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ROLE INTEGRATION OF ADULT WOMEN ONLINE LEARNERS

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by

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ABSTRACT

Abstract

Distance education is one of the fastest growing areas in higher education. Since 1995, enrollments in credit-bearing courses have increased four fold, from an estimated 750,000 to nearly three million. Adult women, who constitute the majority of distance learners, may experience an irony as they undertake studies away from the traditional classroom setting. Attracted by the greater convenience of online courses that can be completed at home or work, they must wrestle more directly than their traditional counterparts with the competing demands of school, work, and family. In the rush to recruit these students, without implementing systematic student support, employing appropriate instructional design, and providing relevant faculty development, institutions risk sacrificing program quality and incurring the significant hidden cost of higher attrition. While no definitive national statistics exist on what percentage of distance learners complete their courses, some believe it is 10 to 20 percentage points lower than for traditional courses.

Researchers studying persistence have traditionally focused on campus-based students. Theorists have investigated how students integrate themselves into academic environments, yet seldom how adults studying at a distance integrate academics into their personal and professional lives. To address that gap, this study explored how seven adult women pursuing an online degree in healthcare sought to integrate their new learner role into their lives during their first course of study. The main research question was, “What is the process by which adult women learners add the online learner role to their lives?” In addition, “Which factors contribute to the ways in which these women negotiate the strain and conflict of adding the online learner role?” was posed as a sub-question. It was hoped that learners in this population who persist through their first course

of study may demonstrate how the proposed role integration process works and how to overcome obstacles to its successful completion.

Each of the seven women who participated in the study resided in the United States and was enrolled in the first course of her online undergraduate degree program at Saint Joseph's College of Maine, a small, private liberal arts college. Taped telephone interviews were the primary data sources. Interviews were transcribed and coded. Member checks enhanced the trustworthiness of the data. Individual case studies were constructed in light of the study's conceptual framework. During analysis, commonalities across cases were examined. Confirmatory and discrepant findings were presented, along with recommendations for practice.

The study findings shed light on the diversity of adult women learner's life contexts, as well as commonalities among the participants who shared similar enrollment outcomes. Three of the women were grandmothers, and four lived in multi-generational households. One woman worked full time from home. One woman was laid off by her employer just before enrolling in her course; another became ill and unable to work after enrolling in her course.

Participants who completed their courses by the study's conclusion reported the most instrumental support from role partners in home, work, and school domains. All seven participants reported using Type III coping (reactive role behavior) while juggling the demands of daily life before enrolling in their courses. After adding the learner role to their lives, however, the women demonstrated that Type III coping was a necessary but insufficient strategy for meeting demands across their expanded role sets. Women who used additional coping strategies; that is, Type I coping (structural role redefinition) and Type II coping (personal role redefinition), completed their courses by the study's conclusion or were making satisfactory academic progress.

Evidence from the study findings supports the expansionist view of role theory, in which an individual's time and energy, under certain conditions, are expandable and can accommodate increased role demands.

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Chapter 1

Problem Statement and Study Purpose

“Ann” and “Sonya”: Two Demographically Similar Online Learners

A typical online learner at the study site, Saint Joseph’s College of Maine Division of Graduate and Professional Studies, may reside in any of the 50 states in the U. S. She is usually between the ages of 35 and 54, with one or more children at home. She is part of a growing trend of adult women enrolling in distance education programs nationally, attracted by the convenience of studying anytime, anywhere. To set the stage for the study, it may be helpful to compare the experiences of two hypothetical students, “Ann” and “Sonya.”

Ann and Sonya are both delighted to learn that they can obtain their bachelor’s in healthcare administration (the College’s most popular program) almost entirely online. The only time they must spend on campus is for a two-week summer residency. By not having to commute weekly to a university campus, they can more easily combine work, education, and family life in a “blended life plan” (Cross, 1981). Neither of these women would be surprised to learn that total enrollments in credit-granting distance education courses have increased four fold between 1994-95 and 2000-2001, to nearly three million (U. S. Department of Education, 1999, 2003). They might find encouragement in the fact that over one-third of learners taking courses online in the fall of 2002 took all their courses online (Allen & Seaman, 2003).

Ann and Sonya share several characteristics in common. Both are married and are in the 35-54 age range. Both have taken college courses in the past and performed well academically, though this will be their first foray into online education. Both women have family incomes in the \$50,000-\$100,000 range. Both work full time and have at least one child under the age of 18 at home. Both aspire to mid-level, administrative positions in a healthcare facility. The brief narrative below, however, will reveal some important differences in the realities these women face, which may impact each woman's ability to persist in her academic program.

Ann's Life Context

Ann is a forty-year-old, lower-mid-level administrator in a long-term care facility. She helped support her family while her husband finished his business degree, fifteen years ago, when their second child was in pre-school. Now their oldest has graduated from college, and the second child is a junior in high school.

Over the years, Ann worked her way up from an activity aide position to activity coordinator in a local nursing home. She took some night courses at the local community college and day-long workshops through her employer; however, accreditation standards have increased in recent years to the point where Ann must obtain her bachelor's degree to continue in her field. Her supervisor, who has a master's in healthcare administration, has been her mentor and has been urging her to finish her degree. "*I know* you can do it, Ann. I'm with you all the way. Let's discuss how we can make it happen," she remarked over coffee recently.

Since her second child, who is 17, will soon leave home, Ann has decided this is a good time to focus on her own career. Her husband is well established in his career and has also encouraged Ann to continue her education. The couple have had many conversations about how to accommodate Ann's needs in this regard, and their son is proud of his mom for "having the guts to go for it." Mother and son have made a pact to help each other with computer issues and homework. They have decided to add a second computer to the household and set up an in-home wireless network so each machine has plenty of Internet access. Ann's computer will be a laptop so that, with the wireless access, she can position herself in any room of the house and get the "quiet time" she will need to study. Again, as a family, the three have agreed to adjust their household duties and rules for quiet times as needed until they find a workable balance, given mom's added role as a student. At a recent family gathering, all four members began brainstorming ideas for celebrating mom's graduation in two to three years.

Sonya's Life Context

Sonya, like Ann, is excited but anxious about beginning online study toward her degree. For Sonya, pursuing her bachelor's in healthcare administration will mean a career change and finding time to "fit it in." She began college years ago as a sociology major, but put her career plans on hold when she got married and began raising a family. Now in her late thirties, Sonya yearns for the intellectual stimulation she enjoyed in college and a more challenging job.

Sonya has found working as a teacher's aide in her kids' middle school convenient: she is never far away if they need her, and she can take them to and from sports practice after school. Since Sonya's husband travels a great deal in his sales job and is often away from home, she feels it is important that she be in the home as much as possible, making sure that everything is taken care of. The extra money she earns helps the family afford sports equipment and other extra-curricular activities for the children. The oldest begins high school in 10 months. Sonya fears that taking online courses to finish her degree will mean she has less time and money for her family. She will keep her job, but it is crucial that her schoolwork not interfere with parenting and spousal obligations. Still, her old interest in sociology pulls at her, and she would enjoy a managerial-type job. She could see herself working in a healthcare facility of some sort, perhaps even earning a master's in social work someday. She wishes she could talk about her dreams with colleagues at work, but she doesn't think that would be prudent. And her husband works so hard, she tries not to focus on her own needs when he is home.

The Challenges Ann and Sonya Face

Ann and Sonya are similar to many adult women, who are the majority of undergraduate online learners in the United States (NCES, 2002). Some studies have previously reported women's participation ranging from 60 to 80 percent of enrollments at various institutions (Thompson, 1998). Yet women face significant barriers, not usually experienced by men to the same degree, in pursuing their academic goals (Kramarae, 2001). The needs of adult women distance learners must be identified (Furst-

Bowe, 2002). For example, women with children are less likely than their male counterparts to have a quiet room available, without interruptions, for studying (von Prümmer, 2000). Ann in the above narrative has an advantage over Sonya because she and her family have already taken steps to ensure that she will have an adequate study environment.

What Ann and Sonya may not know as they make the important decision to return to school is that becoming an adult learner involves a role learning process (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989) and that adults who are trying to learn at a distance for the first time “often feel overwhelmed by the new way of learning and fail to adjust themselves in the new environment” (Chyung, Winiecki, & Fenner, 1998, p. 98). Again, Ann has the advantage of a state-of-the-art computer setup and her son’s willingness to help her with the technical side of things. Her professional experience in the field will help ease her transition into coursework, and she has a mentor in her supervisor, who has offered both emotional and instrumental support.

The convenience of anytime, anywhere learning does not come without a price. Studying at home or in the office can in some ways be more challenging than taking campus-based courses because the learner role is pitted in a more direct way against other life roles. Ann and Sonya may take pause in knowing that, while no definitive national statistics exist on what percentage of distance learners complete their courses, some believe it is 10 to 20 percentage points lower than for traditional courses (Carr, 2000).

Both women may also find it revealing to learn that some women have related their experience as distance learners as doing “double duty” (May, 1994), or as a “third shift,” in effect extending their work day into the night, after household chores are done

and family members are cared for (Kramarae, 2001). There appears to be little latitude for Sonya to make adjustments in her roles as mother and spouse to accommodate her new learner role, or for others in her family unit to help. She may find herself thinking, “Something has got to give.”

Sonya, especially, may find learning at a distance analogous to engaging in a “cottage industry” (von Prümmer, 2000), where she must fend for herself. It appears the added pressure of combining study with her work and family roles will be hers to bear alone. In this respect, online learning may be more difficult for her than for her male counterparts, since she bears more of the burden of childcare and household chores than they (Center for Policy Alternatives, 1996, 2000; von Prümmer). She would undoubtedly find it helpful to learn how other women have managed to “make it all fit” and persist in their studies. Well-intentioned prescriptions for priority setting and time management (Peterson’s, 1998; Simon, 1999; Western Cooperative for Educational Telecommunications, 1999) are incomplete solutions for women whose time and concentration are fragmented by the insistent, often urgent needs of others for whom they care (von Prümmer).

Study Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore the process by which degree-seeking adult women online learners at the study site tried to integrate their academic pursuit into their life context through their first course of study. The study focused on how these adult learners faced the challenge of adding the online learner role, with its concomitant

expectations, to a pre-existing constellation of other life role expectations. It was hoped that learners at the site who persisted through their first course of study may demonstrate how the hypothesized integration process works and how learners can overcome obstacles to its successful completion. Though work-family studies on women's role strain abound, research on women with three roles is limited (Home, 1998). There are few theoretically-based studies on multiple-role adult women online learners.

The main research question was, "What is the process by which adult women learners add the online learner role to their lives?" In addition, "Which factors contribute to the ways in which these women negotiate the strain and conflict of adding the online learner role?" was posed as a sub-question.

The study was intended to help faculty, staff, and program planners at Saint Joseph's College of Maine provide more effective support and interventions for this learner population.

Chapter 2

Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

Introduction

To develop the conceptual framework for this study, I consulted the research literature in several related areas, including persistence models in higher education and adult and distance education. For reasons discussed in the following sections, I found existing persistence models inadequate for explaining root causes of the difficulties faced by adult women learning online. My investigation led to the literature on role theory as I tried to understand how adult women's life roles might interact with the added role of online learner. Therefore, this chapter reviews relevant literatures on persistence, role theory, and coping behaviors, followed by the conceptual framework for this study.

Persistence

Higher Education

When investigating the factors that affect persistence, higher education scholars have examined how students are integrated into academic environments (Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1987) rather than how adult learners integrate academics into their professional and personal lives. Tinto discussed integration as an important factor when he developed his model, but based the concept on Spady's analogy of dropout to suicide.

“When one views the college as a social system with its own value and social structures, one can treat dropout from that social system in a manner analogous to that of suicide in the wider society” (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). Therefore, social and academic integration in Tinto’s model of institutional departure “refer to the extent to which the individual shares the normative attitudes and values of peers and faculty in the institution and abides by the formal and informal structural requirements for membership in that community or in the subgroups of which the individual is a part” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 53).

Higher education attrition models have also been heavily focused on traditional-aged, residential populations (Bean & Metzner, 1985). These models have often emphasized correlations between pre-matriculation characteristics, performance measures, and attrition and “have relied heavily on socialization within the college environment to explain attrition” (Metzner & Bean, 1987, p. 18). Having found little evidence of a relationship between social integration and dropout for nontraditional students, researchers have called into question the appropriateness of such models for use with adult learners (Metzner & Bean). “Personal, family, or employment characteristics, which undoubtedly influence drop-out, are rarely considered because they are probably seen as beyond the influence of the institution” (Kember, 1989, p. 280). Yet, “if an institution has, or hopes to attract, a high proportion of nontraditional students, decision-makers must consider that those students are more likely to be affected by factors external to the institution such as the job or family” (Berge & Huang, 2004, p. 16).

Models seeking to generalize to traditional student populations using inferential statistics have not accounted for the heterogeneity of adult distance learners’ life contexts, nor for the variety of life circumstances that may affect their persistence. In

short, current models of persistence or attrition do not adequately address the learner role integration process of adult women distance learners.

Adult and Distance Education

In a review of the literature on persistence in distance education, Cookson (1990) assigned existing studies to one of three groups: studies of students' reasons for dropout; student profile studies; or institutional factors studies. For the institutional factors studies, Cookson noted most researchers relied on atheoretical approaches to investigations of the impact of institutional interventions on student outcomes, with a few exceptions. For example, Taylor et al. (1986) operationalized institution-student interactions in terms of Tinto's (1975) integration concept, but did not adapt the concept for distance education. Tests on factors in the model believed to affect student persistence rates did not yield consistent results, and the authors concluded the model was not well-suited for distance education systems. Better results were obtained in another study by Sweet (1986), in which the predictive validity of Tinto's model was tested. Tinto's concepts of academic and social integration, redefined in that study as: (a) perceptions of academic performance and ratings of course materials and (b) ratings of tutor phone conversations, respectively, explained 18 percent of the variance in persistence.

One notable exception in addressing the concept of integration as it pertains to the persistence of adult distance learners is the work of Kember (1995), who built on the work of previous persistence scholars (for example, Bean & Metzner, 1985; Cabrera,

Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Metzner & Bean, 1987; Tinto, 1975). Kember adapted Tinto's (1975) concept of social integration when investigating the effects of adult distance learners' work, home, and social environments on persistence. According to Kember,

Social integration can then refer to the degree to which the student is able to integrate the demands of part-time study with the continuing commitments of work, family and social life....Social and academic integration become intervening variables between entry characteristics and outcome measures.” (Kember, 1995, p. 50)

Kember did not define integration further or fully explore the integration process; nor did he test the concept with American learners. Other researchers, citing Kember, have expounded on the importance of learner role integration for distance learners (Simpson, 2003) but have not defined the term or produced empirical evidence to support their claims.

Kember (1995) found that three key facilitators of social integration are enrollment encouragement, study encouragement, and a warm, supportive family environment. He also found that successful social integration “usually resulted from a re-negotiation of previously accepted social positions and status” (Kember, p. 88). “Lack of social integration is frequently manifest in the student resorting to external attribution;” (Kember, p. 89) that is, attributing one's lack of ability to achieve social integration to insufficient time, unexpected events, and distractions. A learner will progress on one of two tracks: a “high” road to successful social integration, continued progress toward academic integration and persistence; or a “low” road to external attribution, academic incompatibility, and perhaps departure.

Kember (1995) employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to test his model. However, his samples were drawn from outside the United States; specifically, Australia, Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, and the United Kingdom. His model depicts a one-way causal flow system and does not fully explore the processes by which social integration takes place.

Departing from the longitudinal persistence model tradition, a second stream of research on adult learners sought to classify barriers to persistence. Garland (1993a; 1993b) proposed a taxonomy of potential barriers to persistence for distance learners, based on an ethnographic study in a natural resource sciences program. Most of the students who dropped out cited time constraints as their primary difficulty. Further probing revealed more complex reasons for departure, including situational, institutional, dispositional, and epistemological barriers. Situational barriers are factors within an individual's milieu that impede progress, such as lack of support from significant others or objective time constraints. Institutional barriers include administrative and procedural issues as well as instructional design issues. Dispositional challenges, such as stress, procrastination, and weak self-confidence, arise from a learner's psychological and sociological makeup. Epistemological barriers involve a learner's difficulty with the course content.

Other researchers previously proposed classification schemes similar to Garland's for explaining barriers to participation in adult education. Johnstone and Rivera (cited in Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) posited two categories of barriers: situational (or external) and dispositional (or internal). To those two categories, Cross (cited in Merriam & Caffarella) added institutional barriers, broader in scope than Garland's similar category,

as it included “all those practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities” (Merriam & Caffarella, p.57).

Garland (1993b) ultimately concluded that, since both withdrawing and persisting students shared similar understandings as to the barriers they faced, “many institutional and situational barriers do not directly cause dropout but do so in interaction with predisposing characteristics, affecting students differentially depending on their disposition” (Garland, pp. 181-182). Indeed, the findings seemed to indicate that a withdrawal decision is essentially idiosyncratic:

This is so because each student is subject to a complicated interplay of positive factors encouraging persistence and negative factors promoting withdrawal. The balance tips one way or the other on an individual basis because each person is unique, possessing different values, beliefs, needs, attitudes, motives, self-concept, past experiences and abilities. (Garland, 1993b, p. 195)

Upon further analysis, Garland (1994) proposed that an underlying cultural theme, the social contradiction between the role of student and the role of adult could account for much of the difficulty encountered by distance students. Adults’ needs for personal control conflict with the traditionally dependent position of the student role. “Meeting student needs for personal control means providing them with the appropriate resources and support they need to be self-efficacious” (Garland, p. 45). While Garland’s taxonomy identifies several types of barriers to adult learner persistence, it does not specifically address barriers faced by adult women learning online. Nor does it explore how the barriers faced by these women play out within their life contexts.

Role Theory

Role theory provided the theoretical foundation for this study's conceptual framework. The concept of role is particularly meaningful for adult women taking on the online learner role in conjunction with their other life roles. "A role is the expected behaviour [sic] associated with a social position," (Banton, 1996, p. 749), such as online learner. "A role is thus a kind of job description for a particular position, a set of skills or qualities expected in a person who occupies that position" (Bee, 1987, p. 68). The role of online learner is associated with certain expected behaviors, such as studying, communicating with an instructor and other online learners via computer, and completing written assignments.

First-time online learners must adjust to the new mode of learning; that is, they must adjust to their new online learner role (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2004). Researchers studying student satisfaction and success in online learning (factors believed to affect persistence) have recently begun mapping the various components to online student role adjustment, based on role identity acquisition theory and three core elements in an online community of inquiry: cognitive presence (interacting effectively through written communication and synthesizing, applying, and evaluating information); social presence (getting to know others in the online group and feeling part of a learning community); and teaching presence (the role of the teacher as facilitator) (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes). Validity testing on the three-factor model yielded high reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha above .90 for each of the three factor clusters) (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2006).

