ON BEATING THE ODDS:
A STUDY OF SUCCESSFUL
COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

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With increasing numbers of underprepared students enrolling in community colleges, it becomes important to recognize what might contribute to their academic success. The purpose of this study was to explore what in the community college students' experience, especially those student facing risk factors, has contributed to their success. Much of the literature focuses on attrition and explores reasons for departure; but what about students who persist, especially those students who persist in spite of what we may predict about their success or what the students expect from themselves? This study explores successful adult learners, how they "beat the odds" and are excelling academically.

This study looked at students at one community college who arrive underprepared based on their incoming placement test and yet several semesters later, they have earned grade point averages of 3.50 or higher in their college level courses. The students completed a "Grit Inventory" (Duckworth, 2007), an alternative version of the Local Model of Student Success (Padilla, 2009) and discussed what knowledge, skills and abilities they used to overcome barriers they encountered. This study also explored how the constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset, impact underprepared community college students.

For my family—thank you
for your love and support!

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The education experience had always been a difficult one for Nik. She had been told as a young child that she was stupid, and after years of hearing this message, she began to accept it. Nik dropped out of high school and lived on the streets of California, becoming a drug addict and a single mother. Approximately ten years later, she was married, a mother of three, and tired of her restaurant server position, so she registered for a class at the local community college. "*When I registered for my first class, I took the class I knew that I would fail—Beginning Algebra! Imagine my surprise when I passed with a 3.5!" And thus began one student's success at beating the odds. This is the story of many students who have defied the researchers' expectations and succeeded in college. Some of these students not only succeeded, but much to their surprise, they excelled academically and are performing in the top ten percent of their class. Watching these students learn, grow, and become successful has encouraged me to explore the reasons for their success and to identify how educational providers can play a part in this success. And so their stories begin.*

Problem Statement

As a student services practitioner at a community college, I am honored to hear the hopes, fears, and dreams of many of our incoming students. The stories are as different as the individuals sharing them. Consider three students who provide a snapshot of the complexity of what adult learners bring to the college campus: Nik is described above; Michelle, age 25, is a single parent of a two-year-old daughter who was an average student in high school; she is a first generation college student who changed her major several times in her first semester. Clara,

returning to education in her early 30's, is married, the mother of two, also first generation, who works full-time to carry the health insurance for her family. In spite of the barriers these women encountered in accessing college, each was invited to join Phi Theta Kappa, the honor society for two-year colleges. These students, who many would describe as at-risk, are not only persisting, they are earning grades of 3.50 or better and are recognized as student leaders on campus. What do these three women have in common in their educational journeys, what can be learned from them, and are their stories representative of the journey of other students?

These students are a part of one of the fastest growing enrollment segments of higher education—students who attend community colleges—and their stories represent issues of equity that include preparation for college, access to college, and college success (Bailey & Morest, 2006). Just under half of all undergraduates enrolled in college are pursuing coursework in community colleges, which in 2009 accounted for eight million credit seeking learners (www.aacc.nche.edu). Expectations that community college students have about their pursuit of higher education are often as diverse as the students themselves (Adelman, 2005), and they enter community college for various reasons. Some students enroll to complete a degree and to transfer to a four-year university; others enroll to attain a certificate or associate degree with work force skill acquisition leading to employment; still others enroll for the pleasure of learning (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Adelman (2005) also introduced the concept called "swirling," to describe students who transfer back and forth between community colleges and four-year institutions; these "swirlers" make tracking students to determine goal attainment or academic success increasingly more difficult.

Regardless of the reason for attending community college, for many of these students college is not a "leading activity" or the most important thing in their lives at the time (Beach,

1995) because they may be more fully committed to work, parenting, or other activities. Often, a student's initial goal for attending a community college is not clearly known or expressed by the student at admission. The lack of a clearly defined career or educational goal or how to define a process that captures students in transition has challenged community colleges in accurately collecting and reporting data about their students (Jacobs & Grubb, 2006), and this may increase the likelihood that students who are in need of support systems to succeed fall through the cracks.

I have long been intrigued by what contributes to student success, and I have found it interesting how two students with similar K -12 academic experiences can have completely different college experiences; one might excel and one might fail or drop out. When I review candidate transcripts for Phi Theta Kappa membership, I often find that one candidate is a high school drop-out and the other a high school honor student; and I find myself wondering what contributed to their success in college. What intrinsic factors contribute to student success? Are some students more motivated at certain periods of their life to be successful? Does finding a mentor contribute to collegiate success? Did a life transition (Bridges, 1991) trigger a return to education for an adult student who had previously not experienced academic success? How do college programs or services contribute to student success? Which circumstances, barriers or obstacles can be most readily overcome by institutional strategies and individual intrinsic factors? What can we learn from successful students?

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to explore what in the community college students' experiences, especially those students facing risk factors, have contributed to their academic success. Much of the literature focuses on attrition and explores reasons for departure, but what

about the students who persist, especially those students who persist in spite of what we may predict about their success or what the students expect from themselves? This study explores successful adult learners, and how they "beat the odds" and are excelling academically. By focusing on students, like the three introduced at the beginning of this chapter who succeeded in the face of multiple risk factors, it may be possible to determine what in the educational experiences of under-prepared students enabled them to overcome identified risk factors and not only persist but also excel academically.

The Research Questions

The overarching research question of this study is: What experiences do underprepared community college students perceive that contributed to their academic success? The sub questions are: What knowledge, skills, and abilities did these students use to overcome the barriers they encountered? How do the constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset, impact underprepared community college students?

Student academic success is a nebulous term and may mean many different things. First, what is the definition of success, and from which lens do we consider success? Is it the institution's definition of success or is it how the student defines success? What if the two definitions differ, depending on who holds the lens? Does an institution provide a program or service that leads to student success, such as a learning community or a mentoring program? Is a student successful because of prior success or an intervention they experienced? Although there are many ways to define academic success, I used an institutional indicator (grade point average) to identify a pool of students to invite to participate. A 3.50 or higher grade point average by students who have earned at least 12 credits of college level coursework is considered to be in about the top 10 percent of two-year college students nationwide (www.ptk.org).

Through conversations with students, I have observed many students succeed in spite of what the college is doing or providing through instructional or student services. I am intrigued with what may be occurring in their lives that contribute to their academic success, and I am curious how motivation, expectancy, and mindset may have shaped the successful student experience. To better understand their lived experiences, I drew on Raymond Padilla's Expertise Model of Student Success, as well as his Unfolding Matrix (2009), as the framework for the study. Padilla believes success is more than "preventing students from abandoning their studies" (p. 9), and if you understand how successful students have achieved their success, you "can develop strategies and practices that will enable more students to perform as successful ones do" (p. 9).

Focus groups and individual interviews were conducted with students who began their community college education underprepared in math and/or English, based on placement test scores, and who subsequently earned a grade point of 3.50 or higher with at least 12 credits of college level coursework. Based on the literature and Padilla's framework, interview protocols were developed that explore questions of the perceived role of several factors in student success, including motivation, early enrollment in developmental coursework, learning communities, mentors and other institutional initiatives, and factors or barriers that students encountered and overcame that may be factors in the lived experiences of these students.

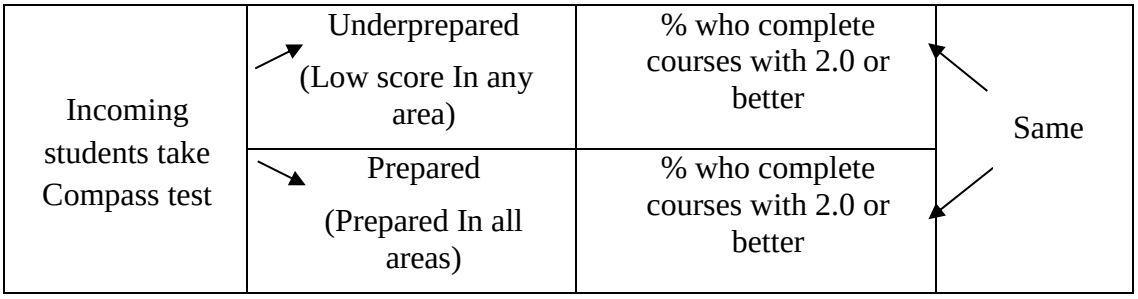
Setting the College Context

Northwestern Michigan College (NMC), like most community colleges, supports students who are not prepared for college-level courses upon admission to postsecondary education. Like many community colleges that use placement tests to identify underprepared students, NMC uses the COMPASS test, which measures reading, writing, and math ability, as a

tool for appropriate course placement. Students take the COMPASS test prior to registering for college courses, and they are placed into the appropriate courses based on test scores.

During a series of meetings in the fall of 2006, NMC decided to create an Academic Quality Improvement Project (AQIP) Action Project entitled, "Enhancing Student Preparation," to address the problem of under-prepared students in the classroom. The goal (see Figure 1) was to ensure that academically under-prepared and academically prepared students complete courses with similar success rates. The college defined successful course completion as earning a 2.0 grade or higher.

Figure 1: Enhancing Student Preparation AQIP Project Goal



Source: NMC AQIP Team

NMC had previously determined scores for placement in math and English courses, but few "hard" pre-requisites were in the system to block students from taking courses outside of math and English, even if a student's reading score placed them below college-level reading. This means students have access to history, psychology, and philosophy courses, all with heavy reading requirements, despite a low COMPASS reading score. The next step for the AQIP Team was to assemble the evidence. Although anecdotal stories were ever present, the college wanted data to illustrate the pervasiveness of the problem of students getting into classes for which they were underprepared. The team turned to the Office of Research and Effectiveness to gather data on how students who were identified as both prepared and underprepared were faring in courses

at NMC. Eleven courses were identified for exploration because of their transferability to four-year colleges and universities, and they included courses from the following departments: English, math, psychology, chemistry, accounting, political science, and history. Data from student records for 13 years (39 semesters) and 11,105 cases were analyzed. Bardach (2005) speaks to three purposes of collecting evidence: to assess the nature and extent of the problem, to assess the features of the policy situation, and to assess the effectiveness of policies similar to your own best practices. The NMC data were clear and convincing, and they are illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: Success Rates in Courses by Underprepared Students

Line	Student	Average success rate in selected Courses	Range
1	Underprepared in both Math *and* English (N=4556)	62.3%	44.8% - 76.0%
2	Underprepared in Math; successful in ENG11 (highest developmental course) or placed in college-level English (N=10335)	66.7%	51.2-81.0%
3	Underprepared in English; successful in MTH111 (intermediate algebra) or placed in college-level Math (N=1381)	80.0%	62.7-91.5%
4	Placed developmental in Math or English or both, but now college- level in both (N=3657)	80.9%	72.2-87.6%
5	Placed college-level in both Math *and* English ((N=3677)	85.9%	70.1% - 93.9%

Source: D. Hiller, NMC, Office of Research and Effectiveness

College faculty and staff learned the following from the data:

- Students who were underprepared in both Math and English had on average a 62.3 % chance of getting a 2.0 or higher grade point average in the eleven courses examined (See line 1 of the chart).

- In Line 2, if a student was underprepared in math but had taken a developmental English class or had placed college-level in English, their chance of earning a 2.0 or higher grade was on average 66.7%.
- If a student was underprepared in English but successful in MTH 111 (intermediate algebra) or came to NMC college-ready in math, the chance of earning a 2.0 or higher became 80.0% on average (see line 3).
- In Line 4, if a student placed developmental in Math or English or both and had taken the developmental courses, they were now considered college ready and their success rate across the eleven courses was on average 80.9%.
- In Line 5, if a student came to NMC college-ready as defined by the placement test, their chance of earning a 2.0 or higher in the same eleven courses, as in the above scenarios, was on average 85.9%.

For NMC, the research problem became clear: how does the college narrow the gap in terms of those students who begin under-prepared and those who arrive college-ready? It appeared that the developmental courses were doing "their job," but students were choosing to delay taking these courses, especially math, until closer to the end of their program of study. The evidence was quite compelling. If students took their developmental courses before taking college level courses, their success rate rose to within five percentage points of those students who placed at college-level (see lines 4 & 5 of the above chart).

The other piece of evidence determined by the separation of math from English preparation was the clarity of how math skills improved performance in non-math courses such as history, psychology, and political science. The math faculty had long reasoned that the critical

thinking skills required in math help students in other courses, but the data suggested that math clearly was directly correlated to student success (see lines 3 & 4 of the above chart).

With such convincing evidence, NMC implemented the following recommendation, effective with the 2008 fall semester: All students placing in developmental classes must begin developmental classes their first semester and continue the sequence through completion. If students placed in both developmental English and math, they were also required to enroll in an academic study skills course in their first semester. Students who were not degree or certificate seeking were exempted from the requirement, and students who chose to enroll only part-time were encouraged to begin with their developmental math course and/or the study skills course in their first semester.

Policies for placement in and sequencing of developmental courses are fairly standard college interventions to provide initial support to underprepared community college students. Other support systems are explored in the next chapter; while common at many community colleges, they are often not understood for their value in actually helping students succeed academically. Colleges are beginning to assess these interventions, but they more typically collect user data (e.g., number and frequency of users) than actually try to understand the impact of placement tests, mentoring programs, counseling services, and other support mechanisms from the student's perspective. An important reason for conducting this research is to see the extent to which any organizational efforts matter to students in helping them succeed.

Importance of the Research

This research is important for several reasons. First, it has the capacity to explore the characteristics of students who normally would not persist, let alone excel. Second, it identifies what colleges do to assist students with overcoming barriers that may impede their success.

Much has been written about those who drop out, but what about the students who persist? Third, it explores how students' motivation and mindset contribute to their academic success. Finally, this study helps to define the fine line that determines drop-out vs. highly successful students and how the college plays a role in determining that fine line. In this day of accountability and providing data or measures for services and academic programs, it is appropriate that we determine how these students accomplish what many never expected them to do. Lessons learned from students who overcome the academic deficiencies that defined them at the beginning of their college career will increase our understanding of student success strategies and shed light on institutional interventions that support under-prepared learners effectively.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review explores the challenges faced by one sector of the American higher education system, underprepared students in community college, and it specifically addresses how some students against all odds have been successful academically. Additionally, institutional strategies and policies to assist these underprepared learners are examined, as well as the constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset and their relation to student success. Raymond Padilla's Expertise Model of Student Success (2009) provides the general framework for this study. The model specifies three parameters: the barriers students encounter, the knowledge they use to identify effective solutions, and the actions they take to overcome the barriers (p. 29). This review lays the foundation for the research I conducted, which explored what students perceive that contributed to their academic success. By having students identify the barriers they encountered and the knowledge, skills, and abilities they acquired to overcome them, colleges may be able to mitigate these barriers. This information is critical to understanding the research questions:

- What experiences do underprepared community college students perceive that contributed to their academic success?
- What knowledge, skills, and abilities did these students use to overcome the barriers they encountered?
- How do the constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset impact underprepared community college students?

Today's Community College Students

The community college system is woven of many individual threads that create a unique tapestry representing the students in attendance. There are multiple missions represented as well by these students: the dual enrolled high school student who takes classes at the community college to jump start their college career or takes more challenging courses to fulfill their high school graduation requirements; the student who arrives with a plan to transfer to a four-year college or university but starts at the community college to test the waters, save money, and/or continue to work; the reverse transfer who began at the four-year college and returns to the community college, sometimes with a previously earned bachelor's degree; the part- time or full-time employee who enrolls to further their job skills or to retrain for a new career; the immigrant who wants to learn English; and the person who wants to enroll in a credit or non-credit course for personal enjoyment (Pusser & Levin, 2009).

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) website illustrates that the community college student tapestry is indeed complex. In addition to the 8 million credited learners, there are an additional 5 million students taking enrichment or other non-credited courses. Forty-two percent of community college students are enrolled full-time, and 58% are enrolled part-time. Although the average age of a community college student is 28, 39% of community college students are age 21 and under. Forty-five percent are between the ages of 22 and 39, and 15% are over the age of 40. Fifty-seven percent of community college students are female, and 43% are male. Eighty percent of the full-time students are employed at least part-time, and 87% of the part-time students are employed (www.aacc.nche.edu). Few adults who return to education at the community college have the ability to stop working while attending college, because they may be supporting families and balancing multiple priorities (Biswas,

Choitz & Prince, 2008). Forty-two percent of community college students are first generation (first in their family to attend college). Almost half of the students (46%) receive some type of financial aid. Forty percent of community college students are minorities, including Hispanics 16%, Blacks 14%, Asian/Pacific Islanders 6%, and Native Americans 1% (www.aacc.nche.edu).

Enrollment data from the U.S. Department of Education illustrate that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to attend community college. These data also show that lower socio-economic students are likely to enroll for fewer credit hours and attend only part of the academic year (2005). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), six in ten students attending community colleges work more than 20 hours per week, and more than 25% work more than 35 hours per week. The other demographic that helps to understand more about the community college learner is that twenty-three percent of community college students have dependent children (as cited in Johnson & Rochkind et al, 2009), and these learners are often juggling school, work, and family obligations. Understanding the complexity of the students' lives during their educational experience may also help to determine what experiences they perceive contributed to their academic success.

Unfortunately, not all students are successful. Data from CCSSE (Community College Survey of Student Engagement) show that 52% of survey respondents reported that completing a certificate is a goal, and 84% said that obtaining an associate degree is a goal, and yet, six years later, fewer than half (45%) who entered a community college with those goals had met them (CCSSE Findings, 2010).

Beyond the demographics that describe the complexity of the community college student tapestry are the students themselves. The next section of this literature review will focus on one group of community college students—adult learners.

Who are the Adult Learners?

The National Center for Educational Statistics (2002) defines an adult learner as having one or more of the following characteristics: delays enrollment, attends part-time, works full-time while enrolled, is considered financially independent for financial aid purposes, has dependents, is a single parent, or does not have a standard high school diploma. These characteristics are often described as barriers to college completion (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Johnson & Rochkind, 2009; Pusser & Levin, 2009). Adult learners are an incredibly diverse population, and it is important not to over-generalize and minimize the rich diversity they bring to their learning environment. Merriam and Caffarella (1999) defined an adult as "anyone either age twenty-one or over, married, or the head of a household" (p. 47). Colleges often define their adult population as those students over the age of 25, and these adults come to college for a variety of reasons. Some come seeking degrees, others come to enhance employment skills, and others come for the enjoyment of learning new information (ibid). Their reasons for attending college are as diverse as the populations represented, which adds to the confusion of how to track and report on their academic progress or how to understand what contributes to their academic success. With increasing numbers of adult learners returning to higher education at community colleges, understanding better the challenges and barriers facing adult learners becomes a necessity.

As opportunities for life-long learning and professional development increase, they create what Tenant and Pogson (1995) discussed as the "tension between continuity and change (which) lies at the heart of what it means to develop across the lifespan" (p.10). This tension may motivate adult learners to succeed in a setting in which they may not have been previously successful. Life events such as finding employment, losing employment, marriage, children, and

death of a spouse often trigger events to change. These life changes often lead students to seek education, an opportunity to re-invent themselves, learn new skills for a career, or re-career (Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2006).

Preparation for college, one of the many catalysts for learning, begins with the early childhood and K-12 systems, and there are inequities within those systems, especially for low-income students who may have limited access to quality schools for their pre-college education experience (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Pusser & Levin, 2009). The estimates that 43% of community college students need remediation (course content that should have been attained or mastered in high school) is a startling statistic; adding that 29% of students attending public four-year universities also need remediation makes the problem huge (Pope, 2008; Vandal, 2010). The costs of lack of preparation are staggering to students and states, not only in time invested by the students taking remedial classes to gain skills, but also in terms of the financial impact on institutions of higher education. These costs are currently estimated at $2.3 – 2.9 billion dollars annually, as colleges invest in developmental education faculty and services to support the underprepared student (Pope, 2008; Vandal, 2010). Pusser and Levin (2009) claimed that "Policymakers look to community colleges to be the main, if not the sole, providers of developmental education, arguing that they are the most cost-efficient and appropriate places to provide the instruction" (p.25). Another sobering statistic is that many of the students needing remediation across multiple academic areas never complete their developmental courses and reach college level content. Regardless, if they begin at a community college or four-year university, according to the U.S. Department of Education, "only 17% of high school graduates who require at least one remedial reading course and 27% who require a remedial math course earn a bachelor's degree" (Vandal, 2010, p. 4).

