

## Faculty Perceptions of Persistence among African American Students Enrolled in Distance Education Courses in Community Colleges

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### Abstract

*The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the challenges faced by African American students in the virtual classroom through the lens of faculty who provide instruction. Thirteen community college faculty members participated in the study. The participants represented two community colleges located in the southeastern region of the United States. Data collection was conducted through qualitative interviews where the researcher used semi-structured and open-ended questions. The participants expressed the hardships encountered by African American learners in rural areas seeking to complete online courses and programs, and how students' intent to leave affects their college trajectory. It was found that African American student persistence was largely impacted by intent to leave, finances, age of students, level of interaction with faculty, and class absenteeism.*

**Keywords:** Higher Education, Distance Education, Online Learning, Community Colleges, Persistence

### 1. Introduction

Society is increasingly technological and learners are demanding access and flexibility regarding their learning opportunities (Christian, 2014). Institutions of higher education have responded to this demand by increasing the availability of distance learning courses and degree programs on their campuses (Christian, 2014). Results of a nationwide survey revealed that almost four million students were enrolled in an online course in the fall of 2007 (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Enrollment isn't an issue. A major problem is the low college completion rate in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2017; Harbour & Smith, 2016). Over 7 million students enroll in online courses yearly. College graduation rates are less than 10% (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Bettinger, Boatman, & Long, 2013).

The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study defined distance education courses and classes as, "primarily delivered using live, interactive audio or videoconferencing, pre-recorded instructional videos, webcasts, CD-ROM, or DVD, or computer-based systems delivered over the Internet. Distance education does not include correspondence courses" (NPSAS, 2008). Students who are participants in distance learning are expected to complete the activities specified in the course or program's didactical concept (Nistor and Neubauer, 2010). Some students are failing to complete or continue courses and programs, making persistence an issue (Christian, 2014).

Researchers have attempted to identify issues plaguing the distance learning community and affect persistence. To understand these issues, it is necessary to understand the characteristics of distance learners. According to Rovai, "distance education students have characteristics and needs that differ from traditional learners and the virtual learning environment differs in important ways from an on-campus environment" (Rovai, 2002). Distance learners are mostly adults who hold multiple roles like family members, workers, and community members, that are 25 or older with multiple responsibilities (McGivney, 2004; Morgan and Tam, 1999; Simpson, 2003).

Commonly, distant learners are referred to as nontraditional students. In addition to age and responsibility, nontraditional students are defined by part-time student status and full-time employment (Rovai, 2002). Institutions of higher learning also offer undergraduate distance learning programs, which account for a somewhat demographic of students (American Society for Cell Biology, 2016). The purpose of this study was to understand minority student persistence, specifically those students who are enrolled in online courses at community colleges, through faculty perspectives.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Qualitative studies have been employed to probe the student perspective of discontinuing online education, but available demographic characteristics is limited. Researchers have attempted to fill the gap of persistence studies by including community college students. However, under-represented populations are not fully denoted in the populations studied. Fox (2018) reported that community colleges were hubs for distance education courses and programs, supporting the need for additional research on student persistence at two-year colleges. Also, Xu and Jagers (2013) reported populations fare worse than others were African American students, males, and students with poor prior education skills. Currently, available qualitative research has focused on student perceptions of ability to persist. This research was designed to understand faculty perceptions of minority student persistence in online courses and programs.

Quantitative analysis of students' decisions to persist or dropout cannot fully define the complex phenomenon in online learning (Willging & Johnson, 2009). Studies regarding the predictability or the relationship between persistence factors are extensive compared to the availability of qualitative investigation data. Qualitative studies have been employed to probe the student perspective of discontinuing online education, but available demographic characteristics is limited. Researchers have attempted to fill the gap of persistence studies by including community college students. To address the gap in literature, the following research questions were utilized:

- 1) How does intent to leave influence minority student persistence in online courses or programs?
- 2) What factors have an increased likelihood of predicting minority student drop-out of an online program?