A new online learner will likely undergo a role-making process (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2006). She will need to construct aspects of the new role with her “own individual meanings and satisfying behaviors attached,” drawing on her previous experience (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994) with the more generalized “learner” role and making adaptations (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, p. 128). Her greater autonomy in an online setting than in a traditional face-to-face environment and the lack of readily available behavioral role models to guide her necessitate her role-making.

Furthermore, roles are “shared expectations about how a particular person in a group ought to behave” (Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998, p. 426). Shared expectations imply that the learner and her instructor *each* bring to the learning process their expectations regarding their respective roles, posing potential conflict. Decades ago, researchers documented discrepancies in how students and faculty conceive of their roles in face-to-face adult education settings (Lennard et al., n.d.). For students in adult education settings generally, the learner role may be situationally defined, the end-product of a dynamic and complex mix of variables, including the life experiences and outlook they bring to the learning process, and instructors who operate within institutional policy frameworks (Harries-Jenkins, 1982). Role theory ultimately explains behavior in terms of the rights and duties associated with particular roles as defined by informal social consensus (Hughes & Graham, 1985).

When starting her course, an online learner may perceive her instructor’s role as a predominantly functional one (Conrad, 2002). That is, she will expect clear and complete guidelines on course requirements up front from the instructor, more than she will expect an interpersonal connection, at least at the beginning of the course. Once the course is

underway, evidence suggests that online learners expect that effective online instructors, in performing their role, will adapt to student needs, provide meaningful examples, motivate students to do their best, facilitate the course effectively, deliver a valuable course, communicate effectively, and show concern for student learning (Young, 2006).

For adult women, work and family roles often loom beyond the learner role. Since the advent of women entering the workforce en masse in the 1970's and the rise of two-income households, researchers writing in the work-family literature have employed role theory to explore the work-family interface. Sources of difficulty that may arise between work and nonwork roles were referred to as work-family conflict, defined as "a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible in some respect" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 77). Work-family literature reviews began to include work-family conflict studies on female samples (Greenhaus & Beutell). Later studies were devoted to the effect of gender on work and family stress (Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, 1987).

Role strain and conflict research on women occupying roles in three domains (work, family, and school) is limited (Home, 1998). One qualitative study reporting on learning needs and experiences of women in nursing distance education found that "a period of passage to adjust to the new demands and role of student life was necessary" (Gillis, Jackson, Braid, MacDonald, & MacQuarrie, 2000, p. 6). Participants in that study "spoke of a transition period when they learned to juggle time between family, friends, work, and study" (Gillis et al., p. 6).

As far as the student role is concerned, studies have focused typically on satisfaction and strain within the student role. For example, we have this partial profile of the strained reentry adult woman learner from a Canadian study:

She has been out of school for less time than her less strained counterpart. She has an occupation goal and intends to use college as a means of finding a new career or advancing in her career. She reports little psychological support from her children because she tends to have young children (Novak & Thacker, 1991, pp. 336-337)

In the same study, the authors reported that spouses, children, and friends inside and outside of school offered the strongest psychological support for these women. Attitudes of professors was the only institutional support that attained significance ($p < .01$); convenience of classes, counseling, and financial aid did not. Only 15.5% of the women in that sample reported no strains since enrolling in college. Role strain and conflict are very common and very real phenomena in reentry women.

Role Strain and Conflict

Role theory can help explain the difficulties an adult woman online learner may face when trying to meet the expectations of her added learner role, along with the expectations of her other life roles. The terms “role conflict” and “role strain” have been used by sociologists and social psychologists to refer to “difficulty in conforming to role expectations” (Secord & Backman, 1964, p. 468). Though the two terms have been used interchangeably, they have separate and distinct connotations:

The more commonly employed term role conflict is generally limited to situations where an actor is confronted with conflicting or competing

expectations. Role strain covers not only those situations, but a great variety of others in which an actor experiences difficulty in meeting a role expectation. (Secord & Backman, 1964, p. 468)

In this study, the term “role strain” is used to refer to intra-role difficulties a woman may experience when trying to meet the expectations of her new online learner role. “Role conflict,” as used in this study, describes inter-role difficulties a woman may experience when trying to meet the *conflicting* expectations of two or more roles simultaneously. For example, a woman whose child falls ill on exam day may feel “pulled apart” (Home, 1998, p. 95). Her conflict may manifest as internal turmoil, such as guilt (Kramarae, 2001) rather than direct confrontation with family members (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994, p. 252).

Many women avoid guilt by making sometimes quite heroic efforts to slot schoolwork unobtrusively into their family and work schedules or by foregoing leisure time to accommodate their families and jobs. (Kramarae, 2001, p. 33)

Amelioration of Role Strain and Conflict

Research on adult women distance learners from a social role perspective may shed additional light on the question of why some individuals, when faced with competing demands of multiple, roles do not become exhausted and may even become energized. Empirical evidence only partially supports the notion that multiple roles inevitably create role strain or conflict; that multiple roles necessarily drain off an individual’s finite energy resources (Marks, 1977). Some literature supports the

hypothesis that role overload (having too much to do) and role conflict are caused by an imbalance of psychological demands and control:

When individuals can feel control in another area, their feeling of being out of control overall...is diminished....Investing in multiple roles can be beneficial to mental health when the quality of the role involvement allows control or mastery and pleasure or attachment (Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, cited in Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989, p. 102).

Marks (1977) expounded upon a tendency in the literature on social role performance, and in common parlance, to confuse the concepts of energy, time, and commitment, and he maintained it is important to distinguish among them. "Failing this, we have little chance of discovering when it is that multiple roles create strain or overload problems and when they do not" (Marks, p. 928). For example, when a significant other makes demands on a busy adult woman distance learner, the request may be stated in terms of time, but actually may be a desire for greater commitment. That commitment might be demonstrated in ways other than amount of time spent with the significant other.

In addition to distinguishing among the three constructs of energy, time, and commitment, Marks (1977) argued that energy and time resources are flexible, expanding and contracting according to systems of commitment that determine their availability. More specifically, "people who maintain more balance across their entire systems of roles and activities will experience less role strain and depression and higher self-esteem, role ease, and other indicators of well-being" (Marks & MacDermid, 1996, p. 417).

Further refinement and testing of Marks' (1977) hypotheses about role balance, commitment, and role strain indicated that relationships between commitment patterns and role strain may interact with the occupational and social context of adults' lives

(O'Neil & Greenberger, 1994a). Role strain may result from “the dynamic interaction of intrapersonal factors, such as commitment to social roles, the objective demands of roles...and the situational constraints or resources that provide the context in which roles are enacted” (O'Neil & Greenberger, 1994b, p. 118). Support from a spouse (an example of a situational resource) has been shown to lessen role strain, as has support from a supervisor, especially for women (O'Neil & Greenberger, 1994a).

Epstein underscored systemic antecedents of role strain and its amelioration:

Steadily accumulating evidence indicates that whether a person feels stressed or happily busy depends on the combination of roles one has, and whether society makes it easy or hard to meet the rules attached to them. Thus, it is not the *number* of roles that necessarily causes stress but the *combination* of them and whether a person gets help in meeting his or her obligations. (Epstein, 1986, p. 95)

Clearly, sources and ameliorators of role strain and conflict for the new adult women online learner spring from both internal and external realms.

Three Types of Coping with Role Strain and Role Conflict

Researchers studying role conflict coping behavior in women fulfilling multiple roles provide guiding concepts for role strain and conflict resolution, a key to integration in this study. Coping has been defined as “what people do to avoid being harmed by life strains,” such as role strain or conflict, and coping responses are the “specific behaviors and perceptions which people use when they are attempting to deal with life problems” (Stanfield, 1998, p. 53).

An early role conflict coping model for women developed by Hall (1972) and still deemed relevant today (Weitzman, 2004) posited three major role conflict coping

strategies, derived from the literature on role theory and designated as Type I, Type II, and Type III. The women in Hall's study were asked about conflicts or strains they had experienced among the various roles in their life and how they dealt (coped) with those conflicts. In Type I coping (structural role redefinition), a woman negotiated a revised set of expectations for one or more of her roles with her role partners. In the present study, for example, a woman may enlist the support of her spouse or partner in performing household tasks so that she can make more time for her studies. A woman may also employ an internal coping mechanism (Type II, personal role redefinition), in which she recasts the expectations of one or more roles in her own mind in order to resolve strain or conflict. She may relax her own expectations for keeping up with the laundry, for example, so she can spend more time studying. Type III coping, or reactive coping behavior, which has been associated with the Superwoman Syndrome (Weitzman, 2004), is exhibited by a woman who attempts to add the responsibilities of her new, learner role onto those of her other roles without adjusting the expectations of any role. Typical behaviors included in this strategy subgroup include time management and working harder to make everything fit.

Evidence to support the notion that not all coping behavior types have equal merit generally, as solutions to role strain and conflict, is inconclusive. In a series of bivariate analyses, Hall (1972) reported a slightly positive association ($p < .07$) between satisfaction and Type I coping, compared to a negative association ($p < .01$) between satisfaction and Type III coping. The association between Type II coping and satisfaction did not attain significance. However, further testing of the data revealed

satisfaction was related more strongly to Types I and II coping combined than to either of those types alone.

A study of female parents in dual-career families on coping with conflict between professional and maternal roles yielded similar but weaker associations between coping types and conflict resolution (Gilbert, Holahan, & Manning, 1981). In that study, researchers combined Hall's Type I and II coping behaviors into a Role Redefinition strategy and recast Type III coping behavior as Role Expansion. Though the degree of conflict resolution was somewhat higher and the level of conflict slightly lower for the Role Redefinition group than for the Role Expansion group, neither of those differences was statistically significant.

Subsequently, researchers examined correlations between role management techniques of reentry women and successful reentry (Edmondson, Payne, & Patton, 1987). They found "role input" (analogous to Type II coping) and "role support" (analogous to Type I coping) related to role performance ($p < .05$) and positive effects of college ($p < .05$) in married women. The authors did not report on Type III coping but noted that role variables have a greater effect on positive outcomes than background-status variables for reentry women.

Though evidence suggests reactive, Type III coping yields less satisfaction for women than Type I and Type II, it may be the type they rely on most often (Beutell & Greenhaus, 1983). Type II and III coping behaviors are thought by some to be inadequate long-term solutions to role strain because they "waste energy in distorting expectations" or require "performing under role overload conditions" (Hall, 1972, p. 475). However, longitudinal data to support or refute that supposition is lacking.

In short, other researchers have hypothesized but not explored how role strain and conflict and their resolution play out within the context of individual women's lives. Because this study measured role conflict and resolution at two intervals, the results shed some light on how role strain and conflict and their resolution are affected by changing role dynamics for adult women online learners.

Role Integration

The term "role integration," used in this study, has been defined by researchers in various ways. Colbeck (1998) used the term to describe the degree to which faculty perform their teaching and research roles simultaneously. Hall (1972) included role integration as a subcategory of Type I coping behavior, in which roles are redesigned "so that they can be performed simultaneously in a mutually reinforcing manner" (p. 476).

In the present study, role integration is the process by which an adult woman online learner takes the learner role in conjunction with her other life roles and copes with various forms of role strain and conflict, in order to persist through her first course of study. That is, integration is the degree to which she is able to resolve role strain and conflict to meet expectations across her expanded role set. This use of the term builds on Kember's (1995) concept of social integration (integrating schoolwork into one's work and family milieu), discussed previously.

As used in this study, role integration is distinguished from "positive role balance," a term which indicates attentiveness, being fully engaged in the performance of each role across a role set; or "the practice of that evenhanded alertness known

sometimes as mindfulness” (Marks & MacDermid, 1996, p. 421). The notion of role balance connotes a precariously transitory state:

It is not an end-point to strive toward, rather it is an ongoing journey where you attain a fleeting moment of balance when everything feels like it is working smoothly together, but then things change very quickly and you lose the sense of balance you had for that instant. (Weitzman, 2004, p. 11)

Role balance describes a temporary, affective state or experience of equilibrium enjoyed by an individual while she is juggling multiple roles. In contrast, role integration is a process of incorporating a new role into one’s existing role set.

Conceptual Framework

From my review of the literature on persistence, role theory, and coping behaviors, I developed a conceptual framework to guide the data collection for this study. Because the adult women in the study were adding the online learner role to their other life roles, the framework included potential, pre-existing sources and ameliorators of role conflict at enrollment, as well as during the first course of study. These encompassed work and family/social role conditions, key aspects of the social milieu of distance students (Heinze, 1983). In addition, the framework included potential forms of role strain within the learner role itself, once added to one’s role set. Guiding concepts from the coping literature focused the data collection on how the women in the study dealt with the challenges they faced while engaged in their first course of study in their degree program, leading ultimately to one of three outcomes: persistence to completion, extension of time to complete, or withdrawal.

Potential Pre-Course Role Conflict

As the diagram in Figure 2-1 indicates (number 1 on the diagram), before enrolling in her online course, a woman is likely to have work and family/social obligations.

She may occupy the roles of mother, spouse/partner, employee, and friend, each with its own role expectations. As an employee, she is expected to work a certain number of hours per week or produce certain outputs in a given timeframe. As a mother and spouse/partner, she may be expected to transport her children to and from school; prepare meals for her family; and otherwise be available for support on a 24-hour basis.

As a friend, she may be expected to offer emotional support or join in group activities. Individuals occupying complementary roles, such as child, husband/partner, supervisor, and friend are “role partners” in the woman’s “role set” (Secord & Backman, 1964).

When a new online learner enrolls in her course, she may be experiencing one or more forms of “role conflict” due to her multiple work, family, and social roles. The greater role conflict that a woman experiences at enrollment may increase the likelihood of academic withdrawal, since role conflict at enrollment is likely to “carry over” and add to any role conflict or strain experienced as a result of taking the learner role.

Role Strain and Conflict During Course

Adding the learner role to one’s role set (Figure 2-1, number 2 on the diagram) may, in and of itself, induce role strain in a variety of ways. Strain within a role may

Figure 2-1

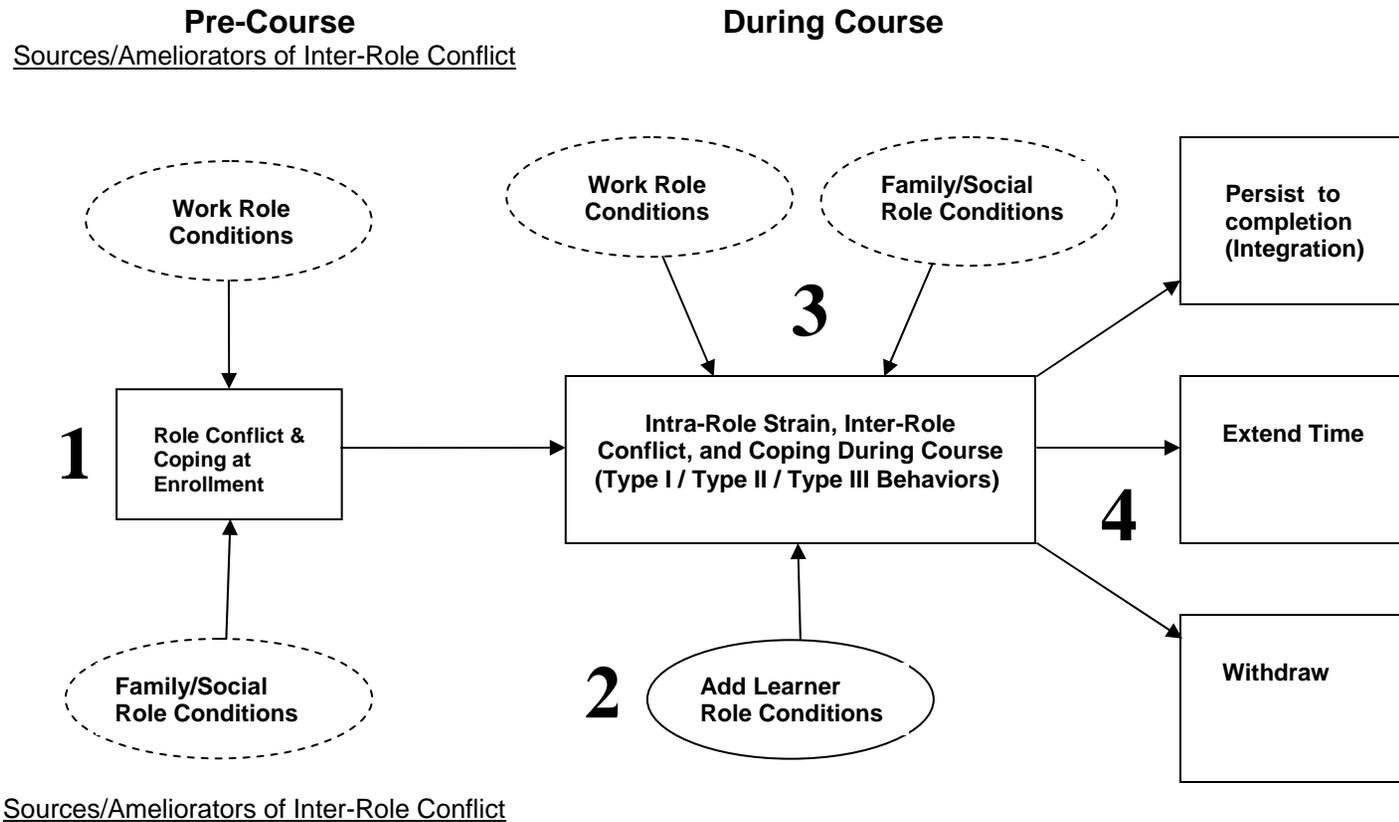


Figure 2-1: Role Integration Process

result when there is a poor fit between a person and role expectations, when expectations for fulfilling the role are unclear, or when the person in the role finds that role partners do not meet their own expectations. In this study, role *strain* pertained to the experience of *intra-role* difficulty with the added, learner role. Previous research suggests that first-time online students undergo significant adjustment (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2004). Role strain may occur “when a person’s own qualities or skills are a poor match for the demands of any one role” (Bee, 1987, p. 68). An adult woman online learner may experience role strain when trying to meet deadlines for completing assignments if she is not skilled in the technology used in the course. Another type of role strain arises when role partners’ expectations are unclear to the person holding the role. This type of role strain may result in conflicting tendencies to act and feelings of inadequacy, guilt, embarrassment, and need frustration (Secord & Backman, 1964). For example, when a learner is instructed to study for an exam but is not told what the exam will cover, she may experience role strain. In addition, role strain may occur when the behavior of an individual occupying a complementary role (an instructor, for example) contradicts the expectations of the person holding the role. If she expects an empathic response from her instructor during a personal crisis, but the instructor displays indifference, a learner may experience role strain.

