, and he really gave me a lot of self-confidence.

However, Mike said that one reason he took the distributive education class was to make his father happy.

After graduating from high school Mike's parents supported his decision to attend college. He was the first one in his family to attend college and he stated that that was why his dad had the money for him to go to college. "But it was always on his terms, and it didn't make it right for me" according to Mike.

Mike attended LCC for three terms during his first enrollment. His goal was to

earn an associate's degree in Fire Science. But, he said, "I was fartin around, I missed classes, especially typing and the math, and all those things you had to have to get into a course." He also said that he was "really immature about the whole thing."

Mike reported that, once in college, he did not get the family support he needed. Mike said they talked about him, "First one to go to school, we're so proud of him." But, when he needed help and time to study, his dad wanted him to make deliveries and work. Mike said his dad said one thing and did another.

While Mike was attending LCC one of his friends joined the Army, went overseas, and then told Mike about all the educational benefits he would get when he got out. Mike said he thought about that and said:

This is perfect. I can grow up. I can become a more mature person. Fireman are supposed to be military based, so I'll have... just get a whole bunch of stuff together, and I'll be more, I'll be a better person. I'll come back out in three years, finish school, and get hired right away. And, that's when I decided I had to do this, I had to go in the Army and I could go over and have fun with my friends for three years.

Mike married his high school sweetheart right after basic training. She went overseas to Germany with him, but Mike said that this was not something she wanted to do. They had problems and she was eventually ordered by the base commander to return home. She returned pregnant and they got divorced shortly after that.

Mike then met a German woman who he married while in Germany. She became pregnant and, before the baby was born, he was sent to the Persian Gulf war.

The Persian Gulf war deeply effected Mike. He was a combat engineer and this experience "hardened me up pretty bad." After returning to the United States and being discharged, he has had to undergo counseling and therapy to help him overcome the



experience of war. He said that he now has a new definition for a friend; “Somebody that can stand up and pull your butt out of it when you’re gonna die -- that’s a friend.”

Mike’s therapist said that, after being back two years, he had to get his life back in order. Mike thought that his military experience would help him get hired at a metropolitan fire department, but it did not. He said, “I didn’t even make it through the first phase of hiring.”

Mike then re-enrolled at LCC and went what his wife called, “double time.” He took between 18 and 30 credits per semester in both the paramedic and fire science program. His goal was to receive an associate’s degree in both programs. Mike received Veteran’s benefits which paid for his tuition, books, plus an \$800 per month living allowance.

Mike said that he got the support needed to succeed in college from his wife and mother. He developed good study techniques and successfully earned three associate’s degrees; a general associate’s, an associate’s degree in fire science, and an associate’s degree in emergency medicine. Today, Mike is employed with a metropolitan fire department as a firefighter and paramedic.

## **Chapter 5**

### **AN ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONDENTS' RESPONSES**

*“Qualitative research is rooted in a phenomenological paradigm which holds that reality is socially constructed through individual or collective definitions of the situation.”*  
(Firestone, 1987, p. 16)

The respondents' experiences growing up, their relationships with parents and siblings, school experiences, and the values, habits, motivations, skills, and abilities they developed all impacted their community college experiences.

Information gathered during the focus interviews documents the inner, subjective reality of each respondent and now can be interpreted, understood, and defined. The respondents' constructions of their life experiences can help us better understand how those experiences have influenced the affective variables influencing persistence.

### **Experiences**

#### **Early Family Experiences**

Family relationships can significantly impact student success, particularly for the traditional age student who enters shortly after high school. Tinto (1993) posits that the establishment of supportive personal relationships -- with faculty members, peers, and other significant persons including family members -- enables students to better cope with the demands of college and has a positive impact on academic success. Conversely, the lack of this support can have a negative impact on success.

Kasworm and Pike (1994) report that many adult learners enter higher education from family backgrounds that tend to place them at an academic disadvantage. Fred, Mike, and Steve reported negative experiences growing up with Fred and Mike reporting

difficulties and poor relationships with their fathers. As an example, after being expelled from high school Fred joined the Army to get away from his father and other family members. When he returned from Viet Nam he still was not on speaking terms with his family and he feels his friends turned against him due to his involvement in the war. His support systems then came from his “outlaw” biker friends. College was not a priority in this group. Mike said that his father was not home very often and they also do not get along even today. Mike’s father, although he verbally supported his idea to attend college, expected him to work rather than study. Mike said that he could attend college, but it was always on his father’s terms.

Of the five respondents, John is the only person who indicated that the habits, values, and beliefs he developed as a child played an important role in his later accomplishments and success. Growing up on a dairy farm required John to start working at an early age. John said that his father had the greatest influence on his work ethic and has always provided support for everything he has done.

### **Secondary School Experiences**

Dewey (1938) posits that everything depends upon the *quality* of the experience which is had and these experiences will influence later experiences. The quality of high school experiences each respondent in this study had, with the exception of John, were all described as poor. Phil reported that he studied very little and had a 1.89 GPA. Fred said that he “did not care much for school” and was expelled his senior year. And Steve said that school was also a poor experience that he did not care for. John was the only exception reporting that he enjoyed school although he was “no great ball of fire.” And it

should be noted that John is the most successful of these respondents in terms of career and other accomplishments later in life.

With four respondents reporting negative experiences in high school, this becomes an important area to consider. These men indicate they lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which they experienced learning. As Steve said, “school became senseless to me and I quit doing the work.” The respondents’ responses indicate that the learning process was boring and had no relationship to things they wanted later in life.

It should be noted Tinto (1993) asserts that academic difficulty and poor grades in high school are not very highly correlated with departure from college. However, the poor high school experience may tend to weaken the individual’s intentions and commitments which is a significant predictor of student success (Tinto, 1993).

### **Experience in the Military**

Fred, Steve, and Mike each had prior military experiences. Fred served in the Viet Nam war and Mike in the Persian Gulf war. Steve and Mike indicated that their military service was a negative experience. Fred said that if he could subtract the Viet Nam war, his experience in the Army was positive as he learned discipline and to take responsibility.

For Mike, Steve, and Fred the military service was a part of the transition from childhood to early adulthood. This period of time, primarily between 18 and 22 years of age, allowed the respondents to make this transition by leaving their families and establishing a degree of independence. Interestingly, for these three respondents the

military appears to be a form of rebellion against their parents. They used their enlistment as a way to break away from family and school.

Fred joined the military service immediately after leaving high school. A college education was not a priority for him and the Army provided a way to “get away.” For Steve and Mike, however, the military came after their first enrollment at LCC. Steve reported that he “just wasn’t ready for school” and, although Mike was focused on earning a degree, left because of a friend who had joined the Army. Mike said that he could join his friend and that the Army would make him “a better person.”

### **First Experience at Lansing Community College**

Four of the five respondents reported negative experiences during the time they first attended LCC. All four believe he lacked the intent, commitment, goals, and motivation to succeed. The fifth respondent, Mike, did seem to have a more positive experience and had the support of his family and a specific goal. However, Mike also reported that he spent too much time socializing and lacked what he felt was the positive support he needed from his father.