As community colleges work to increase their number of graduates, they are also recruiting adults with some college and no degree to return, and/or tapping the population of adults who never attended college to enroll. According to U.S. Census numbers, 42 million Americans between 18 - 64 years of age have not attended college and are underprepared. Of those 42 million, over 8 million have a high school diploma or less and require English language instruction; 14.5 million have a high school diploma, but do not earn a livable wage and are not prepared for post-secondary education; and 19 million do not have a high school diploma or an equivalent. For underprepared learners, remedial education needs to be an essential component of any institutional, state, and/or national strategy to increase college attainment (Jones as cited in Vandal, 2010).

Commitment to Learning

Working through issues of access and preparation are challenging enough for today's student; however, making a commitment to education, especially for community college students, has become increasingly more complex. Attending college is no longer the leading activity (Beach, 1995) for many community college students as they juggle coursework, employment, families, and other obligations. Patricia Cross (1981) referred to these students as having a blended life plan, suggesting that work, education, and leisure are concurrent, rather than alternating activities throughout their life.

Adult learners are often apprehensive about returning to the classroom, especially if their previous classroom experience was not successful (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). One of the main tasks facing educators is assisting learners to recognize the variety of learner experiences they have had throughout their lifelong learning journey. Pratt (1993) discussed the antecedents of adult learning and drew on Knowles' (1980) work on andragogy, claiming that learning is an

"interactive process of interpretation, integration, and transformation of one's experiential world" (as cited in Merriam, 1993, p.17) that must be actively constructed by the learner. As students make meaning of their learning (Tagg, 2003) and draw connections to previous learning experiences, they will become more engaged. Getting students to commit to learning is one thing; educators must foster or create a desire or motivation to learn and help students discover their *growth* mindset. In her 2008 book *Mindset,* Dweck discussed two mindsets people operate from—a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. With a fixed mindset, students believe they have a certain amount of intelligence and trying harder or expending effort to gain new learning strategies is pointless. With a growth mindset, students believe effort can improve their performance, so they "completely [take] charge of their learning and motivation" (Dweck, 2008, p. 61). "Dweck's signature insight is that what people believe shapes what people achieve" (Pink, 2009 p.120). How can a student who comes to college believing they do not belong there, or as in Nik's case, being told "she was stupid" her whole life, succeed? Educators need to assist learners by helping them re-program the tapes playing in their heads and by helping them believe they can be successful. Grant and Dweck (2003) discussed the difference between performance approach goals and performance avoidance goals. Students with a performance approach goal, approach their learning from the growth mindset are according to Grant and Dweck (2003),

> Typically, those who adopt learning goals are found to engage in deeper, more self-regulated learning strategies, have higher intrinsic motivation, and perform better, particularly in the face of challenge or setbacks (p. 543).

When students adopt a learning goal and make it their own, there are no boundaries to limit their learning. Mihaly Czikszentmihalyi defined the optimal place for learning as one where work becomes play, time is forgotten, and mastery becomes the by-product; this is also

known as "flow" (Pink, 2009). Flow becomes a goal, a place where students need to spend more time and energy. Flow, which is a part of the growth mindset, occurs when students are completely involved in what they are doing, time stands still, they know the activity is achievable, and they experience inner clarity.

Drive or flow may very well be the piece that is happening in the "black box" of the student's experience on campus. Institutions of higher education may need to explore how to support and dedicate resources to help students understand how to capitalize and build their expectations for success. "While motivation, like learning itself is internal—something that people have to do for themselves—educators can help students raise their expectations and levels of performance" (Cross, 2001, p.20). Enhancing motivation and expecting success may go a long way in encouraging students of all ages and abilities to set higher goals than they once thought attainable. Helping students identify a learning situation when they find themselves in "flow" may encourage them to create that experience again and again, and may ultimately lead them to completing their program of study or educational goal.

Motivation to Learn

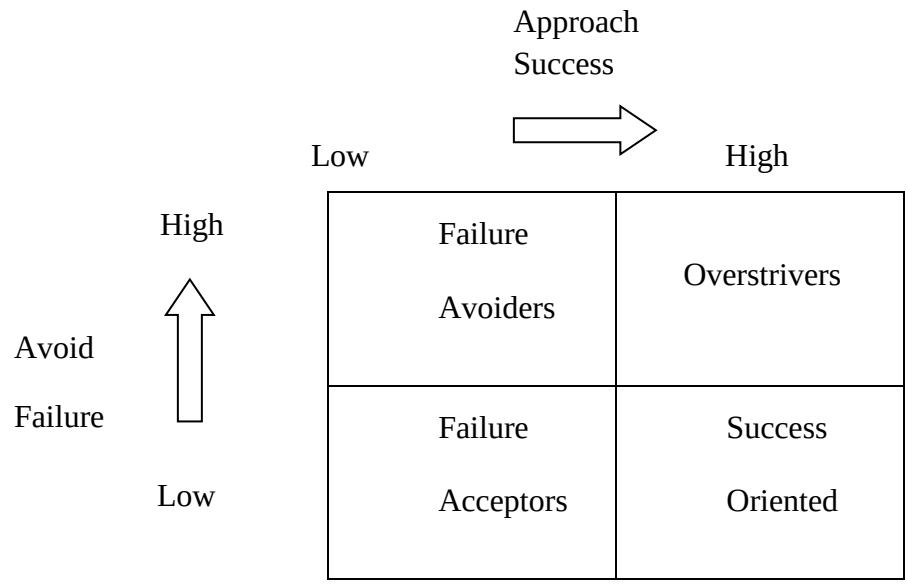
There are many community college students who doubt that they can be successful; they may feel that they are too old to return to school or that they have forgotten too much of what they learned, or should have learned, in high school. They may not have been successful in high school, or they may have perceived they were not successful and believe they do not have the skills necessary to do well now in college. Cross (2001) claimed that there is a "fear-of-failure behavior that is exhibited by some students who enter community college with doubts about their own ability" (ibid., p. 8). These doubts may arise from perceived or actual failure in earlier academic environments. A student who is in doubt of earlier academic ability may have made

the situation even worse by harboring and possibly exaggerating these feelings over the years (Merriam & Caffarella, 2004). A forty-year old returning to the classroom after having been away from school for 20 years may begin to think it will not be possible to keep up with the younger students, because their knowledge is so current and they have not forgotten everything learned in high school (ibid). "Indeed, the fear of failure is so great for some students; they develop self-defeating strategies aimed at avoiding failure rather than achieving success" (Cross, 2001, p. 7). Brophy (1998) claimed that when the tension between motivation to succeed and motivation to avoid failure is examined, those who believe they will succeed engage in the task willingly, and those who believe they will fail either avoid the task or try to minimize failure. As a former career advisor, I am amazed how many people tell me they are fearful of returning to school because they have been out of the educational or learning arena for a number of years. Most of them, when questioned further, admit to teaching themselves many things over the years but they quickly add, "School is different." Learning across the lifespan can be heavily influenced by emotion, which plays a huge part in adult learning (Dirkx, 2009) and can run the spectrum from negative, self-defeating emotions to the euphoric feeling of I can do anything. Removing some of the context bound experiences that see learning as only occurring in school could help students see themselves as lifelong learners.

The role of expectancy, what the student believes they can accomplish if they expend the effort, and the role of value, what they think is important (Brophy, 1998; Cross, 2001), are critical to student success at every level across the education spectrum. This belief in a self-fulfilling prophecy is also the key component in Martin Covington's Self-Worth Typology Model (see Figure 2) that Cross (2001) believes is one of the most beneficial models for understanding the motivation of community college students. Covington contended, "One of the

most basic human motivations is to protect the ego from threat" (p.8), and he developed a four-way typology of motivation that is represented in the figure below:

Figure 2: Covington's Four Way Typology



Cross--Adapted from Covington & Roberts (1994), p. 160

Cross (2001) continued that "students prefer to be seen by others as succeeding through ability rather than through effort" (ibid. p. 9). It is better to be thought of as lazy rather than stupid. There is still a belief that ability or intelligence is fixed and that nothing can be done about it (Brophy, 1998; Cross, 2001; Harju, 1997). When one fails, one can attribute it to lack of trying rather than lack of ability. For adults, this can set up a lifelong belief that it is better to not try and complete their education or academic goals than to attempt college and fail.

The "overstrivers" represented in Covington's (1994) model, tend to work hard and do well, but at extreme personal cost. They may not complete their goal because of illness brought on by not keeping perspective or balance in their lives. The students in the "failure avoider" cell prove to themselves and others that they lack the ability to succeed, and in the "failure acceptor cell" students are "basically indifferent or even antagonistic to achievement" (Cross, 2001, p.10).

The ideal in Covington's model is the cell representing "success-oriented students"; students in this cell are high in their motivation to succeed and are not threatened with failure (Cross, 2001). Somuncuoglu and Yildirim (1999) believe that by equipping students with the skills for learning, they are able to "orchestrate their own life-long learning act more effectively" (p. 267). These students have a resilience that allows them to overcome adversity. Creating opportunities for adult learners to understand how they learn should help them to be more successful learners.

If college is no longer the leading activity or the primary focus in a student's life (Beach 1995), educators need to be more cognizant of the role they play in helping students to achieve their goal and to see the value of degree completion. Cross' work (2001) explained how students may prioritize the competing activities in their lives by determining the value associated with the opportunity to attend/complete college. This assessment of the value of the learning opportunity may motivate students to continue their learning. Cross identified these competing values as "attainment value, intrinsic interest value, utility value, and cost" (p. 13). Attainment value, the meeting of the challenge, has more value than doing well in something perceived as easy. A student's inherent interest in a class or task leads to intrinsic value. Utility value relates to how important this task is in meeting the intended goal, and cost value explores the relationship of what this goal may prevent in some other area of one's life, e.g., achieving high grades may come at the expense of less time with family or other activities.

Motivation for continued learning often occurs when a student really connects with the information. Motivation is more than using the information to pass an exam, reflect their thoughts in a paper, or even complete their degree. As one student in a study by Perin and Charron (2006) stated, "It's kind of like lights just click on every day" (p. 165). Seeing students

alive in their learning, with the opportunity for transforming their lives through education, is a powerful high, and underprepared students may be motivated to continue when they can see small learning successes begin to accumulate (ibid). A number of authors have written about the transformative process of adult learning; and Mezirow (2000), who has written widely on the topic, explained that

> Transformation Theory's focus is how we learn to negotiate and act on our purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we have uncritically assembled from others—to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers. (p. 8)

Educators need to understand their role in modeling opportunities for students to make meaning of their learning, and to help them connect that learning to their lives. Intuitively, it makes sense; if students see how they connect to something bigger than themselves, they will be more excited and motivated about their learning. Ideally, success in one academic class may lead to or contribute to success in other classes, which ultimately allows students to complete their goal.

The Shift Toward Success

With increasing numbers of students requiring developmental education courses (Engle, Berneo & O'Brien, 2006; Perin & Charron, 2006), community colleges should focus their energy on the most promising interventions, which include "developmental education, university transfer, changes in curricula, changes in teaching and learning, student engagement; changes in student support services, [and] changes in instructor roles and leadership" (Myran, 2009, p. 49). These changes impact all areas of the institution and will need the collaboration and engagement of faculty, staff, administrators, and students to bring about change.

Understanding student/institutional demographics and the student's goals are only one small part of the student experience. Getting students in the door is one thing, and far too many community colleges have focused on this access part of their mission instead of seeing students through to completion of their educational goal and/or graduation (Engle & Tinto, 2008). Six major associations involved with community colleges have joined forces on an initiative called the Community College Completion Corps, or C4, and one executive director remarked "for the first time in 20 years we are discussing student success and completion" (www.ptk.org), instead of just student success. Padilla too (2009) readily admitted that academia has focused on the "wrong end" of student success. Instead of focusing on why students leave, he suggested exploring what we can learn from students who are retained and who persist ultimately to graduation or the completion of the student's goal.

Duckworth (2013) suggested that "grit predicts success over and beyond talent" (p. 2). If colleges can assist students in understanding not only what comprises grit but also how to develop grit, they may end up retaining more students. Like Dweck, Duckworth believes the growth mindset will help make you a "tenacious, determined, hard-working person (2013, p. 3). Completion of college level math and/or English in the first semester, completion of a college success course, high percentage of course completion, completion of 20 – 30 credits in the first year, full-time enrollment, summer course completion, continuous enrollment without stop-outs, registration on time, and adequate grade point average are all indicators of successful college students, regardless if they are enrolled in a community college or a four-year institution (Moltz, 2010; Offenstein, Moore, & Shulock, 2010; Reyna, 2010).

Offenstein, Moore, and Shulock (2010) suggested monitoring success by creating milestones and on-track indicators. Milestones are measurable achievements that students

accomplish as steps towards degree completion, and they include returning for subsequent semesters; completing required developmental courses; beginning their college level math and English courses; earning one year of college-level credits; completing general education requirements; completing a community-college transfer curriculum; transferring from a community college to a university; and completing a certificate or degree (p. 3).

One Model for Examining Success

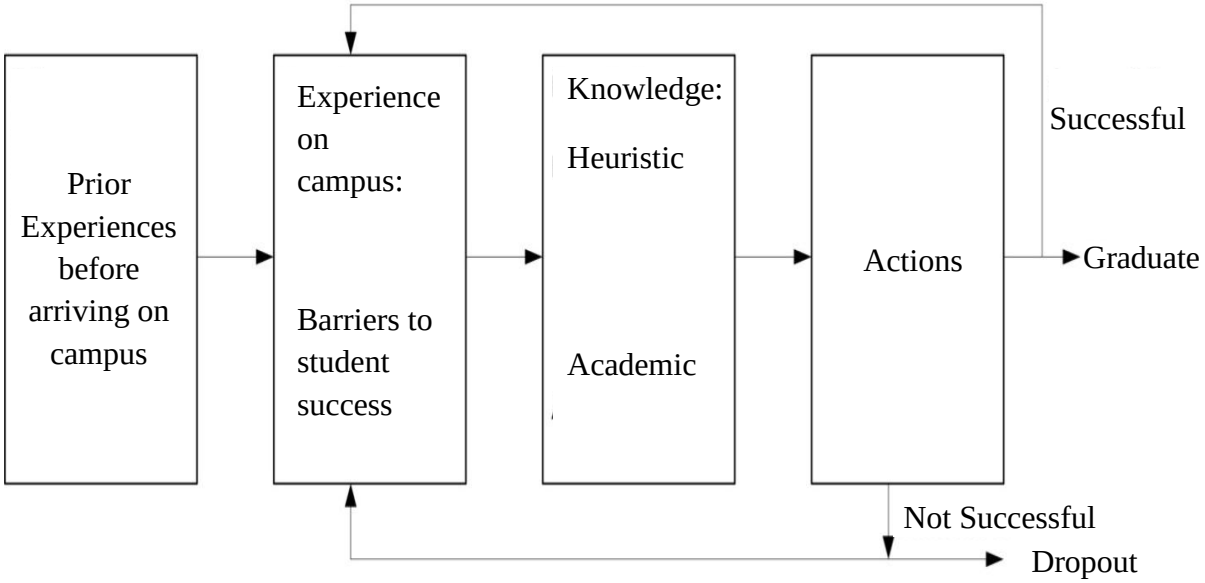
Another approach to how a campus can gather data about its students and use that data to guide institutional decision making is Raymond Padilla's (2009) Expertise Model of Student Success (EMSS), a "theoretical model that presents a particular understanding of student success by bringing together a set of concepts and the relationships that connect them" (p. 8). The EMSS, which can be used to develop a Local Model of Student Success (LMSS), provided the framework for my study of student success at Northwestern Michigan College. The model helps the researcher move beyond "what student characteristics predict college success" to "what expertise do marginalized students possess that enables them to overcome institutional barriers to success" (Bensimon, 2009). Padilla (2009) claimed that the students' expertise is the total knowledge possessed by students at their graduation, and this compiled knowledge comes from two sources. The first is heuristic or informal knowledge, which is campus dependent and is acquired informally by the student through their experience. It may be spread by word-of-mouth through interactions with others. The second source is academic or formal knowledge, which is campus independent. This information includes the laws, axioms, principles, facts, and theories acquired in the classroom, library, labs, etc. (ibid).

Padilla (2009) discussed four assumptions of his Model, with the first being the phenomenon of the campus experience as a "black box" (p. 22) for students. Educators may

know a lot about students as they enter the campus (high school grades, test scores, previous coursework, etc.) and know about the students who graduate (major/program of study, grades, involvement), but they know less about what is occurring in between those entry and exit points. Why is it that some students persist and complete while others drop out? Padilla asserted that the campus presents a series of barriers to the student's academic progress and graduation. "In short, all students face barriers: some more, some less. Not all students face the exact same set of barriers or with the same degree of severity" (p. 23). Recognizing some students overcome barriers while others do not, led me to wonder what barriers can the institution eliminate or help the student control, and what does the student need to recognize/overcome to be successful?

Students may encounter a number of barriers to their success on campus that are broadly grouped in the categories of personal, financial, coursework and learning, and students' prior academic and heuristic knowledge may not be enough to overcome these barriers (Padilla, 2009). In introducing his Expertise Model, Padilla proposed first examining the model as a General Model of Student Success, which is not campus specific, and then to dig deeper through a Local Model of Student Success (LMSS), which is campus specific, or even population specific to a subset of students enrolled on one campus. The EMSS as a General Model of Student Success is described in the following figure:

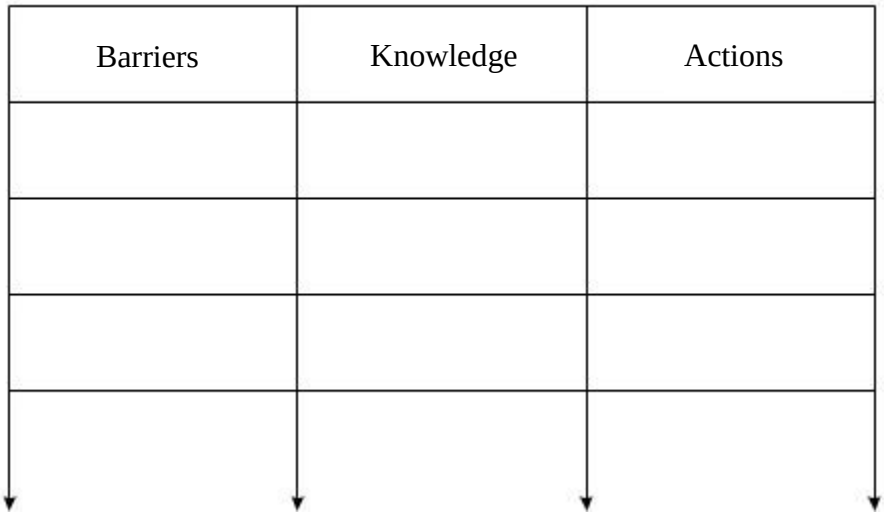
FIGURE 3
EMSS as a General Model of Student Success



Padilla, 2009 p. 27

"The Expertise Model of Student Success as a general student success model specifies three parameters: the barriers that students encounter, the knowledge they use to identify effective solutions and the actions they take to actually overcome the barriers" (Padilla, 2009, p. 29). By collecting data on these parameters at the institutional level, the model becomes a Local Student Success Model (LSSM) and addresses the "black box" effect for the given campus or specific population of students. Padilla discussed how students are an important source of data, and he encouraged campuses also to include faculty, staff, and administrators as additional sources of data. He introduced The Unfolding Matrix (citing Padilla, 1994; see figure 4 on the next page).