Institutional factors which may ameliorate learner role strain include emotional and instrumental support. Learner peer groups, for example, can lend emotional and academic support to those returning or new to the learner role (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kember, 1995), though positive relationships with faculty and individualized advising may weigh more heavily on the success of adult learners (Kasworm & Blowers).

For some women learning at a distance, social interaction with an instructor or peers per se may be less important than specific assistance:

“...there is no need to make a fetish of social interaction. Although many [women] students express a need to talk to other students, many others indicate that after caring for people all day as mothers or workers, their private study is what they do for themselves, is their escape, is, for each of them, if you will, a ‘room of one’s own’. For some women students, the recognized healing that comes through journal writing is replicated in private study.” (Coulter, 1989, p. 17)

Course designers and program planners at educational institutions must take care not to equate learner-learner interaction with quality per se, and some have cautioned that it be included in a course design when learning and motivational gains will justify “restrictions on the students’ temporal independence” (Anderson, 2003, p. 135). Overly enthusiastic use of learner-learner interaction in a course may potentially do more harm than good, adding to learner role strain and ultimately role conflict through increased or overly structured time demands on the busy adult woman learner. Learner role conditions, then, which may affect role strain include: 1) academic and technical skills preparation; 2) clarity of role partner’s expectations for the learner role, especially the instructor’s expectations, 3) extent to which role partners meet the learner’s expectations and 4) emotional or instrumental institutional support.

Adding learner role expectations to her family and work role expectations can increase the role conflict a woman experiences. A learner who faces an assignment deadline when her child is sick is likely to be faced with such conflict. A learner who must work overtime right before an important exam may also feel conflicted. Support from family, friends, and supervisors has been deemed important in reducing role conflict and to adult women learners’ success (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kember, 1995;

Kramarae, 2001; O'Neil and Greenberger, 1994). Instrumental workplace supports such as flexible work hours, and financial support, and emotional support in the form of positive attitudes may be more forthcoming from employers when the sought-after degree is directly work related (Home, 1998). Instrumental support from family or friends may include such things as helping with household tasks or providing tutoring or technical assistance. By conversing with her about her studies, family and friends can lend emotional support to "their learner." Some evidence indicates, however, that a woman's *perception* of the demands of school, family, and job are more powerful predictors of her role conflict than actual institutional, home, or workplace supports (Home).

Family and social role conditions which may affect role conflict and thus persistence are: 1) emotional and instrumental support in the home and social network; and 2) perceived demands of family, friends, and other significant individuals in the social network. Work role conditions which may affect role conflict and persistence are: 1) learner-work role congruence; 2) emotional and instrumental support in the workplace; and 3) perceived job-related demands.

The various forms of role strain and role conflict and ameliorating effects noted above which a woman may experience during her course enrollment, may influence her ability and opportunities to resolve them (Figure 2-1, number 3 on the diagram). Her experience of strain and conflict may lead a woman to try and resolve them so that she can continue in her new learner role.

Coping Behaviors

Type I coping behavior, which involves structural role redefinition, is exhibited by a woman who negotiates expectations for one or more of her roles with role partners. That is, the role is mutually redefined, and responsibilities are adjusted or shared. In Chapter 1, the example was given of Ann who met with her supervisor to discuss what adjustments might be needed at work in order for her to begin studies. Ann also met with her husband and son so that, as a family, they could make adjustments in household duties to free up more quiet time for Ann.

In Type II coping, a woman alters her own perceptions of a role's expectations. For example, she may decide that studying every night is not feasible, so she adjusts her study schedule to twice per week. That is, she changes her inner reality of the situation and acts accordingly.

Type III coping, associated with the superwoman syndrome, is the type of coping alluded to in Kramarae's (2001) study entitled, "The Third Shift: Women Learning Online." Type III coping is exhibited in a woman who regularly deprives herself of sleep by studying late at night because that is the only time she perceives she has available for coursework. She tries to fit the extra demands of the learner role on top of existing demands of other roles.

Enrollment Outcome

In this study, a participant persisted if she completed her first academic course by her official course end date, regardless of her course grade; or if she requested a time

extension and was making satisfactory academic progress (had submitted at least one assignment). Participants had 15 weeks to complete their course, according to stated policy at the study site.

A participant was considered to have withdrawn on one of two conditions: a) if she requested a formal withdrawal from her course b) if she reached her course expiration date without completing any assignments and had taken no further action. Participants who requested a time extension were not tracked further in order to determine whether they eventually completed their course, because of time constraints for completing the study.

According to the study's conceptual framework, her persistence to course completion would indicate that she has integrated the learner role during her first course; that is, she has managed to perform the expectations of the learner role as well as meet the expectations of her other life roles.

Conclusion

Existing persistence models in higher education and adult and distance education do not adequately account for factors within an adult woman online learner's life context that may affect her ability to continue her academic pursuits. There is a need for qualitative research to provide a deeper understanding of what individual adult women online learners perceive contributes to their retention (Dupin-Bryant, 2004). Role strain and conflict are potential deterrents to her persistence. They form inner and outer realities of her particular situation that she must deal with on a daily basis in order to

persist. An adult woman online learner is an actor not only *upon* her environment, but also *subject to* her environment.

When she takes on the learner role, an adult woman engages in a process of role-making in this new role, even while incorporating that role into the context of her other life roles. This process is not well understood, and researchers have called for studies that explore how these women cope with the internal and external aspects of role conflict as it relates to adult students (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994). Some types of coping strategies may be more effective than others for a woman trying to resolve role strain and conflict. Yet a woman's coping behavior repertoire may be limited by her own perception or by the expectations of others in her life who act as her role partners.

This exploratory study seeks to understand the process by which adult women learning online incorporate the online learner role into their life context based on guiding concepts from role theory. The conceptual framework derived from the literature is not intended as a generalizable model in the positivist tradition. Instead, it provided a basis for initiating data collection and analyses, but did not preclude me from learning about other important issues that affected the persistence of the adult women learners who participated in this study.

Chapter 3

Methods

Methods used to conduct the study are discussed in this chapter, including the standpoint of the researcher, details about the study site, sampling procedure, and data collection and analysis. The chapter also addresses limitations of the study and products from the research.

The main research question for this study was, “What is the process by which adult women learners incorporate the online learner role into their lives?” In addition, “Which factors contribute to the ways in which these women negotiate the strain and conflict of adding the online learner role?” was posed as a sub-question.

Study Approaches

This exploratory study employed an orientational approach. “Orientational qualitative inquiry begins with an explicit theoretical or ideological perspective” (Patton, 1990, p. 86); in this instance, role theory. The researcher’s perspective was that of a social psychologist, who understands that individuals act according to the role expectations that they perceive others hold for them and that they hold for themselves. When challenges in life arise, an individual may experience difficulty when her own and others’ expectations are incongruent, compete with one another; or when the individual is ill-equipped to perform the expectations of a role.

Another way to frame the study's approach in accounting for participants' experiences is "realist," in which subjectivist and objectivist stances in social theory are integrated, in order to overcome the limitations of each (Robson, 2002). From an objectivist perspective, the "purpose of science is to develop universal causal laws" (Robson, p. 20). "Explaining an event is simply relating it to a general law" (Robson, p. 20). On the other hand, subjectivism holds that people "are conscious, purposive actors who have ideas about their world and attach meaning to what is going on around them. In particular, their behaviour depends crucially on these ideas and meanings" (Robson, p. 24). Explanation, in a realist view of science, "is showing how some event has occurred in a particular case" (Robson, p. 32).

The new integration argues that social structure is at the same time the relatively enduring product, and also the medium, of motivated human action. This allows both subjectivist and objectivist approaches to co-exist. Social structures such as language are both reproduced and transformed by action, but they also pre-exist for individuals. They permit persons to act meaningfully and intentionally while at the same time limit the ways in which they can act. (Robson, 2002, p. 35)

In the realist view, individuals are subject to social structures such as role expectations, but can also ignore them or try to change them. For example, a woman who feels compelled not to let laundry accumulate longer than two days, either because of her own self-expectations as a partner or mother or because of expectations of her held by others in her household, may decide to ignore those expectations and wait three or four days to do the laundry. Or, she may ask another member of her household to do laundry. Thus, the realist approach accounts for subjectivity and human agency.

The study's aim was to portray, through the use of thick description (Geertz, 1973, chap. 1), the lived experiences of the women who participated in the interviews. I

assumed that while each woman's story, recorded in rich, contextual detail, might reflect her individuality and the uniqueness of her situation, it would also yield comparisons and contrasts against the others' stories. My task as a researcher was to remain true to the information the women shared with me, yet present their experiences in a way that would be useful to practitioners who could better serve them. By telling each woman's story in detail, in her own words as much as possible, I could accomplish the former. By documenting differences and similarities among the women's experiences, I could accomplish the latter.

Thus, the study really contains two perspectives: the participants' viewpoints (the emic perspective), rendered through extensive, direct quotations from the interviews (Patton, 1990, p. 241) and the researcher's viewpoint (etic perspective) .

The emic perspective, then, is the outsider's attempt to produce as faithfully as possible—in a word, to reproduce—the informant's own descriptions or production of sounds, behavior, beliefs, etc. The etic perspective is the observer's subsequent attempt to take the descriptive information they have already gathered and to organize, systematize, compare—in a word, redescribe—that information in terms of a system of their own making. (McCutcheon, 1999).

My own viewpoint, as the researcher, in writing each woman's case narrative, was necessary to “make conceptual and theoretical sense of the case, and to report the findings so that their contribution to the literature is clear” (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 548).

Researcher Qualifications

As a researcher, I approached this investigation from the professional standpoints of a student affairs practitioner and an instructional designer. In my graduate academic pursuits and professional life, I have focused on student development in higher education and adult and distance education. As an Instructional Designer at Saint Joseph's College of Maine, I lead a design team to develop course materials for delivery over the Internet. I also develop and present training materials for online faculty and co-teach a Certified Online Instructor Program online seminar.

As an adult woman and first-generation college student who cared for a terminally ill, elderly parent while in graduate school, I appreciated the challenges faced by some of the study participants. My lengthy first-hand experience with juggling work, relationships, and major life events while completing my dissertation at a distance, coupled with my training as a counselor, contributed to the unconditional positive regard with which I approached each participant during her interviews.

The preconceptions that I brought to the investigation were: a) persistence in one's educational pursuits at a distance is a desirable goal but one that may pose challenges and even hardship for an adult woman learner; b) by integrating the learner role, an adult woman may become more autonomous in setting and attaining her educational goals; and c) educational institutions, while offering the promise of distance learning to individuals, are responsible for supporting those individuals through the challenges of fulfilling their educational aspirations.

Study Site

The study was conducted through the Division of Graduate and Professional studies (GPS) at Saint Joseph's College of Maine, a small accredited liberal arts Catholic-affiliated school with signature programs in health care. The College's GPS distance education division enrollment exceeds 4,000 students, representing most of the 50 United States and many foreign countries. Most of the students (84 percent) are women, the majority of whom are between the ages of 35 and 54. Seventy-nine percent of students work full time, and 56 percent have one or more children at home. Over 50 percent have household incomes in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range.

Admission into the Division is offered on an open, rolling basis, so that learners may begin their studies on the 15th or 30th day of any month during the year. Learners study under the direction of GPS faculty and have 15 weeks to complete a course. Any learner may request additional time to complete her course, in writing, along with payment of a \$100 fee. Though students are encouraged to enroll in two courses at a time, approximately 60 percent elect to take one course, especially at the beginning of their academic program.

The College began offering a print-based distance nursing program in 1976. Since then, more than 8,500 adult learners from all 50 states and 22 countries have earned their degrees through the Division of Graduate and Professional Studies. Much of the school's success with its distance education programming has been attributed to its faculty-directed independent study model and eight full-time student advisors, who maintain contact by phone and e-mail with individual students throughout their programs

of study. Nearly all GPS faculty are adjunct, working professionals from all over the country. In addition, two full-time staff log and track all completed student written assignments. Advisors monitor their students' academic progress by reviewing completed assignment status and through personal contact. Advisors are the primary point of contact between the College and the students, and they are charged with communicating periodically with them, approximately once per month. They are student advocates. During the required two-week summer residency for all academic programs, most students seek out their advisors to meet them in person and thank them for their logistical help or emotional support. Free technical support is also available to learners on a 24/7 basis through the company that hosts the College's online courses.

Many of the distance courses at the College are available in both print and online formats, affording students a choice of modality. However, enrollment trends at the school indicate a rapidly growing preference for online courses. Online courses at Saint Joseph's College are delivered via the World Wide Web through a course management system called WebCT, one of the most widely used systems in American distance educational institutions today. Learners can view and download course materials using any computer connected to the Internet. Course-specific online discussion boards provide a semi-public forum for learners and instructors to connect with one another anytime, anywhere.

Two of the online courses, HC 205 American Health Care Systems (renamed HA 205 during the study), and NU 500 Conceptual Bases for Nursing, are the point of entry for two of the College's most popular programs: the Bachelor of Science in Health

Administration, and the Master of Science in Nursing, respectively. These were the courses in which study participants were enrolled.

Internal GPS retention data indicate that of all GPS undergraduate, degree-seeking students beginning their academic programs from January 2000 to January 2002, approximately 50 percent were still actively enrolled as of January 2005. For the Bachelor of Science in Health Care Administration, the retention rate from the same data set is also approximately 50 percent.

Study Sample

Seven U. S. adult women between the ages of 35 and 56, with a spouse/partner and at least one child (of any age, whether living at home or not), were solicited from enrollees in the introductory HC 205 American Health Care Systems and NU 500 Conceptual Bases in Nursing online courses, as they took the online learner role. Four participants were enrolled in NU 500; three participants enrolled in HC 205.

One of the seven participants, Dee, was selected as a disconfirming example for the study. She was the only woman who had previously taken an online course and who had taken a college course within a year of her participation in the study. The additional information she provided about her previous online course experience in relation to her course at Saint Joseph's College was helpful in and of itself but also because it informed the experiences of the other women. Dee's expectations of her course experience were more congruent with her actual experience than for some of the other participants, such as Estelle or Judy.

Participants were purposefully selected on the basis of their likelihood of manifesting role strain and role conflict constructs, through their occupation of partner/spouse, employee, and parent roles, as well as having been out of school for a year or more. “The purpose of purposeful sampling is to select information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 1990, p. 169). An Admission counselor mentioned the study to prospective participants at the time of enrollment and gained permission for me to place an intake phone call with them. Participants received no compensation.

Data Collection

During the intake phone call to each prospective participant, as soon as possible after enrollment, I explained the study purpose, judged the appropriateness of each candidate, and ascertained her willingness to participate, following explicit Human Participants protocols. No potential candidate declined to participate during their intake phone call. However, two potential candidates could not be reached to schedule their first interview after their intake phone call, and they were withdrawn from the sampling pool.

With written consent I conducted the first of two tape recorded, structured interviews (Interview #1, see Appendix) by phone. After each interview, I transcribed the tape recording to produce a verbatim, written transcript.

After the first interview was completed, I followed up with each participant for a second phone interview upon one of three conditions. If a participant completed all but the final assignment in her course (that is, if all her assignments but her final assignment were logged by the Assignment Processing Department), I contacted her for the second interview (Interview #2a, “at course completion”). If a participant withdrew from her course before completing her final assignment, I followed up with her for the second interview (Interview #2b, “at course withdrawal”). If a participant requested extra time to complete her course, I also followed up with her for a second interview (Interview#2c, “at time extension”). Data collection began in June 2005, when the first interview was conducted. Data collection ended 16 months later, in October 2006, with the completion of the last interview.

Data Analysis

“The design of qualitative studies can in a real sense be seen as analytic” (Huberman & Miles, 1998, p. 184). Decisions I made regarding the conceptual framework, research questions, sample, and instrumentation of my study all involved anticipatory data reduction, which is an aspect of analysis (Huberman & Miles). My choices in all of these areas both limited and focused my attention toward particular occurrences in my interactions with participants.

Throughout the data collection and analysis phases, I composed researcher memos as observations, questions, and insights arose. For example, as soon as possible after each interview, I captured my reflections on the interview for inclusion in the

“database.” Those reflections not only helped guide my analysis but provided a partial record of the process.

Researcher memos are one way of “establishing a chain of evidence” (Yin, 1994, pp. 98-99) to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. By engaging in dialog with experts who would approach analysis of my data from different perspectives, I minimized the risk of “tunnel vision,” a significant threat to the credibility of the findings. Others may find alternative explanations for phenomena that I might miss, particularly in the initial phase of analysis.

After producing the written transcript for each of the second interviews, I turned to the task of completing the coding and case narrative for each participant, in turn. To prepare for writing each participant’s narrative and to handle the sheer volume of data generated by the interviews, I began data reduction using “sensitizing concepts” (Patton, 1990, p. 216) from the study’s conceptual framework, such as “role strain,” “role conflict,” and “coping,” along with other constructs from the literature, to code relevant sections of each interview transcript to a matrix display (please see the Appendix for a coding sample). The matrix ultimately contained an overview of each woman’s information, side-by-side with the others. I trusted my own judgment and ability to recognize pertinent information in the data (Seidman, 1991, p. 90), attending to the saliency of what the women said.

With the matrix display, interview transcripts, and my researcher memos at hand, I wrote a case narrative for each participant, moving constantly back and forth among the data sources. My goal at this stage of analysis was to reveal, in each participant’s own

words as much as possible, the realities of her situation, focused by the study's conceptual framework.

Although one starts any effort at thick description, beyond the obvious and superficial, from a state of general bewilderment as to what the devil is going on—trying to find one's feet—one does not start (or ought not) intellectually empty-handed. Theoretical ideas are not created wholly anew in each study;...they are adopted from other, related studies, and refined in the process, applied to new interpretive problems. (Geertz, 1973, p. 27)

The extensive information contained in the women's profiles "provides the reader with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author's conclusion 'makes sense'" (Merriam, 1998, p. 120). I asked each study participant to review a copy of her written case document for accuracy and completeness.

After crafting the in-depth individual profiles of the seven women, my task as a researcher was to review their experiences relative to one another. As I wrote the fourth and remaining cases, I began cross-case analysis. By performing cross-case analysis of the data, I could uncover the bigger picture inherent in the data.