All the respondents in this study reported they left LCC voluntarily the first time they attended. John and Steve attended only one semester, Phil, Mike, and Fred took classes over a one year period. However, although they all report that they left voluntarily, Tinto (1993) posits that many students who leave voluntarily are actually involuntary leavers. They have encountered barriers that they are not able to overcome and this results in their departures.

Cross (1988) puts obstacles or barriers that affect participation and persistence into three categories: situational barriers (cost of college, job responsibilities, not enough time, family unsupportive); institutional barriers (courses not scheduled at a convenient time, courses not available, strict attendance requirements, too much red tape); and dispositional barriers (afraid that they are too old, low grades in past, lack of confidence in their abilities, don't enjoy school). These barriers must be overcome before they can be successful in college.

The data collected in this study shows that each respondent encountered barriers during their first attendance at LCC and that these barriers may have contributed to their departure. As an example, John encountered situational barriers including work schedule difficulties, money problems, and time issues. Mike also encountered work problems with his father, who was also his employer. His father would not give him the time from work to study. Phil experienced dispositional barriers that included poor grades in high school and a feeling that college was not important. Steve experienced institutional barriers including strict attendance requirements and dispositional barriers including conflict with his parents over college attendance. And Fred experienced dispositional barriers including a feeling that college was not important in his life.

### **The Time Span Between First and Last Enrollment**

The respondent's life course, particularly the time between the first and last enrollment, appears to be significant. This time period ranged from seven years for Phil to 21 years for John. In examining the specific events, relationships, achievements, failures,

and aspirations that make up the lives of these respondents, we can see changes that affected their later success at LCC.

Fred spent the time between his first and second enrollment working and changed career goals several times. He reports leaving LCC because he was offered the opportunity to earn a journeyman's card with the company he then worked for. Fred worked for that company for four years, moving from position to position. He said the promises that were made never materialized. Fred reports that he had a very bad attitude about everything, which he believes, was due to his experiences surrounding the Viet Nam war. After being out of school for 18 years, his attitudes changed and he decided that he wanted more than to just "eek" out a living. With a new career goal of real estate work in mind, Fred re-enrolled at LCC earning an associate's degree.

Phil's first experience with LCC was to take courses of interest. He did well in those courses and did not view himself as failing. However, he reported a lack of intent to complete a program, he was not committed to college, and he did not have any clear educational or career goals. As he said, "... who you know is better than what you know." And Phil felt that knowing the right people would get him a good job. In 1991, after being out of school for seven years, Phil decided he needed a college degree in order to get a better paying job. He was still unemployed due to a broken leg and said, "in trying to get back to work, no one would hire me, so with my degree I hope this will change." He clearly had a new work goal, to find a new and better paying job, and felt that a college degree would enable him to reach that goal. Today, Phil's goal is to earn a bachelor's degree and he is currently enrolled at Northwood University.

During Steve's time out of college he enlisted in the Marines. He said that he just was not ready for college and thought that the discipline of the military would be good for him. He re-enrolled at LCC after being discharged, but again dropped out. For Steve, 10 years passed before he re-enrolled at LCC and successfully earned his degree. During those 10 years Steve became self employed and today still runs his own small business unloading trucks.

The time span between John's first and second enrollment lasted 21 years. John first left LCC due to scheduling barriers he could not overcome. A college degree was not required for his job as a state police trooper which lessened his commitment to earn a degree. During the time John was out of college, he continued to progress in his career and eventually was elected county sheriff. At this point he began to see the value of a college education. Although not required for his job, his subordinates, friends, and social acquaintances had college educations. As a school board member, he said that he was the only person without a college education and a college degree became a new priority for John. His intent and motivation to earn a college degree became far stronger and, with the barriers first encountered gone, he re-enrolled at LCC.

Much of Mike's time between his first and second enrollment was spent in the Army. He was a good student the first time he attended and seemed to have the intentions, commitments, and goals necessary to graduate. But, he said he had a "falling out" with his father and chose to leave LCC to join the Army. As a veteran, he knew he could receive educational benefits and would not need to rely on his father. During the nine year span he was out of school, Mike was sent to the Persian Gulf, had a child, was divorced, remarried, and had another child. When Mike returned from the Persian Gulf he



experienced psychological problems and spent two years doing little. Only after receiving counseling from a therapist and feeling the support of his wife and his mother, did he return to LCC with a strong commitment and goal in mind. Mike wanted to be a fireman since childhood and later a paramedic. He knew that an associate's degree was important to accomplish this goal and he successfully graduated. He was later employed by the Lansing Fire Department.

### **Last Experience at Lansing Community College**

All respondents in this study reported that they were more focused the second time they attended and had a specific goal in mind -- earning an associate's degree. All respondents reported that they talked with an advisor and met on a regular basis with faculty members both in and out of the classroom.

John reported that the second time he attended LCC he took only one class at a time. He said that his kids were gone and he did not want to tie himself down with studying. His major was business and he talked with an advisor and faculty members teaching courses he took. John made a point of telling me that he always sat in the front of the class and challenged instructors by asking, "Who says?" when it came to course material. John found the experience challenging and he also found a great deal of support from his wife.

Phil reported having a stronger goal the second time he attended LCC. His intent was to earn an associate's degree and he made a full time commitment to that goal. During his last attendance Phil said that he changed his goal from an associate's degree to a bachelor's degree. His instructors told him that a two year degree was not as good as a

four year degree. Also, students were telling him that he needed a four year degree to get a job. Phil experienced a number of barriers during this time period. His Parkinson's disease coupled with unemployment made attending college difficult. Phil did report talking with an advisor and faculty members, but he also said that they did not help him greatly. Phil took advantage of other services offered by LCC including math tutoring. The biggest difference between his first and last attendance, according to Phil, was that the last time he was there to "learn -- not just get a grade."

Fred reported that the biggest change between his first and last attendance was his attitude. He said, "my attitude was bad the first time I went to school. I was just a 24-25 year old kid and I was ticked off at the whole world. I mean I didn't want to socialize with anyone. Everybody was my enemy. You know, this was the attitude instilled in me through the war and through society." However, the last time Fred attended LCC his outlook on life had changed. He continued by saying, "But now my attitude had changed. It took 15-20 years to change it. And it's even an effort today to continue. But, my attitude changed." Fred said the last time he attended LCC he was more focused and had a specific goal in mind -- earning an associate's degree. "Earning a degree was the most important thing to me. Nothing else was even close to its importance."

Steve attended LCC three different times, not succeeding until the last. He reported never meeting with advisors or faculty members until the last time he attended. Steve blames his first failure at LCC on the English course, "The biggest thing was -- I couldn't pass English." He left before completing his program the second time because of family issues. Steve said:

My wife was all this and that and we got in this big blowup. I was working at the shop plus carrying 16 to 19 credits or something like that. She got mad and one day I finally blew up -- and I just remember -- all of a sudden there went across the room a whole stack of books... it ain't worth this, ya know?

The last time Steve attended LCC he went full time and made an effort to talk with an advisor and faculty members. He said that he felt like a failure earlier and the "second time around was whole different world for me -- I was a grown-up man." Steve's intent to graduate the last time was far stronger than previous times and he had made a commitment to himself to succeed.