Figure 4: The Unfolding Matrix with Three Columns and Indefinite Number of Rows



Padilla, 2009, p.29

The downward arrows signify that rows can be added to the model until all possible barriers are exhausted. After all the barriers have been listed, students are then asked to "identify the knowledge successful students possess that allows them to overcome each barrier" (p. 29). When using the unfolding matrix, the facilitator wants to ensure that all knowledge related to the same barrier is captured in the cell adjacent to the barrier. Once students have exhausted the knowledge that has helped them overcome the barriers, they are then asked to determine actions for each of the corresponding barriers and knowledge cells.

Padilla (2009) continued with his third assumption, that students who are successful are those who are experts at being students. Successful students have struck the balance between their heuristic and academic knowledge; they know how to seek out the campus resources necessary to complete their course or program of study. Padilla's final assumption is the conation factor, which refers to the "action or the will to act" (p. 26). This part of our mental faculty or personality Daniel Pink (2009) described as *drive,* and it means that people are driven

by three elements of motivation: autonomy, mastery, and purpose. Adult learners operating in Covington's "Success Oriented" cell (as cited in Cross, 2001) benefit from autonomy, mastery, and purpose with their high approach to success and their low avoidance of failure. Ryder and Deci (2000) stressed that autonomy creates opportunities for behaviors that are volitional, as compared to behaviors that are the result of pressure and control. In their work describing self-determination theory, they claimed, "Intrinsically motivated behaviors, which are performed out of interest and satisfy the innate psychological needs for competence and autonomy are the prototype of self-determined behavior" (p. 65). For example, being successful in class builds competence. Believing you have more options and choices leads to autonomy or feeling more in control of your life.

Continuing the shift towards student success, Schreiner (2010) identifies the construct of "thriving" and described the characteristics that thriving students possess, which include engaged learning, academic determination, positive perspective, diverse citizenship, and social connectedness. Schreiner believes that there are three aspects to thriving, with the first being academic thriving, by which students are energized by the learning process and believe their investment of effort, motivation to succeed, pursuing one's goals, and managing one's time are part of academic determination. She also discussed interpersonal thriving, which is defined as a positive perspective and belief that optimism can be learned. Students with a positive perspective handle stress well, and "keep trying, even when progress is slow or difficult, they remain confident of their ability to achieve the final outcome and therefore persist in the face of challenges" (p. 7). The final aspect of thriving is intrapersonal thriving, and it is here that Schreiner believes that meaningful connections and valuing differences play a role. Like Dweck (2008) and her beliefs on mindset, Schreiner believes that the positive perspective may be the

most significant aspect to her thriving quotient. Schreiner also described three components of students' engagement in the learning process: meaningful processing; focused attention; and active participation. Instructors can facilitate student engagement by sharing their passion for their subject and their desire to get to know their students, and by asking students to share how they best learn. Baxter-Magolda and King (2004) suggested that educators "situate learning in the learner's experiences" (p. 41), and Schreiner (2010) suggested that students apply the coursework to personal relationships and real life problems, leading to increased engagement.

Summary

Community college students create a unique tapestry of learners, many of whom are adult, first generation, and underprepared for their journey. Getting learners in the door is only a small part of the experience; keeping them enrolled, engaged, and ultimately successful in reaching their goal presents many challenges. Through exploring the constructs of mindset, expectancy, and motivation, educators can determine strategies for working with students and helping them develop their individual success strategies. Achor (2010) stated it even more succinctly: "The mental construction of our daily activities, more than the activity itself, defines our reality" (p.71) and helping students reframe how they see themselves as learners may ultimately help them be successful in their educational pursuit.

The literature review also explored Raymond Padilla's (2009) Expertise Model of Student Success and how community colleges can explore what barriers, knowledge, and actions impact student success. Understanding the role colleges play in helping shape the students experience is critical; too often our efforts have been focused on why students leave our institution and not what contributed to their success. My research focused on what experiences contributed to students' academic success; what knowledge, skills and abilities students used to

overcome the barriers they encountered while enrolled; and how the constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset impact adult learners in the community college.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction/Design

Community college students often balance multiple priorities. They may arrive for college academically underprepared in reading, writing, and/or math; they may also be unclear as to their program of study, delayed their start in college, work 30 or more hours per week, or raise children—sometimes as a single parent (Biswas, Choitz & Prince, 2008). And yet, some students still excel in spite of these challenges. This study used a qualitative research design for data collection, including focus groups and personal interviews. This design was appropriate because the overarching research questions asked what and how about underprepared students' lived experiences in their community college, and what experiences contributed to their success (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990). According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990), one of the benefits of using focus groups prior to individual interviews is that they provide a large amount of data and allow participants to build upon the comments and reflections of other group members.

Focus groups of students who entered the institution identified as underprepared and are now excelling academically were asked to explore the barriers they may have experienced and the knowledge that would have been helpful to them earlier in their student career, and to identify actions they recommend for overcoming the barriers they encountered as students. Participants were asked to complete both a Grit Inventory (Duckworth, 2007) and an alternative version of the Local Model of Student Success (Padilla, 2009). The synergy that occurred produced data that would not arise when individual interviews were the sole method of data collection. Additionally, during the individual interviews, students were asked how the

constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset contributed to their success. The individual interviews allowed me to delve deeper into the students' stories and to hear from them individually about what they believe contributed to their success that they may not have shared in a group setting.

The overarching research questions explored in this study were: 1) what experiences underprepared students perceive contributed to their academic success; 2) what knowledge, skills, and abilities the students used to overcome the barriers they encountered; and 3) how the constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset impacted underprepared students in community college. A fourth question, how do the experiences of students earning a grade point average between a 2.0 – 2.50 differ from the students who are earning a 3.50 or higher GPA, was not able to be answered due to lack of participation from the lower achieving GPA group. These questions needed to be explored, especially on community college campuses where far more students enter the college than leave with a credential (Vandal, 2010). The focus groups and interviews allowed me to meet students in their natural setting and to present a detailed view of the topic, and ultimately the research allowed me to be an active learner who could tell the students' story (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Site Selection and Participants

This research was conducted at Northwestern Michigan College (NMC) in Traverse City, Michigan. NMC was Michigan's first community college, founded in 1951 by a local group of citizens interested in providing post-secondary education opportunities to what was then a small, rural community miles from the closest four-year college (Tanis, 1973). One of the college's founding fathers, Ross Biederman, gathered a group of community leaders together to discuss the need for higher education in northwestern Michigan. "He talked about the number of high

school graduates who could not afford to go away to college and how those who could manage this expense generally did not come back to the area" (ibid, p. 3). Although there were junior colleges in Michigan prior to this date, there were no community colleges. Community leaders petitioned the legislature about forming a community college and also raised the funds necessary to begin the college.

NMC celebrated its 60th Anniversary in 2011, and enrollment has grown from 165 students attending that first year to 4,846 students enrolled for the fall semester of 2012. NMC's enrollment peaked in the fall of 2010, with 5440 students enrolled. Approximately 42% of the students are enrolled full-time, taking 12 or more credits; this percentage has decreased over the past five years. About 36% of the NMC student population is over 25 years of age, and this percentage has been fairly consistent for the past four years (NMC digital dashboard). This age group more than others seems to be correlated with the employment rate; as the employment rate increases, enrollment decreases, and when unemployment rates increase, so does the college enrollment.

NMC's student enrollment for the past four years is illustrated in Table 2 below:

Table 2: NMC Student Enrollment

	Fall 2009	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012
Age Range	# Enrolled % of Total	# Enrolled % of Total	# Enrolled % of Total	# Enrolled % of Total
< = 17	239 4.7%	232 4.3%	259 5.0%	363 7.5%
18 – 20	1841 36.2%	1846 33.9%	1731 33.5%	1636 33.8%
21- 25	1170 23%	1259 23.1%	1171 22.7%	1088 22.5%
26- 30	631 12.4%	661 12.2%	591 11.4%	584 12.1%

Table 2 (cont'd)

31 – 35	353 6.9%	418 7.7%	433 8.4%	385 7.9%
> = 36	852 16.7%	1024 18.8%	1083 19.0%	790 16.3%
Totals	5086	5440	5168	4846

NMC Digital Dashboard

In the fall semester 2012, 2,611 students were female, accounting for 53.9 % of the student population, compared to 2,236 students who were male, or 46.1% of the student population. This number has varied within two percent for the past four years. In addition, NMC also tracks the number of credit hours students take each semester, and it found the average student credit load for fall semester 2012was 9.6 credits, down from 10.1 four years ago. See Table 3 for credit load.

Table 3: Credit Load

	Fall 2009	Fall 2010	Fall 2011	Fall 2012
Credit Load	# Enrolled % of Total	# Enrolled % of Total	# Enrolled % of Total	# Enrolled % of Total
(< 6 credits)	769 15.1%	814 15.0%	767 14.8%	803 16.9%
(6 –8credits)	1171 23.0%	1221 22.4%	1239 24.0%	1191 24.6%
(9 -11 credits)	657 12.9%	851 15.6%	880 17.0%	796 16.4%
12 or> credits	2489 48.9%	2554 46.9%	2282 44.2%	2057 42.4%
Totals	5086	5440	5168	4847
Aver. Credit	10.1	10.0	9.8	9.6

NMC Digital Dashboard

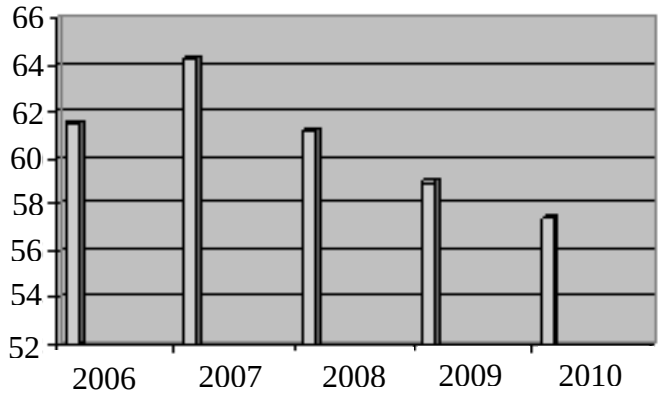
Participants in this study were all non-traditional students who upon entering NMC were required to register for a developmental English and/or math class based on their COMPASS

Placement test. All participating students were enrolled at NMC for the spring 2013 semester. The criteria used to determine non-traditional students included one or more of the following characteristics:

- age 24 or over
- delayed start in college
- married and/or head of household, including single parents
- first generation college student

The developmental placement rate for incoming students at NMC in the past five years is reported in Figure 5 below:

Figure 5: Incidence of Developmental Placement Rate (Percent)



Source: NMC Office of Research & Effectiveness

Note: The developmental placement rate of those who were new to NMC in the cohort year and who were either full- or part- time in their first semester and taking one or more developmental classes (MTH 06/08; MTH08; MTH10/23; MTH23; ENG97; and ENG99).

The Office of Research, Planning and Effectiveness (ORPE) at NMC was asked to query the institutional data mart where all student data are stored. The criteria used included students who were:

- registered for Spring 2013
- had begun their coursework in one of the past five years
- were 24 years of age or older on January 1, 2013
- had an overall grade point average between 2.00 – 2.49 or 3.50 – 4.00.
- had at least 12 earned college level credits

Of the 4,847 students enrolled in the fall of 2012, 621 students met the above criteria. From that group of students, 230 were initially placed in developmental education courses; 86 of the 230 students had grades in the 2.00 – 2.50 grade point average range, and 144 of the 230 students had GPA's in the 3.50 – 4.00 range. Once this pool of students was identified, the Office of Research, Planning and Effectiveness sent my email invitation (Appendix A) to the students, along with a brief survey for the student to complete electronically (https://nmcir.qualtrics.com/WRQualtricsSurveyEngine/?SID=SV_9YVqnijIfHKUk5f&Preview=Survey&_=1), on April 18, 2013. The survey asked students to identify whether they were interested in participating in the study, and if they replied yes, the second question asked them to identify a week they would prefer the focus group to be held with three choices: the week before exams, exam week, or the week following exams. Students then entered their contact information: name, phone number, and preferred email address, and they were thanked for their willingness to respond. Of the 36 students that responded to the survey, 30 preferred the week after exams for the focus group. Three focus groups were scheduled for the week following final exams, and all 36 students were emailed an invitation to participate in a focus group. Twenty

eight students were in the 3.50 – 4.00 GPA group, and eight were in the 2.00 – 2.50 grade point average group.

The goal was to run three focus groups of 8 – 12 students per group, two groups for students in the 3.50 – 4.00 GPA range and one group for students in the 2.00 – 2.50 GPA range. The students who agreed to participate in the study were sent another email (Appendix B), inviting them to participate in one of two focus group times for the higher GPA group and one time for the lower GPA group. A third email (Appendix C) was sent reminding them of the group time and inviting them to select a sandwich for the buffet lunch. The priority for focus group selection was students who placed in both developmental English and math first, followed by students who placed in the lowest level of math (pre-algebra) and were college ready in English, and finally the students who placed in beginning algebra and were college ready in English. Unfortunately, only one student who initially agreed to participate in the focus group placed in both developmental English and math, and was in the 2.00 – 2.50 range; she did not return the email to confirm attendance for the focus group. Both full- and part-time students were invited to participate in the focus groups. Upon completion of the focus groups, individuals were invited to participate in the 1:1 interviews.

Procedures and Data Collection

I invited more students than I expected to need from the higher grade point average group for the focus groups of eight to twelve students, considering that some students would not be available (or interested) in participating. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) claimed it is better to invite too many participants and excuse late arrivals than to have too few students, in order to maximize the value of the group dynamics. Planning for twelve participants ensured that the group had enough participants, even when accommodating no-shows. Focus groups can be run

with as few as four and as many as twelve individuals, and are generally composed of between seven and ten individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The focus group discussions were held on Tuesday, May 7, 2013, and Wednesday, May 8, 2013, for the higher GPA groups. Eight students attended the first focus group and twelve students attended the second focus group. The following Monday, May 13, was the focus group for the 2.0 – 2.50 students; two confirmed attendance but only one student showed. I called the other student and she shared she had to take her sibling to work and was an hour away.

I served as the focus group moderator, and I asked two entry level non-teaching staff members to help with the focus group logistics. Their purpose in helping with the focus groups was explained to the participants; one served as the scribe for the modified version of the Local Model of Student Success and discussion topic responses, and the other person worked with the technology to insure that the session was recorded and that the technology worked through the entire session. Although I was not an instructor for any of these students, which might have made them uncomfortable with me hearing their stories, I was cognizant that students may likely have associated me with my professional role at the college. Therefore, I was mindful when asking for assistance with the focus groups to ensure that students participating in the focus groups did not work for staff volunteering to assist me. I reviewed the focus group protocol with the staff members assisting, so that no one intentionally made a student feel uncomfortable about what they shared. The staff helped me watch for those who interrupted, questioned, or tried to lead the discussion. I conducted a debriefing session immediately following each focus group with these colleagues to capture their initial thoughts and the themes discussed. The focus groups were all digitally recorded (audio only) on two different recording devices. Tape recording or even video recording focus groups can help connect the data and fill in the gaps in the notes taken during the

focus group (Patton, 1990; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). I audio recorded all three focus groups and the individual interviews, and the tapes were destroyed upon completion of the dissertation.

Collecting students' opinions can be subjective, as can interpreting their opinions; I had to recognize my own bias throughout the study. As the researcher conducting focus groups and interviews with students at my own institution, I had to separate my role as a long serving administrator with my role as a student researcher. I introduced the participants to my role as a student, shared with them the purpose of the study for my graduate program, ensured confidentiality, and was honest with them in how the data would be analyzed and reported. These measures went a long way towards removing any threat of bias in the study (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

The sessions began with each participant completing a consent form as they entered the focus group room (Appendix D). No student needed to be excused from participating in the focus group because of failure to sign the consent form. Once the consent forms were signed, students were also asked to complete the Grit Inventory (Appendix E). Upon completion of the 12 item grit scale, the students were provided with the self-scoring rubric, and they learned their grittiness factor, 5 being "extremely gritty" and 1 being "not gritty at all." Students also responded to a question on their perception of their grittiness, and how their grittiness influenced their education. The completed Grit Scales provided a snapshot of a potential grit score or range of scores required to be a successful community college student. Students were provided with a lunch buffet while we waited for all participants to check in and complete the above tasks, and while I confirmed that all consent forms were completed correctly.

Table tent cards with the students' first names were placed in front of each student, and the students were encouraged to use each other's names as they built upon ideas from fellow students in the discussion. This helped me identify students on the recordings and allowed for a more candid discussion, with fewer interjections by facilitators. I provided a brief overview of the reasons for the study, and I asked if there were any initial questions before the focus group began. I also shared the ground rules to guide the process, so that the students would recognize that every voice represented in the room had a story to share and was valued, and none would have the exact same experience (see Ground Rules—Appendix F). The focus groups were scheduled to last approximately 90 minutes to two hours; the first focus group ran for two hours and thirty minutes, and the second group ran just a few minutes shy of two hours. The interview with the one student who participated from the 2.00 – 2.50 group lasted approximately 40 minutes.

I began the focus groups by asking students a series of nine open-ended questions in order to focus on general perceptions about their college experience—what was rewarding, what was challenging, what their experience was like with the COMPASS Placement test, and to what they attributed their success in college (see Appendix G for Focus Group Questions). As part of the focus group, after students had an opportunity to answer the open-ended questions, we created an *alternative* model of Padilla's (2009) Unfolding Matrix, described previously (on page 26 of the literature review; see Figure 4). This was accomplished by asking students to identify perceptions of the barriers they encountered at the college. The second list explored the knowledge they had or had acquired to overcome any barriers they encountered. Finally, they generated a third list, describing the actions they believe successful students take to overcome perceived barriers. Upon completion of the lists of barriers, knowledge and actions, the students

were asked if there was anything they believe contributed to their success that had not yet been discussed. Finally, I informed the students that some of them would be invited to participate in an individual interview. Individuals who shared stories that needed further exploring, or who exhibited behaviors that implied they wanted to share more were invited for individual interviews. These individual interviews allowed me to delve deeper and to explore what the student was feeling/thinking during the focus group. The individual interviews allowed the opportunity to clarify information they shared within the focus group (see Appendix H for Interview Questions).

The rationale for beginning with the focus groups was that they allow for synergism, snowballing, stimulation, security, and spontaneity (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990), which may be helpful as students hear others share personal stories. These advantages allowed for much richer lists to be built regarding barriers encountered, knowledge helpful to understand the barriers, and actions taken to overcome the barriers than could be assembled by the students working in isolation.

Although there can be some disadvantages to focus groups, the groups flowed well. The students were told to plan on 90 minutes to two hours, and the first group ran almost two and a half hours. Most of the participants were able to stay and others were excused when they needed to return to work or other obligations. The second group ran just under two hours. I made sure that no participant monopolized the conversation and that the time limits were recognized for getting through the questions when everyone chose to answer. It was also necessary to ensure that quieter people had the opportunity to participate (Patton, 1990). Six individual interviews were conducted after the focus groups, which allowed students to share information they may not have felt comfortable sharing within the focus group. These individual interviews allowed me

not only to check what I heard from the student, but also to follow up on the nonverbal communication observed, or to dig deeper into the students' story.