Study Limitations

This study's objective was not to generalize to all adult women online learners but to provide enough description and rigorous interpretation of the lived experiences of several adult women online learners at the study site so that readers may make meaningful comparison to other contexts. The study's sample size was too small to generate or test hypotheses pertaining to the research questions. However, working propositions developed from the study findings may help other researchers to formulate

hypotheses which can be tested with larger samples. For example, a new adult woman online learner may be more likely to persist in her first course of study if she makes adjustments to one or more of her other life roles in order to accommodate the added, learner role. Similarly, she may be more likely to complete her first online course if she employs all three types of coping behaviors (Type I, Type II, and Type III) explored in the present study.

Completion of the first course of study in an online degree program by an adult woman learner cannot be equated with integration. The study findings suggest there may be other aspects to role integration, such as psychological factors. For example, Joyce did not avail herself of the help offered her by individuals within her family support network in order to progress in her course. The study findings do not reveal why she did not do so or whether she would have completed her course had she done so. Thus, while what I observed as the study researcher was that three other participants—Elizabeth, Estelle, and Dee—appeared to integrate the learner role by virtue of their course completions, it is beyond the scope of the study to assert that they did in fact integrate the learner role. That they made progress toward integrating the learner role is a more reasonable claim.

The exploratory findings from the study will be useful for their theoretically-based insight into the process of particular adult women online learners, who either persisted in or withdrew from their first course of study in an academic degree program.

Researchers studying online education have operationalized persistence in various ways. As a result, there is no standard definition of the construct in the field. Because “persistence” in this study was construed as successful completion of the first course of

study in an online academic degree program, data were not collected beyond the course level at program entry. However, one participant (“Elizabeth”), who was interviewed early in the study’s data collection phase, completed her first course on time and requested a time extension for her second course, which she also completed.

The framework for this study did not take into account all possible pre-enrollment characteristics of adult women online learners, such as learning style, health status, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and previous academic achievement, which may affect role strain, conflict, or persistence. While Edmondson, Payne, and Patton (1987) found that many background-status variables, such as those just mentioned, may have no significant bearing on role conflict, this study suggests otherwise. The nature of the open-ended interviews used in this study allowed some issues that were not in the original framework to emerge as important factors in the persistence of several women in this study. Two examples include health status of the adult women learners or members of their families and needs of extended family members. These health and extended family issues should be more fully explored in future research. There were no women in the study who were mothers of very young children or infants, who might face additional stressors, such as childcare availability or affordability. On the other hand, the study sample did include women whose roles included providing childcare for their grandchildren on top of their worker, partner, parent, and learner roles.

The degree to which ethnic and cultural norms may have influenced the perceptions and efforts of these women as they attempted to integrate their new learner role into their lives was not addressed in this study. Information regarding each woman's ethnicity was not collected. Additional research is needed to examine the interaction of cultural and institutional normative pressures with an individual's self-efficacy in resolving role strain and conflict.

How or whether individual characteristics, such as one's perceived ability to role negotiate (Miller, Johnson, Hart, & Peterson, 1999) affect one's ability to ameliorate role strain and conflict through particular coping behaviors or other mechanisms is a subject for future study. The women in this study all demonstrated how they attempted to resolve conflicts when they arose, yet the study reveals little about their innate abilities or particular stress responses.

Intra-role strain (within roles) other than the learner role was not accounted for in this study, either at enrollment or during the course of study. Future research should explore how role strain within an individual's pre-existing roles impacts strain in a new role, as well as conflict across roles in the role set.

Role integration may manifest differently for individuals taking different types of distance education courses. For example, the participants in this study were engaged in self-paced, faculty-directed independent study courses, requiring minimal learner-learner interaction. It is conceivable that other types of course designs, which include greater online interaction requirements, would exert different demands on learners than those in this study.

Products

The study findings will be used to inform administrators, student services staff, and course designers at Saint Joseph's College of Maine in their efforts to address the needs of learners similar to the study participants more effectively. More precisely targeted interventions can increase the likelihood of learner persistence across academic programs. An executive summary of findings will be distributed to key individuals and departments within the Division of Graduate and Professional Studies at the College, such as the Dean, academic program directors, Admissions, Operations/Advising, and Course Design and Delivery.

The answers to the research questions posed by this study may help advance persistence theory in distance education as well as practitioners' understanding of appropriate support for adult women online learners whose life contexts are similar to those of the study participants. The concept of role integration provides a new conceptual framework upon which practitioners may base program design and specific interventions. Study findings will include a clear explanation of the integration model with recommendations for its use. A manuscript suitable for publication will also be submitted to one or more refereed journals in related disciplines, such as adult and distance education or healthcare.

Chapter 4

Findings

In-depth profiles of the seven study participants are included in this chapter. The case narrative for each woman contains detailed information, largely in her own words, about her life context when she began her course, followed by a retrospective account of her experience while taking her course. Areas of focus, tied to the study's conceptual framework, include potential sources and ameliorators of role conflict at enrollment, as well as role strain, conflict, and coping during the course. The result of each woman's course enrollment is presented, to the degree possible at the study's conclusion, as one of three outcomes: persistence to completion; course time extension; or withdrawal.

At the time of writing the study findings, participants' statuses spanned all three possible outcomes. Two participants had completed their course on time. One participant had extended her course and completed it. Two participants had extended their course and were making satisfactory progress toward completion. Two participants had been administratively withdrawn from their course for unsatisfactory progress. Neither had requested a time extension, nor submitted an assignment by her course expiration date.

Individual Profiles

Elizabeth

During our first interview, Elizabeth spoke with me from her home at 7:00 in the evening, her local time. When at first I could not reach her at our appointed time, she called me back to apologize for being on the phone, talking to a sibling about their mother, who was recuperating from surgery, and who does not live with Elizabeth. I detected no background noise or other distraction during the interview, which belied the fact that four others and the family dog shared her living space. Her husband, who holds a management-level position, her retired elderly father, handicapped brother, and teenage daughter all live with her. As our conversation unfolded, it became apparent that each member of the household played a well-defined and active role in managing day-to-day household affairs. Elizabeth spoke rapidly, articulating her words clearly and without hesitation, as if she were accustomed to using her time efficiently. Her speech was animated; she often mimicked others affectionately when recounting their comments. Our first interview lasted 30 minutes.

When I spoke with her again, 11 months later, she had completed the course on time, earning an “A” grade. She was enrolled in her second course, making excellent progress, though she had requested a time extension. During our second interview, she explained that she requested the extension because her father-in-law had been hospitalized for a month, in the intensive care unit, and she “had to be at the hospital every day.”

Pre-Course

Enrollment Decision

It was early summer, and Elizabeth, a trained nurse, working in medical insurance claims, had just enrolled in her first course (HC 205: United States Health Care System) in her Bachelor of Science in Health Care Administration degree program. Her degree program was directly related to her work. “I love the insurance industry,” she said. “I really understand it, and I really try to get the patients to get the most of what they can out of it. And I just thought that this would be the logical choice.” She was pleased that HC 205 would be her first course. She thought, “Well, since I’m stepping back in, let me at least pick something I’m familiar with.”

She elected to start her course in mid-September, however, through a special deferment offered by the College. The timing seemed right. “I had thought about it [enrolling] for a couple of years. My daughter is going to be a senior in high school, and she is gonna be going to college....And I thought, you know, my company pays tuition. I am throwing money literally out the window if I don’t take advantage of this....Like it just came upon me. I’m throwing money out the window, my kid is leaving, and I want to do this. I need to do this for me.”

Academic and Technological Readiness at Enrollment

Though she has been in a health-care related field “for years,” she was “a little nervous” about being a student again. “[P]art of me feels like, well I know about health

care systems, and then part of me feels like, but that's different than being a student.”

The last college course she took, several years ago, was in mathematics. “I'm terrible in math.” She had already begun reviewing her textbook, though her course didn't officially start for another three months. “I ordered it as soon as it was available. ‘Cause I'm like a nut, and I—I guess I'm a little nervous, you know, ‘cause I haven't been in school in a long time....I just figure well, if I get a jump on it...if I have...a half an hour I just sort of sit and look through it and read things and see if it—and a lot of it so far is like okay....” Elizabeth did not anticipate any difficulty with the technologies used in the course. “Oh no, I work with the computer and systems all day. So I'm not worried about that at all. I work from a home office so we have to do everything ourselves—set up, program, everything.”

Emotional and Instrumental Support at Enrollment

Key members of Elizabeth's support system were, in her opinion, feeling positive about her enrolling in a college course, especially her husband. “My spouse was *so* excited when I called him and told him I did it. And I did it without even...like I had mentioned it for all these years, but the day I did it I did not call him first and say, ‘I'm doing this.’ I just did it....[H]e thinks I should have done this and should do it for me.” Elizabeth frequently relies on her husband to help with logistical tasks and described him as a calming influence. “My spouse will be the best one I think....whenever I'm getting stressed beyond what I can handle he's always like, ‘Okay, what—what do we need to do?’ He's...very soothing and calm....[H]e'll take my dad to doctors' appointments if

I'm over the top, you know....[H]e'll say, 'Don't cook....I'll cook tonight.' Which means what restaurant do you want to order food from. But it's still—I don't have to do it....”

Her teenage daughter, with whom she is very close, supported her mother's decision but was somewhat puzzled because, as her mother recounted, “I can't believe you want to go back to school. You must be out of your mind....Why would you want to do that?” Her mother laughed when recalling her daughter's words and explained, “But I've told her...that...it's like something I *want* to do. It's different than learning [a subject] that you're never gonna use in your life....She's very generous-hearted but she seems fine with it right now.” Elizabeth felt she could continue to count on her daughter to fix some meals for her and help with Elizabeth's brother. “Well she's great at making me any kind of food I want when I'm hungry....And I'm sure she'll do that when I'm studying. And I'm certain that as long as it doesn't impact me being away from her too much, she'll be okay....But—but in general, she'll do anything I ask her to do. She's very good about that. She helps me around the house. And with [my brother], she's very good with him. She goes and teaches at his special ed group also.”

Elizabeth felt that the other family members living with her—her elderly father and her brother—were also supportive of her decision to enroll in her course. “Oh he—he supports everything I do,” she said of her father. “He'd pay for it if they [employer] didn't.” Her father helps with the laundry and can cook meals and go grocery shopping. “[T]hat all will help me. Because even though I don't want him to have to do it all the time, when I'm in school I think I'll let him do it more. And knowing that he *will* do it will help me.” As for her brother, “Oh, he supports everything. He's happy for

everybody. He's just got that kind of personality." His role in helping around the house, according to Elizabeth, is to "bring me my water and take my laundry down....I imagine that's what he'll continue to do."

Each family member seemed to play their part in the overall functioning of the household. Elizabeth noted, "This family's pretty good. We stick together. Get on each other's nerves, but we do stick together."

Elizabeth's work supervisor, with whom she has "been friends for years," was enthusiastic about her decision. "She was like, '*Go for it, girl!* That's great. You can do my job when I leave.'" She also "signed the [tuition reimbursement] forms right away and...sent them on their way." She had also expressed a willingness to help Elizabeth fit schoolwork into her work schedule. "When you have slow time, study or do what you need to," she had said. Her support eased Elizabeth's mind. "So that helps me because it doesn't make me feel guilty about taking time."

Elizabeth's friends appeared to offer her emotional support, primarily. Her closest friend was "very supportive of it [decision to enroll]. She's like, 'Better you than me. I'll never go back.'" "But," as Elizabeth explained, "she already *has* her bachelor's." Her other friends "think it's really great. I mean but I haven't really gone in depth with everybody 'cause it won't really affect their lives, I don't think too much. At least not right at this moment. I—I probably don't realize how much it's really gonna be, but you know 'cause it will involve not being able to do things when you have to do your schoolwork. But...right now everybody seems like, 'Oh, good, yeah it's a good idea. Oh, great I can't believe you're doin' that.' Oh, and a couple of my girlfriends are like, 'Are you kidding me? How can you even put yourself through that?'"

A Typical Day

Elizabeth's days were typically long and tightly packed. She got up in the morning at about 5:15 a.m. and went to bed "usually by 11" p.m. At the time of her first interview, her daughter would get breakfast. Elizabeth would make coffee and turn on her home office computer, to "clean up anything from the night before that came in late." She telecommuted, processing insurance claims from her home office. Then the two would leave for the daughter's school.

After returning home, Elizabeth helped her husband "get his lunch ready" and off to work. Then she would let the dog out and see her father and brother off to church. And "start work." When her father and brother returned from church, they would do some household chores: unload the dishwasher and do some laundry. Elizabeth described her work schedule as "very busy." "I have a lot of patients that I carry...in my patient load....And...sometimes I have lunch. Most of the time I don't." When her daughter comes home from school, the two talk about her day. Someone in the family usually has a doctor's appointment during the week. "Maybe more than that." Since her mother had surgery, Elizabeth checked on her daily. And then there were special events or clubs to attend or usher a family member to. The family usually had dinner together; occasionally they ate out. After dinner, Elizabeth might do more laundry and, at the time of her first interview, read from her textbook. "I usually collapse at night....collapse and go to sleep and start all over," she said.

Conflicts and Resolution

Most of the everyday conflicts Elizabeth faced revolved around scheduling issues. “The most time I feel real conflict is if somebody’s got a doctor’s appointment during the day while I’m working.” Though her supervisor encourages her to take the time she needs from work, Elizabeth feels stressed “...that I’m gonna get a call, and I’m not gonna be here to deal with it....And it’s crazy, because, like, an hour’s really not that long for an insurance company to call you back....I just don’t want them waiting.” She described her feelings about such conflicts this way: “I feel a lot of pull....And I get kind of resentful that there’s so much work that you really can’t get it all done.” Anticipating the added chore of schoolwork, she said, “I know you’re thinking, ‘When is she gonna go to school in here?’ But I’m gonna make time for me....And I’ve already told everybody, ‘When I’m in school, you’re just gonna have to learn to handle it yourself.’”

She did not feel as much stress scheduling around emergencies. “...[I]f there’s an emergency, my family comes first. And that’s just the way it is. And my work knows that. And it’s that way for all of them also....It’s almost the daily mundane things that have to be done that make me feel more torn.”

When asked how she resolved scheduling conflicts, she sighed and then explained, “...I check my voicemail a lot. It seems to make me feel better, like, okay I know what’s goin’ on....I try very hard to schedule things early in the morning or in the evening. Or on a weekend, like...doctor’s appointments.” She also described how working as efficiently as possible helped her keep up with volume of work that needed to get done. “I’m real quick at typing....I’ve done this for a long time.” One relaxation

strategy she found particularly effective was to get manicures.. “That relaxes me....I don’t know why. It’s like the one thing I’m doin’ that takes care of me....And I will not stop doing that. I’m like, ‘I’m goin’ to my nail appointment, don’t even talk to me.’”

During Course

At the time of our second interview, Elizabeth had finished her first course, HC 205: United States Health Care System, earning an “A” grade, and was taking a subsequent course. We rescheduled our interview appointment four times to work around scheduling conflicts and health emergencies in Elizabeth’s family. When I called as a courtesy to remind her of our final appointment, she was dealing with another urgent medical situation and asked if we could do the interview that night, because things were “crazy” right now. She had just come from the hospital, where her father-in-law was in intensive care. We conducted the interview without interruption and, as with the first interview, I detected no background noise. Elizabeth’s responses to my questions were focused and articulate. She spoke in the same animated manner as she did in our first interview. I was struck by her presence of mind and willingness to do the interview, given the medical emergency she was facing. I expected to witness a somewhat chaotic scene, which did not materialize.

Expectations and Experience of the Course

Elizabeth was pleasantly surprised and pleased with her course experience, especially with the interpersonal interaction she had with her instructor, who was both accessible and approachable. “I thought it would be a lot more unfriendly. Because...I didn’t think there’d be interaction. But in fact there was, because [the instructor] would e-mail me with comments about the paper. But also, we started to just talk about different things, like family things....I could ask her questions and get to know her....It wasn’t just the computer link....I really thought it would be like, cold. But it wasn’t.” Her positive relationship with her instructor was what Elizabeth focused on when relating the quality of her course experience.

Clarity of Course Expectations

The expectations for the course were “absolutely, very clearly” expressed, in Elizabeth’s opinion. “The questions and the way that the whole format is online, about the objectives and the description, and...whatever your unit assignment is, was crystal clear.” She specifically mentioned how important her instructor’s feedback was at the beginning of the course, “especially after doing the first [assignment].”

Relationship with Instructor and Advisor

Prompt response time and effective advocacy on her behalf were key expectations Elizabeth had of her instructor and advisor. Both exceeded her expectations. She

described her instructor as “very responsive.” She had similar comments regarding her advisor. “Well, [my advisor’s] fabulous, let me tell you something. Every time I e-mail her, she’s got an answer right away.”

Their personal presence and interest in her welfare, however, surprised her. She was amazed that her advisor checked in with her more than once during the course, just to find out how she was doing. “She e-mails me a couple times during every course: ‘How are you doing, is there anything I can do?’ ...If I don’t need anything from her, she still contacts me and says, ‘Are you okay, do you need anything, how are you doing?’” When she talked about her instructor, Elizabeth stressed the human element to that relationship. “If there was a problem, if there was a question, that she wasn’t all—I don’t know—book, and you couldn’t even know her as a person.” At one point during her course, Elizabeth contacted her instructor to let her know she would need to submit an assignment later than expected, due to a family member’s hospitalization. Her instructor was responsive to her needs. But then the two struck up a casual conversation about things that were happening in their lives, and Elizabeth enjoyed their personal connection. Her instructor was someone with whom she could talk to and relate.

Difficulties with the Course

When I asked her what difficulties, if any, she experienced in the course, she told me, “I really didn’t, to be honest. I mean, I got an ‘A,’ and I thought the course was really interesting and that the instructor was very clear.”

Academic Preparation

In hindsight, Elizabeth thought she was “very prepared” academically for her first course, largely because of her extensive experience in the healthcare field. What she gained, primarily, was new factual information to round out her existing knowledge. For this reason, she felt that HC 205 was a good course for her to take first in her degree program. On the other hand, she was dreading taking her math requirement because, as she said, “I’m terrible in math.”

Life Changes During Course

Elizabeth’s father had surgery while she was taking her course. She said that made keeping up with her schoolwork “a little bit tougher,” and she missed a day or two of work. Undaunted, she took her books to the hospital. Reflecting on that experience, she said, “Honestly, sometimes that was the best time [to study] because there was no phone, nobody asking me, ‘Mom, can you--?’ Sometimes you find those times not to be as bad as you think they’re going to be. And he did fine, so it wasn’t very stressful.” She would leave work and head straight to the hospital instead of going home to fix dinner for her family. Because her husband and daughter were, as she described them, “very self-sufficient,” they picked up some of the household duties for her during that time.