## **2. Literature Review**

According to Willging and Johnson, "dropout rates in online programs are known to be significant" (Willging & Johnson, 2009). Because of the convenience, affordability, and basic skills education, community colleges enroll large numbers of underrepresented students, including those considered to be a minority. Although students are enrolling in online courses, completion statistics are far lower; there is a 40-80% attrition rate among distance learners (Smith, 2010). Nash (2005) notes the obvious data concerning the attrition rates of distance education students at community colleges.

There is an obvious gap between online student enrollment and persistence and degree attainment (Xu & Jagers, 2013). Students in the western and southern community college systems were found to be less likely to return to school the following semester after taking one or more courses online after first enrolling (CCRC, 2013). The study also indicated that students taking more online courses were less likely to obtain a degree or transfer their credits to a four-year institution. While achievement gaps were present all over, certain groups fared worse than others. Those groups included males, students with lower prior GPAs, and African American students; the performance gaps were consistent across all subject areas (CCRC, 2013).

The inability to transfer high enrollment rates to high completion rates presents issues for institutions.

Researchers that have attempted to understand the phenomena behind student persistence in online courses have done so by relying on specific factors and collecting numerical data. Despite single-parent, minority, low-income women having dominated the population of online learners (Peter & Horn, 2005), studies evaluating the persistence phenomenon concentrate heavily on Caucasian students, and more specifically, Caucasian women (Muller, 2008). Yeboah and Smith (2016) attest to cultural dispositions influencing how students' progress and interact in the learning environment. Previous studies (Muller, 2008; Patterson & McFadden, 2008) have noted that minority students are less successful in online courses compared to their counterparts.

While all online learners struggle to persist (Fox, 2017), students with low prior academic performance, African American students, and male students perform substantially lower than all other demographics.

## **3. Methodology**

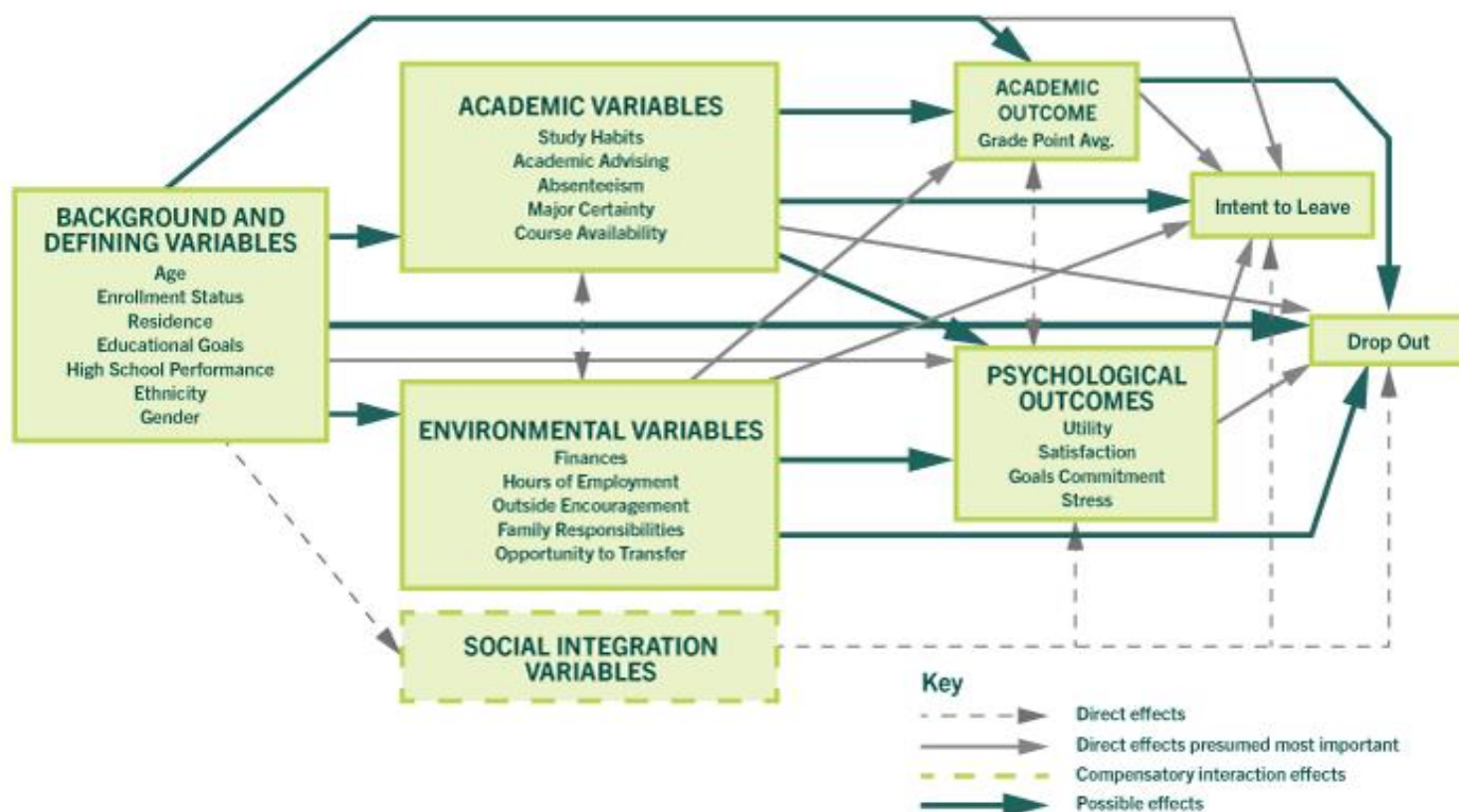
Qualitative research methods were used for this study to examine faculty perceptions of minority student persistence in distance education courses to approach this phenomenon. Institutions granting associate degrees which can be completed in at least two but less than four years. Enrollment in these institutions remains less than 5,000, and the student bodies are at least 60% minority (African American) or higher. Purposive sampling was utilized and the population represented faculty members who taught at least one online course. Each participant was