Analysis of Data

The amount of data was overwhelming and fascinating at the same time. My role was to make sense of it all, to let the data drive my findings, and not to be concerned if the data did not "fit" what the literature claimed I might find. Marshall & Rossman (1999) shared a six step analytic process that guided my analysis: organizing the data; generating categories, themes and patterns; coding the data; testing the emergent understandings; searching for alternative explanations; and writing the report (p. 152). Immediately after each focus group, a debriefing session was held with the two people who assisted me to discuss what we observed from the participants that might not have been captured in the audio tapes. This included non-verbal behaviors and side conversations that contributed to the data but may not have been captured on the recording. These additional data were important, as they added to the story and helped me understand why some students were more communicative than others (Stewart & Shamdansani, 1990). We compared our thoughts on potential themes generated by the participants and what the students chose to share in their summary comments.

Padilla (2009) provided taxonomies of barriers, knowledge, and actions, and I first determined how the data captured through the lists created in the focus groups aligned with the Padilla taxonomy. A quick review of the grit scale scores collected at the beginning of each focus group served as a discussion prompt towards the end of the session, after the students had created the alternative model of student success. The students' "grittiness" factor was compared across the groups, to see if there was a difference between the scores and the students' grade point average. After transcribing both focus group and individual interviews, I assigned each

student an alias in order for anonymity to be preserved. I also reviewed the information from the lists of barriers they encountered, knowledge that helped them to overcome the barriers, and actions students took to minimize the barrier or add to their knowledge base. Comparing and contrasting the NMC alternative Model of Student Success with the Padilla Model generated one set of data for analysis. This information was compared with the barrier themes Padilla (2009) identified in his Local Model of Student Success: personal, financial, coursework, learning, institutional, and student support barriers (p.140 -142). Padilla categorized knowledge as experiential, study and skills, procedural, relational and comparative, and motivational (p. 144 - 148). Actions taken by students were described as strategic, pragmatic, persuasive, and supportive (p. 149 – 151).

Themes and the coding of data were driven by the lists developed in the focus groups; for example, what barriers did students identify; what knowledge, skills and abilities did they develop to overcome the barriers; and then what action did they take to navigate through institutional processes. Data from both the Grit scale and the lists created, while deductive in nature, provided a basis for theoretical contributions for success, while the responses from the open-ended questions allowed me to explore "unanticipated or unmeasured factors" (Patton, 1990, p.46). Following the deductive analysis, I explored how the data fit with the literature other than Padilla.

Exploring the differences between the full and part-time students, and then between the students who excel and those who have grades between a 2.00 and a 2.50, provided information to discern whether students with a more positive outlook on their learning journey are more successful, or whether students who approach learning from a creator vs. victim mindset are more likely to have higher grade point averages. It was interesting to explore whether significant

life events influence academic success and whether a point could be determined when students may be more motivated to start college, or return to college.

Finally, I utilized a peer debriefer, someone not connected to the college, to review the themes and codes I created to help determine if I have interpreted things too narrowly or if I assumed things I should not have from the data.

Approval for the Study

Because NMC does not yet have an Institutional Review Board (IRB), I provided copies of the proposal and met with the Vice President for Enrollment Management & Student Services, the Director of the Office of Research, Planning and Effectiveness, and the Vice President of Educational Services. These three individuals were in position to sanction this study, and I discussed the research protocol, procedures, and questions with them.

Upon completion of the proposal defense, approval of MSU's University Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects (UCRIHS) was sought and granted. I incorporated suggested changes from the NMC team, the proposal defense committee, and the UCRIHS Board prior to beginning the focus groups.

Limitations of the Research

The research was conducted at one community college and involved twenty-one students, which means the study was not comprehensive in scope. Since only students from one community college were asked to participate, findings may not be applicable to all community colleges and may not transfer well to four-year college and university settings; however, there are still lessons to be learned. The research could be replicated by other institutions with relative ease, and as Padilla (2009) suggested, the more colleges that build Local Models of Student Success, the more we will come to understand student success so that you "can develop

strategies and practices that will enable more students to perform as successful ones do" (p. 9).

With only one student participating in a focus group from the 2.00 – 2.50 GPA group, I was not able to discern differences between groups. The one student identified himself with the higher achieving grade point average group as he had been enrolled for eight semesters from the fall of 1998 through the spring of 2002, returned to school ten years later in the fall of 2012, and improved his grades dramatically. It would be interesting to repeat this study with a group of students in the 2.00 – 2.50 GPA range, to determine if differences in grit, barriers they encountered, or knowledge or action taken differ from the students in the higher GPA group.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

To understand the lived experiences of underprepared community college students and their perceptions of what contributed to their academic success, a series of questions was asked of them in both focus group and individual interview settings. The overarching research question was: What experiences do underprepared community college students perceive contributed to their academic success? Secondary questions include: What knowledge, skills, and abilities did these students use to overcome barriers they encountered? How do the constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset impact underprepared community college students? Students participating in this study all placed in developmental math, with a course placement in a beginning algebra class or lower. The beginning algebra class at NMC is the equivalent of algebra 1 in high school, or two classes below college algebra. The students had to have completed their developmental math courses and earned at least a minimum of twelve college level credits with at least a 3.50 GPA to be included in this study. The reader will be introduced to the students and their educational journey prior to enrolling in college; explore how students responded to the grit scale (Duckworth, 2007), and their perceptions of being non-traditional in age. Additionally, the challenges these adult learners face, the joy of feeling successful, and learning to put themselves first will be discussed. The students also shared the barriers they had encountered, and the knowledge and skills they acquired to work through their barriers. Recognizing they were not alone on their journey, the students reflected on who supported their journey and how the college offered a re-entry program to ease the transition to higher education.

While the students were similar in being underprepared for college based on the COMPASS placement test, they were all successful students, and their journeys to this point

were uniquely theirs. Some spoke of pleasurable K-12 experiences and others spoke of challenges or frustration. Several spoke of juggling multiple life roles, including student, employee, parent, and/or caregiver as examples, while another shared still finding time to attend *keggers* with younger students. The students shared their experiences of being non-traditional students in the classroom and the challenges they encountered as older students. They also shared their most rewarding experiences and who or what motivated them to return or continue their journey.

Meet the Students

A total of 21 students responded to the survey, volunteering to attend one of the focus groups. Of the 21 students, 16 were females and 5 were males. According to the Office of Research Planning and Effectiveness, the data showed women represented 54% of the eligible 230 students meeting the selection criteria which is representative of the female population of students overall at 53.9% of enrollment. This over representation of women in the study is based solely on who volunteered to participate.

Table 4 introduces the students by their pseudonym, age, program of study, grade point average on a 4.00 scale, the number of college credits they have earned, and their grit score, measured on a 5.0 scale (one being little grit to five being most gritty). The Grit Inventory measured student perceptions of how hard they worked and also whether they sustained interest in an activity over time (Duckworth, 2007). Later on, the students discussed their "grittiness factor." See Table 4 on the next page.

Table 4: Meet the Students

Name	Age	Major	Grade Point Average	Under Prepared In math and/or English	Credits Earned	Grit Score (described below)
Alycia	31	Nursing	3.68	Math	65	4.55
Annie	38	Social work	4.00	Math	67	4.00
Bonnie	35	Business-Comp. Applications	3.91	Math	121	4.25
Ester	45	Criminal Justice	3.66	Math	41	4.00
Gloria	51	Business	3.59	Math	15	4.03
Gwen	39	Nursing	3.83	Math	64	3.92
Hank	33	Social work	2.74*	Math	81	4.17
Josephine	59	Liberal Studies	3.80	Math	41	4.42
Karen	36	Bus. Adm./ Management	4.00	Math	61	4.00
Kristopher	54	Pre Law	3.77	Math	43	3.58
Lisa	43	Psychology	3.87	Math	23	4.25
Mary	28	Pre-Med	3.87	Math	64	3.90
Marie	51	Social Work	3.83	Math	43	3.92
Melanie	28	Bus. Adm.	3.65	Math	86	4.25
Nadine	36	Nursing	4.00	Math	20	4.10
Nancy	33	English Lit	3.87	Math	45	2.33
Pete	57	Creative Mgt. in Art	3.87	Math	115	4.33
Rachelle	60	Liberal Arts	3.75	Math	27	4.08
Reece	52	Culinary	3.79	Math	49	4.33
Ryder	27	Math	3.50	Math	66	3.75
Sandy	48	Accounting	3.92	Math	36	3.00

*Hank's grade point average was within the 2.00 – 2.50 GPA range when the study began

Academic Grit

At the beginning of each focus group, students were asked to complete a 12-item Grit Scale (Duckworth, 2007). The response choices included: very much like me, mostly like me, somewhat like me, not much like me, and not like me at all. For six of the questions, the above

responses scored from one to five points and for the other six questions; the scores were rated from five to one, with the response "somewhat like me" always scoring a three (see Appendix E). The response indicated level of grit and some questions were asked in a manner that grit would be represented by a response "very much like me" and for other questions, the grittier response would be "not much like me." The 21 participants had grit factor scores between 2.33 and a 4.55 (a score of 1 demonstrating the least grit and 5 being the grittiest); individual scores are reported in the far right column of Table 4 above.

Table 5 below provides the questions on the Grit Inventory as well as the numbers of students who responded similarly to each question.

Table 5: Grit Inventory Results

	Question	Very Much Like Me	Mostly Like Me	Somewhat Like Me	Not Much Like Me	Not At All Like Me
1	I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge	15	2	3+*	--	--
2	New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones	4	2	8	6	*
3	My interests change from year to year	2	2	3	13	*
4	Setbacks don't discourage me	5+*	6	5	4	--
5	I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest	1	--	5	12	2+*
6	I am a hard worker	14+*	5	1	--	--
7	I often have a goal but later choose to pursue a different one	1	--	6	11	2+*

Table 5 (cont'd)

8	I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete	1	1	5	11+*	2
9	I finish whatever I begin	9+*	9	--	2	--
10	I have achieved a goal that took years of work	11+*	6	2	1	--
11	I become interested in new pursuits every few months	2	2	2+ *	14	--
12	I am diligent	17+*	2	1	--	--

The * represents Hank's responses, the student with the lower grade point average

On nine of the 12 questions, more than half of the respondents had the same response. Questions with the greatest number of respondents reporting similarly were:

- Question 12: I am diligent, 18 of the 21 students responded very much like me
- Question 1: I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge, 15 students responded very much like me
- Question 6: I am a hard worker, 15 students responded very much like me
- Question 11: I become interested in new pursuits every few months, 14 students reported not much like me
- Question 3: My interests change from year to year, 13 students reported not much like me

Questions 6 and 12 seem quite similar in asking students' perceptions of whether they are a hard worker (15 respondents) versus diligent (18 respondents). By including the category "mostly like me", as well as "very much like me", both questions had 20 of the 21 students who responded with one of those two responses. Questions 3 and 11 asked the students how often

they became interested in new pursuits or their interests changed, and again the responses were quite congruent with 14 students who responded "not much like me" on either question. Including the response category "somewhat like me," both questions have 17 of the 21 students who responded with one of those two answers. Only on question 8, "I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete" did students respond across all five answer choices, even though the majority of responses were in the "not much like me" category.

The students were also asked to comment on their grittiness score after completing the Grit Inventory. The majority of students saw their score as accurate, and many reported not being surprised by their level of grittiness. A sampling of student responses to grit includes Karen, with identical scores of 4.00 for both her GPA and Grit Scale. She commented, "I am not surprised by the results. I am a determined, strong-willed person. I am a task checker-offer type of person. I set goals and reach my goals." In a follow up interview, Karen commented more on her grit score, adding:

> I get an adrenalin rush. I do very well under pressure, sometimes even to a fault…when I get accolades for doing something last minute, it doesn't help. For example, I did a five page paper in 40 minutes. If it's a personal story, I can share very quickly; if it's a research paper, I do allow a little more time. A friend shared she had 30 hours of research done for her paper, and I knew I had the entire paper completed in less than 10 hours. I know it's not because I am capable, but I am under pressure and I have a deadline. Oh, no…Reframe. I am capable; my life doesn't allow for 30 hours of research. So yes, there's a certain adrenalin rush I get when I do so well, in so little time.

Like Karen, Annie has a 4.00 GPA and scored a 4.00 on the grit scale. Annie thought her grit score had improved, in part, to her journey at the college:

> I think it all pretty well applies. I think what's interesting is prior to coming to school; I think my answers would have been much different. I think before starting, I had a self-perception of giving up on things when they got difficult or not seeing things through to the end; starting a project and then abandoning it. And maybe that was true then but this is now. I am creating a different set of history by looking back on who I am. Take the question, "I am a hard worker?" I said, 'mostly like me.' I would have answered differently before school. I've gotten grittier through this, or I see that I am grittier than I used to be. I think grit is something that's developed. My life philosophy is about empowering people. If you believe you are capable, you can develop it from there.

Similarly, Ryder with a grit score of 3.75 shared: "I believe that my grit level is accurate and honest. It seems a bit higher than my current GPA." And Melanie, a student with a 4.25 grit score, shared: "My level of grittiness is pretty high. I like to set goals and keep working until I achieve them." With a score falling between Ryder and Melanie at 3.92, Marie shared similarly to Annie that grit, like other skills, needs to be developed through experience:

> With regard to my grit score, I've been called tenacious and I guess that's a good thing, right? From my life experience and the struggles that I had, I found I had survival skills I didn't even know I had and I used them. I developed them. It's like, what is happiness? If I gave you a timeline of my life, I could have gone a whole different direction, and I did for a while. I think it needs to be taught by experience, and I am not sure it can be taught.

Nancy's grit score at 2.33 seemed surprisingly low compared to her 3.87 GPA, which is almost the reverse for Hank. His grit score of 4.17, the fifth highest grit score, was remarkably high since he was the one student who participated from the 2.00- 2.50 grade point group. Although Hank's GPA was the lowest of the 21 students, he shared the following comment related to his grit score: "I feel I stick with stuff to overcome challenges." Hank saw himself as a higher achieving student and explained his student experience as:

> I graduated from high school in 1998 and came right to NMC because that's what you do, but I got a job as a 911 dispatcher so I quit school because I was making $50,000 a year. I was going to school to be a teacher and I was making more as a dispatcher so what's the point of school, I kind of did it half-assed for a while and then I stopped. Ten years later, I got burned out at doing dispatch so I came back to do social work through the Ferris program.

In Hank's last two semesters, he has earned all 3.50 and 4.00 grades, compared to earlier semesters when his grades averaged between a 1.77 and a 2.82, depending on the semester, which accounts for his lower GPA. Nancy, on the other hand, thought her low grit score was terrible, adding, "It doesn't surprise me, and it makes me doubt the likelihood of my future success. It also makes me wonder how I've done as well as I have so far." Sandy, who also had a lower than average grit score of 3.00 for this group of higher achieving students reflected differently on her lower score: "I think my grittiness level of 3 shows a mix of both determination and hard work, along with self-doubt and procrastination. I think this accurately describes me."

The students, except for Nancy, all had higher than average grit scores. The mean grit score for these 21 students was a 3.96, with the median score being 4.03 on a 5.00 scale.

Although grit may not explain everything about grade point average and/or student success, this group of students reflected positively on the Grit Scale, with the exception of Nancy, who wondered about her future as a student. After completing the Grit Inventory at the beginning of each focus group, a series of questions (see Attachment G) was asked to determine what other experiences students believed contributed to their success, and to explore whether motivation, mindset, knowledge, and/or skills helped them overcome any barriers they encountered. For many students, their stories began before they enrolled in college.

The Journey Prior to College

In describing their educational journeys, the students shared a variety of experiences that preceded their enrollment at NMC. Success in high school and dreams of going to college may have been delayed by pregnancy or other family obligations. First generation students thought that college may not have been an option, because no one discussed it or encouraged it. By their own account, some knew they were anxious to get out of high school and never thought about continuing their education. For some students, the focus group or interview in which they participated for this study may have been the first time they verbalized how they felt about their educational journey prior to enrolling. Annie shared quite candidly in the focus group:

> I decided that school sucked in fourth grade and pretty much gave up. My family was a very traditional family. I was raised to grow up, get married, become a wife and a mother; education wasn't really valued. The only reason I would have gone to college was to meet somebody to marry.

And then she added:

> I was shocked in my senior year of high school when I didn't get into the university I had planned to enroll in. I didn't realize you were supposed to get good grades to get in. I

> thought I would get in just because. There was no real conversation about college in my house. My father had gone there, my older siblings had gone there, and when I didn't get in, I didn't have a Plan B for college. I was already pretty negative about school. I hated it, so I graduated from high school, just barely, and started working. I ended up being able to create a career in the mortgage industry and got out of that in early 2007 before the bottom fell out. We had moved to northern Michigan and my husband had a good job so I was going to be a stay-at-home mom for a while and do volunteer work. Ironically, I volunteered in my daughter's fourth grade classroom and discovered that I liked school as an adult, so I enrolled the following semester and have found a lot of satisfaction by doing well.

Rachelle shared rather sheepishly:

> I did not pursue college out of high school. My mom always shared, "you need to get a band on your hand and get married." I graduated 115 out of 115 in my high school, I got a job, a husband, and had a successful career. I learned to program computers in 1984! Following a very successful career, I lost my job and moved to northern Michigan to be closer to my grandkids. I wondered if I could get into school and I did. I just never stopped taking the next step.

For other students, high school was disrupted by the family's relocation out of the country or being told they would never attend college. One student shared that after his parents left the country leaving him behind to finish high school, he quit attending. He eventually returned and completed high school through Adult Education. One younger woman, visiting the United States on a work visa, did not want to return to her home country. She knew she wanted to do something in the health care field, but if she returned home to their corrupt education

system, her options would be limited and she would not be allowed to study what she loved. She communicated with a friend attending college in Traverse City, who connected her with a family so that she could begin taking classes at Northwestern Michigan College.

Melanie had a child in her senior year of high school. She returned to finish her high school credits when she was 21, after the father of her child was put in jail. She described feeling completely overwhelmed by her college orientation:

> Everybody was there. They all had family or friends with them, and I was there alone. I never really had a support system in my life; those who were in my life were always telling me I was not good enough, I was worthless. That's what I grew up with. I did enough to get by in school; I never did any homework but would get A's on my tests without doing anything. I probably had a C grade average, if I learned I had a D, I would figure out how many assignments I had to do to raise my grade. When my daughter's father was put in jail, I realized I was on my own. I was taking care of my mother and grandmother who were both disabled as well as my daughter. I found I kept apologizing to my daughter that I couldn't afford to buy what she was asking for. I was only qualified to work at a gas station and a fast food restaurant. I recognized I was pretty good at handling all the "business stuff" for my mom and grandma, so now I am working on my bachelor's in business administration.

Reece was told by high school officials that he would never go to college, and he ended up with a career in the military. As a retired veteran, he too was reluctant to consider college, commenting:

> I was the kid who sat on the corner in high school and smoked cigarettes and was told I'd

never go to college. I was a D or below student, never passed algebra and had a D- in English.

Gloria shared:

> I had always wanted to go to college but allowed some older man to talk me into getting married. Two children later, we divorced and there I was, working in a factory trying to raise a family.

Later in an individual interview, she disclosed:

> I was horribly abused as a child, you know, with garden hoses, electrical wiring and stuff. I wasn't allowed to go to school dances or hang out with people. I had to stay home. We lived 30 miles out in the country, and I had to take care of my brothers and sisters; the only fun thing I could do was homework. So that's what I did, all the extra credit and the extra papers. The teachers always gave me the praise. I wasn't getting it at home; so that helped me. I was the oldest of the five kids.
>
> I don't look at that now as the most horrible thing in the world. I turned it into a positive. It made me pay attention in school and get good grades. Towards the end, the gym teacher suspected the abuse because I refused to change clothes. She forced me to strip and called the principal and counselor. They called my parents in. My parents were very wealthy. They took me home and beat me twice as much. Nothing was ever done by the school. It was a very different time, not like it is today…As a child, if I had given up, I would have committed suicide as an early teenager. I just do the best I can. Giving up is not an option where I come from.