### **Academic Support Experiences**

Support by and with faculty members and academic advisors plays an important role in the study of persistence. Very simply, none of the respondents reported talking with an academic advisor or meeting with faculty members outside of the classroom the first time they attended and each respondent did the final time they attended. Tinto (1993) notes that student interaction with faculty members appears to play a central role in a student's commitment to intellectual growth and involvement in learning. Tinto (1993) also asserts,

...research demonstrates that the degree and quality of personal interaction with other members of the institution are critical elements in the process of student persistence. By contrast, the absence of sufficient contact with other members of the institution proves to be the single most important predictor of eventual departure even after taking account of the independent effects of background, personality, and academic performance (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1979)(p. 56).

Interaction with academic advisors also performs an important role in establishing students' goals and commitments to an academic program. As the respondents reported in this study, the first time they attended they were "just taking classes." The last time they attended they talked with advisors and established academic plans that led to graduation.

### **Affective Variables**

As noted in the literature review, Astin (1991) defines affective variables as those that have to do with the student's feelings, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, and social and interpersonal relationships. Affective variables are important to study as they have a strong impact on persistence (Astin, 1991).

The respondent interviews were examined by looking for patterns, identifiable themes, expected and unexpected responses, and meaning in the respondents' constructions of their experiences.

### **The Respondent's Values, Beliefs, and Habits**

Singer (1992) postulates that *who* people are in the sense of what they believe, think, and feel, as individuals and as members of social groups, is a crucial concern for educational and other researchers of the human experience.

Each of the respondents in this study either directly or indirectly stated *who* they are and what they believe. When Fred was asked to describe himself he immediately responded by saying, "I don't feel successful at all because I'm definitely not where I want to be." Fred's past history shows a pattern of activities that have been less than

successful. He was expelled from high school, had a very poor family life, is divorced, has attempted unsuccessfully to start a real estate business, and now works selling clothes -- which he admits is only until he can do something else.

Steve describes himself as very “independent.” He feels this is due, in part, to his childhood which was very “controlled.” He reported feeling “like a slave” as a child and, as a result of his home environment, he just rebelled while in high school. “I defied any kind of anybody just commanding me to do anything.” Steve reports that he has never held a job for more than three years and favors self-employment over the structure involved in working for someone else.

When asked to describe himself, Phil talks instead of his brother and sister. He relates how his sister is the smartest of the three and his brother has earned three college degrees and is very successful. Throughout the interview Phil refers back to his brother’s successes. He seems to describe himself through his brother and sister.

Mike avoided the question of who he was. Later, he did describe himself as someone who likes to help other people. “As long as I can remember I wanted to be a fireman.” Mike’s social network in high school included friends who were often in trouble and used drugs. Today, Mike said that most of his high school friends are either dead or in jail. Reflecting on his high school years Mike said, “They never stopped having fun.”

**Values:** As noted earlier in this study, the term value can be defined as, “a strong preference based on a conception of what is desirable, important, and worthy of esteem” (Lenning, Lee, Micek, and Service, 1977, pp. 58-59).

John describes himself as a hard working man with a strong work ethic. Growing up on a dairy farm he learned at an early age that hard work was the norm. His father was a strong person who instilled in John the value and importance of work. Although John was not an exceptional student in high school, he was very successful in sports earning a high school state championship. This drive and motivation also became apparent in his work after high school. He was focused on a career in law enforcement and has spent the last 30 years as a law enforcement officer. John's work ethic has made him a leader in his profession and he is currently a county sheriff.

All the respondents reported that, during most of their lives, a college education held little value. As an example, Phil said:

For the first 30, well actually 40 - 43 years of my life I didn't think education was worth anything... it was a waste of time. But for the last five or six years I've learned that there is no substitute for a good education. There are so many things that are open to me and I don't mean monetary, cause money is a minute thing with me, but it teaches you how to get along with people... how to talk to people.

A question for this study is then, can a shift in values be reflected in subsequent behavior and, more directly, can a shift in the respondent's attitudes toward education affect their propensity to persist? The answer appears to be yes. As each respondent's attitude toward education took a more positive shift, their perception of the value of an education increased. During the respondents last attendance at LCC they each reported that a college education held greater value than the first time they attended.

**Beliefs:** Beliefs, which are defined as a state or habit of mind, are normally expressed in reaction to precipitating events and varies in relation to those events (Singer,

1992). None of the respondents interviewed held the belief that college was essential when they first attended. Phil felt that college was “a waste of time.” He went on to say, “I was of the belief that who you know is better than what you know.” John said that he decided to attend college only because there was government money available. Steve said that college was “not a good experience.” He indicated that he was not ready for school and was not disciplined enough to do the work. Mike was the only respondent in this study who seemed to have a concrete goal the first time he attended LCC although he also said that he did not take college seriously. These beliefs affected their persistence the first time they attended college. Each, holding the belief that college was not important, set themselves up for failure.

The last time they attended LCC their beliefs had changed significantly. College then became the most important event to each respondent. However, it should be noted that each respondent held the belief that college was important from an employment perspective. They tended to perceive college as an opportunity for personal advancement rather than hold the belief that college was an essential part of their lives. Each respondent’s belief that an education was important changed as their work and careers changed.

I would note as did Ivie (1994) in her study of community college stop-outs, that the respondents tended to perceive college as an opportunity for personal advancement rather than as an environment with which their identities and life experiences were inextricably interwoven.

**Habits:** During our lifetimes we create hundreds, if not thousands, of habits and these habits make up who we are and how we live our lives. A habit is defined as a mode of behavior or way of behaving (Webster, 1966). Each respondent developed certain habits over his lifetime that affect persistence. For the respondents to be successful in college, particularly Mike, Steve, Phil, and Fred, they had to change their beliefs and ways of behaving -- their habits.

When each respondent was asked about what habits they had, none could clearly state what they were. However, by examining the text of their interviews, a number of their habits become evident.

John grew up with the habit of working hard. His father instilled in him his work ethic which was that you worked hard each and every day. If you wanted something in life, you had to work hard to earn it. John's success in work and life exemplifies this and he demands nothing less of everyone who works for him. By contrast, Phil did not have a habit of setting goals or achieving them and, as a result, does not have any solid career plan at age 52.

Steve said he has a habit of not holding onto a job for more than three years. He hates structure, values independence, and his work habits reflect his beliefs. During the time between his second and last attendance, he was self-employed with jobs that included collecting trash, digging trenches, cleaning offices, and unloading trucks.

To be successful in reaching their educational goals the respondents had to change habits built over a lifetime. However, changing habits can be difficult and to change habits, the respondents had to change the recognition and rewards that come from habits. For Steve, Mike, Fred, and Phil the recognition and rewards they sought were extrinsic



and tied to a college education. Each of the four sought new employment opportunities and felt that a college education would help them reach their goals. John's recognition and rewards are more intrinsic. He wants to be an equal with his peers who have earned college degrees.

### **Intentions and Commitments**

Tinto (1993) posits that individual departure can be viewed as arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution (Tinto, 1993). "Positive experiences -- that is, integrative ones -- reinforce persistence through their impact upon heightened intentions and commitments both to the goal of college completion and to the institution in which the person finds him/herself (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, and Hengstler 1992). Negative or malintegrative experiences serve to weaken intentions and commitments, especially commitment to the institution, and thereby enhance the likelihood of leaving" (Tinto, 1993, p. 115).