selected based on the following criteria: (a) faculty status at a two-year institution, (b) having taught one or more online course, (c) having taught a minority population for at least one semester.

The interviews were conducted over the phone using or by using Skype or Zoom technology. The semi-structured interview questions were recorded with the consent of participants to later be coded and transcribed.

When considering the issue of persistence among nontraditional college students, the most common theory associated with such is Bean and Metzner's (1985) theory of Undergraduate Student Attrition. According to the theory, four factors are associated with the likelihood of early school departure. These four factors are (1) background and defining variables, (2) academic variables, (3) environmental variables, and (4) social integration variables (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The environmental factors that impede student persistence include (a) finances, (b) hours of employment, (c) outside encouragement, (d) family responsibilities, and (e) opportunity to transfer. These factors are most relatable to community college online learners because they are largely nontraditional (CCRC, 2013).

**Figure 1. The Nontraditional Undergraduate Student Attrition Model (Bean & Metzner, 1985)**



#### 4. Results

In this phenomenological study, the experiences of 13 community college faculty members were examined to understand perceptions of African American student persistence in distance education. The intent of the research was to gain understanding of faculty perceptions of African American student attrition and intent to leave, specifically online learners enrolled at community colleges.

Participants in the study were able to provide descriptions of experiences with eLearning and student attrition in the eLearning environment. Bean and Metzner's (1985) Nontraditional Student Attrition Model was used as the framework to guide the study (see Figure 1). Participants in this study discussed perceptions of African American student attrition and factors that impeding student success. When asked how a student's intent to leave influenced persistence, participants provided a variety of responses. Their responses reflected the structure of community colleges and students' academic or career aspirations.

First, future aspirations had a significant impact on a student's likelihood of continued enrollment in an online course. the majority of study participants at each institution felt that students having future aspirations related to career and academic progress was a predictor of student attrition. The majority of faculty participants at each institution agreed that intent to leave had a positive impact on student attrition; students who have career and educational aspirations were more likely to continue their online education.