And for Ryder, being in college was a "fluke." He never intended to enroll in college:

> Starting college was a fluke. I tagged along with friends who were visiting NMC. It was not my plan to enroll and here I am. Something inside of me said, "I'll give this a fair shot, I deserve…my children deserve a better way of life." I was the first in my family to graduate from high school so I am in unexplored territory by even enrolling in college. I didn't have anyone to guide my journey; I think I quit everyday (mentally). I want to be that someone for my sister (10 years younger) and my children.

In a follow up interview, Ryder shared more of his feelings about his journey prior to enrollment at the community college:

> I didn't have a good experience in high school…I didn't like the groups of people and how they segregated themselves in high school by social or ethnic class. I had a really bad time in high school. I did not like high school. I didn't like junior high, it wasn't that great either. Elementary school wasn't that great for me either…when I look back on it; my entire educational experience was not good. It was kind of torturous for me.

Kristopher, another of the male students, also never intended to enroll. He came to northern Michigan to recuperate after a snowboarding accident in Colorado, as the altitude was too high for his broken ribs, concussion, and collapsed lungs to recover. The friend he was staying with said, "Why don't you go back to school, dude, all you do is read and write, you're not going to find a job!"

For several students, their journey in the community college was not their first "go around" with post-secondary education. Nadine, currently enrolled in the nursing program, has a Master's in Fine Art. She shared that she partied a lot as an undergraduate, found her passion in art, and went on to complete her Masters. She thought she would be employable when she finished her Master's degree and then corrected herself, "No, I thought I would be able to make

art." Now, she really loves the ideas of math and science and is looking forward to a career in nursing. Alycia also earned a previous degree, a bachelor's in science in marketing from a state university. Pre-med had always been her passion but she "couldn't get" physics. She could not understand the tutors. Her life got complicated when she became pregnant and she moved to northern Michigan to be near family. After being married and having another child who became very ill at five months old, the Hospital nurses rekindled her passion for medicine, and she is now in her senior practicum of the nursing program with plans to complete a doctorate.

For other students, their arrival at the community college was inspired by a job loss or the inability to acquire a position in the workforce. Lisa shared she did not qualify for financial aid after high school, so she got a job and worked until she had a child. When she was ready to re-enter the workforce some years later, she learned she was not qualified to do so without educational training. Ester started community college coursework after being passed over for a promotion twice, while others entered community college on workforce development programs or re-training money due to a layoff or factory closing.

However they arrived at the community college, whether it was through a job loss, retraining program, divorce or the desire to become something more for themselves or their families, the students were candid about their journeys. They were comfortable talking about their classroom experience in a focus group that was more homogeneous than their typical classroom experience. Even though the age range was from 28 – 60 years of age in the focus groups, they recognized they were among students who had not recently graduated from high school, and they were quite candid about their experience as adult learners in the college classroom.

On Being Adult Learners in the Community College Classroom

Whatever occurred in their previous educational experience, these students are all enrolled in a community college, and as adults over the age of 24, they are considered to be adult learners or nontraditional students. In many community colleges, they represent the "typical" student; however, depending on what time of day they attend class, they may not see others they identify with in terms of age. Karen shared:

> I was scared to death to return…I was so old and was encouraged to see [older students] around me. We are doing it together. Really, I came out of desperation; I was losing hope in the job market. I didn't have an education, and I was determined to never be in that position again. I have now re-entered the workforce and have been promoted a few times. I attend school full-time, work full-time, I am a single mom of two teenage boys, I tote them around…Life is busy and I am determined to finish!

Josephine (age 59) had a slightly different perspective about being an older student on campus. She connected with many younger students through different student organizations and found this very essential to her student experience. Exposure to different worlds and thoughts by younger students helped dissipate her fears. Josephine reflected on her preconceptions:

> I am so old. How I am going to learn this? What am I going to do with this? How am I going get a job? I am sure [the negative thoughts] are sitting out there somewhere because on a bad day, I can touch every one of them. But it doesn't really matter right now because knowing that I have a supportive network on this campus means everything…and I mean everything to me!

Nancy discussed her feelings, and many of the focus group participants nodded vehemently in agreement:

> I just remember feeling terrified! I tested into Honors English 111; my class was basically a bunch of AP high school students. I was like, oh my gosh! I was so old, these kids are like super smart, they're the smartest kids in their classes. I found out later the competition wasn't really that stiff, a lot of people weren't really engaged—and I think that really quickly, I was like, Oh, it's good to be 30 and going to school because I am really interested in it. They would say things like, "I didn't do my homework, I'm so cool" and I'm like "that's not cool, that's stupid."

Agreeing with Nancy, Sandy commented, "Yeah, the young kids act like they're doing their parents a favor by being there." Marie also agreed, claiming a young girl in her class asked, "Why are you going to school? If I didn't have to be here, I wouldn't be here" at which point Marie shared… "hmmm, that's why I am here!" As the non-traditional students described the younger, traditional age students in the classroom, Sandy quipped, "I like going into the class and seeing older students…it's almost like I want to say to the ones just out of high school, 'could you be any more boring'?"

There was consensus among the focus group participants that younger students were often wasting their time and money, or someone's money, being in college. Bonnie passionately commented:

> The kids that did [college] right after high school, they don't put together that you just paid $500 for this class, so why wouldn't you put your best effort in to it? But for us…we've paid this money, we've **earned** this money. If we're gonna do it, we're going to do it well. We're going to ask every question, learn every aspect, and learn every technique. Many young people don't have any focus…how many times have you heard them say, "all I need is a 2.5"…Really—that's what your shooting for?

One participant shared that not all young students have wasted time and money, and in fact, she believed that some are driven by a very clear direction of what they want to do with their lives; a focus she never had in her late teens. Some participants discussed challenges of not knowing what they want to be when they grow up, even though, chronologically, they are already grown and have adult children or grandchildren. Marie (a grandmother at 51 years of age) shared that she is taking it slow and will only take one or two, maybe three classes in any semester. She wanted to integrate what she has learned with each course, and thinks she will be a social worker. She shared, "I just don't know what I want to be when I grow up!" She has a wonderful support system in her husband and friends, and she believes, "Everybody needs one or more people like that to encourage you to keep on keeping on!"

Many in the focus groups found support from teachers, family members, and co-workers, and one student commented that her biggest supporter is her ex-husband. However, even with support, these non-traditional students found some challenges navigating the higher education system.

Challenges for Adult Learners

The focus group participants shared a number of challenges they encountered returning to school and in the classroom. For students who are also parents, snow days for the public schools and the college remaining open, and/or the dilemma of what to do with sick kids was a challenge. A number of students shared that when their kids are sick they found most faculty will work with them about missed classes. For several, their biggest challenge was taking classes in an accelerated format or during the shortened summer session; although ideal for accelerating their program, the shortened format classes are intense, and the students wondered how much learning actually occurs. One student had challenges with the choice between school

and work; others faced internal struggles, and several discussed the lack of support by family or keeping their educational journey from friends out of fear they may not be successful. Other students discussed having to balance or juggle competing responsibilities, navigating institutional barriers related to scheduling, testing out of classes, placement testing, and classroom teacher experiences. Some of the stories came from students' early memories, including what Karen remembered:

> I wanted to quit that first day. It was a long day as I was in class from 9:00 am – 4:00 pm. I remember going out for lunch and seriously thought about going home; I thought I can't do this, and seriously thought about not going back. I felt I should be working as I am so used to being busy. Sitting in a class was very hard for me. I wasn't bringing home any money doing this. I thought I was stalling my job search and thinking, what am I doing sitting in a class? Should I drop out if a job comes along? If I got a job, would I risk my grade? It got easier, seven semesters later, I am still plugging away. I have not missed a class; I don't know; it gets easier. I just remember sitting there that first day being torn…should I be working or sitting in a classroom? I was conflicted, with all the "what ifs." What if this happens? I had to learn to let go and take it one day at a time.

Sandy disclosed:

> It's hard not to obsess over things. You just become a perfectionist; you become too hard on yourself. I freak out about everything. I put way too much pressure on myself. I like seeing the 4.00. Do I want to give that up and say, "no, I just need a 2.5; I think I'll go to a kegger"?

Gloria revealed, "I have severe panic syndrome, and I missed a paper in my English class. It got too big for me, and finally my English teacher shared, 'skip it and move on'." Later in the

individual interview, Gloria provided more information on her incomplete paper. She had picked the topic "addictions," and as she began her research, she realized it hit too close to home, because her son was in prison at the time on a drug related charge. He is out now, back living in her home, and she is scared of what he may try to do. Gloria desperately wants him to turn his life around but is afraid to trust him. She wished she had picked another topic, and she was going to talk with the instructor about starting over with a different focus. She knew part of her struggle was because of her panic syndrome, and she also believed that the topic was escalating her panic.

Marie shared, "I think for me, it's my own demons…I'm just fighting with myself and the older I get, I am seeing more of my insecurities. I have to fight with myself." Others shared a perceived lack of support by family members or friends. Rachelle remembered how she did well in a German class she took. She shared:

> I called my mother and upon hearing my news, she asked, "What good is German?" I quit letting anyone know about the classes I was taking. When I received my invitation to join the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, I was dancing around the house. My ex-husband called and he and our son are super supportive. My ex asked me, "Who are you going to tell?" I shared, "no-one." It really doesn't matter. I was so thrilled and I wasn't going to let anyone sour it for me.

During an individual interview, Karen said that she too, did not talk about taking classes and, in fact, had not told her best friend about returning to school:

> When I started to school with the BRIDGE program, nobody knew outside of my kids and my mom and dad; none of my friends knew. I refused to tell anybody because if I didn't make it, what are they going to think? If I can't finish it or if I drop out or if I fail, I didn't want to have to explain it to anybody so the best way around that was to not even

tell them I am going to school. Even my best friend didn't know I was going to school, until I started my third semester. The only reason I told her was because I made the Dean's list and it was posted in the community newspaper. It was the first time I physically saw my name in print on the part time dean's list. When I saw that, I thought I have to tell my best friend before she sees it! Well, then it caused a bit of a rift, and she said, "I can't believe I have talked to you every day for the last eight or nine months, and you couldn't tell me you were going to school?"

I was so afraid of failure that even my best friend didn't know I was going to school and now, well, you know the article they did on me in the paper about developmental education [the story made the community paper front page complete with picture] everybody knows, as I was "front page news above the fold!"

For many of the students, their challenges came in the form of juggling all of life's responsibilities. In addition to being students, many are employees, parents, heads of households, and caretakers of aging parents or grandchildren. Challenges included time, whether it was the time involved in attending class and studying, or the time that school meant away from family, friends and other responsibilities. Adult learners also faced challenges on how to navigate institutional policies or encountered instructors who were perceived as less than helpful. Karen shared:

My challenge has been time. My time is valuable to me…I hate sitting in a class where you feel you don't need to be there, especially three hour classes once a week where you feel like you could have learned this at home. I wish I knew how to test out of a class. I wish there was a way out—it's not a waste of time to achieve my goals but to sit through a class that you could probably test out of.

Later in an individual interview, Karen talked more about this, saying:

> It's definitely harder for me to sit in class as an adult student because I have so many other things I could be doing, and I can multi-task until the day is done. For example, with my online class, I can have my elluminate [online chat] session on and be listening to my professor while I do dishes and fold my laundry. You can't do that when you are sitting in a classroom. I think I can get the work done without sitting in classroom, I can get it done faster, and I can probably do it just as well. It's hard sitting in a class especially some when the class is at such a slow pace. I can't handle that. The teacher is talking about personal anecdotes. Not to be rude, but I don't care. That class drives me crazy. Just let me turn in all the assignments and be done!

Rachelle wished she had also known more about testing out of classes, indicating:

> Testing out of classes, I found I am taking classes to fill credits to get my degree and know that I could probably be teaching the class. I had two different instructors who were products of their catholic school education, and the nuns taught these people well, standing like a Gestapo in the front of the room. I dropped that class fast. It's so unnecessary. You can say things in so many different ways instead of putting someone down. I just don't like that! Had testing out been an option, I would have done that!

Several students shared their memories or their own "personal horror stories" about the placement test, classroom and/or teacher experiences that were challenging, Lisa shared:

> Taking the COMPASS test was my favorite memory of returning to school. I placed really well in English (Honors English) and loved it. But the math test, I have to say, it made me laugh so hard. I worked in the mortgage industry, I was a bank manager, a mortgage lender and a bookkeeper, and I had to take Beginning Algebra. I could not

> believe it. It was a real eye opener. But this is what I have been doing for the past 20 years, and I have made a great living doing it. WOW! I have to say, I couldn't believe it. Math has really changed a lot in the 20 plus years. I didn't know how to do it. I honestly didn't know! It was humbling, and being on the honor roll, really helped because otherwise, I think I would have felt mentally challenged because I have identified myself with this math thing for so long, this is what I do for a living, and to tank the COMPASS test was—well, you mean I will really have to apply myself, to do the homework? You've got to be kidding? I was on the honor roll in high school, and it really helped me to tank the test!

As the conversation shifted to math classes, the one common denominator among the focus group participants, Sandy revealed:

> My biggest obstacle was a math phobia. I think if I would have not just freaked out about having that, because I am 48 years old, and I thought I would have to start at kindergarten level math. I was thinking by the time I get up to snuff to take the math required for a program, I will be like 80! I have learned, I have to take it one step at a time, and I also found the Khan Academy on the Internet. After studying that for a month, I took the COMPASS test and I was surprised that I placed in MTH 23. I'm a lot closer than I thought. It's a bucket list thing for me, to prove that I can do it. I am going into accounting. I know it sounds boring as heck, and I don't know if I will like it or not, or if I will be able to find a job. It's like the proverbial Band-Aid thing, I just have to rip it off and see how bad it is.

Reece, who also placed into Math 23 Beginning Algebra, shared his struggle with math. He wanted to understand the subject, not just be able to do the problems:

> Math 23 was a real challenge for me. I graduated from high school in 1979, probably had my last math class in 1976. I never had any algebra. I am a self-learner; I got the *Algebra for Dummies* book and three or four different books. In high school, you don't need to understand what's behind it, you just need to do it. Now, I need to understand what's behind the problem.

Melanie shared:

> My beginning algebra class (was challenging)…the instructor was brilliant in math but wasn't good at working with people who didn't understand math. He asked someone to come to the board and work on an equation. The guy he asked did a problem and the instructor said, "What are you, an idiot?" The guy packed up his things and went straight to the department head. The instructor was extremely rude to people and not willing to help anybody. I barely escaped that class. He taught above the section level. The only good thing was that Math 111 (my next class) was so much easier than Math 23.

Gloria did not recount her challenging math story until we had our individual interview and then disclosed:

> I actually cut my fingernails for the second day of class. The teacher came over to me and my girlfriend the first day and said, "My, my, my, what pretty nails you have. They've got to go." My girlfriend asked why? The teacher picked up her calculator and punched the calculator and said; "we need to use our fingers to work." The girl picked up her pencil, used the eraser end and said, "how about that?" I went home and cut my nails. The other girl didn't, and the instructor wasn't very nice to her. My friend stayed only a few more days and then dropped the class. The instructor didn't give me any trouble after that because I cut my nails. I'm not trying to cause any problem here, if she

> wants me to cut my hair, I would have cut my hair. I need to get through math, you know what I mean? A lot of students didn't make it that semester in her class. After all this, I didn't pass the math class either.

When Gloria was questioned more about this experience and how this experience might be demonstrated in her grit score, she continued:

> Setbacks don't discourage me. I had one serious setback, when I took that Math 10/23 class, I got a 0.0. I was put on financial aid probation and I was horrified. I decided to take it over the very next semester, against my husband's wishes to wait a semester. I took it with a different instructor and got a 4.00.

Rachelle had some frustration with instructors and she described her experience this way:

> The thing that irritates me the most and I have watched it with two different instructors; I do not like condescending people. It drives me insane. I was enrolled in a class and I found myself gritting my teeth, about the instructor. I knew she and I were going to come to words, I dropped the class. It's so unnecessary! You can say things in so many different ways instead of putting someone down. I just don't like that!

During the focus group, after a number of challenges were discussed and several pauses occurred, it was interesting when Reece, a career military officer, offered:

> The biggest challenge for me is watching the self-destruction of the young kids in my classes. It really distracts me from where I want to go because I really care about them and I want them to succeed. You come to class and they don't show up, they don't come to class on time, they don't do their homework, and you want to ask them "what are you doing with your lives?" Then, I tell myself 'you've got enough on your plate. If they

come to you and ask you, then you can talk with them.' But for me, it's a big distraction for me and a challenge to overcome, watching them self-destruct.

As other participants listened to him, Reece felt affirmed by a number of head nods in the group. Rachelle, the oldest person in the group at age 60, shared, "I don't worry about these young students. I've watched them skip through. They are so smart, their brain just exudes smart." However, the younger students presented some additional challenges for adult learners. Younger students were often not prepared for class or group projects, and the adult learners found this a frustration; especially if a grade was attached to the group work.

As students discussed their challenges, an emerging theme was the need to just keep moving forward, they needed to just keep going; and although one woman mentioned she "was constantly fighting self-doubt," students kept attending class, and enrolled for future semesters. Amidst the challenges, there were signs of little victories and the students had many to share.

Early Successes

Whether those little victories included doing well on the COMPASS Placement Test, success in a class they didn't expect to do well, or finding their focus; the students eagerly shared their experiences. Reece, who was told he would never amount to anything and was no better than a D student in high school, shared how exciting it was for him to take the COMPASS placement test. He had been in the military for years, and coming in to take the exam, Reece did not know where he stood academically. He still remembered his D grades from high school. He reflected, "I thought I was stupid enough, I might not even qualify to go to college." Upon placing high enough on the placement exam to enroll in honors English, Reece shared with the faculty advisor at orientation, "I don't think I am that smart, there's got to be a mistake!"

Nadine talked about her first semester memory. She was in a beginning algebra class and

found she was really good at it after spending so much time drawing and painting. She also found an ability to focus on math just as she had done with the art classes, years before. For Nadine, this early success resulted in feelings of "being thrilled."

For Ryder, finding focus was also his success. He originally thought he would major in culinary arts or nursing. Ryder had completed two years of culinary arts through the career center in high school and figured people are always going to eat, or he thought he could choose nursing because people are always going to get hurt. Sitting in a beginning algebra class one day, Ryder reflected:

> I didn't even want to go to class that day. I had been up most of the night doing homework and my son who was less than six months old hadn't slept. I was tired, I threw on a hoodie and, for those of you who have children, you can identify when you saw them for the first time. You have that "special connection." I watched my math instructor have that connection with a problem on the board, and I knew I wanted to teach college math. I started in beginning algebra, and I have taken every math class now through differential equations. So for me, success is the willingness to be open-minded enough to find yourself.

Karen also found success in her beginning algebra class. She believed she had done two problems on a test correctly that were marked wrong. She went up to the instructor and shared that she wanted to respectfully challenge the two problems. The instructor recognized that Karen was right and re-graded all the exams. Karen commented:

> It's the only time I left school, wanting to call someone and brag about it! I have kept things pretty quiet; very few people knew I was taking classes. I didn't want to feel like a failure if I didn't make it, and so the less people that knew, the more I could continue on

without feeling like I owed anybody else anything. School was something I could do just for me!