Each of these respondents reported having negative experiences the first time they attended LCC. Phil lacked direction and goals as did Fred; John had conflicts with his work schedule; Steve said he was not disciplined enough; and Mike said he was just "fartin around." None of these respondents had the intentions or commitment to be successful on their first attempt at LCC.

Tinto (1993) posits that individual intentions regarding participation in higher education are important predictors of the likelihood of degree completion. "Generally

speaking,” according to Tinto (1993), “the higher the level of one’s educational or occupational goals, the greater the likelihood of college completion” (p. 38). This is supported by Cope and Hannah’s (1975) conclusion that of all personal attributes studied, “personal commitment to either an academic or occupational goal is the single most important determinant of persistence in college” (Cope and Hannah, 1975, p. 19; Tinto, 1993, p. 43).

Phil lacked any educational or occupational goal at the time he first enrolled at LCC. He just took classes as they seemed like “something I would like to do.” As a result he states, “each one just kind of fizzed out.” However, the second time he enrolled, Phil did have a goal -- to earn an associate’s degree. He stated that he “actually went to learn.”

John first enrolled at LCC because there was “some government money available.” He lacked educational goals and said that college “wasn’t a good experience.” A college education was not required for his job as a state trooper and, due to scheduling conflicts, he quit. After being out of school for 21 years, John was influenced by the circumstances around him and he returned to LCC with a concrete goal of earning an associate’s degree and then a bachelor’s degree. His subordinates had graduate degrees and he now expected his employees to have a college education. John felt it was important for him to set the example by going to college himself. As a result, he earned an associate’s degree and is now pursuing a bachelor’s degree at Northwood University.

Fred did not have any specific goal when he first enrolled at LCC. He took some classes in arc welding as he felt those courses would help him in his motorcycle business. After attending LCC for almost two years with no specific goals Fred said, “I had enough

education” and quit. Fred returned to LCC after an absence of 18 years. He said his career had changed course and now wants to own a real estate business. Fred’s goal was to earn an associate’s degree and he met with an advisor who helped him develop a solid plan. This time Fred said that school “was the most important thing” to him.

Steve first attended a technical institute after being “talked into it” by his parents. That did not work out and he quit after attending for only three months. Steve then enrolled at LCC and said that he was not disciplined enough to do the work. Lacking any goals he quit after only one semester. Steve returned to LCC eight years later and again did not succeed in earning a degree. He first started with “dreams” of being a mathematician and then changed to marketing so that he could be in corporate sales. But again, he did not have any solid or realistic goals. He said his study habits were poor and when he left his GPA was 0.5. The third time Steve enrolled at LCC he was successful and earned two associate’s degrees. He said he had a “fascination” with electronics and majored in bio-medical electronics and electronics communication. However, he does not have any plans of pursuing a career in either of these areas.

Mike, unlike the other respondents, did have a specific goal when he enrolled the first time; to earn an associate’s degree in fire science. He attended LCC for three terms and had good grades in fire science but not in the other courses he took. Mike said that he was in school because his father wanted him to be the first in the family to go to college. But, Mike’s father sent him a mixed message. When Mike needed help and time to study, his father would make him work at the family business. His relationship with his father deteriorated and Mike quit school to join the Army. His goal was still to earn a degree in

fire science and he believed the Army would provide him with the education he wanted.

But that did not work out for Mike.

After six years in the Army including the Persian Gulf War, Mike returned home. But the war had taken a toll on Mike psychologically and he did nothing for almost two years. During this time Mike received psychological counseling and his therapist suggested that he should re-enroll at LCC. Mike did re-enroll and made a personal commitment to earn a degree in fire science. He attended full time and, in addition to earning an associate's degree in fire science, earned a general associate's degree and another associate's degree in emergency medicine qualifying him to be a paramedic.

## **Chapter 6**

### **DISCUSSION**

*“A philosophy of education, like any theory, has to be stated in words, in symbols.” (Dewey, 1938, p. 28)*

This is a study of how the life experiences of five men affected their propensity to persist and succeed in achieving their educational goals at Lansing Community College. In this chapter I will summarize the study’s purpose, methodology, and results; discuss the significant findings of this study; consider the findings in light of existing studies; reflect on the research including how the study relates to my personal life, how the study relates to the literature, and the implications for practice; discuss the limitations of the study; and make recommendations for further study.

#### **Summary of the Study**

Five men who graduated from Lansing Community College earning an associate’s degree volunteered to participate in this study. Each respondent had attended Lansing Community College at least once without graduating and had been out of college from seven to 21 years before returning to successfully graduate. The methods employed to gather information included a comprehensive questionnaire, focus interviews, and conversation. The purpose for using these methods was to write a brief life history of each respondent and construct his educational biography. Prior to face-to-face interviews each respondent was sent the major research questions and a list of the questions that would be asked during the interview (see appendix G). They were encouraged to reflect on these questions prior to the interview.

Past literature in the area of student retention, academic persistence, and student withdrawal has been done quantitatively by Tinto (1993), Astin (1991), and others and has focused on background characteristics, goal commitment, and measures of academic and social integration.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand how each respondent's lifelong experiences influenced their values, interests, attitudes, and beliefs and how those affective variables may affect the respondent's propensity to persist.

### **Summary of Results**

The data collected from the questionnaires, interviews, and conversations were analyzed in light of the research questions at the beginning of this study. The results can be broken down into the early life experiences (birth to 22 years old), secondary school experiences, college experiences, and the transition period between first and last attendance at Lansing Community College. From the information gathered about the experiences during these periods, the major theme of "intentions and commitments" emerges. Each respondent's "intentions" and their "commitments" to education were shaped by their experiences in childhood, secondary school, their experiences with Lansing Community College, and their life experiences outside of school.

### **Experience**

The respondent's early life experiences influenced their later values, beliefs, attitudes, and their intentions and commitments to education. During this time the respondents lived with their families and their social worlds expanded from home and

family to a wider sphere that included school, peer groups, and neighborhood. The influence of this environment shaped their views of life, their habits, their values, and their beliefs.

Rebellion played a key role in the lives of Fred, Steve, and Mike. Fred rebelled in high school and rebelled against his parents. He was expelled from school and joined the Army. This rebellious attitude has continued to play a role in his life. Fred joined an outlaw biker club after leaving the Army and took classes at Lansing Community College only to improve his welding skills. He lacked any educational goal or commitment to college and was living for the moment.

Steve also rebelled against school and his parents. His family was very controlling and he rebelled against authority. Ironically, Steve joined the Marines to escape this type environment and found an even more regimented life style. Although he enrolled at Lansing Community College shortly after leaving the Marines, he soon failed leaving with a 0.5 GPA.