Impact of Schoolwork on Relationships and Work

Usually, Elizabeth studied on the weekends, while her husband and daughter went off-roading in their new Jeep. “So it really didn’t impact them, because they weren’t [at home]....And it really worked. Because I wasn’t saying, ‘No, I can’t do that because I have to do my schoolwork.’ I didn’t want to go do what they were doing, so they kind of found something to do while I was...in school.” Her father would either fix dinner for himself or help her prepare something when the family ate together. She thought that her schoolwork affected her friends more than her family, since she was not able to join them for dinners or other social gatherings. In short, “doing things other than work or running the home or doing schoolwork stopped.”

Because Elizabeth did not do schoolwork during work, she didn’t feel “that it even impacted it.” She thought that because she was only taking one course at a time, it wasn’t that invasive.

Changing Needs or Demands in Home/Social Life

Her father’s hospitalization meant that Elizabeth needed to spend more time with him while he recuperated. On the other hand, her daughter got her driver’s license, which meant Elizabeth gained back the time she had previously been spending driving her daughter back and forth to school every day. “And that was a *huge* gift.”

Self-Perception of Changing Role Responsibilities

When asked how her perception changed in terms of what she needed to do in response to the needs of others while she was taking her course, Elizabeth noted a definite shift in her thinking and acting. Except when her father was sick, which in her mind justified letting some of the housework go, it bothered her at first that the laundry would “back up” or she was too tired to “even put a load of laundry in.” She started asking her daughter to help. But she also began feeling less uneasy when things did not get done. She said, “I realized that, you know it’s not a crisis if the laundry waits two days....I actually think it made me...less compulsive about things that really don’t matter.” She set her priorities on her family, job, and schoolwork. “And if I did have free time, I wanted to be with my daughter and my husband and go for a walk or take a bike ride. I didn’t want to do the laundry. And, see, before I’m not so sure I would have done that. So it was kind of good, actually.”

A Typical Day During Course

Except for her father’s hospitalization, Elizabeth’s daily routine, and the routine of others in her household, did not change much while she was taking her course. She kept basically the same working hours and, most nights, did some schoolwork. “I just felt like I had to stay on top of it.” When her daughter got her driver’s license, Elizabeth didn’t have to make daily trips to and from school, which saved her some time.

Conflicts and Resolution During Course

At one point during her course, Elizabeth was faced with the dilemma of catching up on her schoolwork (“I had to get this paper done”) or attending an event her niece was participating in. She decided to stay home and finish her paper, but during our interview several months later, she still felt bad about not being there for her niece. “I want to be able to be there for everybody when they need me. And I felt like I let her down.” Later, when I asked her how she resolved conflicts when they came up, she came back to her earlier dilemma. “But you can’t take that back....Once you miss it, you miss it. And I’ve been to everything in their life. I mean she was not upset with me....And I just had to let it go, because I couldn’t take it back. So, I just made sure I got to the next thing.” On one other occasion, she found it awkward to ask her pastor to proctor an exam for her near the holidays, though he seemed happy to oblige. As a compromise, she “tried to work around his schedule, which I felt was the only thing I really could do.”

All in all, she didn’t face many conflicts while trying to fit her schoolwork in because, as she put it, “I have such a supportive family. If I didn’t, it would be a problem.” If her daughter were younger and less self-sufficient, she thought that might have made it more difficult to fit schoolwork in.

Emotional and Instrumental Support During Course

The support Elizabeth anticipated receiving from her family and friends while taking her course did materialize. Her husband helped around the house and helped Elizabeth plan a major event at their church. Her daughter, father, and brother all helped

with household chores, just as she had predicted. She kept her same work hours, so as to not affect her work, but she did commiserate with her supervisor occasionally about life stressors in general. Her closest friends remained “very supportive” and understanding when Elizabeth and her husband could not get together with them. Other friends expressed some disappointment at not being able to get together, but “never got angry or anything.” Fellow church members helped with church-related activities “because they knew all the things I had on my plate.”

Her instructor also offered both emotional and instrumental support, in the forms of positive and constructive feedback. Her advisor not only checked in with her to see how she was doing but also intervened whenever Elizabeth had an administrative question or issue. Elizabeth was amazed by her quick responses via e-mail. “I think [she] has never taken more than 20 minutes to answer me....I’m like, ‘Do you ever go home?’”

Suggestions for the College

When reflecting on what the College could do in the future to help her or others like her to complete courses, Elizabeth had no suggestions. As far as she was concerned, the College was meeting or exceeding all of her expectations. “I mean they really are responsive, they’re quick. They’re reasonable. They seem very fair....I’ve talked to other people who have...gone for other online colleges and have had horrible experiences, where they either didn’t get answers, the demands were ridiculous. There

[were] timelines that there was *no* change on, no give. And I don't think that helps working people....I really have had a positive experience so far.”

Decision to Continue Taking Courses

Elizabeth plans to continue taking courses at Saint Joseph's College of Maine. She emphasized the intrinsic rewards of studying and being in college as reasons for signing up for her next course. “It was very exciting to be back in school, even though I wasn't physically going. It was just, like something that what I was doing, it was just for me. And I was really learning a lot about the healthcare industry. And I just loved being back in school. Not like when I was in college. I don't think I appreciated it. But I did this time. And I was really looking forward to my next course.”

Furthermore, for Elizabeth, the act of studying itself seemed to foster a state of mindfulness, a state believed by some to be a factor in alleviating role strain and conflict (Marks & MacDermid, 1996). “Because it just pulls you away...it just takes you away from everything else. Because you have to concentrate on what you're doing. And I think I really enjoyed that.”

Coping Strategy

Elizabeth expanded her coping behavior repertoire after she enrolled in her course. Before her course started, she emphasized working as efficiently as possible (Type III coping – reactive role behavior) to get everything done in her job and at home.

“I check my voicemail a lot,” and “I’m real quick at typing,” she said. She tried to schedule appointments so as to avoid conflicts. Prayer helped to help reduce her stress level. She also treated herself to manicures as a relaxation technique.

Once she enrolled in her course, however, she began trying additional approaches. “I’ve already told everybody, ‘When I’m in school, you’re just going to have to learn to handle it yourself.’” With a single declaration, she put others in the household on notice that she was reducing the scope of her “wife,” “mother,” “sister,” and “daughter” roles, a form of Type I coping (structural role redefinition). In another demonstration of Type I coping, she re-negotiated the date and time of our second interview. When I placed a courtesy reminder call to her the night before our scheduled appointment, she asked if we could do the interview “right now,” because she had just come from the hospital where her father-in-law was in intensive care. Over time, she felt less uneasy about letting some of the household chores go, such as when she fell behind with the laundry. She asked her daughter to help, and she altered her perception of what she needed to do; both behaviors are forms of Type II coping (personal role redefinition). “I realized that...it’s not a crisis if the laundry waits two days.”

Estelle

Estelle spoke with me from her home at 6:15 in the evening, her local time, as scheduled, for our first interview. She and her husband were helping to raise their grandson, who, like on most nights, was there that night, until his father came to pick him up. While Estelle was on the phone with me, her grandson engaged with others in the

household who were present in the background; his grandfather and Estelle's college-aged daughter.

When Estelle and I spoke again, three and a half months later, she had completed her first course, NU 500, in the Master's in Nursing program, earning a "B+" grade. Not satisfied with her first course experience, she planned to "try one more and see if it's any different."

Pre-Course

Enrollment Decision

A few months before we spoke, Estelle had made the commitment to pursue her master's in nursing. She wanted to keep options for herself open, and she sensed the need for job security down the line. Her bad back precluded her from returning to bedside nursing, and her husband would retire well before her, given their age difference. She sensed the time was right to enroll. "I've thought about master's for a long time. And...realized time's getting away, and I'm 47, and if I'm going to do it, now's the time to do it."

Academic and Technological Readiness at Enrollment

Three things were uppermost in Estelle's mind as she began her course: her fear that her computer might crash again (her son had to re-load the operating system for her the week before we spoke); unclear assignment instructions; and questions about how to

access library resources. She was not concerned about understanding the material; it was the format that she found difficult to navigate. “[B]eing mostly an independent study, I’m finding I’m not prepared very well at all for it....It’s very difficult to get answers. The instructions I don’t think are very clear. And it’s very difficult to get answers back from the instructor....It’s what they want for an assignment to be submitted that gets confusing.” As for computer issues, Estelle could use her daughter’s computer if she had to, and she had been budgeting for a new computer if hers couldn’t be fixed.

Emotional and Instrumental Support at Enrollment

Estelle’s emotional support network consisted of her husband, daughter, son, and a close friend. Her husband had always stood by her when it came to her education, first for nursing school when they were newlyweds, then for her bachelor’s, and now for her master’s. She was pleasantly surprised by her husband’s response to her decision. “I think he’s very supportive, although he doesn’t understand I don’t think how much time it does take.” When I asked her how she knew he was supportive, she chuckled and said, “Well, you know, after [many] years, you know.” She explained, “He did tell me...enthusiastically, ‘You should do it if that’s what you want to do.’ And...both times I’ve finished programs, he’s told me how proud he is. So, I know.” Estelle’s daughter was “very enthused” about her mother’s new educational goal, since they would both be in school in nursing programs. “She’s in nursing school, too, and she—she’s excited about us kind of doing this together.” A close friend of Estelle’s supported her decision to return to school unconditionally. “[H]er attitude is whatever makes me happy is okay.

She didn't go any further than high school, so she doesn't understand my love of education. But if it fulfills you, then she's all for it." Though her son was "pretty overwhelmed right now" with work and raising his little boy, Estelle felt he was behind her. "[H]e's always been my biggest cheerleader...he's probably the one who tells me I'm intelligent enough to get through this.

Individuals outside her immediate family, besides her closest friend, were less supportive. Her work supervisor, a diploma nurse, didn't really understand her decision to enroll in courses. "She thinks I'm crazy. Her words to me are, 'Why would you do that?'" Estelle's employing organization, however, generally supported employees in furthering their education. "[T]hey're very flexible." Members of Estelle's craft group, who met once a month, viewed her coursework as taking time away from their time together. She laughed, "[N]one of them are supportive because it takes away from [crafting]."

For the most part, with the exception of her son and supervisor perhaps, the individuals Estelle counted on for emotional support were also the ones she turned to for other types of support. Her husband helped with housework, errands, and grocery shopping if she asked him to. She referred to her son and daughter each as her "cheerleader." But while her son was too busy with work and being a single parent to offer instrumental help, her daughter was a big help when she was home from college. "Oh she'd do anything for me....She's...always offering to run here or there for me or do this or that for me....anything from running errands for me to doing housework to listening to me vent." Her close friend "would do anything" she needed, such as shopping for craft supplies when she was out.

When her grandson was born and Estelle needed to change her work schedule, her supervisor and organization came through for her. “Yeah, [my supervisor’s] very flexible with my hours. If I need to change them or need to be there on one day over the other. They’ve rearranged a couple of...meetings to be done in the morning, because I can’t do them in the afternoons anymore.”

A Typical Day

At 5:15 a.m. Estelle began her day. She summed up her routine for me. Typically, she was “off to work from 6:30 to 11:30 every morning. And then I baby-sit until 7:00 at night. And then I study until 10:00, 11:00.” She worked half-time as a nursing home care agency administrator. When her grandson is older, she planned to work full time in that role. But for now, when she got home from work, her focus until 7:00 was on baby-sitting her grandson. “And then I usually get the books out. Before I was in school I was doing a lot of [personal] study. So I was kind of in the...mode of reading and studying and that.” Estelle’s daily routine was helpful in setting the stage for her schoolwork.

Conflicts and Resolution

When her grandson was born, Estelle ruled out working full time at her agency. Because her son was a single dad, she said, “[I]t would be easier if I was home full time, taking care of the baby.” But by working part time, she was able to continue receiving

benefits, which was a key factor in her decision. “We decided on half days of daycare....I work for the benefits primarily. And I enjoy it.” By adjusting her daily routine, Estelle was able to continue working and to help with her grandson.

She discussed options for daycare with her son, and she adjusted her work schedule with her boss. “There are times that I have to go in on Saturdays. For instance, if the baby’s sick, I stay home with him. And then I go in on the weekends and finish up what I have to do. My work has been very flexible, always has been.”

During Course

I followed up with Estelle in September, just after her official course end date. She finished her course nearly two weeks early, earning an above average grade. We spoke at 8:00 in the evening, her local time, at her request, after her son had picked up her grandson. As with our first interview, she was at home, but her daughter had returned to school, and her grandson was gone for the night, so the house was quiet.

Expectations and Experience of the Course

Though Estelle planned to enroll in the second course of her degree program, she wasn’t sure whether she would continue beyond that point. “I’m going to try one more and see if it’s any different,” she said. Her first course, NU500, was different than she anticipated, and in some ways fell short of her expectations. “Oh, it was totally different than what I expected. Well I expected like online lectures that you could check into at

your own, you know, timeframe, your own flexibility. And there really was very little input from the instructor. I mean there was like two paragraphs of instruction for each unit, and that was it. And then the readings....So it was very independent.”

Clarity of Course Expectations

Estelle found some of the assignment instructions problematic. In the first unit of the course, students were required to write an opinion paper. “And one of the girls asked if we needed to have references for this paper.” When the instructor indicated that, if they used references, to cite them, Estelle was frustrated. “That wasn’t the question. We knew that. The thing is...should it be...a totally opinion paper, or did we have to find supporting evidence for it...I mean it was very vague, very indirect answers and not at all what you needed when you were floundering and lost.” She needed more direct answers.

Relationship with Instructor and Advisor

Her relationship with her instructor didn’t meet her expectations “at all.” Though she expected to communicate with her instructor via e-mail, she “had to call her on her cell phone.” She did talk with her instructor “a couple times,” but she “didn’t think it was very informative.” She felt as though she had intruded on her instructor’s time. “I thought it was kind of short and like I had interrupted something.” On another occasion, when her instructor admonished her to remember to use correct verb tenses in her paper, Estelle was surprised. “Well I went back to my papers, and it was never mentioned

ever.” This discrepancy led her to conclude her instructor “doesn’t know her students.” The time it took for her instructor to provide feedback on her papers was sometimes longer than expected. “Well, one paper took over two weeks to get back.”

The interactions she had with her advisor met Estelle’s expectations, for the most part. “Oh, she was real sweet. She helped me whenever I needed it.” Though she had an e-mail and a phone call out to her advisor when we spoke, generally she received a response from her within “a couple days.”

Difficulties with the Course

The greatest challenges Estelle faced regarding the course itself were its presentation and the writing assignments. She referred again to a lack of clarity for the assignments. “Well, again it was so vague. It was...really difficult to get into and understand and write a clear paper....” She explained that although she found writing the papers challenging, she was satisfied with the results and didn’t agree with her instructor’s feedback. “Well, I thought the papers came together pretty well...I mean I really struggled with it. But when it was done and submitted, I thought it was darn good.”

Academic Preparation

When reflecting on her preparedness for the course, Estelle reiterated her difficulty with the presentation of the subject. “The way it was presented, I wasn’t at all

[prepared].” When I asked her about the subject matter itself, she didn’t find that problematic. “It’s kind of what we’ve done the past, you know, associate’s, bachelor’s, only more in depth and more um, a lot’s happened in the last 10 years. So it was pretty interesting, actually.” To my surprise, however, she didn’t think being employed in the field helped her with the theory. “No, not at all. No. Well I don’t think, where I work anyway, that theory is involved in anything we do. I think it should be perhaps more, but it’s not.” Doing the reading and research for the course were not a hindrance for Estelle, but trying to meet other expectations in the course, such as requirements for written assignments, was at times frustrating.

Life Changes During Course

Other aspects of Estelle’s life and the lives of those close to her remained consistent while she was taking her course. Nothing had come up that she could think of; no big changes occurred.

Impact of Schoolwork on Relationships and Work

In her opinion, Estelle’s taking her course had no effect on her or those close to her. “It didn’t impact it, it was fine.” She found fitting schoolwork into everything else in her life to be “no problem.”

When I asked her how taking her course affected her work role, if at all, she said, “It didn’t.” As I recalled, her agency had accommodated her need for flexible hours in

the past. Adding schoolwork to her life did not require any further adjustments to her schedule.

Changing Needs or Demands in Home/Social Life

Estelle “didn’t notice any changes at all” in the needs or demands of those in her home or social life since she started her schoolwork. She did not comment further on that question. Her perception of what she needed to do in response to the needs of others in her life did not change, either.

A Typical Day During Course

There was no change to Estelle’s daily routine while she was taking her course. As she described her day to me, I noted it was pretty much the same as when we spoke during our first interview. “Yeah, pretty much,” she agreed. “I work from 6:30 to 11:30. Pick the boy up at 11:30. Have him until 7:00. And then either do my homework in the evenings or on the weekends. And then socializing is done on the weekends, too.” She told me she continued with her crafts group once a month, as before, and that her schoolwork had no effect on that activity or members of the group.

Conflicts and Resolution During Course

“I never felt conflict,” Estelle said when I asked her about any times when she feels conflicts between her schoolwork and what she needed to do as a spouse, mother,

friend, or employee. So I assumed out loud that she didn't have any conflicts to resolve while she was taking her course. "No," she replied. She explained, "I think the family's used to me being in school off and on." I probed a bit further, asking how she managed her time or any change in anything that she needed to do around the house, or did anybody else have to pitch in. "Mmm mmm, no not really," she said.

Emotional and Instrumental Support During Course

As I explained that I would like to explore some of the ways that others in her life may have offered her support while she was taking her course, Estelle quickly replied, "Ah, I don't think they ever saw a need to. So, I mean if I'd have been stressed out, I'm sure one—somebody would have stepped up. But there was never a need to." I confirmed with her that even things like others getting meals or doing household chores were not necessary. "No, no problem," she said.

Suggestions for the College

"I think that the library research has to be better. I did a lot of my research through work because I could pull up full articles, as opposed to only being able to pull up a title, possibly an abstract, and hoping it's something you need." When I asked Estelle about this further, she said, "I was even going to my daughter's college, which is not far from here, to do research." Library services was an important factor in her course experience. This was the only suggestion Estelle could think of as we concluded our interview.

Coping Strategy

Long before Estelle enrolled in her course, she had negotiated flexible work hours with her boss so she could help raise her grandson (Type I coping – structural role redefinition). She said leaving her part-time job when the baby was born was not an option: “I couldn’t quit work.” So she made arrangements with her son to place the baby in daycare in the mornings, then be home to baby-sit him afternoons (Type I coping).