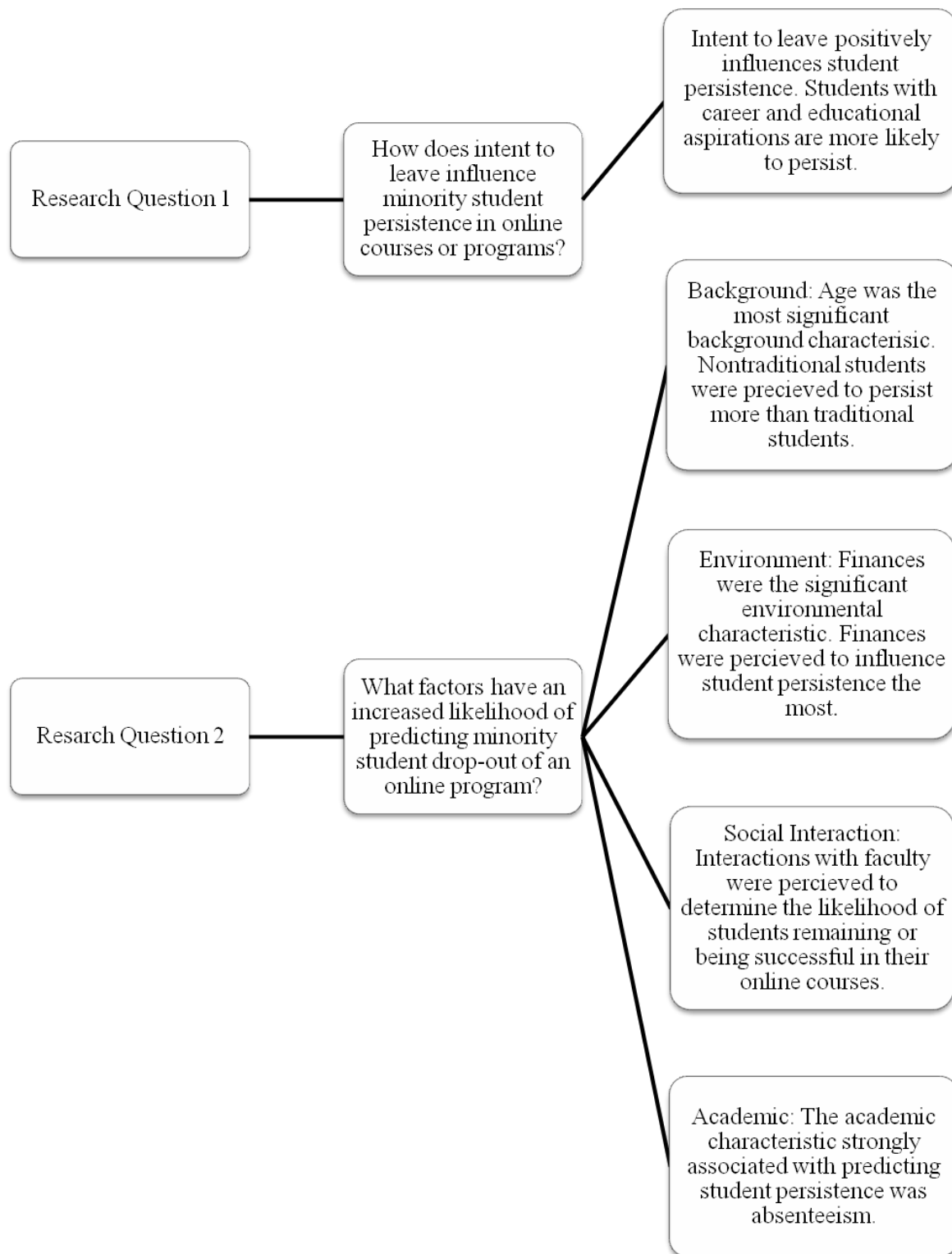
Participants were asked about the challenges students face in being successful in online courses. Faculty participants discussed what they perceived to be issues associated with the likelihood of student drop-out.