For other students success was a completed honors project in an especially difficult course [Anatomy and Physiology], for others it was an invitation to join the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society. One student commented that she loved the electronic grade book available through Moodle [the learning management system], and she loved knowing where she ranked. Another student experienced success as a "pay it forward" lesson he helped a student with challenging software so that when he needed the help, he could get someone to return the favor. These successes contributed to students wanting to continue their education and as their success grew, the students recognized they were changing and growing as well.

Putting Self First

Many students recognized they were doing something for themselves by going to college and that after being married, being a parent, or being an employee it felt strange to be doing something purely for them. Lisa shared in her focus group introduction, "School is the only thing on my plate that is just for me. It's mine, all mine! When I ace an exam, I love it! Some moms like massages, I like school!"

Karen, reflecting on her growth, commented:

> To see myself succeed, to build self-esteem—it never gets old to see that 4.0. I have 70 credits and it doesn't get old! Sure I have this fear in the back of my head, "What if I lose that grade?" And then I remember, "It's not life, it's a grade, it's okay." I think a huge part of it for me is I do it because nobody thought I could. I have had two failed marriages. Both of my ex-spouses were extremely abusive; they tore down every part of my self-esteem. I wanted to do something for me to see myself succeed, and it's brought

me a long way to build my confidence; just to be an adult, and to succeed in work and in school. It's proving everybody else wrong. I am the first in my family to attend college and I have a high schooler. We are both doing algebra. We are doing the same problems, and it was the first time I was able to help him with his math. To be at that level, it feels great. I couldn't do high school algebra when I was in high school!

Lisa, another first generation college student reflected:

> For me, it's straight up competition. My mom is in Mensa, my sister is in Mensa; I was always intimidated to take the test because I'm not the smart one in my family. So now, when I make the Dean's List, and receive my invitation to join Phi Theta Kappa, or I get my grades, I scan them and send them to my mom. I am good at this, and I want them to know. I'm the first in my family to go to college. I'm surrounded by geniuses, but I'm the one who is going to have the piece of paper that says I really am smart. It's competition.

Melanie shared she also returned to school thinking it would help her provide more for her daughter. She too has embraced the competition and is driven by success:

> It started out to provide a better life for my daughter, and then it morphed into the drive to prove everybody else wrong. I wanted to get equal footing. I want to get past them. It's where I am at—a drive to succeed!

Reece disclosed his drive and the need to know where he ranked within his classes:

> My desire to succeed and learn something new, other than what I had already known, is something I look forward to. To come in [to the culinary school], cook a new recipe or write a new paper and have them tell me it's good, it's all a pat on my back and I know I am doing something for me. It's coming from inside of me. I am afraid of failure. I am

> afraid of failure so much that it drives me to study, to be that number one in class without saying it, to my classmates. I want to know where I am in the rankings. You don't want to let them know you ruined the average in that class because you got a 100 percent on the test. I keep telling myself, "I am not going to fail at this." I tell people I did okay. It drives me every day, being happy to come in and learn something new!

Many of the focus group participants recognized that putting oneself first while being in school was difficult and involved making tough choices when not everyone would be happy with the outcome. One student called these "heartbreaking" choices. Missing children's events at school because of class or homework that had to be done was a common thread. Bonnie shared that a tragedy in her family led to a blessing. Last fall when her father passed away, her mom moved in with Bonnie and her family. Bonnie feels twelve again as her mom makes "school lunches" and spends time with her grandchildren. Bonnie shared with her mom involved with the family, that she does not feel like she is ignoring them when she is in class or working on homework; this has allowed her to put herself first and yet not feel guilty about her family.

Local Model of Student Success

The Padilla Model (2009), explored in the literature review, provided the framework for this study. As part of the focus groups, students were asked to create lists of barriers they encountered at the community college. Additionally, they shared the knowledge they learned to overcome the barriers as well as the actions they took, or observed other students taking during their journey. The students identified many barriers they or others encountered.

Barriers:

- Child care—scheduling and lack of an on-campus option
- Affordability of course resources, i.e., textbooks

- Disabilities
- Lack of and/or inappropriate study skills
- Poorly written tests/assignments (lacking clarity)
- Lack of awareness/information about course content or methods
- Hours of tutoring and other services
- Learning styles not always recognized/acknowledged
- Managing multi-modal lecture styles (PowerPoint PPT+ notes + lecture)
- Not getting the PPT ahead of time
- Moodle (non-standard use)
- Group work
- Financial Aid
- Scheduling – course offering times and getting into popular classes
- Website—finding info and navigating
- Parking/Transportation
- Commuting
- Managing multiple responsibilities
- Cultural value of education
- Emotional health—depression/anxiety
- Translating previous experience to new fields
- Negativity from “support” systems

After listing the barriers they encountered, the students were asked to create a list of what knowledge helped them overcome any of the barriers mentioned. Their list of knowledge learned or acquired was only half as long as their list of barriers.

Knowledge Acquired or Learned:

- Learning appropriate study skills and strategies
- Awareness of available resources and options
- Outside resources (Lynda.com and private tutoring)
- Access or request materials (PPT) before class
- Self-confidence
- How to access, analyze and understand new inform and resources
- Critical thinking and logic
- Using technology
- Know yourself –what motivates you

After capturing the knowledge list, students were asked to create one additional list: they identified actions they took or saw other students take to overcome barriers. This list contained even fewer items than the knowledge list:

Actions Taken:

- Preparing for class early/previewing class material
- Know yourself and develop learning processes that work for you
- Schedule time for yourself
- Taking advantage of resources

- Asking for help
- Develop relationships with faculty and staff—seek mentors
- Make connections with other students

The lists of barriers, knowledge, and action contributed to the data. The conversations that took place around the lists are described in the themes and stories shared previously and in the sections that follow. The students were excited to learn through the focus groups that they were not traveling this journey alone.

I am Not Alone!

An opportunity to meet individually with some of the focus group participants allowed me to delve more deeply into how they came to be students, how they described experiences as learners through their lifetime, who or what motivated them on this journey, and whether anyone questioned why they were pursuing additional education. Six students, Annie, Gloria, Karen, Marie, Rachelle, and Ryder, participated in individual interviews, and their stories added to the data for understanding what contributed to their academic success.

As the students reflected on their experiences in the focus groups, there seemed to be positive energy generated by feeling they had discovered like-minded comrades in their learning journey. Ryder shared:

> It was inspirational to be in the focus group. It reminded me to keep pushing forward; there is lot of hope and possibilities. It was a good experience for me being in the focus group, realizing, I'm not the only one; it doesn't matter where you come from, or what you do, what encounters you've had or what obstacles you encounter. You can still persevere and be successful. All of them, [the focus group participants] were very successful in their own right. Everybody had a hurdle; that really resonated with me. By

hurdles, I mean as in life obstacles; some were positive, some were negative, and some seemed insurmountable at the time! Each individual had their own insurmountable challenge, and every single one of them, they persevered and overcame and are doing extremely well as students.

Karen reflected:

> It was really encouraging to see the people of all ages, gender, race and everything. We're all in the same boat. We all have different reasons for being there, but we're there, we're pressing on, it was nice. Most of my classes are online, so I don't see my peers. The majority of students when I am sitting in a class are in their 20's; they have different life circumstances. To sit in that focus group and to realize, if they can do it, I can do it; if they can come through such adversity, I can do it. I said to myself, "What am I complaining about?" It gave me a little bit more drive. To see where they are at, to see what they've come through and to continue on—it makes me feel not so alone!

Marie shared similar thoughts:

> I remember thinking as I was hearing tidbits of information and their stories, I am not as different as I thought I was. Life has kind of happened in between. It was encouraging for me to hear some of the stories, hear the struggles and the tools that helped them to succeed.

Conversely, even though Annie connected with the experiences of other students, she was not as positive about the focus group. She did not relate to some of their responses and was frustrated:

> Well if I am totally honest, I went out of there a little frustrated. I felt like it was a therapy session. Instead of answering questions, they went off task…oh never mind. I'd be rewriting history. I feel like it was interesting. There were a lot of those types of

themes of not having done well or it took time or maturity in figuring out what you want to do with yourself.

Overall though, the students responded favorably to the focus group experience and discussed opportunities to come together to support each other in the coming semesters. They were also more understanding of themselves and the challenges they faced when they heard the stories of other students on similar journeys.

Self-Discovery through a Re-entry Model

The individual interviews provided the opportunity to dig a little deeper into the students' stories about their prior learning experiences and thoughts about being back in the college. Some students chose to share more of their personal story and one in particular shared an especially meaningful moment for her in the focus group. Karen and Lisa had not seen each other for approximately ten years when they found themselves together in the focus group. They had worked together at the same bank, but their lives had gone in different directions, and they did not know the other was in school. During the focus group, Lisa shared that Karen's demeanor and confidence had changed since they had worked together ten years ago. Karen recognized this in herself, but to have someone else acknowledge this change was huge for her. Karen continued:

> It was a different time in my life. I didn't keep in touch with anybody from then. I never felt close to anyone because of the personal things I was going through. My husband, at that time, was in prison. It was a challenge for me, because I didn't want people to know. To tell people that I was married, they might ask me, "What does he do?" I was trying to keep that away from public knowledge, keep it away from the workplace. My kids were young at the time; they were one and three when I started working at that position. It

was very much an emotional time in my life. I didn't feel confident. My husband had had an affair. He'd gone to jail prior to that for domestic violence issues, prior to the prison thing. I had no self- confidence. I couldn't face people; I couldn't look at them. I was battered inside and out. There was no one I could trust. You don't reach out to people. You want to do it alone; you don't want to talk about your life, so I avoided it. I didn't want these new people in my life to know what it was like at home, I didn't want to be judged on that, I didn't want to risk not working because of it. I didn't know if my employer found out, if he'd keep me. My husband came home, and the behaviors started again. I filed for divorce, and that was the end of it. There was just a lot of emotional baggage that I carried for a long time. I didn't have any confidence. I didn't have any friends. I didn't want any friends; I didn't want to be vulnerable. It was a very lonely time. You are doing it all alone, but you are doing it alone on purpose. I think that stopped me from doing anything to better myself because I didn't feel like I was worth it. It wasn't until after my second divorce that I started looking at why do I choose the people I choose? What can I do to make myself better?

These questions brought Karen to the college and she enrolled in the BRIDGE program, a re-entry program designed for adult learners or students who needed a one semester boost to gain confidence and study skills to be successful in college. This cohort model included courses in communication, college success skills and technology. Five of the twenty-one students who participated in the research entered through the BRIDGE program. Karen continued:

> I think going through the BRIDGE program really helped me emotionally. It helped me to connect with academic success and personal success. Charlene was invaluable as an educator and as an encourager. I remember she had us do this exercise in the first week

where we put all our thoughts down on what was distracting us from our education. My list was front and back. She had us repeat the exercise the last week of class and I didn't have anything to write! It was all the self-assessments, learning to let myself learn, grow and discover who I am. It was really hard for me to put words to my value, to my worth. Sixteen weeks later I was able to laugh at myself; "Really Karen, if everything looked like it was in order, I could fool the world!" I had OCD tendencies. I was able to see such a turn in who I was. It was enough to push me on that I could do anything! It was a personal learning semester for me; it was my turning point. When I first started back, I was scared to be the old person in class. I was afraid, "What if I forget to go to class?" I was scared of failure! I wanted everything to look perfect from the outside. I was afraid of looking like I didn't have it together. It put the fear in me. Once I got through that first semester, everything was a cake walk.

Marie shared she, too, had entered through the BRIDGE program.

As a learner, I graduated high school in 1980; I didn't pay much attention to my education. People learn things because they have a certain position in the world, and I just don't have that position, so it's really not important for me, so I just have to say that. As a small child I think I was inquisitive and wanted to learn things, but something happened to me between that small child and that teenager. Trauma took away that wanting to learn for me. So coming to NMC was through the BRIDGE program. I had a therapist who encouraged me to take the BRIDGE program in 2006. When I made the decision to come to the BRIDGE program in 2010, I knew I would succeed, and everyone will succeed in the BRIDGE program.

I decided not to ask Marie about the trauma she experienced. Later on in the interview she volunteered more information:

> Neither of my parents went to high school. I think it was 8th grade when they stopped attending school. There are seven kids in our family, and I was the youngest. My oldest sister wanted to be a nurse. She was more of a grown up to me. She didn't make the test or pursue it. Everybody cleans houses, and nobody has gone any further, even my brothers. It just isn't in our family to go into higher education. I am swimming against that tide. I know they are thinking, "You little runt. You are the youngest and if they don't do it, how do you think you are going to do it?" So I am not sharing this journey with my parents. I will say things to my one sister, but I really don't have a relationship with my family. It was like a bomb went off in my family. My oldest sister got married. My dad left the family, so my mom moved the rest of us back to the U.S. We were living in Canada. I didn't have anybody to watch to see how it was done. The sister I was closest to had schizophrenia and introduced me to things that probably weren't the best. The whole first half of my life was survival. I applied for graduation, but I am not going to do that. I don't want to take four or five classes in a semester. I don't want to miss out on anything, and I'm going to keep on being a student for a while.

Thankful for the Support of Others

The students found themselves supported by family, advisors, teachers, and friends. One recognized a spouse who helped with the housework, another, the mother who returned to live and make lunches for her grown daughter and spend time with the granddaughter, an advisor who recommended classes, or teachers who encouraged and motivated students to continue, the students were thankful for the support they found on their journey. Marie shared:

> I am surprised at how I have found receptivity in most everybody that I have worked with here—students and teachers. People have been encouraging and understanding like Lisa, my advisor; she has been so helpful! Coming into NMC, I bring with me my experiences, and my expectation was the same as it was in high school. I didn't expect people to be that nice to me, as I was kind of more a reserved person. I have been surprised how much more comfortable I feel. I am expressing myself here, and people care and want me to learn. I never had that experience with learning in high school; it wasn't a good experience, not even in middle school. That's my fear, that nobody is going to care whether I succeed or not, and I have found that some people do [care], and I stay around those people, and I've really had good experiences. I relate to the younger students much more than I thought I would. I thought it wouldn't be that way, I get along well; I learn a lot from them, and I've been encouraging of them too.

Marie also shared how a friend encouraged her to return to school:

> My friend, I highly respect, she's like a mother figure /counselor figure for me as well as a friend. She was the one that encouraged me to take the BRIDGE program. She's been a cheerleader for me because my family isn't really that for me. My sisters will say, "That's cool, whatever you are doing," but my parents are not that encouraging. They've never been that encouraging force in my life. [My friend] is that person who has really encouraged me… not in a pushy way. I've seen what she has gone through in her life. She achieved high education. I am not so much different from her in life experiences, self-doubt, lack of confidence and all that good stuff, and that's been really helpful. That's just who she is, she doesn't try to be something she's not. Every now and then I have to stop and think, "I have a brain, just like everyone else." I went to a psychologist

and was tested because I didn't retain information. I tested normal. I have to keep taking that next step using those tools because I didn't have them before. I have to trust myself. I don't have a disability. It's the mental and emotional blocks, those voices; those demons that keep whispering in my head. She's been a real encouragement. Everybody needs somebody. My husband has been encouraging. He says, "You never had the opportunities and you do now, so just keep going forward." I am starting to feel like that magnet—I am starting to attract other pieces so I can keep moving forward!

Annie found support in the faculty and also found support from her family. She shared:

> Well, I think faculty, contribute a lot to student success. I have had really good experiences with all of my instructors. There was only one that didn't seem like he wanted to be here, and I thought, "If he didn't care, why should I care?" But I did care and I found everyone is supportive. The instructors have a lot of enthusiasm. I can see going to a different school with a different environment and maybe not doing as well. There's probably something about NMC that contributes to our success. I know that a lot of my personal circumstances are different [from other students] with not having to juggle a job; and I have one really great self-sufficient kid, and a supportive spouse. I am sure that contributes a lot. I hear my classmates talking about having to work full-time, trying to raise a family, and all of the other obligations, and I just don't have that. I have ample opportunity and time to get my work done and to give it the extra effort I want to put into it. I don't know if I would have done as well, if I was pulled in a million different directions.

Ryder was terrified of school and attending college:

> My projection was not good, but when I got here, I found something entirely different. All different ethnic groups were working together to succeed. That was different, that was new. My instructor for ENG 111/11 was very supportive. She picked on a group us, for fun. We were the 'smokers,' and when we'd come in from break, she'd have on the board how many days of our life we would lose per cigarette. She did it in a fun and caring way.

Ryder would like to have a career in higher education; his work as a math tutor and student success coach has stimulated this interest. He continued:

> Maybe I can have a successful academic career. Everyone was so inviting, so positive, here, let me help you succeed. I learned you have to want it and you have to seek out the resources. You know the adage: You can bring a horse to water. As a math tutor, I say to my students, "I will help you be as successful as you want to be. If you want to climb mountains, I will help you climb mountains. I promise you, because that's what everyone did for me!"

Gloria has been motivated and supported by her instructors. She shared:

> It's been the teachers and my drive for knowledge, [that contributed] to my education. It makes me keep, wanting to come, no matter what. Every time I get a compliment or an A, it makes me realize I can do it. It really motivates me to keep going.

Sandy also shared that developing relationships with teachers was instrumental to her success, adding, "I never had a role model until my first year of college."

<u>And Then, There's the Yearning</u>

The students shared their stories of the family members, friends or teachers who motivated them and kept them moving forward. There were multiple stories of support and

encouragement, and, yet, in the quiet places and spaces of their stories, there was also something more, as Karen, Gloria and Marie shared so poignantly:

For Karen,

> I think going through the BRIDGE program really helped me emotionally. It helped me to connect with academic success and personal success. I've gotten promoted four times at my job, in the year and a half I have been there. And I can honestly tell you it's hard to let go of some of those habits and those patterns that you accumulate during a time of such despair. We went without for so long, it's hard; it is still hard. You go to the grocery store, and you have this mentality that the money is not going to be there next week, so you don't want to buy very much because you don't know if you're going to need it for something else. If you do buy the food, you don't want to eat much because you don't know how long it's going to have to last. It's a huge mindset difference when you've been through such poverty issues. People don't think about it, they don't think it happens here. Two and a half years of not working is a big deal. I will never go through that again. I'm going to make sure my resume is chock full of everything that can I put on there so my resume will be at the top of the list, if this unfortunately should ever happen again. My motivation in learning is definitely to see myself reach my goal. I've got some family traits of tenacity—when you put your mind to something, it's not going away.

For Gloria:

> Learning is never a waste of time, no matter what. Prior to starting at NMC, I was going to counseling, hanging out with the kids, the grand kids and my husband, and you can

only watch so much television and eat so many Ho-Ho's. If it is between that and school, then school is the choice, no matter what!

I didn't know a lot about college. I thought it would be a lot harder than it was. I thought there would be a lot less help than there really is. Being here at NMC, with all the teachers and the reading and writing center and the math center, the tutors—it's great. That's the one thing I didn't realize, and I am really grateful for all of the support.

And for Marie:

There's something inside, there's something I don't know. I don't know exactly what I am going to do, or what I want to do. I don't know. People ask me that, people that I should be listening to; but there's something that makes me want to keep going, and I don't know what to call that. I think it's a spiritual thing. I believe for me that there is something I still need to do in life, part of my purpose in life. It's not done, there's something that is not done. I just keep going. When people question, "What kind of social work, do you want to do?" I don't know. I have proven that I can connect with people of any age. When I sit in a classroom, I look around and think. "There's something so good in every one of these people." I have more love inside of me that I want to share!