Mike rebelled against his father and joined the Army. He said that he had had a “falling out” with his dad and that the Army would give him the opportunity to get the training and education he needed to be a fireman. Mike did not excel in high school and he said school was “more of a social trip for me than it was an educational experience.” During his childhood he had a very close relationship with his mother although he said his father was not around much. Mike’s attitudes about school and the study habits he developed in high school influenced his first attendance at Lansing Community College. Mike, who worked for his father while attending Lansing Community College, blames the mixed messages he got from his father for his failure in school. His father was proud that

Mike was the first to attend college, but at the same time required him to work rather than study.

As a contrast to Fred, Steve, and Mike, John grew up without rebelling against his parents and society. The values, beliefs, and work ethics held by his father played a major role in shaping who he is today. John did not adopt the attitude that he was owed something by society nor did he expect to get anything he did not earn. John, unlike Fred, Steve, or Mike, discussed his work ethic while growing up. His father expected him to work on the family dairy farm and that came before *anything* else. Fred, Steve, and Mike discussed this period in terms of academic problems in high school and causing trouble while there. Fred and Steve emphasized their need to rebel and neither respondent reported working during this time.

With the exception of John, the respondents did not grow up valuing hard work, education, or goal setting. John has accomplished more with regard to his career than the other four respondents and the values, beliefs, attitudes, and motivations he developed during childhood strongly affected his later accomplishments and successes.

High school was a time where the respondent's educational values, beliefs, and habits were molded. Mike, Phil, Steve, and Fred reported negative experiences in high school. They were poor students, got into trouble, and this attitude about school carried forward to their first attendance at LCC. Learning was a negative experience for them and they lost the impetus to learn because of the way in which learning was experienced. They associated school with boredom, indifference, and apathy. By contrast, John reported that school was a positive experience. Although he was "no great ball of fire" in



his words, he did get good grades and participated in sports becoming a high school state champion in an individual sport.

All five respondents reported negative experiences the first time they attended LCC. Four of the five respondents lacked any goal or commitment that included an associate's degree. Basically, they were "just taking classes." Mike is the only exception to this as he did plan to earn an associate's degree the first time he attended.

### **Affective Variables**

Affective variables, as defined by Astin (1991), are those that have to do with the student's feelings, attitudes, beliefs, aspirations, and social and interpersonal relationships. In this study the affective variables of values, beliefs, habits, intentions, and commitments were examined. These variables help define *who* the respondents are in the sense of what they believe, think, and feel, as individuals and as members of social groups.

Values, habits, and beliefs are shaped by the respondent's life experiences. As each respondent passed through childhood and early adulthood he developed certain values, habits, and beliefs that were strongly influenced by family and environment. In turn these values, habits, and beliefs affected his persistence at LCC. When each respondent entered middle adulthood his values, habits, and beliefs were modified by life events and changing needs and had a more positive affect on persistence.

Throughout each respondent's life he has had experiences, both positive and negative, that have influenced the level of his intentions and commitments to education. As noted by Tinto (1993) and is supported by this study, negative life and educational experiences will enhance the likelihood of leaving college. Four of the five respondents

reported negative experiences with family, high school, and work and those experiences affected their disposition towards college.

Tinto (1993) also notes that individual intentions regarding participation in higher education are important predictors of the probability of degree completion. This is also supported by this study as none of the respondents had a strong intention to graduate during their first enrollment. Only during their last enrollment did each respondent report that they had a strong desire to earn an associate's degree. As Fred reported, school "was the most important thing."

However, I would note as did Ivie (1994) in her study of community college stop-outs, that the respondents tended to perceive college as an opportunity for personal advancement rather than as an environment with which their identities and life experiences were inextricably interwoven.

### **Defining "Student Success" in Light of This Study**

As stated in a previous chapter, a broad definition of student success is best presented by Dr. Thomas Angelo and the National Council of Instructional Administrators (Dyer, 1991). Their definition states:

Successful students are successful learners who identify, commit to, and attain their educational goals. They demonstrate the skills, knowledge, attitudes and self-direction needed to perform ethically and productively in society, to adapt to change, to appreciate diversity, and to make a reasoned commitment on issues of importance (p. 1).

Student success does reflect the goals and expectations students bring with them to college, the progress they make in courses and programs, and the educational outcomes they attain (Dyer, 1991).

Success is different for each person and for each respondent in this study. By examining each respondent's responses several constants appear that relate to success: purpose, intention, commitment, goals, outcomes, and satisfaction. The respondents' past experiences shape these constants and facilitate their success.

It can be posited that life experience affects readiness to learn. By early middle age, the respondents in this study had developed the habits, values, and beliefs necessary to succeed. Their intentions and commitments toward education have changed since childhood and early adulthood affecting persistence in a positive way.

### **Reflections on the Research**

The purpose for this study was to explore how a community college student's lifelong experiences influence their values, attitudes, and beliefs and how those variables may affect the student's propensity to persist and achieve their educational goals.

### **A Personal Perspective**

From this research I gained a better understanding of how, as an individual grows through childhood and early adulthood he or she will develop certain values, habits, attitudes, and beliefs. These affective variables are strongly influenced by their family and the environment in which they live, and in turn, may affect their college experiences. Then, as an individual enters middle adulthood, his or her values, attitudes, and beliefs

may be modified by their experiences, life events, and changing needs. This can strengthen their commitment to succeed in college. In my own personal life I know that the attitudes I hold today about education are far different than they were when I was growing up.

None of the five participants in this study would be considered exceptional students in high school and I was no exception. In high school I was mediocre at best. My high school guidance counselor suggested I go to a vocational school or into the Army when I graduated as I was not smart enough for college. Joining the Army in 1967 was not considered the best career choice by many and I did not have a specific vocational aptitude. Although I successfully completed two years of college, I continued to believe I was not smart enough for college and failed after transferring to Michigan State University. I developed the belief that college was not important and that a degree was “only a piece of paper.” I justified my lack of success.

However, my attitudes about education were modified by changing life events and a college education became very important to me as it did with my five respondents. Their attitudes about college changed and they developed a new sense of commitment to completing a college education. All five of the respondents were successful in achieving their educational goals and I was also successful -- earning an associate's degree and, in 1978, a bachelor's degree.

Persistence is strongly influenced by the commitment a person makes to successfully accomplishing their goals. This commitment is in turn influenced by his or her previous experiences and may change with changing life events. Changing life events also give us new and more expansive experiences that enable us to become more focused and successful. Success in college *will* depend upon the goals and expectations we bring with

us, the progress we make in achieving those goals, and the outcomes we attain. Success is accomplishing our personal goals.

Now, as I raise two sons ages 16 and 18, I am particularly in tune to their values, beliefs, and attitudes about life and education. Can I affect their later success in college by reinforcing the value of a college education today? Only time will tell. My 16-year-old son is having a very good experience in high school and is making plans for college. My 18-year-old son has had exceptionally poor experiences in high school and college may not be in his plans.

### **Relating the Results to Tinto's Research**

Perhaps the best relationship between the results of this study and the literature is presented in Tinto's model of persistence (found on p. 19). The men in this study had pre-entry attributes including their family backgrounds, their skills and abilities, and their prior schooling. These attributes allowed them to form certain values, beliefs, and attitudes toward education and from these they formed their intentions and commitments. For these men, the commitment they made to college was not strong enough to sustain them through graduation. Additionally, their institutional experiences and their ability to academically and socially integrate into the college did not reinforce their desire to earn a degree and they departed.