By the time she enrolled in her course, Estelle’s family were in a workable routine, and family members were “used to” her being in school “off and on.” Her daughter, away at college, helped out whenever she came home during school breaks (Type I coping). While Estelle was taking her course, there were no changes within the family unit or her job that affected her established schedule.

Dee

Dee was the director of a busy hospital unit, on call 24 hours a day. When I spoke with her during our first interview, she was two months into her first course, HC205. We needed to reschedule our original appointment so that her informed consent form could be finalized, and we postponed the interview until her return from vacation. When I could not reach her by phone at her office to conduct the interview, I followed up via e-mail to determine whether she would like to continue as a participant in the study. She replied to my e-mail indicating she would continue, so we scheduled an interview soon after that, at 1:00 her local time. In her e-mail, she also indicated she had been out of

work on temporary disability. She had not yet submitted an assignment for her course as a result.

When she connected with me by phone from her home, I asked her to think back to when she first enrolled in her course. Occasionally, I could hear kitchen sounds in the background, such as the sound of clinking dishes. The members of her household included her husband, married daughter, son-in-law, toddler-age grandson, and son.

Three and a half months after our first interview, I spoke with Dee again. Despite the onset of a debilitating illness and the loss of her position at the hospital, she continued working on her course, for which she had received a time extension. She had completed all of her course units and had a high “A” average going into her final exam, which she was waiting to take. Within a month of our second interview, she completed her exam, earning an “A” grade in the course. She had not enrolled in a subsequent course.

Pre-Course

Enrollment Decision

“Well, to be perfectly blunt, my boss said either you go back, or you don’t keep your position.” At the time of our interview, Dee was director of a hospital unit, and she laughed when I asked her why she had enrolled in her course.

Academic and Technological Readiness at Enrollment

Dee was the only participant in the study who had completed a college course within a year of her enrollment of Saint Joseph's College. It was also an online course, at another institution. Prior to that, she took her last college course 16 years ago. "Well I've never had a problem academically, so I didn't think it would be a problem," she said when commenting on her academic readiness for HC205. She was finding the course related to her work "in some ways." She explained, "I mean there's a lot I can relate to and what I've seen. Maybe not so much per se the unit I cover, but in general for the hospital atmosphere, yes." She felt that her familiarity with the terminology and systems was helpful.

Her experience with her previous online course also helped with her preparedness. "I think the course at [the other school] kind of helped prepare me for...the technological, computer way to do it."

Emotional and Instrumental Support at Enrollment

From Dee's perspective, her spouse and two adult children had no strong feelings one way or the other about her taking her course. She said her husband "knows I need to do it for work, so it's okay. So he accepts it." She didn't think her schoolwork had any real effect on her children, "so they don't really have much of an opinion." Her son-in-law was also taking online courses. "[S]ometimes we'll just have conversations about doing it online. And we'll compare what he's doing to what I'm doing...But it's like I'm not the only student in the house."

The day Dee returned to work after her vacation, she “had a new boss.” Her former supervisor knew she “went back to school” but hadn’t really indicated how she felt about Dee’s enrollment. Since her new supervisor was so new, she didn’t “really know her that well.”

Several friends and colleagues of Dee’s were also furthering their professional education in one way or another. With her friends, Dee could talk “about the stressors and stuff.” She relied on them for emotional support. “I have a girlfriend who’s...finishing up her [advanced degree]...I have a lot of friends who are taking continuing education and stuff....So it’s kind of everybody’s in the same boat.” Then, without further prompting, she mentioned her work colleagues and staff. “Like a lot of the people at work, they’re all back in school, so we’re all doing it.” They talk with one another about their experiences. “[F]or support and ideas about something and just how it’s going.” She referred to a couple of her work colleagues as friends. “Two of my friends at work just recently completed a degree. And...a lot of my staff, they’re all back in school, too. So we’re all talking about papers and what’s due and all the other stuff that’s going on.”

Dee turned primarily to her spouse and two adult children for support while trying to manage everything in her life. Typically, her spouse did things like food shopping and “household tasks that previously I would really be doing a lot of. Errands, shopping, those kinds of things.” When she mentioned that her children helped with housework and cooking, I commented on what sounded like clinking dishes in the background, wondering if someone was helping her right then. “Yeah, actually yes,” she chuckled.

Her former supervisor had also been helpful to her regarding her schoolwork, when she needed to take work time to study, “to do some of my readings, or to do what I needed to do to get it done.” But she reiterated she hadn’t yet established a relationship with her new supervisor.

A Typical Day

Before she was out of work on disability, Dee was on-call 24 hours a day and carried a beeper. “It can go off at 5:00 in the morning. There’s different crises that happen on the unit that I’m called in about, that I get involved in....And there really is no typical day, which probably makes it interesting, but also exasperating at times.”

I asked her if she could paint a picture for me of a typical day. She generally got up between 7:00 and 8:00. “Unless my beeper went off, and then I was unable to go back to sleep.” She started thinking about things she would need to do for the day and “sometimes give a call into the unit on my way in.” Once she got to work, her day was usually hectic, and she normally worked through lunch. “And some days I’d be running from meeting to meeting....other days I’d be out there...helping them with...whatever was going on in the unit.” Then there were administrative tasks, such as budgets and staffing issues, to take care of. She sometimes had meetings with families and social workers and consulted on clinical issues. Sometimes she would be at work 10 to 12 hours. “And then go home and stay on beeper with calls going back and forth.” The constant interruptions made it difficult to fit in her schoolwork, even after she got home at the end of the day. “To do what you needed to do for the family, then to get called

back on the phone again, dealing with staffing, whatever else is going on at work. And then trying to remember that you still needed to get your schoolwork done and still needed to sleep....” Fortunately, her son-in-law and husband teamed up to handle dinner preparations and cleanup. “So they would kind of handle dinner, and it would trade off, like who would cook, or who would clean up.” After dinner, Dee could spend time reading for her course; yet she would sometimes bring office paperwork home as well. “So that was all after dinner and before bed....Sometimes, usually, it was lights out between 11:00 and 11:30. There were times, especially when I was at [other school] when I was up to like midnight or later, reading or getting stuff done.”

At the time of our first interview, Dee was out on temporary disability, so I asked her how things had changed in her routine. “Well, my life has been affected. I’m, I guess from the medication, I’m tired...has something to do with pain, too, so I am in pain a lot of the time.” She found she needed much more sleep than before, which made it harder for her to keep up with her course. Despite her condition, she pressed on. “I fell behind in my work, and now I’m trying to play catch up, since I’m feeling a little better. So I just completed like unit 1 today....I need...an extraordinary amount of sleep lately. I can sleep 10 to 12 hours a day now.” She was trying to establish a new routine for herself.

Conflicts and Resolution

While her job allowed her some flexibility in the hours she worked, her job duties did not change after Dee started her course. “Basically at the time the supervisor I had

was kind of, ‘You need to do what you need to do for your family, but you still need to get your work responsibilities done’ ...[I]f I needed to come in later because of something I needed to take care of, or leave earlier to attend to something, there wasn’t really too much disruption that way.” But then she would have to make up what she missed by leaving early. Scheduling conflicts, when they did occur, were generally resolved without much difficulty. “Occasionally they might have come up. Occasionally, but not that often. I could usually figure out some way to take care of it.”

When the occasional scheduling conflict arose, Dee typically made adjustments to her work schedule. “Yeah, just by I guess adjusting my schedule and looking ahead and seeing where I could adjust in my schedule to give me the time I needed to do what I needed to do.” She was grateful for the help her family members offered her. “I guess the fortunate thing right now is...I do have an extended family living with me that, some of the things then they can pick up on for me, too. So it’s not all on me.” Together, they were able to work out scheduling issues.

During Course

Approximately three and a half months after our first interview, shortly after her extended course expiration date, Dee was able to meet by phone with me for our second interview. In our e-mail exchanges leading up to our interview, Dee indicated she needed some time to recuperate after being out of work on disability. Then, soon after returning to work, she had to leave again on disability. This resulted in the loss of her position at the hospital. She had written, “This is a big blow to me and at present I am just trying to

take one day at a time.” Respecting her health needs, I shortened the interview slightly, to just over 30 minutes. She spoke with me by phone from a quiet room in her home, at 1:00 in the afternoon, her local time. She had completed all of the assignments for her course (earning a high “A” average) and was preparing to take her final exam.

Expectations and Experience of the Course

Dee’s experience of her course matched her expectations. “I had known some co-workers who were doing [online study] through Saint Joe’s, and suggested I do that after my intense, stressful experience at [other school]....And I’m very happy, and it has met all my expectations.” I asked her to share a bit about what her expectations were, going into the course. “That I’d be able, I guess the biggest one, to balance work and school and especially now balance work, school, my illness, and everything. And with...Saint Jos., the way they do it, I can do that. I could not have sustained another semester at [other school]. It just would have been too much for me.” She appreciated the flexibility afforded by the independent study format.

Clarity of Course Expectations

Dee found the course expectations were expressed “clearly.” “Everything was in the book, and everything was there. And I knew what I was looking for and what I needed to get out of the course.”

Relationship with Instructor and Advisor

At the start of the course, Dee did not expect to have much of a relationship with her instructor. “I mean we’d e-mail once in a while, but we didn’t have really a relationship. Because I didn’t really need to go with her for...advice or anything, or problems with the work.” She related how, in her past educational experience, there may have been “300 kids in your class.” Though the contact she did have with her instructor for HC205 was positive, she continued, “I kind of always just thought that learning on your own and doing it online was more of really a self exercise. So other than someone like to guide you and grade and offer feedback, I really didn’t, for myself, see anything else that I needed in the relationship with my instructor.” Dee saw the role of her instructor as a primarily functional one, which her instructor performed as she expected.

Difficulties with the Course

When I asked Dee about what difficulties she experienced with her course, she replied simply, “None.” Earlier in the interview, when talking about how helpful her advisor was, she had also mentioned her tendency toward perfectionism as a student. “I’ve always been very critical of myself, perfectionistic. So when I saw the grades, I’d go, ‘Oh, I did better than I thought I did.’” Her high marks going into the final exam corroborated her statement.

Academic Preparation

Dee thought her years of professional experience helped her do well in her course. Responding to my question about how prepared she was for the course, she said, “Ah, very. And I think that’s because of my professional experience.” She had said words to that effect toward the beginning of our interview, when reflecting on the effect of adding schoolwork to her life. “So it wasn’t foreign material to me. I could draw a lot on experience.”

Life Changes During Course

Shortly after returning to work after her temporary disability, Dee “gradually started to feel sicker and sicker again.” The demands of her job did not ease up, however. “And it became a lot, especially...because it is a 24-hour a day job, and I am on call 24 hours a day. So the pager would go off at 5:00 in the morning, or I’d come home from work, and it would go off three times within an hour or something, sometimes....and we were also getting ready for [a major event at work]....And people had resigned, and things were just a little out of control at work....And I don’t think physically I was really up to it.” Ultimately, she lost her position.

Besides dealing with her own health issues and job loss, Dee faced other major changes within her family unit. “Well my daughter’s not doing well again physically. She’s been ill [for years]. And she went a little downhill. My son had lost his job during this whole time, too, so...there’s been a lot of upheaval personally for me in the past several months.”

Impact of Schoolwork on Relationships and Work

Dee requested and obtained a time extension to complete her course. She reiterated that the course material was not difficult for her. “Actually, like I told you in the last interview, school has never really been a problem for me. And that way I’m lucky.” She was grateful she was a good student, and that relieved some of the added burden. “I guess being good at school was a blessing because it wasn’t really that much added pressure on me.”

To meet the challenge of finishing her course while working, she tried fitting in small study periods after work and on weekends. “I had to compress it...I tried to do...an hour a day when I came home from work. And usually I could do that. But lots of times I’d just spend time on the weekend doing it. Because I’d be so exhausted when I came home from work that, it was kind of impossible.” Before she fell ill, she could do more on her course while working. “I used to be able to work and come home and spend a couple hours on school and keep going. And I just couldn’t do that this time.”

The one person in her household Dee mentioned as being affected by her schoolwork was her grandson. “[W]hen I had to compress the work on the weekend, when my grandson wanted...to do something. And then I’d say, ‘No, Granny’s doing her schoolwork now.’ So he missed out a little bit on some of my weekend time with him.” Then she talked about how doing schoolwork had become a normal occurrence in their household.

But it wasn’t that bad. He’s a really good student, too, and I’m very proud of him...and his father’s also back in school. So...we’re all...very education minded. So he sees that. And...lots of times when I was doing schoolwork, I’d have him sitting down with me. And he’d read one of his

books or do something....Or I'd give him something to do while he was waiting for me to finish....[M]y son-in-law had a lot of schoolwork on the weekends, too, sometimes. So we were all just like sitting down and trying to do it. And it was kind of—it kind of is part of the flow of the house now.

Having such a demanding job, Dee did not find it possible to make any adjustments in her schedule for schoolwork. “Ah, no, the course didn't really affect my work.” In her case, her work experience helped with her course, but not vice versa.

Changing Needs or Demands in Home/Social Life

Her daughter's illness meant that others in the family needed to help around the house. “Well basically her husband...helped her a lot. And I help her too, sometimes. Like if I'm not doing too ill, and she's feeling sicker, then I'll pick up my grandson from school.” Dee described how her extended family, as a group, coped with daily challenges.

So we're kind of all in a very interdependent relationship here. Because we all have our own issues, but we're all very supportive of each other....We're more old fashioned, living in an extended type family....[T]here's always someone...to start dinner, if someone else can't do it. Or there's always someone to pick up my grandson. Or there's always...someone around to ask, usually. So that—that the burden doesn't get too much on any one person.

Self-Perception of Changing Role Responsibilities

Dee's illness resulted not only in her changing perception of what she could do for herself and others, but a shift in her identity. In response to her more limited physical ability, she “came to the realization that I can't do it all anymore.” This was very hard

for her. “And as hard as I try not to face it, that I really could no longer do the job I loved and was in anymore....That’s been a hard perception. To say that I need to take care of me now. And that sometimes I come first now. And I have to really say no sometimes, because I’m just not up to doing it. And my total identity has changed over the past two years....That’s like very mind altering, earth shattering, whatever. It’s a whole perception of who you’ve been and who you are.”

A Typical Day During Course

In her view, Dee’s illness precluded her having any “typical” days. What she did on a particular day depended “on how I feel on a day. I mean right now I can’t even drive too far. I’m kind of home a lot. Physically I can’t do much of anything. An hour in the mall will like totally exhaust me.” Performing household tasks such as cleaning were draining for her and took much longer than normal.

Conflicts and Resolution During Course

Even while she was working, Dee did not recall any specific conflicts between her schoolwork and her familial or social obligations. “No, I kind of just looked at it as part of something that I needed to complete.” Now that she was home full time, however, it was easier for her to do her assignments. “I usually did that when other people were at work, my grandson’s in school or something. So it didn’t really impact because I’d use my time to keep myself busy when there was nothing else to do anyway.”

She did mention that the flexibility allowed for study at a distance at Saint Joseph's College helped tremendously. "I mean you can just say okay, on this day I have this amount of time. You can look at like the week's schedule and say okay, I can plug it in all here." She contrasted this flexibility with the more structured, paced approach at some other schools she was familiar with. "It's the pacing and...every like Monday there's an assignment due. It's like you can't do it at your pace....And it doesn't matter whether your son's sick, or you're up all night....Your assignment still has to be in on time on that day." She felt the latter approach made it very difficult to go to school while working and having family obligations.

Emotional and Instrumental Support During Course

Because others in Dee's family had already expanded what they did to help keep the household running since her illness, her schoolwork was not much of an added burden. "[E]verybody's been having to do more because I can't do so much....[T]he more they picked up for my physically around the house, the more I could concentrate on my schoolwork....[T]hey were already helping because of my illness. So it wasn't really where they had to put any more effort into helping me because I was in school."

Though everyone in the family pitched in to help with daily household tasks, Dee's husband and son-in-law played a large part in keeping up with the chores, especially food shopping and preparation. "I cook once in a while, but [my husband and son-in-law have] been mainly the cooks....And so everybody's...really been pitching in helping." Her daughter, despite her own illness, worked part time and helped "by doing

stuff around the house, too. And it's kind of mutual with her. Like if I ask her to do something, or she asks me to do something...we gauge it on how each one of us is feeling at the time."

During her brief return to work, Dee found her new supervisor a bit less flexible in adjusting her work hours than her former boss. However, she was more supportive of the people on her unit than her previous supervisor. "So...we were starting, I think, to establish a good working relationship." However, the two never had a chance to talk much about Dee's course. "No, we were too busy getting ready for [a major event at work]."

Because she did not need much support from her instructor, Dee was satisfied with the limited interaction they had. "I did the assignments. I got them in, she gave me the feedback. I don't think I needed a lot of support in the course." She mentioned that was because she "had always been a good student." Her advisor, however, did function in more of a support role. "She was really supportive. She sent me supportive e-mails when I kept her up on you know what was going on with me. And that I needed the extension and why and everything."

Suggestions for the College

Dee did not think the College needed to change the course experience for students. For her, the flexibility to do her coursework on her own schedule was paramount. "[I]t's just very flexible without stressing yourself to the max with a family

and a full-time job. I think that Saint Joe's really got it down right when...they established this the way they're doing it." She summed up her experience this way:

I mean the...advisor's always there for advice....[Y]ou can e-mail your instructor if you need to and find out things. Everyone's been very pleasant. And if you do need an extension for any reason, you can get one.

She felt that the College was benefiting many people who needed a flexible way to study and pursue a degree.

Decision to Continue Taking Courses

Whether Dee would enroll in another course and continue in her degree program was not certain at the time of her second interview. She said her "whole life is up in question right now," and she didn't know "what's going to happen yet." She had some very big decisions ahead of her.

Coping Strategy

Through her debilitating illness, Dee's perspective changed, not only in terms of what she could accomplish on a daily basis, but also in terms of who she was. Before her illness and job loss, she typically used scheduling techniques (Type III coping – reactive role behavior) to prevent conflicts. She also asked members of her family for help (Type I coping – structural role redefinition). When she became disabled, she had to re-think completely what she could handle on a daily basis (Type II coping – personal role redefinition). "I came to the realization that I can't do it all anymore....That's been a

hard perception,” she said. With the others in her extended family unit, including her daughter, who was also ill, she re-negotiated daily household tasks (Type I coping) so that she could continue working on her course. She described the family’s functioning as “interdependence.” “So that...the burden doesn’t get too much on any one person.”

Susan

Susan spoke with me from her school office at 9:00 a.m., her local time. She was a Nurse Leader for a public school system, where she had just become a CPR instructor. At one point during our interview, I heard the muffled sound of the school bell signaling a class period change. Students shuffled along in the hallway, while a series of short announcements were read over the loudspeaker. The following day, she was scheduled to begin her first course, HC 205, in her degree program, the Bachelor of Science in Health Care Administration.