Summary

The students' community college experience provided a plethora of emotions; nervousness, fear, confusion, and overwhelmed are being replaced with excitement, gratitude for help, the thrill of success, and the joy for learning. Through focus groups and individual interviews, the students shared their stories. Although similar in placing in a developmental math class, their stories are unique. Some excelled in high school while others dropped out or

barely passed their high school graduation requirements. Some attended college right out of high school with several even completing a bachelor's degree, while others delayed their college start by decades. They share the demographic of being non-traditional in age, while their entry or re-entry experience to higher education differed. Some were thrilled and excited, and others were nervous or terrified. Many shared challenges they experienced: some battled the voices or demons in their own head, while others dealt with the feeling of doing it alone and afraid of failure. For others, the challenge to succeed in college came from how to balance and prioritize the competing demands on their time whether it was work, family, extended family, or even the amount of school work to which they could commit. Students described success as overcoming obstacles, real or perceived; and they discovered the joy of learning. Often, the joy was recognized as "guilty pleasure" of doing something for themselves; yet understanding they were also modeling lifelong learning for children or grandchildren. In the process of getting an education, they learned about themselves, and for this group of students, they were happy with the discovery. Some students discussed the importance of finding a mentor and establishing relationships with teachers, while others learned they still did not know all the answers or where the journey may lead.

Overall, the students were motivated by their experiences and were eager to share their stories. Their lives are incredibly full, and they were most excited to be a part of the focus group and to hear the stories of companions on similar journeys. Several students asked if there could be a support group so they could share their experiences and recognize they are not alone. The students' lives, like threads on a tapestry, are individual and unique. When woven together, though, they create an image that is even more rich and captivating and needs to be shared.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

Community college student enrollment is one of the fastest growing markets in higher education. Many students entering community college are underprepared for college level coursework; they may be first generation (first in their family to attend a post-secondary institution) and/or find themselves balancing multiple and competing priorities for their time. Employment and family obligations, including child care and elder care, may be more than distractions to a student's college education and may disrupt their degree completion. Open access to community college has meant an "open door" (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Clark, 1960), allowing students who were not prepared for college level coursework or who may not have had the funding to attend four year colleges and universities to attain advanced education. Recently, this open door has been called a "revolving door" (Tinto, 2008), as large numbers of students do not persist to their second year of coursework, and even fewer graduate or transfer to four-year colleges and universities.

Instead of exploring why students are struggling or departing from college, this study explored what contributed to student success at Northwestern Michigan College (NMC) through focus groups and individual interviews of underprepared students who were nearing the completion of their degree and had grade point averages of 3.50 or higher on a 4.00 scale. Twenty-one students who placed underprepared in math and were required to take a pre-algebra or beginning algebra class were invited to participate in the study. Each student completed a Grit Scale Inventory (Duckworth, 2007) to measure their commitment to a task, their focus when completing a project, and how they handled setbacks, and then they participated in a focus group

interview. During the focus groups the students also completed an alternative Local Model of Student Success (Padilla, 2009). Six of the students participated in a follow-up individual interview.

Themes and Research Questions

A number of themes related to what contributed to student success emerged from the data. These themes include academic grit, putting self first, recognition that students are not alone on their journey, and re-entry or student success programs. Using the Padilla (2009) Local Model of Student Success (LMSS) allowed students to discuss the barriers they encountered at the college, the knowledge they acquired to overcome the barriers, and the actions they took to be successful. These data provided the necessary information to answer the overarching research question and the two subsidiary questions that guided this study, which were:

1. What experiences do underprepared community college students perceive contributed to their academic success?
2. What knowledge, skills, and abilities did these students use to overcome barriers they encountered?
3. How do the constructs of motivation, expectancy, and mindset, impact underprepared community college students?

Meet the Students

Before addressing the research questions, it is important to know about the students who shared their stories. Twenty-one students, ranging in age from 27 – 60 participated in the research; their mean age was 42.10 years old, which is significantly higher than the institution's average age of 26 years for students enrolled for the fall semester of 2012. The students had earned at least 15 credits and two students had earned over 100 credits; on average they had

earned 55.86 credits, indicating that many students were close to completing their Associate's degree. All the students had determined their academic major prior to the focus groups. Twenty students had earned 3.50 or higher grade point averages, and one student volunteered to participate from the 2.00 – 2.50 GPA group. His actual grade point average at the time of the focus group was 2.74, since the 2013 spring semester grades had been posted, and he had received all 4.00's.

This study also looked at the relationship between academic grit/perseverance and student success. Ryder, in his individual interview, shared that he was amazed I picked a group of students who had all overcome some major life obstacle, enrolled in school, and were doing well. He was surprised to learn the only criteria for the focus group invitation was the 3.50 or higher grade point average and having originally placed in at least one developmental education class. It appeared the majority of the group who responded to participate in the study had overcome some major life obstacle. These obstacles included divorce or death of a loved one, being a high school dropout or poor performer in high school, or being a single parent or caregiver for an aging parent. The students' tenacity to rise above or push through their obstacle as well as complete their developmental course(s), complete at least 12 college level credits, and earn a 3.50 or higher GPA was reflected in their grit score. The twenty-one students were asked to complete a twelve item Grit Inventory (Duckworth, 2007) at the beginning of the focus group. The Inventory produced a grit score ranging from 1.00 to 5.00 with a score of five demonstrating the most "gritty." The participants' scores demonstrated higher than average grit at 3.96. The inventory asked questions to determine students' perception of how diligent or how hard they work, how easily discouraged they are by setbacks, and how often their interests change or their focus shifts on a project they are working on. The inventory uses a five item Likert scale

response that helps measure the intensity of the response. Duckworth claims, "Grit is sticking with your future day in, day out, not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years and working really hard to make that future a reality" (www.ted.com, May 10, 2013).

Padilla, (2009) recognized the role of resiliency in his Local Model of Student Success and determined students who "could achieve success even in the face of adversity or at least bounce back with a positive attitude and self-confidence despite failure" (p. 129) would more likely be retained in school. It seems likely that a student who has a higher grit score would be more resilient as they have learned to overcome setbacks and are more likely to complete a project they have started. But what are the limitations of the Grit Scale and is there a correlation between GPA and Grit? If grit is critical to student success, how should institutions scale up their efforts to assess students' grit prior to registering for classes? How are the concepts of grit, mindset, resilience, and self-determination theory connected? Duckworth (2012) found "the grittiest students—not the smartest ones—had the highest GPA's" (American Public Media). The relationship between these concepts related to persistence is not yet clear, and needs to be explored more fully in future research.

Question 1—What experiences do students believe contributed to their academic success?

There was an overwhelming sense of "this is my time", and/or "I am doing school for me" by the students who participated in the research. The students were excited about their educational journey, and they discussed openly their academic success and the experiences that contributed to it. Many recognized they also received help along the way. These experiences include the NMC BRIDGE program, finding their career focus, being recognized for academic excellence, receiving feedback from instructors and the ability to create relationships with faculty and staff as important to their success as students.

The college's BRIDGE program was a highly regarded experience discussed by five of the participants. This one semester elective program geared for adult returning students is designed to build students' skills and confidence before taking the COMPASS Placement test. A number of social service agencies in the community recommend the program to clients considering college, and the admissions and advising staff also recommend it to students. BRIDGE operates in a cohort model, and students discussed how the cohort helped them recognize there were other students who were unsure about returning to education. In the BRIDGE program, students attend two full days a week with day or evening options; they take computer classes, a communications class, and a math class. The program provided the students with many opportunities to develop study skills, for self-assessment and gaining confidence for their educational journey that they were lacking, and it eased the re-entry for approximately one-quarter of the participants in this study. Several former BRIDGE students discussed the benefits of the self-assessments, and the required journaling, discovering who they were, exploring what they were interested in pursuing, and how to develop study strategies.

For other students, discovering their focus and/or career path contributed to their feeling successful, as exemplified by Ryder. He thought he would be a culinary major, but instead he fell in love with math. Others described feeling successful when invited to do honors coursework or to join the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society, the honor society for two year colleges. Lisa talked about scanning her invitation to join Phi Theta Kappa and copies of her grades when her name appeared on the Dean's List and sending them off to her mother. These opportunities led students to believe they could be successful and they are considered to be among the "best of the best students" at NMC, as their letters of invitation to participate in honors coursework or join the honor society state. These outstanding students are *thriving,* and they believe their investment

of effort, motivation to succeed, pursuing one's goals, and managing one's time are part of academic determination (Schreiner, 2010).

The students also shared the value of receiving feedback from their instructors as an important part of their experience. Even when the feedback seemed critical, students recognized the importance of being able to learn and to grow from the critique. Feedback from other students was not as important as instructor feedback, but the participants found value in connecting with like-minded students in their classes, especially those who viewed their own educational journey as important and were serious about their academic pursuits. Additionally, students found value in establishing relationships with faculty and staff; these relationships were built in a number of ways, including the completion of honors contracts in courses, service-learning opportunities, or on campus employment. Students reported almost exclusively positive experiences interacting with faculty and staff as part of what contributed to their academic success.

Question 2—Overcoming Barriers

Myriad resources and strategies contributed to students overcoming barriers including awareness and use of appropriate organizational and study skills, time management, and college or internet resources. Additionally, self-confidence and knowing what motivates oneself were also mentioned frequently in the focus groups. Students discussed the need to develop learning processes for themselves, versus relying on what might work for others, scheduling time for themselves, knowing when to ask for help, making connections with other students, and developing relationships with faculty and staff, including finding a mentor, as strategies they used to overcome barriers to success in college.

Students discussed having a wide spectrum of institutional support services as essential to their success; services mentioned included the Tutoring Center, the Writing and Reading Center, the Math Center and the Student Success Center. Students really appreciated the fact that all the resources were free. Several students also used the Disability Support Services and appreciated the accommodations available to them which, depending on their disability, might include audio books, extended time on tests, and readers and notetakers for class. Additionally, the Student Success Center, with the availability to meet 1:1 with a success coach, was also appreciated. Online resources including Lynda.com, an online training library that covers many software titles for design and web development platforms, and PLATO, another online learning platform that NMC has purchased were also mentioned as especially valuable for students who, because of work or family obligations, were not able to take advantage of services that typically close at 5:00 p.m.

Classroom strategies to overcome barriers, including where to sit in the classroom, how to survive peer reviews, group projects, and using the resources available, were discussed by the students as important to their academic success. Several students shared that they originally sat in the back of the classroom so they could observe everything; others started sitting in the back and then realized they were less distracted when they sat near the front with their back to the windows. Those who moved to the front felt the back of the room was where those who really did not want to be in class or wanted to socialize sat. The focus group participants also felt many of the younger students spent class time on their phone, texting or checking Facebook during lectures, and participants did not like sitting near the distractions.

Students perceived peer reviews and group projects as potential barriers to their learning. Many saw the need for working on projects and class teams as a way to build skills for the work

world. However, these non-traditional students, many of whom work and raise families, were also discouraged about the time required outside of class for group projects. Even when class time was made available, they did not want to see a group grade impact their grade point average and have a negative impact on their overall GPA. Most students shared they would rather have the points for the class be under their control and not defined by a group project. Focus group participants described themselves as being "overly competitive" about their grades, and they often felt they "carried" their groups on many projects. They did not want to have "less than committed students" influence their course grade.

One of the more telling responses from the non-traditional students was that they believed they were more likely to take advantage of campus resources as compared to students just out of high school. They also believed they were much better about seeking resources or asking why something is not provided than the more traditional aged students. Participants saw this tenacity for seeking resources as part of how they overcome barriers. Once they had committed to their education, these students were not going to let anything keep them from completing it, and they wanted services to match their level of expectation.

Question 3—Constructs of motivation, expectancy and mindset

As the students discussed the educational barriers they encountered, the knowledge they acquired, or how they learned to move beyond the barrier to the actions taken, there were some common themes. Students recognized that their self-confidence, learning what motivated them, and the learning processes that worked for them were important. Students were motivated both extrinsically and intrinsically. Extrinsic motivators included grades, and invitations to complete honors contracts or to join the Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society; and for one student cutting her fingernails to gain her instructor's approval motivated her in math. Intrinsic motivators included

wanting to prove to themselves and others that they could be successful at school, and the desire to do more than was required by proving mastery or expertise in the subject. Many students reported that they were not going to let anything get in the way of their education, that for too long they had been someone's spouse or mother, and that this was their time to do something for themselves. One woman reported that school is the only thing on her plate that is "just for me…it's mine, all mine!" Students shared that they will not give up and will not let anything or anyone stop them from their educational journey. This is what Daniel Pink (2009) referred to as drive, the powerful motivation that comes when you put your mind to something. Some of this drive is related to the student's tenacity or grit.

Several students did not expect to be successful, thinking their college experience might mirror their high school experience of poor grades and lack of direction. Instead, students reported finding focus or their own personal drive through their initial success with the placement test or introductory courses. Dweck (2008) described the construct of mindset as what people believe shapes what they achieve. Students recognized their academic success and utilized resources to continue their success; more importantly, they believed they could be successful. For example, one woman reported beginning college to better provide for her daughter, and after some initial success, her mantra became to prove everyone else wrong that she would not be successful as a student. Now she recognizes her drive is much more personal; her motivation now is to succeed for herself.

Motivation of Higher Achieving Students:

A discussion of the findings would not be complete without exploring the differences in the response time of the two groups of students based on their GPA to participate in the study. The higher achieving grade point group were much more motivated to participate in the study,

based on their response time to the invitation, than the students with a grade point average of 2.00 – 2.50. The Office of Research Planning and Effectiveness (ORPE) emailed the letter of invitation to the students who qualified for the study, which included a link to a brief survey in which they agreed to participate in the study. Within 24 hours of the email invitation, twelve students in the higher achieving grade point group had responded, as compared with only two students in the 2.00 – 2.50 GPA group. Within a week, twenty students agreed to participate in one of two focus groups for students with the higher grade point averages, and I was still waiting for responses from the other grade point average group. Eventually, two students responded and agreed to attend a focus group. On the day of their scheduled focus group, only one student actually showed up. I called the other student who had emailed her lunch preference (I was providing lunch); she shared that she was driving her brother to an appointment and was an hour away and "guessed she wasn't going to make the focus group." Subsequent emails to this group to determine if they would respond electronically to the questions were unanswered except by one student who responded with a one word reply—yes. After forwarding her the consent form and the questions and thanking her for agreeing to participate, I received another one word answer, "sure" and never received the responses.

It is possible that if this study were to be replicated, another group of students in the 2.00 – 2.50 GPA range might be more responsive. It is also possible because the study occurred right at the end of the spring semester that another timeframe might yield better participation results from students. How many other opportunities are missed by students not checking their student email on a regular basis?

The Padilla Framework

This study used Raymond Padilla's *Student Success Modeling* (2009) as a framework.

Padilla encourages educators to create Local Models of Student Success (LMSS), and an alternative form of a LMSS was created by the students in this study. To create the model, students were asked during the focus group to identify the barriers they encountered in their educational pursuit. Padilla identified 59 barriers in the book and categorized the barriers as:

- Personal
- Financial
- Coursework
- Learning
- Institutional Barriers
- Student Support Barriers

Students in this study identified 21 barriers found within the Padilla classification groupings. For example, NMC students experienced personal barriers including childcare, disabilities, commuting, managing multiple responsibilities, cultural value of education, emotional health/depression/anxiety, and negativity from support systems. Financial barriers include affordability of course resources/textbooks and availability of financial aid. Coursework barriers include poorly written tests/assignments that lack clarity, managing multi-modal lecture styles (PowerPoint with notes and lecture), Moodle (the lack of standardized use of this online learning platform by faculty), and group work. Identified learning barriers were the lack of appropriate study skills and the fact that learning styles are not always recognized or acknowledged by instructors. NMC students identified Institutional Barriers to be the lack of awareness/information about course content or the instructional delivery method, the hours of the tutoring center and other services, the course offering times and access to popular classes, and

finding and navigating the college's website, and parking. Students also reported that translating previous experience to new academic fields is a perceived barrier. This best fit in the Student Support Barriers category identified by Padilla (2009).

Throughout the focus group and individual interviews, students discussed other barriers captured by Padilla (2009) in his list, including finding balance, lack of support by family and friends, having to work while attending school, mandatory out-of-class group work, fellow students lacking skills and motivation, problems with the English language, and making time for studying. While most barriers mentioned by the students fit within the Padilla (2009) model, NMC students more succinctly expressed several barriers not found in his list. One barrier was managing multi-modal lecture styles where instructors use PowerPoint with Notes as well as lecture. Some instructors are reluctant to share their PowerPoints with students prior to the class, and for these students, it was important to have access prior to class so they could review the notes, compare them with the text, and prepare for the lecture. Another barrier encountered by NMC students was the cultural value of education, especially among first generation students where education was not modeled. Students felt torn between their desire for improving their lives through education and the negativity they received from their families and their "support" system about the time and energy spent on education. The final barrier expressed by NMC students not found in the Padilla (2009) model was the lack of translating previous experiences to their education. Students expressed interest in earning more credits for life and work experience and/or having alternative formats for course delivery that would be more expedient or accessible for students with extremely full lives.

NMC students discussed developing their critical thinking skills and logic as part of the knowledge they acquired to overcome the barriers they encountered. This was not something

mentioned specifically by Padilla (2009) in his LMSS. Critical thinking has been identified by Northwestern Michigan College as one of its three general education outcomes, and that may have triggered students to express that item specifically. Additionally, in the actions list generated by NMC students, they identified developing relationships with faculty and staff and seeking mentors as contributing to their success. Padilla (2009) encourages all community colleges after they create a LMSS to compare and contrast what they can do at their institution. Additionally, he suggests colleges delve deeper into sub-populations of students to explore the commonalities and differences across different populations. For example, even within this study of non-traditional age students, there were different experiences and obligations the students brought to their educational journey, whether they were a first generation college student, single parent, had a learning disability, or were employed. Their lived experiences demonstrated different barriers they encountered, knowledge they found helpful, or actions they took to overcome the barriers. It is important for colleges not to think that a single solution will work for all students as colleges try to mitigate the barriers on their campus.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The students in this study provided insights into the experiences contributing to their academic success. They shared the knowledge and actions they took to overcome the barriers they encountered as students. Additionally, they discussed how being motivated, growing accustomed to expect academic success, and having a positive mindset impacted their student experience. These insights may provide researchers and practitioners with opportunities to impact both practice and policy at the individual, course, and institutional level.

At the individual student level, students expressed the desire to know other non-traditional students like themselves. For a number of the students, they enjoyed the camaraderie

of a group of students like themselves getting together to discuss their educational pursuits and their experiences. One way to do this would be to provide a support group or student organization for non-traditional students. They thought a student organization/ support group would be helpful for them feeling like they were not alone on this journey.

Students also resonated with the Grit Scale as a way of understanding how their perseverance and tenacity contribute to their academic success. Providing an opportunity for students to test their grittiness may go a long way in reducing the number of students who do not persist through the semester or are retained between semesters. Institutions could decide to have students complete the 12 item grit scale at orientation or as part of their first day of class. Results could be used to determine if students who persist through the semester can be better predicted by their grit score result over their course placement scores. It would be interesting to pilot this over a larger audience and determine if there is a correlation between grit and retention and between grit and student success. Duckworth (2013) believes that "Grit predicts success over and beyond talent. When you consider individuals of equal talent, the grittier ones do better," (www.ted.com) and it is possible that adults returning to education are rediscovering just how gritty they might be. Take Hank for example, who had a ten year break from when he first started college until he returned. His GPA originally was in the 2.00 – 2.50 range; in his two semesters since he returned, his grades have improved to all 3.50 – 4.00's. Is he grittier since he returned to college, or are there other factors that adult learners bring to their experience that help them persist and achieve in college? Since grit can be learned, students whose grit score is average or below average could be referred to a Student Success Center or another student services area, to determine if the student misunderstood questions, or needs to learn how to develop their grit through a workshop or other training program.