The last time they attended LCC their pre-entry attributes had changed due to their life experiences. Their values, attitudes, and beliefs about education were more positive. They each had a stronger commitment to graduate and this manifested itself in positive

institutional experiences and stronger academic and social integration. The result was that they accomplished their educational goals -- earning an associate's degree.

Although no unique discoveries were made over the course of this research, this study does reaffirm Tinto's observation that intention and commitment are essential variables in student success. As a community college instructor, I work daily with students, both traditional and non-traditional, who are "just taking classes." For many non-traditional students this becomes their "safety net" if they fail. "I just went to take some classes" as Phil and Fred stated.

Student success in a community college cannot be measured by graduation rates or degrees. Rather, success is personal and can only be measured by personal goal attainment. This supports the National Council of Instructional Administrator's definition of success which, in part, states that "Successful students are successful learners who identify, commit to, and attain their educational goals" (Dyer, 1991, p. 1).

### **Implications for Practice**

Again we should note that success is an individual experience and that each person may view success differently. This is particularly important for the community college educator. Many students take courses for personal interest or to develop new job skills. They are successful if they enjoyed the course or learned a new job skill.

For this study to have value for the community college we must identify how the information might be used. Retention programs are integral parts of most institutions and the results of this study may help those who counsel and work with students. As stated earlier, the purpose for this study was to gain a better understanding of how a non-

traditional student's life long experiences shape their values, attitudes, and beliefs and how they in turn affect persistence. With that understanding, a college will be in a better position to recognize, counsel, and advise students who have not developed the intent or commitment to succeed.

A commitment to student success by the community college should be more than a slogan. This commitment should be a pattern of activity between all faculty and staff members within the college (Tinto, 1995). By identifying students who are at-risk of not persisting, community colleges can provide those students with services including faculty support, academic advising, career counseling, tutoring, and the other services that encompass academic integration by the student.

Early identification of at-risk students is difficult. As many students are not in degree seeking programs, determining when a student has been successful or when a student is at-risk of not succeeding is difficult. As an instructor at Lansing Community College, I feel faculty members are a first line in the identification of at-risk students. Early in-class monitoring and identification systems will allow faculty to identify a student who shows signs of, or is at risk of failure or stopping out.

Early in-class warning systems and academic alerts are integral components of many community colleges including Lansing Community College and Austin Community College, Austin, Texas. An additional method to alert the faculty and college of a student who may be at a higher risk of leaving is through the use of student information forms. I have developed and very successfully used a student information form (based on an Austin Community College Student Success Form) that, in addition to gathering basic student information during the first class session, allows the student to self-identify if they have

any of the factors that may put them at a higher risk than others. By completing the form the student may indicate that he or she has concerns and these can be promptly addressed. The checklist from this form (Appendix I) is shown in Figure 6.1. Students are asked to check the appropriate box if they have any of the following concerns:

**Figure 6.1**

<input type="checkbox"/> Reading, writing, or math skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Returning to school after many years
<input type="checkbox"/> Study skills, test taking skills	<input type="checkbox"/> Moving to Lansing from another area
<input type="checkbox"/> Considering withdrawal from course	<input type="checkbox"/> Absenteeism
<input type="checkbox"/> Considering withdrawal from LCC	<input type="checkbox"/> Motivation
<input type="checkbox"/> Major or career/work decisions	<input type="checkbox"/> Worrying too much about tests or grades
<input type="checkbox"/> Child care issues	<input type="checkbox"/> Financial aid or support information
<input type="checkbox"/> Other (describe):	

**Checklist from Student Information Form**  
(adapted from Austin Community College Student Success Form)

These are issues the five respondents in this study identified as concerns they had the first time they attended. I would suggest that, if these concerns had been identified earlier during the student's first attendance, they might have persisted. However, I should also note that three of the five respondents were rebelling against different things in their lives and even addressing the above issues may not have prevented them from leaving college.

### **Limitations of Study**

This study is limited to the experiences of five men. As a qualitative study, the purpose is to better understand the relationship of experience to persistence for these five individuals.

Images of what constitutes success have long been in dispute and success in life cannot be measured alone by the successful completing of college. Many people enjoy



great success without having completed or even attended college. We must also be careful not to paint a dichotomy between success and failure as there is a large area of transaction between the two. What is success for one is not for another. We each have our own values, beliefs, and goals which will result in our own measure of success.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The results of this study suggest the need for larger qualitative studies on how the life experiences of community college students affect their propensity to persist. Future studies should focus on students attending a community college for the first time and how interventions by faculty members and advisors may impact student success. There is a need for early and aggressive intervention for students who are identified as “at risk.” This study demonstrates that students who enter college with a past history of low achievement and low family support are more likely to drop out than those who have a history of achievement.

There is also a need for further quantitative studies of community college student persistence that are institution specific. Although there is a great deal of literature on student success, each institution has a student population that is unique to the community it serves. As an example, Lansing Community College serves a community that employs many autoworkers and thus, these students may have needs geared to that industry. This population of students may also have factors that are unique to their demographics (i.e., older, male, many lacking basic skills).

These studies would enable the college to address very specific issues and may increase the college’s overall retention rates. However, research should focus on student

needs and improving the effectiveness of the institution. Retention should be the result of these efforts.

## **APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX A**

**COPY OF THE “INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE” LETTER**

**JOSEPH R. CODDE****1206 EAST GENEVA DRIVE • DEWITT, MI • 48820****(517) 669-8522 VOICE • (517) 669-3763 FAX****INTERNET EMAIL: CODDEJOS@PILOT.MSU.EDU**

**TO: LCC Graduate**  
**DATE: July 2, 1996**  
**RE: Study of LCC Student Success**

I am writing to request your cooperation in a research study being done to better understand community college student persistence and success. This is a study of students who first enrolled in a community college, did not graduate, and later returned after a period of 5 years or more to graduate. As a Ph.D. candidate at Michigan State University, I am conducting this study as part of my dissertation.

Many students leave college without accomplishing their educational goals while others are successful. By gaining a better understanding of why this happens, community colleges -- such as Lansing Community College -- will be better equipped to help more students succeed. In order to do this I would like to talk with community college graduates, like yourself, who have experienced leaving college and later returning to graduate.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and would involve first completing a questionnaire and then taking part in an in-depth interview. This interview, which will take approximately 2 hours and is strictly confidential, will explore your life and educational experiences and how they may have influenced your persistence and success. You may choose not to participate in parts of the study; for example, you may elect not to answer certain questions asked on the pre-interview questionnaire or during the interviews. You may discontinue participation at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw entirely from the study, all information provided by you, regardless of the form in which it is held, will be turned over to you.

All results will be treated with strict confidence. Your participation in this study will not be disclosed to anyone and you will not be identified in any report of research findings. If you wish, results of my research will be made available to you at the conclusion of the study.

Your participation in this study will be greatly appreciated and may provide information that will help other students succeed in the future. I will be glad to meet with you at a place and time that is convenient for you. If you would, please either call me at 669-8522 or complete the enclosed form telling me how to best contact you and return it in the enclosed stamped envelope.