Family and community life were very important to her. Along with her husband, who held office in their church, she facilitated a nine-hour marriage program for the local diocese. The program ran six times a year, and the next session would begin shortly after Susan’s course started. She read at two masses per week at church, and she and her husband also met once a month with an ecumenical group on homelessness. Every other weekend, she baby-sat her 2-year-old grandson for her son. Her son and daughter were both in their 30s. Her daughter, in the midst of a job search, had just moved back in with her parents, after her marriage plans fell through.

Four and a half months after our first interview, I spoke with Susan again. She was back at school in her position as a nurse leader. By that time, she had completed the first two units in her course and had a “B” average. Though she had taken time off from working and from her studies during the summer, she had submitted her first course unit in August; her second in September.

Pre-Course

Enrollment Decision

Earning her master’s degree in nursing had “always been” a personal goal of Susan’s. “I’ll be the first in my family to do it.” Years ago, she enrolled in college only to be diagnosed with breast cancer, which required major surgery, so she withdrew.

But now she had the added incentive of retiring from the school system and teaching nursing at a local community college, if she obtained her master’s degree. “And believe it or not, I’ve already been offered a job [there].” That would allow her to teach part-time and spend more time with her husband. She had summers off from the school system but was not on teacher’s salary, making it necessary for her to work per diem in a local hospital emergency room in the summer. “But in September,” she said, “after being on the negotiating committee for [several] years, we are finally going on teacher’s salary. So it’s going to be huge raises for all the nurses. So it’s made it all worthwhile. So that’s another reason I’m going back to school. Because I do not have to work this summer. So I can devote more time to my studies.”

Academic and Technological Readiness at Enrollment

The two concerns Susan had about her readiness for her course hinged on the fact that she had been out of nursing school for over 20 years. “I’ve kept up on recent nursing concepts and what is new, but I feel I’ll have to do a lot of reading to catch up on past philosophies and what nursing is actually based on....And one thing I’m a little bit nervous about is writing papers, following the APA format, because it’s been a long time since I’ve done any formal writing.” She had purchased her textbook but hadn’t “opened it yet.”

In contrast, she had no qualms about her technology proficiency. “I’m really good with the computer. Everything that I do in my job is electronic. I’m...writing reports and sending to [another agency] electronically. All my nurses, I communicate with them electronically. So I don’t see any problems. I’ve already downloaded the syllabus from Saint Joseph’s. And I have my password to get into the library.” She had organized instructions for various procedures she might need to perform. “I’ve actually started a notebook at home and have all those things categorized....So if I need to...use the library, I’ve got it all written down how to do it.” Her computer was all set up at home. “And I have a laptop at home that’s wireless. So I can go almost anywhere in my house and be...by myself if I need to do that.”

Emotional and Instrumental Support at Enrollment

Everyone who was significant in Susan’s life, in her view, was supportive of her educational goals. The only concern her husband had was how they would finance her

education. “He was a little bit nervous about the money because he’s very frugal with money and is always worried about our future, that we’re going to have enough to live on. But I did get a...small scholarship from the [school association]. And I’ve also applied for a scholarship from [a statewide professional organization]. And Saint Joseph’s just sent me an award letter that I got a student loan. So that has kind of taken a little burden off of him.”

With the financial piece in place, her husband was squarely behind her.

“Because...he really wants me...to do this. He’s been really supportive in anything that I’ve wanted to do....[E]very time we go to a family gathering, he just brags to everybody that...I’ve been accepted and will be working on my master’s. He made sure that I had a laptop. And he had a friend come in and put a router in so it could be wireless, so I could use it in the quiet of any room I wanted....And anything he can do to make it easier for me...just to let him know.”

Her son and daughter also expressed their support to her. Her son was “really excited that I got accepted....[H]e...gave me a hug and said...if anything he could do to help me....with the computer, or whatever. But I mean he’s busy with his life, too. It’s I don’t think as big a thing in his life as it is in my husband’s and my life.” When Susan “downloaded the syllabus,” her daughter “wanted to look at it....And how I was going to do it and how did...you get into the library. Because she was interested in everything I was going to do.”

At work, her supervisor was “very supportive.” Though school nurses in her state didn’t yet need a master’s degree as a condition of employment, Susan thought that could change in the near future. “[T]hey go back and forth. Right now they’re just saying you

need a bachelor's. So [my supervisor's] been really supportive. And anytime a scholarship announcement comes up, she'll ask me if I had seen it. So she's very anxious for me to finish my master's."

"Interested" and "excited" about Susan's online course, her best friend had asked her questions about it. "She has only finished high school, so to have me talk about graduate school, she is really interested in what it's going to entail....She's... wanted to know how you do it online. They don't own a computer in their house, so she is after her husband to get one."

Both of Susan's parents "have their [undergraduate] degrees. So for me to be going on to graduate school, my mom's already planning the party when I graduate....And she keeps saying, 'I hope you're not just going to have them mail [your diploma] to you. I want you to go through the ceremony.' And I think they're excited, too, for the Catholic aspect of the College. Because I mentioned that...I saw the Bishop's name, [he] was at the graduation ceremony. And that means a lot to me, too." Her parents were elderly, so she refused to borrow money from them to help finance her education, even though her father had offered to help.

Whether for proofreading papers or moral support, Susan felt she could count on her husband for help. "[H]e's really good with me when I'm writing something, getting the English grammar correct. And he types as quickly as someone can talk, or word process. So he's offered to...do that....I think emotional support, too, he's very good at. And he picks up really quick on my body language when I'm getting frustrated."

Though her son was "busy with his young family," Susan thought he would be helpful in an emergency. "But during like a major crisis in the family...he's the first one

at the door. If...me or my husband's sick, he's right there to help out. Or if we're...painting the house or something like that he's right there. But other than that...he's just so busy with his family and working overtime to make ends meet...."

Because her daughter was "going through her own emotional crisis," given her cancelled wedding plans, Susan felt her support would be limited "probably for the next couple of months." She did not want to add to her daughter's stress. "[S]he needs her space without me adding any of my problems onto her right now."

At work, her supervisor's door was "always open," and Susan had called on her for personal support in the past. For example, she told me she had sought her advice when her daughter's marriage plans fell through. "[S]he is a good resource," she said.

With her best friend, she could talk about "what's on my mind. What I'm feeling." She said, "Ah, yeah, [she] and I talk a lot...I'm not sure she could help me with any of the school problems, but being best friends...we'll talk a lot about trying to squeeze everything in with family." She was someone who could be relied on for "emotional" support.

Though her parents were very supportive of her educational plans, they were dealing with the loss of Susan's sibling, who had died suddenly. "I'm close to my parents, but I wouldn't go to them for support at this point." It was "hard," she said, to talk with them about serious matters at that time.

One of the parish priests at her church was also a source of support for her. She said they "just hit it off," and he was "a good person just to go to," to talk with. "And you know he's well educated, so I think if I had a problem writing a paper or was worried about formatting or something, he would be a good resource." He was "excited" that she

was attending Saint Joseph's College and was "kidding" her about it "because he...was saying...when he was growing up, he had Sisters of Mercy at school." He took an interest in her course. "In fact, yesterday at mass he was saying, 'When does your course start?' And 'Do you have your books?' And he's always...just checking up to make sure that I'm fine with it and where I am with the course."

A Typical Day

Susan's day started early. "[M]y husband and I are up by 5:00 a.m." They went to church, where her husband "does [mass] weekdays," and she was the reader. Then she headed for school, where she was usually at her desk "by quarter of eight," to plan her day. "I'm not due to be here until 8:30, quarter of nine, but that's just me. I just like the quiet...I'm kind of anal about things. I will make a list of what I want to accomplish for the day....I have my little write-on calendar on the wall...I have deadlines for myself when reports are due and when I need to do things.

"And usually in the morning I have tons of paperwork. Reports for the State, reports for the superintendent. I supervise [several] schools....So the days, it goes by fast." She also ordered supplies, oversaw grant projects within her school system, and helped write health policies. "I get maybe 30 to 40 e-mails every day, just in the morning from my supervisor, other nurses, staff members, superintendent, outside community projects." Normally she worked through lunch and ate it "on my way home, at between 3:00 and 4:00 in the afternoon." For several weeks, she was also going once a week to a cancer center, midday, for treatment for anemia.

After work, she “will just go home,” arriving before her husband. “My...husband isn’t home until like 5:00, so that gives me an hour, an hour and a half, of just quiet time for myself. And I may just check my family e-mail. And the last couple of days I’ve just been outlining the first paper that’s due for my first course.” The rest of her day’s schedule “depends on my husband,” who held office in a social group at their church. She was “at church at least two nights a week for different organizations.”

At night, she often read or sewed. “I get a lot of journals, [professional journals]. And a lot of times I’ll just read. I love to sew. So I do sewing in the evening.” In warmer weather, she and her husband “just pack a lunch, and we go kayaking together.” Bedtime for her was usually around 11:00.

She was also planning her study routine. “I think it’s going to be easier for me once school gets out. Because my husband does work, and I can allot maybe two mornings a week that I’ll do nothing but studying. And then my plan is once we get back to school that, say from 3:00 to 5:00, I’m just going to lock my door in the office and just do my schoolwork here.” She feared if she did not block out specific times to study, she would “just fill it with other things.”

Conflicts and Resolution

Since her daughter moved back home, Susan found “that’s been kind of hard, because now it’s three adults living at home.” With her son’s two small children also staying with them at least one night each weekend, it had been a challenge to arrange sleeping quarters for everyone. The room that used to be her daughter’s bedroom “is now

my sewing room, and the baby's crib is in there. So she's sleeping [in a spare bed]. So this weekend we're going to try and rearrange the room and get her a bed and get it back to a room for her so she feels part of the family."

The night before our interview, her son called to ask her to baby-sit his children the next day, but she had to work. "[H]e got called in to [work]. And my daughter-in-law works, and she had to work today....And I felt bad because—I said, 'Well I have, I have to work.' He thought I was out of school." Susan said her grandson had a serious medical condition that required special care, "so I'm almost the only person that takes care of him."

She described herself as "nurturing" and prone to overcommitting herself to help others. "And a lot of times I put other people before myself. And I mean my health is good, but I've got to be really careful with it....I'm always putting other people first. And I don't like to say 'no' to people. Even though it might put a big burden on me. You know I may say 'yes' to two or three things, and they're all at the same time. And then I get frustrated because I can't get them all done. The way I want them done."

She was "learning to say 'no' a lot more often" to demands on her time and energy. "I don't mean it to sound selfish, but I'm trying to put myself first. Because the doctor said right now...rest is important.." For the upcoming weekend, she had talked with her son about baby-sitting her grandson one night instead of two. "And I hate to say 'no' to [my son] because I love my grandson so much. But he's a lot of care when he comes....And he agreed...that we will pick one night as opposed to two." Not only was scheduling time for herself problematic, but "just scheduling, period" was an ongoing

challenge for the family. “Between...my husband’s schedule and their schedule and now...my daughter being home, too.”

During Course

Two months after beginning her course, Susan requested a time extension, and she was granted six additional weeks to complete her course. We conducted her second interview approximately two weeks before her new course end date. She explained that two weeks into her course, her computer had failed “when I went to write my first paper,” and the manufacturer took six weeks to repair it. “So that’s how I got the extension. Because [the manufacturer] was nice enough to write my advisor a note, saying...the computer truly was with us all that time.” She had completed two of the three units for her course and also needed to submit her final project. About her setback, she said, “I found that really stressful. But it also taught me a lesson to have my [spare] flash drive around my neck and any time I do anything to save it.”

It was fall when I followed up with Susan. The school where she worked was back in session after the summer break, and she spoke with me from the quiet of her office, as she had during our first interview. Halfway through the interview, her cell phone rang a few times. When I asked her if she needed to take the call, she assured me, “No, it’s my husband. I can call him back..” When it rang again a few moments later, she chuckled and said, “He’s already called three times.” We continued the interview, which lasted approximately 40 minutes, with no further interruptions.

Expectations and Experience of the Course

Though she didn't especially enjoy the subject matter of her first course, Susan said her experience of it was "pretty much what I expected. I really don't enjoy nursing theory and philosophies of nursing. I really like the more...meat and potatoes...pediatric nursing or things that I can understand better than philosophies." As far as the online format was concerned, the "only thing that I missed was if I really didn't understand something. It wasn't like you could raise your hand in class and ask...I went on the discussion page on the [course Web site]. And you can see what other people are saying. And that...helped a little bit....[I]t was [what I expected] because I knew that I would...get the books with the syllabus, and you're pretty much on your own to understand what you're reading."

Clarity of Course Expectations

According to Susan, her course "syllabus was very easy to understand. She had the objectives for the whole course. And then each unit that was due was really explained, I thought, well."

Relationship with Instructor and Advisor

While her relationship with her instructor met her expectations, her relationship with her advisor did not. She appreciated her instructor's acknowledgement of submitted assignments, as well as her follow through with stated turnaround times. "I really

appreciated when I e-mailed her an assignment that she would just e-mail me back and say, 'Yes, I received it, and I'll get back to you in three to five days.' And within that time period, she did respond." Her instructor's comments on her papers were also helpful. For example, "This is a good point." Or, "You really should make this clearer." Susan "appreciated that rather than just getting an e-mail that said your...grade for this paper is 'B.'"

With her advisor, she recalled having two e-mail exchanges. "I think the one e-mail that I got, telling me who she was and then the one when I was so upset over my computer." She thought her advisor would check in with her periodically. "I'm sorry to say I can't even tell you what her name is. I thought maybe she might either e-mail me or call me and just ask...how I was doing. Did I need any help...[S]ome type of connection, maybe every three to four weeks."

Difficulties with the Course

Besides the difficulty with her computer hardware, Susan encountered another technical problem when she submitted her first two papers to her instructor. The word processing software she was using was incompatible with the software used by the College. "[M]y laptop at home is WordPerfect. And I didn't know that when you electronically send reports, the other person sometimes can't open it...[T]he first and second paper I sent, I ended up faxing. Because when I sent it, they couldn't open it. And nobody could figure out why." She enlisted the help of a technical support person at

work. “And my tech person here at school looked at it and said it was because it was written in WordPerfect. And I should have converted it to Microsoft Word.”

With one of her friends, she also found a solution to learning APA formatting for her papers, a concern she had expressed in her first interview. “Well after I struggled...through the first two papers, I found out that—and my girlfriend...found it, too—there’s a CD that you can download on your computer. And it’s the APA format. And you just fill in the blanks. It’ll say, ‘Type title here. Type your professor’s name here. Put your abstract here.’ And it does the double-spacing for you. And if it doesn’t like your grammar, it puts a green line underneath it. It’s very neat.”

Academic Preparation

Susan felt “not very well prepared” for the subject matter in her first course, given that her academic background was in education and psychology, rather than nursing. “Because I don’t have a BSN [Bachelor of Science in Nursing]. So I missed any theory courses or philosophy courses in nursing. So I really had to...do some back tracking to understand this particular course.” She addressed the gap in her preparation by doing “some extra reading. In the textbook. In...the library too, just looking up really basic nursing concepts. And that helped, too. On my own. Just because that’s me.”

Life Changes During Course

All summer, Susan had to continue receiving weekly intravenous treatments for poor iron absorption. “I wasn’t feeling well. Not enough to keep me home in bed, but just was not myself. A little short of breath and just didn’t have the energy I used to have. And found out as a result of my colon cancer, my body had stopped absorbing iron...I was severely anemic.” Soon, she hoped, she would only have to go to the clinic once a month, as she was “feeling much better.” The intravenous treatments were time consuming and restricted her activity. “[I]t takes them three hours to do it. And I did try studying while I was there. But they really load me up on [medication] because I’m a really allergic person. So...even if I read and took notes, I couldn’t read my writing. So that just didn’t work out.” Still, she tried to keep her condition in perspective. “[Y]ou just have to think of it in a positive way that it’s something they can fix.”

Tragically, her daughter’s best friend died suddenly over the summer. Susan was doing her best to comfort her daughter, while re-experiencing her own sense of loss over the death of her deceased sibling. She said her daughter “wants to spend a lot of time just talking. And you can’t really say, ‘Well, see, I’ve got to do some studying,’ or ‘I’ve got to do this.’ I want to be available to her.” Some days were better than others for her daughter. “And you know one day she’d be fine, the next...she’d be really...down and not want to talk. And it kind of dredged up some emotional feelings for me, because I lost my [younger sibling a few] years ago.”

Impact of Schoolwork on Relationships and Work

Susan referred to her husband and daughter when asked about the effect of schoolwork on those close to her. “I don’t think it’s really impacted my husband at all....[H]e’s [a church official], so he’s out a lot....So I have a lot of time that I’m alone. And...both my daughter and my husband are....really supportive of me. And...always asking, ‘Where are you in school?’ And in fact my husband asked to read one of my papers. And he read it, and he goes, ‘I think it sounds good, but I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about.’ But I mean they’re always asking, and ‘What’s next.’”

Susan did not work over the summer in the local hospital emergency room, as she had done in the past. So her course had no effect on her work role during that time. “I didn’t do anything this summer, except take care of the grandkids.”

Though she was back at school in her full-time job, she said her schoolwork “doesn’t really affect work. I guess because I’m really anal about schedules and know I work from 8:00 to 3:00.” If she studied in her office, she did so after work. “And I usually plan to either study here or, if there’s nobody at home, study at home on every Tuesday and Thursday, no matter what. I don’t plan anything after school those two days, and those are the days I study.” She tried to keep her schoolwork “separate” from her job.

Changing Needs or Demands in Home/Social Life

Other than her daughter’s need for her emotional support after the death of her best friend, Susan didn’t think there were any other changes in the needs of those close to

her while taking her course. She recalled a scheduling conflict that had occurred at one point. Her husband had forgotten to tell her about a church function they needed to attend. “I had planned to spend the morning working on my paper. And my husband had forgotten to tell me about a commitment we had at church. So that kind of put me off schedule.”

Still, she did not experience what she would call conflicts with family members. “I really don’t have a problem at home with school or any you know—not interferences, but any...conflicts. Because everybody, well my husband and daughter, know how much this means to me.” She stressed the fact that the three of them “share household duties. So it’s not like I feel like I have to do the dishes or vacuum before I can do schoolwork. Because everybody kind of chips in.”

Self-Perception of Changing Role Responsibilities

There were times when Susan adjusted her normal routine with family members to accommodate her schoolwork. “[S]ometimes if I’m a little behind on studying, I may give up...going out to dinner or pizza...to do some studying. And...my husband and daughter may go, but...they really understand.”