The findings will be presented by respective factor (background, academic, environmental, and social interaction). Participants asserted that background characteristics could be used to determine the likelihood of student attrition. Most faculty participants in the study agreed that nontraditional students were more likely to persist. Age, a background characteristic, was found to be a significant indicator of likelihood of student attrition. Study findings indicated that age influenced students' desire to leave or complete the online course. In addition to age, residency and gender were associated with student success in their online courses.

Collectively, study participants agreed that environmental factors created common barriers students' eLearning productivity and success. Environmental factors included finances, hours of employment, outside encouragement, family responsibilities, and the opportunity to transfer. The results of this study confirmed the negative impact of finances on African American students' ability to complete online courses. Students who were unable to afford textbooks or other learning materials were more likely to perform poorly because they were missing an important learning tool. The general consensus was that finances had an incredible impact on students' ability to be successful. If students were without the funds to remain enrolled, purchase a textbook, or acquire a mandatory technology tool, it was likely they would not complete the course(s).

When considering the aspect of social interaction, the majority of faculty members concluded that students' interaction with students was necessary for their academic success and commitment to the learning process. Interaction in the online format was facilitated through a Learning Management System (LMS) which teachers and students access. Participants reported using Canvas as the baseline LMS tool and the use of additional tools to facilitate social interactions between instructors and students in the online environment. Facetime, discussion boards, video chats, and group projects were among the most popular tools used by eLearning faculty. Results of surveying faculty to determine perception of the importance of social interaction in the online environment and its likelihood to predict student attrition indicated the majority of faculty agreed on the importance of social interactions and instructors knowing the student. It was also found that students can be motivators to one another and communication, in general, is a major factor in students being successful in their online courses, and interactions with peers and instructors influence students to persist.

Absenteeism was a critical issue that is linked to attrition and was an early indicator to faculty members, whether a student would be successful in the online course. In understanding how academic factors could be used to predict the likelihood of student attrition, the faculty unanimously agreed that chronic absenteeism was an important concern. In the virtual classroom, chronic absenteeism is noted when a student does not complete specific tasks by a given date or time. This means that while a student may have accessed the learning management system, failure to complete a task would result in them being marked absent. There were two trends among participants' reports of chronic absenteeism. The majority of participants agreed that chronic absenteeism was noticeable within the first two weeks of an online course. There is then a second spike of absenteeism and withdrawal near midterm which could be attributed to poor grades after a proctored midterm exam or students receiving financial aid in the form of a refund check. In some cases, the students did not appear digitally and instructors were tasked with withdrawing them from a course.



**Figure 2: Summary of Findings**

**5. Conclusion**

The study sought to understand faculty perceptions of persistence of African American students enrolled in distance education courses at two community colleges. The sample consisted of faculty members from two community colleges who taught online courses at the participating institutions for at least one semester prior to the study. A favorable characteristic of the participant pool was that 85% percent of the sample had five or more years of online teaching experience. Faculty participants’ combined knowledge added to the rich descriptions of perceptions and experiences with teaching African American students online.

Without being prompted, participants were vivid in responses, as if trying to paint a picture or tell a story of what it's like to be an online faculty member facing issues associated with student attrition. An additional strength was the diversity of thought represented by the sample of participants.

Between the two participating institutions, the researcher was able to interview faculty members with different content backgrounds, like English, Psychology, and Health Sciences.

One constraint of the study was participants' focus on the extremities associated with the rural population like the poor quality of technology access and knowledge. Another limitation was that the study focused on African Americans at community colleges, which include traditional, nontraditional, and dual-enrollment students. COVID-19 presented a limitation to the availability of participants. In the initial stages of data collection, the pandemic was non-existent and online instructors were more accessible.

As higher education institutions began to transition to remote learning, online learning expanded, which required participants to alter their availability to students and the institutions. The study provided insight for institutions that cater to a large African American population. As COVID-19 increased in severity, the study had implications that could directly alter online learning in the changing climate of higher education.

While qualitative data presents certain limitations, the perceptions of the participants were vivid and accurate depictions, and those details could be used as the foundation for future researchers that seek to understand online learning disparities among African American students and other minorities.

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