Sincerely,

Joseph R. Codde

## **APPENDIX B**

### **COPY OF THE PARTICIPANT RETURN LETTER**

CONTACT FORM

Mr. Joseph R. Codde  
1206 East Geneva Drive  
DeWitt, Michigan 48820

Dear Mr. Codde;

Yes, I read the letter describing your research project and I am interested in participating as an interview subject. Please contact me so that we can arrange for a convenient time to meet and discuss this project. My name, address, and telephone numbers are listed below. I understand this is not a consent form and, by returning this form, I am not obligated to actually participate. I also understand that, if I choose not to participate, this contact form and any references to my name will be destroyed.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Evening Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to call \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C**

**COPY OF THE RESPONSE TO THE**

**“INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE” LETTER**



**JOSEPH R. CODDE**

**1206 EAST GENEVA DRIVE • DEWITT, MI • 48820**

**(517) 669-8522 VOICE • (517) 669-3763 FAX**

**INTERNET EMAIL: CODDEJOS@PILOT.MSU.EDU**

**June 20, 1996**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_;

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this study on community college student success. This is a very important study where the results may help other students at LCC and around the country succeed in achieving their educational goals.

The research is being conducted in two steps. Step one is to complete the enclosed questionnaires. While doing so, you may find that there are questions that you do not have answers for or that you would prefer not to answer. If any questions fit this category, please do not answer them. Step two is an in-depth interview that will take approximately two hours.

Once you have completed these questionnaires, please return them in the enclosed postage paid envelope. I will then contact you to arrange for a convenient time to meet for the interview.

Thanks once again for your help and participation! If you have any questions please call me at 669-8522.

Sincerely,

Joseph R. Codde

Enc.: questionnaire

**APPENDIX D**

**COPY OF THE PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

LETTER OF CONSENT

Mr. Joseph R. Codde  
1206 East Geneva Drive  
DeWitt, MI 48820

Dear Mr. Codde;

I have read the letter describing your research project and, having a reasonable understanding of the project's purposes and procedures, I agree to participate as an interview subject.

I understand that participation is voluntary and that any information collected from me will be held in the strictest of confidence. In any report on research findings, I understand that my name and anything that would identify me will not be mentioned; that every safeguard will be taken to ensure confidentiality; and that any information that could be used to identify me will be disguised. I further understand that all data collected from me will be destroyed at the conclusion of your study.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study, or parts of it, at any time without penalty and that, if I choose to terminate my involvement entirely, all information collected from me will be turned over to me.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Daytime Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Evening Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Best time to call: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E**

### **COPY OF THE PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE**

<i>PRE-INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE</i>
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PLEASE ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN PREPARATION FOR AN IN-DEPTH INTERVIEW. IF THE QUESTION DOES NOT APPLY TO YOU, YOU DO NOT WISH TO ANSWER THE QUESTION, OR IF YOU DO NOT HAVE AN ANSWER, PLEASE PUT "N/A".

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_ Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_ Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female

Race:

- \_\_\_\_\_ American Indian or Alaskan Native
- \_\_\_\_\_ Black, not of Hispanic Origin
- \_\_\_\_\_ Asian, Pacific Islander
- \_\_\_\_\_ Hispanic
- \_\_\_\_\_ White, not of Hispanic Origin

Marital Status: \_\_\_\_\_ Single  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Married  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Separated  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Divorced  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Widowed

Number of Children: \_\_\_\_\_ Ages: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Brothers: \_\_\_\_\_ Ages: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Sisters: \_\_\_\_\_ Ages: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you a US citizen? \_\_\_\_\_ If no, where is your citizenship? \_\_\_\_\_

County of Legal Residence: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you own or rent your home? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you the first member of your family to go to college? \_\_\_\_\_

If no, who was? \_\_\_\_\_

What colleges have you attended? \_\_\_\_\_

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What college certificates and/or degrees have you earned, where were they earned, and when? \_\_\_\_\_

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What is your mother's highest level of education? \_\_\_\_\_

If she attended college, where? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your father's highest level of education? \_\_\_\_\_

If he attended college, where? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your brother's highest level of education? \_\_\_\_\_

If he attended college, where? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your sister's highest level of education? \_\_\_\_\_

If she attended college, where? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any children in college and, if yes, where? \_\_\_\_\_

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Are you employed? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

Did your employer require you to attend college? \_\_\_\_\_

Did they provide any tuition assistance? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your mother's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

What is your father's occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

**What are your brother's/sister's occupations?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

What is your current salary? \_\_\_\_\_

**Has anyone provided you with financial support for college? If so, who and what percentage did they pay?** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Where did you go to high school? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you earn a high school diploma or a GED? \_\_\_\_\_

**What was your high school grade point average?** \_\_\_\_\_

**What were your SAT or ACT scores?** \_\_\_\_\_

**Briefly explain why you did not graduate the first time you attended LCC.**

[illegible]

**Briefly explain why you were successful the second time you attended LCC.**

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



**APPENDIX F**

**COPY OF THE EDUCATIONAL LIFELINE QUESTIONNAIRE**

EDUCATIONAL LIFELINE
----------------------

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

IDENTIFICATION OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Please list events, people and/or moments which you would characterize as significant life and/or educational experiences. Identify past, present, and possible future experiences that you feel were/are/will be educational to you. List the item under the decade they occurred.

*The following possible educational experiences are listed to help you start your thinking:*

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An influential teacher</li> <li>• A talent or special interest</li> <li>• A significant accomplishment</li> <li>• Recognition or honor you received</li> <li>• A geographic move</li> <li>• A significant period with a parent or friend</li> <li>• Social or religious experiences</li> <li>• An interesting book, film, or program</li> <li>• Personal reflections about education</li> <li>• An influential role model</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• An encounter with a famous person</li> <li>• A discovery about yourself</li> <li>• Something important that you finished</li> <li>• A health related experience</li> <li>• Economic hardship (i.e., loss of job)</li> <li>• Experiences during your career</li> <li>• Travel opportunities</li> <li>• Community involvement</li> <li>• Attitude change about learning</li> <li>• A change in life (i.e., marriage, divorce)</li> </ul> |
|---|---|

**Birth to 10 years:**

|⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒|

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**10 to 20 years:**

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**20 to 30 years:**

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**30 to 40 years:**

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**40 to 50 years:**

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**50 to 60 years:**

|⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨|

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**Additional information that spans several stages of your life.****Please indicate general dates or time frame.**

|⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨⇨|

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**Please list 4 - 5 events that took place around the time you left LCC the first time you attended.**

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**Please list 4 - 5 events that took place around the time you re-enrolled at LCC the final time you attended.**

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**APPENDIX G**  
**COPY OF THE PRE-INTERVIEW LETTER**  
**INCLUDING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**JOSEPH R. CODDE****1206 EAST GENEVA DRIVE • DEWITT, MI • 48820****(517) 669-8522 VOICE • (517) 669-3763 FAX****INTERNET EMAIL: CODDEJOS@PILOT.MSU.EDU**

**Dear Participant;**

Once again, thank you for your participation in this very important research project. Your responses, thoughts, and opinions will be very helpful in the development of programs and services that may help other community college students succeed in their programs.