At the course level, a number of the students commented they would also like more flexibility in the course offerings, both in the number of classes available as hybrid or online course options as well as the opportunity for courses to be available in an accelerated format. One student shared she would love to see accelerated options available year round instead of just during the summer session. The more the adult student is juggling with regard to work and/or family obligations, the more these options are appealing. Students also discussed the desire to be able to test out of more classes or have the opportunity for a portfolio assessment of work to show competency for all or part of the course material so as not to sit through a 16 week course for the sake of seat time.

One way to potentially mitigate students' frustration with group projects and "carrying" non performing students would be to offer more honors sections or courses limited to enrollment by higher achieving students. These students might find themselves more challenged in a class with more motivated students. Also at the course level, instructors should explore policies restricting cell phone use during class, to minimize distractions and engage more students in class discussions and projects.

Child care continues to be a barrier for students and is compounded when their children are sick or the K-12 system has weather or in-service related closures. One promising practice would be for faculty to capture their class on podcast or utilize other technology for students to access information.

At the institutional level, decisions on what to do with community college students who arrive underprepared are impacting both policy and practice. The students in this study were all underprepared for college based on their COMPASS placement score; all 21 of the students were underprepared in math, testing at least two if not three courses below college algebra. From the

21 participants in this study, 13 completed their developmental math course in the first or second semester of enrollment. One student completed math in the third semester of enrollment, two more in their fifth semester, one each in their sixth, seventh and eighth semesters and two students have yet to register for their math class; and yet all of these students have been identified as successful, with grade point averages of 3.50 or higher, and they have earned on average at least 50 college level credits beyond any developmental courses they have taken. Should colleges require a student to begin with developmental math and/or English classes based on their placement scores? Should students have access to other classes in the curriculum before completing developmental math and/or English courses? Colleges need to study whether taking the developmental class in the first semester improves performance in subsequent semesters.

A follow up study to the NMC 2008 data which put in practice a policy requiring students to complete their developmental math or English classes in their first semester could be revisited. The 2008 study illustrated students who completed their developmental English and math classes performed better in subsequent courses. Not all students in this study adhered to the 2008 policy of taking their developmental math courses first, and yet they are still successful. The institution needs to determine whether the policy is making a difference with regard to student success. It is necessary to compare whether the requirement of completing developmental math or English continued to create success in subsequent semesters.

At the institutional level, colleges need to explore how they assist students to develop heuristic knowledge, the more informal knowledge about how the college operates (Padilla, 2009). It may not be enough to tell students at orientation that all communication will come via email; signs on bulletin boards, banners hanging in classroom buildings, and faculty sharing this message could re-enforce the critical value of students checking their email. Colleges could also

determine if there are more efficient and effective ways to communicate using social media (Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr) or text messaging, and whether these preferences are defined by the age of the student and/or by the campus culture.

Finally, it is also imperative for institutions to provide a mechanism for classrooms concerns/complaints to be addressed. Students need to be able to discuss inappropriate requests, comments, or rude behaviors by faculty and staff, and be able to do so without fear of recourse while enrolled in the course. Participants in this study shared that they either tolerated what they described as inappropriate behavior by some faculty or waited until the end of the semester to discuss with an academic chair out of fear for how their grade would be impacted. In some cases, students dropped the course or knew of other students who dropped a course, or left the institution altogether rather than tolerate the behavior. Institutions need to insure they are providing a safe environment for students to learn.

Future Studies

This study made me realize how much we do not know about successful students. Surveys are administered fairly routinely on most college campuses to determine student satisfaction with services, their evaluation of classroom experiences and/or instructors, placement responses six months after graduation to determine if they have landed a job/career in their field of study, and even why students may have dropped out. Rarely, however, do institutions look at what is working successfully on their campuses. This failure to check and adjust contributes to institutions keeping programs and services long after they may have outlived their benefit, or creating policies without the follow up to determine if the results warrant continuation of a policy, program, or service. The post-secondary education literature for years focused on why students were dropping out (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Tinto, 1993); rarely

did it explore what was happening for students who were successful or thriving (Schreiner, 2010). To understand what is happening in the successful student's experience, more students need to be studied and more colleges need to be involved. Padilla (2009) suggested that every community college needs to create a Local Model of Student Success. Determining if there is a relationship between what is captured in the LMSS with regard to barriers and how students use grit, motivation, mindset and expectancy could be further explored. More specifically, are there differences for students who are first generation or members of other sub-populations that could provide additional information for colleges as they work to improve the resources necessary for student success? These models when created could be studied to determine common themes across institutions to inform both policy and practice.

A number of the participants had overcome incredible obstacles including physical and verbal abuse as children, addictions, domestic violence, divorce, and loss of a loved one. Did these experiences contribute to their sense of resilience or grit? Do survivors cope better when they return to school than students who have not had to overcome such major life obstacles? A future study could be designed to explore the differences between those who have survived some traumatic life event versus the student who delayed their enrollment because of finances, marriage, children or other family obligations.

The approach of using both focus groups and individual interviews could be replicated on other community college campuses; to determine if there are consistencies between themes and experiences. Originally scheduled to run for 90 minutes each, the focus groups were just under 120 minutes and 150 minutes, demonstrating the students had plenty to share. It would be interesting to look at community colleges that provide a support group or student organization for non-traditional students to determine if they have met a niche for having these students

connect outside the classroom. Some students participating in this study said it was the first time a small group like themselves had been brought together.

The original intent of the study to compare students who are successful at the 2.00 – 2.50 grade point average with students who are exceling academically at the 3.50 GPA or higher, was not met. Being able to conduct that study may provide deeper understanding of how these two populations differ. It would have been interesting to compare the grit scores of students achieving grades of 2.00 – 2.50 with those students in the higher grade point average group, even though both groups of students are successful. Another study could compare the grit scores of those who drop out or are asked to leave the institution because of poor performance with those students in the 2.00 – 2.50 range, to see if there is a quantifiable difference in grit scores and/or experience. Is there something small that can be addressed that might cause a difference in student success? The opportunity to code responses and compare whether there are certain aspects of grit that are differentiated by grade point average could be another study.

It may be interesting to explore sub-populations of students in future studies; for example, with increasing numbers of veterans returning to college, are there unique barriers veterans may experience? It would also be interesting to see if this study could be scaled to include more students and to determine if the identified themes of grit, putting self first, recognition that students are not alone on their journey, and re-entry or student success programs are inclusive of what contributes to student success, or if other themes emerge. Additionally, are the constructs of motivation, expectancy and mindset also scalable to determine how they impact student success? Using the Local Model of Student Success (Padilla, 2009) across larger groups of students would also help colleges understand the barriers students face as well as the knowledge they have acquired or learned to be successful. Knowing this information would

allow colleges to create student success manuals or orientation programs that might better meet the student's needs and help many more students be even more successful.

Institutions of higher education and especially community colleges seem poised to tackle the problem of too many underprepared students not being successful. In light of increasing pressure from state and federal government as well as local stakeholders, this work is important. The revolving door needs to be an evolving door where students succeed and become the fully functioning individuals they are capable of becoming. And when this happens, not only will our students' lives be transformed, so will our institutions.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Email Invitation to Students

APPENDIX A

Email Invitation to Students

I am writing to request your consideration to participate in my research study on experiences of successful community college students. The purpose of this study is to learn from you about your experience and what contributed to your success as a student. The research is part of a dissertation for fulfillment of my doctoral degree in higher, adult, and lifelong education at Michigan State University.

As a successful student at Northwestern Michigan College, your participation would contribute to my understanding of the journey community college students undertake. I will explore the things you think contributed to your success and the barriers or obstacles you may have had to overcome.

I would like you to participate in a focus group where I will provide food and beverages, and I have asked 8 – 12 other NMC students to join us. I plan to tape the discussion to help me remember all of your comments, and when I report my findings you will be given an alias so no one will be able to connect your comments back to you.

As colleges across the country explore ways to improve student success, I keep saying we need to ask those students who are successful, what contributed to your success? Please come and share your story by completing the three question survey at the link below:

Follow this link to the Survey:
Take the Survey

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
https://nmcir.qualtrics.com/WRQualtricsSurveyEngine/?SID=SV_9YVqnijIfHKUk5f&Preview=Survey&_=1

Thank you for considering and congratulations again on your success at NMC!

Sincerely,

Kari

Kari Kahler
MSU Doctoral Student
231-995-1228
kkahler@nmc.edu

APPENDIX B

Follow Up E-mail to Students

APPENDIX B

Follow Up E-mail to Students

Greetings! This is a reminder for your consideration to participate in my research study on experiences of successful community college students. For those of you who may have missed the first invitation, the purpose of this study is to learn from you about your experience and what contributed to your success as a student. The research is part of a dissertation for fulfillment of my doctoral degree in higher, adult, and lifelong education at Michigan State University.

As a successful student at Northwestern Michigan College, your participation would contribute to my understanding of the journey community college students undertake. I will explore the things you think contributed to your success and the barriers or obstacles you may have had to overcome.

I would like you to participate in a focus group where I will provide food and beverages, and I have asked 8 – 12 other NMC students to join us. I plan to tape the discussion to help me remember all of your comments, and when I report my findings you will be given an alias so no one will be able to connect your comments back to you.

As colleges across the country explore ways to improve student success, I keep saying we need to ask those students who are successful, what contributed to your success? Please come and share your story by completing the three question survey at the link below. The focus groups will be scheduled for the week of May 6th as we are now half way through exam week.

Thank you for considering and congratulations again on your success at NMC!

Follow this link to the Survey:
Take the Survey

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:
https://nmcir.qualtrics.com/WRQualtricsSurveyEngine/?SID=SV_9YVqnijIfHKUk5f&Preview=Survey&_=1

Sincerely,

Kari

Kari Kahler
MSU Doctoral Student
231-995-1228
kkahler@nmc.edu

APPENDIX C

Reminder Email for the Focus Group

APPENDIX C

Reminder Email for Focus Group

Congratulations on completing another semester at NMC and thank you for agreeing to participate in a focus group with 8 - 12 other successful students for my research. There are two sessions to pick from this coming week; you need to only attend one. One will be Tuesday, May 7 at 11:30 a.m. and the other will be Wednesday, May 8th at 11:30 a.m. Both sessions will be in Osterlin 201 and I will provide lunch. I know how busy you are and I will keep the session to between 90 minutes and two hours maximum.

As I have shared in previous correspondence, my research is focused on students who may have overcome barriers in their student experience and have become successful students. You are to be commended for all that you have achieved and I hope that not only can I learn more about your journey but be able to share your story and stories of students like you so that community colleges can help remove barriers for other students.

When you arrive for the group meeting, you will be asked to sign a consent form that states you are volunteering for this study. As I have shared previously, I will make every effort to maintain your privacy as I report the findings.

I hope you are still able to participate, **please let me know** by return email **which day you can attend**. If for any reason your plans have changed, please let me know as soon as possible so I can work on an alternate date.

I look forward to meeting with you and hearing your story!

Sincerely,

Kari Kahler

MSU Doctoral Student

231-995-1228

kkahler@nmc.edu

APPENDIX D

Consent Form

APPENDIX D

Consent Form

Study Title: Community College Student Success

Principal Investigator:
Dr. Marilyn Amey, Professor and Chair
Department of Educational Administration, Michigan State University
418 Erickson Hall, East Lansing, MI 48824, (517)432-1056, amey@msu.edu

Researcher:
Kari Kahler, Doctoral Candidate
Michigan State University
(231) 995-1228
kkahler@nmc.edu

Purpose of Research:

The purpose of this research is in fulfillment of a dissertation requirement for the Ph.D. in higher, adult, and lifelong education. The goal of this study is to understand the factors contributing to the success of community college students.

Procedures:

You will be asked to participate in a focus group with 8 – 12 other students to share what you believe contributed to your success as a community college student. You will be asked to take a 12 item Grit inventory and you will also be asked to identify barriers you may have encountered, knowledge and skills you acquired to overcome the barriers and actions you took to be successful.

You may also be invited to participate in a 1:1 interview as a follow up where you will be asked a series of open ended questions providing a more in-depth look at your experience as a community college student.

Potential Benefits:

You will contribute to an expanding body of knowledge on what community colleges can learn from successful students and how can colleges across the country help by removing barriers students may have encountered in their educational journey.

Food and beverages will be provided for your consumption and other than that, it is possible you many not benefit from participation in this study.

Potential Risks and Discomforts:

Several precautions will be taken to protect your confidentiality as a participant. You will be assigned or allowed to select a pseudonym to maintain privacy of your identity. Your contact name and information will only be used to contact you for arrangements for this research.

Sometimes in a focus group, students may share experiences they later regret, and I will ask as part of this consent for everyone to honor, what is heard in this room, stays in this room. There may be some unforeseen risks that are not known at the present time.

Privacy and Confidentiality:

Information produced by this study will be confidential and private to the maximum extent allowable by law.

Information and responses in the form of transcriptions will be recorded on a separate electronic document (Microsoft Word®) without any personal identifying names attached. Data collected on barriers, knowledge and actions taken to over the barriers will be collected without contributor's name attached.

Transcriptions of the focus groups, recordings of the interviews and any notes collected by the researcher will use pseudonyms.

Voluntary Participation:

You are under no obligation to participate in this research. Participation is strictly voluntary. By voluntarily entering this study, you do not waive any of your legal rights. You may withdraw your participation at any time without prejudice. You have the option to not answer any question you feel is not applicable or inappropriate.

The total time commitment is 60 – 90 minutes for the focus group and an additional 30 – 60 minutes for an individual follow up interview.

You may request a copy of the focus group transcript, the summary sheets on barriers, knowledge and actions taken, the individual interview transcript or the final report if you wish.

Contact Information for Questions and Concerns:

If you have any questions or concerns, you may contact Marilyn Amey, Principal Investigator at amey@msu.edu or (517) 432-1056.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights and/or role as a research participant, would like to obtain information or offer input, or would like to register a complaint about this study, you may contact, anonymously if you wish, Michigan State University's Human Research Protection Program at 517-355-2180, or e-mail irb@msu.edu or regular mail at 207 Olds Hall, MSU, East Lansing, MI 48824.

Informed Consent Agreement:

You are indicating your voluntary agreement to participate in this study by participating in the focus group and follow up interview by signing this consent form. You are also indicating you would like to be in this research study and agree to be audio recorded during the focus group and follow up interview.

_____ _____

Signature Date

_____

Please Print Name

APPENDIX E

Grit Scale

APPENDIX E

Grit Scale

12- Item Grit Scale

Directions for taking the Grit Scale: Please respond to the following 12 items. Be honest – there are no right or wrong answers!

1. I have overcome setbacks to conquer an important challenge.
- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

2. New ideas and projects sometimes distract me from previous ones.
- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

3. My interests change from year to year.
- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

4. Setbacks don't discourage me.
- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

5. I have been obsessed with a certain idea or project for a short time but later lost interest.
- Very much like me
- Mostly like me
- Somewhat like me
- Not much like me
- Not like me at all

6. I am a hard worker.
□Very much like me
□Mostly like me
□Somewhat like me
□Not much like me
□Not like me at all

7. I often set a goal but later choose to pursue a different one.
□Very much like me
□Mostly like me
□Somewhat like me
□Not much like me
□Not like me at all

8. I have difficulty maintaining my focus on projects that take more than a few months to complete.
□Very much like me
□Mostly like me
□Somewhat like me
□Not much like me
□Not like me at all

9. I finish whatever I begin.
□Very much like me
□Mostly like me
□Somewhat like me
□Not much like me
□Not like me at all

10. I have achieved a goal that took years of work.
□Very much like me
□Mostly like me
□Somewhat like me
□Not much like me
□Not like me at all

11. I become interested in new pursuits every few months.
□Very much like me
□Mostly like me
□Somewhat like me
□Not much like me
□Not like me at all

12. I am diligent
□Very much like me
□Mostly like me
□Somewhat like me
□Not much like me
□Not like me at all

Scoring:
1. For questions 1, 4, 6, 9, 10 and 12 assign the following points:

5 = Very much like me
4 = Mostly like me
3 = Somewhat like me
2 = Not much like me
1 = Not like me at all

2. For questions 2, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 11 assign the following points:

1 = Very much like me
2 = Mostly like me
3 = Somewhat like me
4 = Not much like me
5 = Not like me at all

Add up all the points and divide by 12. The maximum score on this scale is 5 (extremely gritty), and the lowest scale on this scale is 1 (not at all gritty).

Please provide your response to the question below:

Now that you have completed the Grit Scale and determined your grittiness score, what do you think of your level of grittiness?

Please self-report your cumulative GPA range:

_____below 2.00

_____2.00 – 2.49

_____2.50 – 2.99

_____3.00 – 3.49

_____3.50 – 4.00

Source: Duckworth, A.L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M.D., & Kelly, D.R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 9*, 1087-1101.

APPENDIX F

Ground Rules

APPENDIX F

Ground Rules

I have found that groups tend to function better when ground rules have been established or the group creates them together. In the interest of time for the focus group, I intend to share pre-established ground rules and ask the participants if they can adhere to them while we work through the focus group questions and group activity.

Suggested Ground Rules:

- Let others speak without interrupting
- Everyone has something to contribute, so don't monopolize the discussion
- Don't assume that your experience is the same as the person next to you
- What is shared in the room should not be shared with others outside of this group
- Even though we will use each other's names during the focus group, when the research is written up, everyone will have a pseudonym
- Please speak up so your voice is recorded
- Please be honest if you have constructive criticism to share so improvements can occur where necessary
- We will be scribing (writing down) some of the responses…please let us know if we have misconstrued or misunderstood your idea

APPENDIX G

Focus Group Questions

APPENDIX G

Focus Group Questions

1.) Please share with the group how you came to be a student at the college.

2.) Please share memories of your first semester taking classes at the college.

3.) What has been the most rewarding experience for you as a student at the college?

4.) You have probably heard comments from friends and fellow students about their experience at the college, what do you think they have found to be rewarding?

5.) What has been your most challenging experience for you as a student at the college?

6.) You have probably heard comments from friends and fellow students about their experience at the college, what do you think they have found to be challenging?

7.) Please share your experience of taking the COMPASS Placement Exam.

8.) How did it feel when you first learned your COMPASS scores placed you in developmental classes?

9.) To what do you attribute your academic success?

10.) As you reflect on your experience at the college, what do you know now that you wish you had known when you began your experience?

11.) Now that you have had an opportunity to think about your college experience, do you have any thoughts about what contributed to your success here?

Create the lists of barriers, knowledge, and actions taken to overcome barriers

Follow up questions:

12.) How can students' motivation help them succeed in college?
13.) What did you think of the Grit Scale?
14.) How do you perceive your level of "grittiness"?
15.) How can your grittiness help or hinder your student experience?
16.) As you reflect on what you have heard today, what would you share with another individual considering attending college?

APPENDIX H

Individual Interview Questions

APPENDIX H

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your background as a learner and how you came to attend NMC.

2. What are your observations on the things you heard or observed at the focus group?

3. How would you describe your experience as a learner through your lifetime?

4. Please share with me your experience as a student at the college.

5. Are there any questions that you would like to provide more information about, now that you are not a part of the group setting?

6. As you think about your education, please describe who or what may have motivated you during your journey?

7. As you think about your education, did anyone ever question why you were continuing your education? If so, how did you respond?

8. As you reflect on your experience here at the college, what do you know now that you wish you had known at the beginning of your experience?

9. Now that you have had an opportunity to think about your experience here at the college, do you have any other thought about what has contributed to your academic success or experience?

10. As you may have had time to reflect on the grit inventory you took at the focus group, is there anything that seemed to fit related to your academic experience?

11. If you were given the opportunity to design a new college that was focused on student success and completion, what would you do?

12. Do you have anything else you would like to share with me regarding your experience as a student?

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