I have received and reviewed your pre-interview questionnaire and I would now like to continue with the in-depth interview. As we have discussed, this interview will take approximately 2 hours in which you will talk about your life and college experiences and how they affected your college education. The interview will be audio-taped so that I may listen to your statements later to search for themes that appear consistently in your responses and in the responses of other participants.

As this interview is being audio-taped and your responses transcribed, I want to reinforce the fact that everything is being kept strictly confidential. During the interview and in the transcripts you will be identified only with a pseudonym (made up name) which I am asking you to select prior to the interview. After the completion of this study all information, notes, transcripts, audio-tapes, and other materials related to your interview will be destroyed or given to you if you prefer.

The title of this dissertation is "THE ROLE OF EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION: HOW LIFE AND EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES INFLUENCE NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES." The primary questions for this research are:

- Why did you persist and succeed in reaching your educational goals at LCC after first leaving the college and, in particular, how did your life experiences, values, beliefs, and habits affect your ultimate success?

Attached is a sheet of questions. Before we meet for the interview, please read and reflect on these questions as they will be asked during the interview.

If you have any questions about the study or interview prior to our meeting, please call me at 669-8522. Thank you for your cooperation and I look forward to our interview.

Sincerely,

Joseph Codde

INTERVIEW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
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1. Tell me about your experiences growing up and how they may have affected your education.
2. How have you changed as a learner from childhood to adulthood and from the first time you attended LCC to the second?
3. Describe your experiences at LCC the first time you attended. Why did you leave?
4. Describe the period of time you were out of college? How did you feel about education during that time period?
5. Describe your experiences at LCC the second time you attended. Why did you return and how was this experience different from the first?
6. How have other people in your life affected your education (family, friends, teachers, employers, etc.)?
7. How do you believe your life experiences, personal values, beliefs, and habits affected your education.



**APPENDIX H**

**COPY OF THE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Name:

Date of Interview:

OPENING REMARKS

The purpose of this interview is to gather information for the preparation of an educational biography. The biography will be used to study how your educational and other life experiences affected your persistence in the community college.

During the course of this interview, I will ask you a variety of questions related to your life and your life as a student and learner. I hope that we can consider many of these questions in some depth, in order to gain a full understanding of your educational life and the experiences affecting your persistence.

QUESTIONS

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me about your experiences growing up and how they may have affected your education.

*PROBES:*

- Describe your relationship with your parents. Did they support your college decisions?
- Did you like high school? What were your study habits like?
- Give me an example of a person with whom you had a significant educative relationship during high school. What kinds of things did this person(s) do to promote your learning? Did you get to know any of your high school teachers and did they influence your learning?
- What were your friends like in high school? Were they good students? What did they do after high school? Did any go on to college? Where?
- Did anyone encourage you to go to college?
- Did you feel that a college education was important?
- Who were your role models growing up?

3. How have you changed as a learner from childhood to adulthood?

*PROBES:*

- How is learning in adulthood different from learning in childhood?
- Are your study habits now different from what they were as a child?
- Do you participate in any continuing education programs?

4. Describe your experiences at LCC the first time you attended.

*PROBES:*

- Why did you choose LCC?
- Have you attended any other colleges?
- Did you attend full-time or part-time?
- What did you study? Why?
- What was your goal when your first enrolled?
- Did you talk with an advisor?
- Did you ever meet with faculty members outside of the classroom?
- How were your grades?
- Did you consider yourself a good student?
- What kind of support did your family and friends give you?
- When did you first start thinking about leaving? Why did you leave?
- How long did you attend?
- What did your family think about your decision to leave?
- During the first time you attended college, how important did you feel a college education was? Did it have value? Describe.

5. Describe the period of time you were out of college?

*PROBES:*

- How did you feel about education during that time period?

6. Describe your experiences at LCC the second time you attended. Why did you return and how was this experience different from the first?

*PROBES:*

- Did you attend full-time or part-time?
- What did you study? Why?
- What was your goal when you enrolled the second time?
- Did you talk with an advisor?
- Did you ever meet with faculty members outside of the classroom?
- How were your grades?
- Did you consider leaving before you finished?
- Did you consider yourself a good student?
- What kind of support did your family and friends give you?
- What did your family think about your decision to attend the second time?
- How important was college during the second time you attended? Was it different from the first time?

7. How have other people in your life affected your education (family, friends, teachers, employers, etc.)?

*PROBES:*

- Do you have any role models? What about that person makes him or her a role model?
- How has that role model affected your life?

8. How do you believe your life experiences, personal values, beliefs, and habits affected your education.

- How would you describe who you are?
- How would you describe the value of an education now that you have finished school?
- What motivates you to complete projects, school, etc.?
- Do you procrastinate or have time-management problems?
- Did you have any self-doubt about your ability to succeed in college?
- What have you learned about yourself as an adult?
- What do you consider important in your life?
- What habits do you have that have lead to growth? (Read definition of habit)
- Persistence is defined as starting something and then going on to successfully finish it. Can you describe some things throughout your life that you have persisted at?

**APPENDIX I**  
**STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET**

**STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET**

(adapted from Austin Community College Student Success Form)

Course:		Section:	Date:
Instructor:		Location:	Semester:
Student Name:		Student Number	Social Security No.
Address:			
City:		State:	Zip Code:
Daytime Telephone: Home/Work		Nighttime Telephone: Home/Work	
Major Area of Interest:		Hours per week employed:	# credits enrolled in this semester:
<b>Q1</b>	<b>Q2</b>	<b>Q3</b>	<b>Q4</b>
<b><i>What is your main reason for attending LCC?</i></b>  1. Obtain training in a specific occupational program 2. Upgrade your current job skills 3. Gain new job skills in order to change occupations 4. Take LCC courses that lead to transfer and an undergraduate degree 5. Take individual courses of personal interest 6. Use college resources such as PE facilities, etc.	<b><i>To accomplish your goal will you?</i></b>  1. Earn an associates degree 2. Earn a certificate 3. Take courses only	<b><i>Which category bests represents your educational background?</i></b>  1. Some high school 2. GED 3. High school graduate 4. Some college credit 5. Associates degree 6. Bachelors degree 7. Masters degree 8. Doctorate or professional degree	<b><i>Are you currently employed?</i></b>  1. Full time 2. Part time 3. Not, employed, seeking employment 4. Not employed, not seeking employment because of other responsibilities

The following section is **optional** and will be used to determine your need for College services that might help you succeed in this course. Please check any areas that you might like assistance with or additional information. *You need not respond to statements that you find too personal or objectionable. Completing this form or the following section is not part of any requirement for this course.*

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Reading, writing, or math skills   | <input type="checkbox"/> Returning to school after many years    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Study skills, test taking skills   | <input type="checkbox"/> Moving to Lansing from another area     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Considering withdrawal from course | <input type="checkbox"/> Absenteeism                             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Considering withdrawal from LCC    | <input type="checkbox"/> Motivation                              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Major or career/work decisions     | <input type="checkbox"/> Worrying too much about tests or grades |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Child care issues                  | <input type="checkbox"/> Financial aid or support information    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (describe):                  |  |

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## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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