At other times Susan felt frustrated that she could not accomplish all she set out to on a given day. “Oh sometimes I just feel there’s not enough hours in the day. Because...usually I have a mental list in my head of what I want to get done for the day. And a lot of times I won’t get it all done. Because you have all these great plans, and I

come into school and something else has happened, and it changes my whole direction, where I'm going.”

A Typical Day During Course

In the summer, while school was out, Susan's day still started early. “Still getting up early. And with [the dogs] in the house, they like to get up early and go outside.” She was also still “the reader at 7:00 Mass.”

Because she was not working at the local hospital as in previous years, she had more free time than usual and tried to work somewhat on her course while her computer was being repaired. “And during the summer, it gave me the luxury of going out to breakfast with our friends from church. And then the rest of the day...probably household things. Or my husband and I did a lot of kayaking and always tried to spend at least 15 or 20 minutes—maybe longer than that, maybe close to half an hour—of just reading...all the reference material we were supposed to read for the course. Maybe taking notes.” She reminisced a bit about her time off. “[I]t seems so long ago. Yeah...the days just seem to fly by with...family. And my husband and I do a lot of fishing.” The couple had taken a two-week vacation out of state. They also spent a week in a nearby metropolitan area. “I didn't bring any of my books with me,” Susan said. “I didn't do anything those three weeks.”

Conflicts and Resolution During Course

An ongoing conflict Susan faced was when she had to work later than usual, which made it difficult to work on her course. “[I]f...I’m...late here at school with meetings or...involved with a community project....And know there’s a paper due and get home, and by the time we get supper cooked and the dishes put away, I’m just too tired to do anything but go to bed. I get really frustrated then.”

Other than her daughter’s friend’s death and her own health issues, Susan did not recall “any major conflicts.” She said her solution to conflict depended on “what it is.” For minor conflicts, she said she, her husband, and daughter relied on their “good communication skills” to work things out.

She was trying other strategies, too. “I’m learning...to say, ‘I need to do this,’ or...‘I need to read this chapter’....I’ve set up a space that’s all mine in the house with...my desk and my computer....And...as long as I’m not overburdened with a lot of school meetings, my husband’s out maybe four out of the seven nights each week. So that gives me quiet time that I can do...studying or...research things on the Internet.” By voicing her needs and claiming time and space for herself, she was establishing new boundaries.

Emotional and Instrumental Support During Course

The support Susan received from her family matched her expectations. Her spouse was “very supportive. You know he’s always asking, ‘Are you keeping up on your assignments?’ And...he’s always offered to read the papers ahead of time. And try

to help me...with the grammar and computer stuff, because he's really good on the computer." As she anticipated, her daughter was "also supportive but very limited because she's working two jobs." Her daughter was also mourning the death of her best friend. Her son, though "supportive," was busy with his own family and small children. "He always asks me how I'm doing. But with his young family, we've probably seen him like once a week and that's it."

At work, her supervisor remained "supportive," and Susan had talked with her about her course. "I probably see her monthly....I went to [a statewide professional] conference....And ahead of time was telling her about it, because...I got a...scholarship from the association."

Her best friend remained "really supportive," although she had gone south for the winter. "[T]hey left [in] September for their [winter] home. So I won't see her now all winter. But one of...my nurses is working on her bachelor's in nursing. So we kind of trade information back and forth...both bemoaning the APA format."

She found her instructor supportive when she struggled with the APA formatting for her papers. When she submitted her first paper, after getting her computer repaired, her instructor provided helpful feedback. "I had trouble with the APA format. And she...wrote a really nice e-mail to me, giving...me support and...trying to point out the mistakes I made. And this may sound weird, but I really appreciate when she finishes her e-mails, she always says, 'God bless.' And that means a lot to me."

The communication she had with her advisor was limited. "I haven't heard from my advisor for a long time, other than when she e-mailed me when I explained my

computer problem. And then she e-mailed me back and said she had gotten me an extension. But other than that I rarely hear from her.”

At her church, the parish priest she had relied on for support and conversation was caring for his own father, who was ill. “No, he’s still there, but his...Dad’s sick, so...I don’t see him that often.” However, she had connected with a new seminary student at the church. “And he...of course is studying, too. And we’ve had some really great conversations about the APA format...I was telling him how my paper was on theory, whether it was borrowed or shared or unique. And we’ve had some great discussions on that...[W]e both can relate to each other, what we’re going through.”

Suggestions for the College

Susan felt that increased interaction with her advisor would help her feel more “connected” to the College. “I think...the advisor could be a little more active. “And...even just a quick e-mail: ‘How are things going?’ Or...a phone call even. I think I would feel more connected to Saint Joseph's.” A connection to the College was important to her. “Yeah, it is. Because I am kind of proud of myself that I’m doing this.”

Decision to Continue Taking Courses

Susan planned to finish her course and continue in her degree program at the College. “Oh, definitely. As soon as I finish this one, I’m actually planning to take two next semester. Because where I’ve got some scholarship money now, and I got a

Stafford [loan]....So the tuition is no longer a problem.” Susan was taking prerequisite courses through the College’s “Bridge Program,” which was designed for individuals enrolling in the Master’s in Nursing program without a Bachelor of Science in Nursing.

Coping Strategy

Susan relied heavily on a single coping behavior type before starting her course: Type III (reactive role behavior). She had, however, just a few days before our first interview, negotiated with her son to baby-sit her grandchildren for one, instead of two, nights each weekend (Type I coping - structural role redefinition). “I’m learning to say ‘no’ a lot more often....I’m trying to put myself first. Because the doctor said right now...rest is important.” After starting her course, she increased her use of Type I coping and introduced Type II coping (personal role redefinition) into her coping strategy repertoire.

Before starting her course, she relied heavily on to-do lists to help her organize tasks (Type III coping). “I’m kind of anal about things,” she said. She continued using her lists while taking her course but found they didn’t always work well. “Oh sometimes I just feel there’s not enough hours in the day....I have a mental list in my head of what I want to get done for the day. And a lot of times I won’t get it all done....I get really frustrated then.” She described herself as “nurturing” and “always putting other people first.” “I don’t like to say ‘no’ to people,” she said, “even though it might put a big burden on me.” Taking on more commitments than she could reasonably handle would

ultimately force her into a reactive mode (Type III coping). “And then I get frustrated because I can’t get them all done.”

After starting her course, she tried studying and taking notes while receiving her weekly three-hour intravenous iron treatments (Type III coping) but found that didn’t work, either, because of the medication she had to take. “So...even if I read and took notes, I couldn’t read my writing.” She stopped trying to study during her treatments. Instead, she claimed a quiet space in the house to study (Type II coping). “I’ve set up a space that’s all mine in the house, with my desk and my computer.” Sometimes, if she was “a little behind on studying,” she would forgo a dinner out with her husband and daughter and said they “really understand” (Type II coping).

When she encountered the incompatibility issue with her word-processing software, she enlisted the help of a technician at her own school (Type I coping). Then, she and her friend found software on a CD that solved their APA formatting difficulties (Type I coping).

Judy Jones

Judy had just had her morning coffee when I called her at home for our first interview, at 9:00 her local time. It was springtime, and her first online course in her master’s in nursing program, NU500, had just begun a few days before. We spoke for approximately 30 minutes, and a few times, her husband’s voice was audible in the background, while he conducted business by phone from their home office. Judy also

worked from home, since she was an adjunct faculty member at a nearby university.

Previously, she had worked in direct home care.

Their two children were off at grade school, so the house was quiet except when the family dog barked at one point during our conversation. Judy's husband attended to their pet while she continued her interview with me, reinforcing her comment to me that they do things "50-50," as a team. They had relocated recently to a new locale, so Judy's parents, siblings, and friends all lived far from them.

When we spoke again, five months later, Judy had requested a time extension for her course and was still working on it. A month before our second interview, she had completed her first unit, for which she received an "A" grade.

Pre-Course

Enrollment Decision

"I cannot become full-time faculty without my master's," she said when I asked her about her enrollment decision. "I want to be in nursing education. And in order for me to continue on that journey, I have to at least get my master's, and then my Ph.D." She planned to take out a student loan to finance her education. "I can get a good student loan without the repayment right away. That was...probably the biggest issue...the financial piece." Judy also talked about the timing of her decision and her husband's plans to help with the kids and things at home. "You know, [several] years ago, my children were younger and required more of my time....[I]t's just they're a little

bit...more independent. My husband's job allows him to pick up and drop the kids off if I'm unable to....[H]e's a great 'at-home' mom, so...if I say...'Tonight I need two hours to myself,' then I know that's not going to be a problem." Now that Judy and her husband had flexible working hours, and the kids were older, the time seemed right for her to continue her education.

Academic and Technological Readiness at Enrollment

While she felt that her teaching job provided her with a preview of some of what she would experience as a student, Judy wondered how it would be writing papers at the graduate level, especially in APA (American Psychological Association) format, after her time away from being a student. "I think with the expectations that I've had of my students, I now can see that I'm going to be applying that to myself. So I feel more prepared, but still there's some anxiety with it being so long since I've...written papers and used APA style....It's not so much will I be able to do the work. It's more will I be able to put it together at a master's level."

Because she used word processing and other software in her work, she was not nervous about the technology she would encounter in her online course. "No, I, I feel very good with computers, so that...piece doesn't cause me any anxiety at all." She also had siblings to turn to for computer help, if necessary. "[M]y brothers are huge on technology, so if I've ever had questions I've also called them. But I...pretty much figured out...how to troubleshoot quite a few things, and I have the right equipment."

Emotional and Instrumental Support at Enrollment

Judy felt she had the support of her spouse, work colleagues, her dean at the university, and her three closest friends. When she was planning for her enrollment, she and her husband talked about the timing of her decision and what adjustments might be needed at home so she could study. “[W]e looked at it as a couple...as far as the finance part, as far as the timing piece...[W]e’ve talked about how am I going to be able to work all of the fun, recreational things that we do in...the summer, since I’m starting this course just prior to summer. And...we’re just going to do what we have to do to work around my studies. And he’s very supportive of that.” Judy had also talked to two work colleagues, two professors, about her plans. “[They] sent in my references and have totally supported me and encouraged me to go for it.” The dean of her department at the university was also behind her. “[E]ven my...dean of nursing that I was speaking to this morning, too, was like, ‘I think it’s fantastic that you’re going for it.’” Her colleagues all told her that her “niche is in education” and they would like to see her “go further.” She found their support “really helpful.” One of her close friends, who graduated with her from nursing school, was especially enthusiastic about her plans. Judy laughed out loud as she recalled, “[S]he is very excited for me to do it because she said I have to go through it first before she can. So I’m the guinea pig.” “So,” Judy said, “I’ve got great support from everywhere.”

Her parents and siblings were also supportive of her educational goals, though a bit puzzled by them. “But...,” she said, “...how do I say this, I know that they support me and stuff, but I don’t think they totally get what it is.” She explained that she was the

first in her family to get a bachelor's degree, and she felt that "if you're not surrounded by an environment...where you're working with people who have...graduate degrees, then—you know. They're...excited for me, they support me, but I don't think they actually get as to what it is and why I would want it." They thought she was so busy already with everything else in her life that "why would you throw that in the pot?"

Before Judy started working in her course, she had also talked with her two pre-teen-aged children about what it would be like when "Mommy's going back to school." Her daughter had said, "You're going to be at your computer more each night." Then, when Judy mentioned, "I'm going to be a student just like you guys, and...I have to do my homework every night just like you do," her daughter started asking her mother questions. "[S]he was more interested, like, 'You're going to be a student?...You're going back to school? Why? How?'" The two got into a whole conversation about higher education and how long it takes to complete a master's degree, and how Mom would do this at home.

For help around the house and with the children, Judy counted on her husband. "I've got the greatest spouse because it's always been a 50-50 in everything in our marriage, in our child raising...." She thought the two would work out any challenges they faced because of her schoolwork. "[W]e will figure out, okay...what do we need to do in order for this to happen. And it's...always a partnership, a discussion, and then we come up with our solution as to how we're going to be able to do this." She felt grateful for her husband's willingness to negotiate tasks. "I just feel I'm so lucky to have someone in my life who *is* 50-50. I have tons of friends who have spouses who would...say, 'Well, you're just going to have to figure out how you're going to juggle

that, because I can't." She was proud that she and her husband had always been there for their children, especially since they had no family members living near them to help them.

At work, Judy didn't think expectations for her job would change. "I don't think there's going to be as much leeway. You know, if I have deadlines...or whatever it may be, then I—I think...the expectation is that I continue to do that...[T]hey're going to be supportive of me doing my...course as long as it's not interfering with what I need to do for work."

Though her closest friends were very supportive of Judy's decision to pursue her degree, they lived several hours away. She knew what they would have done to help her, had they lived closer. "I know that, for instance, if my husband had something going on and I said I just needed some time, they would have taken the kids, no problem. Or, 'Have them come over here so you can get your stuff done.'" Her husband was now clearly her primary support. "But because they're so far away, and I haven't established any great relationships here yet, that might be an issue...if my husband, who's the number one support, is *not* there." She would miss her friends' support, but would work with her children to carve out the time she needed to study. "I would just let them know...'Mommy needs her alone time right now. Could you guys...focus on this or do this, or, and they'd be okay with that.'" So she would rely on her friends for moral support, over the phone.

Now that her parents and siblings also lived far from her, Judy did not expect much from them in terms of support. "[T]here's a huge amount of distance between most of us....They just would not be physically available to me." She didn't anticipate relying

on them for emotional support, either. Yet, she was confident about her decision to continue her education. “And I’m at a place where this is for me. This is what I want to do. And this is what I want to achieve....So the emotional piece of that is really not too heavy on me.” She was ready to strike out in a new direction for herself, regardless of whether or not her family could be there for her.

Despite her children being so young, Judy thought they would come through for her while she was in school. She laughed when recalling how her daughter had reacted when her Mom couldn’t attend her play. “She was the one consoling me.” It was okay that her Mom couldn’t be there because her Dad went and videotaped the event. “I think for the kids, they’re going to adapt like it’s just no other big deal because everything that we’ve done has always been either Mom or Dad there.” Judy didn’t think her being in school would have much of an effect on her two children.

A Typical Day

Usually Judy was the first one in her house to get up in the morning. She left at 6:00 for the university. After teaching her class, she picked up the children from school at 3:00 and took them home, for an after-school snack and to get out their homework. If her husband hadn’t prepared dinner already, she would help with that. On some days there were after-school activities to attend. The children were usually in bed by 8:00 or 8:30. Then Judy focused on the work she brought home. “And then after that is my time. I’m usually grading papers at night. So that requires at least an hour....Any prep for the next day....So the majority of the time it’s with the kids after...school.” Still, she

appreciated the time she did have in the afternoons. “But again, it’s more free time, so that’s been the nice thing about this job that I have is that my afternoons are not—or my evenings I should say—are not taken up by other stuff other than the grading of the papers.”

Conflicts and Resolution

Though her teaching position freed Judy up for after-school events, the hours she worked were not flexible. “Well for instance, my daughter was in a play at school...It was mid-afternoon, and there was just no other instructor I could get to cover the clinical aspect of...the teaching. And thankfully my husband was able to go and videotaped it for me. But I felt...sad that I wasn’t able to see her in the play. So that piece bothers me as far as my children, I’ve always tried to make it that they’re number one, and my career number two.”

Her previous work in direct home care had more flexible hours. “I could go work my schedule around my kids’ schedule, so if there was a field trip or something I could see some patients prior to that, then go on the field trip with my kids, and then go back out and see more patients.” She anticipated doing home care again during the upcoming summer months. “But I will be doing that for the summer. So that gives me a lot more flexibility.” She was counting on her home care schedule to help her fit in her schoolwork. “I’ve already thought about if I had to take a couple hours just for me to do, you know, work on a paper or something for this master’s, then I’m going to be able to work my schedule around that.”

Judy had also thought about how she would fit in her schoolwork when her fall teaching started up again. “But again in the fall, I’ll be back to teaching, but...it’s only going to be part time this fall. So I would have more time for other things....My children and my studies.” She would reduce her teaching load to one course instead of two to accommodate her studies.

When I asked her if there were other ways in which she resolved conflicts as they came up, she reflected on her daughter’s play again. “I think with that piece, if I could have worked on trying to find someone to substitute me sooner...that might have worked....That would be my strategy...to find a substitute sooner than what I did this last time.” Along with seeking help by asking a colleague to cover for her, she acknowledged there was another, internal, conflict she would need to resolve. “[T]hen, my whole thing is being able to let go of the guilt part of it and be thankful that their dad is able to be there for them.” She chuckled, “And hope it doesn’t come back as trauma one day for the kids.” By being there a “majority of the time” for her children, she was able to resolve some of the guilt that she felt about times when she could not.

During Course

Just before Judy’s extended time limit for her course ended, in September, she spoke with me by phone from her home, at 9:30 in the morning, her local time. Over the summer, before she was able to complete any assignments, she requested a time extension for her course, due to a family medical emergency. Her mother, who lived several hours away, was hospitalized for a major cardiac event. Soon after, her maternal

grandmother also had medical issues. So Judy had to travel to their locale to advocate for both, overseeing aspects of their care. Now she was back home, teaching one course at the university. She had also done some per diem direct care during the summer. When I asked her how the course was going, she laughed and said, “Oh, well not as I anticipated....[T]his summer a lot went on that was not expected. And so I was delayed. But...I’m kicking butt right now trying to get it done so that I can meet the deadline.”

Things had quieted down for her, but now she was anxious about whether she could complete her course by the deadline and whether she could get additional time if needed. “I have a lot of fears with trying to get it all completed before the [deadline]. And I don’t know if they’ll extend me any more time than I have. And that’s, that’s my fear right there.” She hadn’t yet put in a second request for more time. “I haven’t spoken to anybody yet, thinking okay, I can kick butt and...see if I can get it all in and done.” She was also concerned that there wasn’t enough time left for her assignments to be graded. “[T]here’s that turnaround wait time for your instructor to—they only want one assignment in at a time. So that turnaround wait, which is up to 10 days, is what’s scaring me.”

To complicate matters further, after Judy started her course, the College implemented a new policy, shortening course completion time from six months to 15 weeks. “So I wish it was the six months,” she chuckled nervously. It would have been better for me, but...I thought 15 weeks was just plenty of time.”

Expectations and Experience of the Course

The expectations Judy had going into her course did not exactly match her experience of it. While she thought her schedule would be manageable, which proved not to be the case, she also thought the course itself would be more challenging. “[M]y expectation was that it would be a lot harder. I guess that within myself thinking, ‘Oh, a master’s program’s going to be really difficult.’ But it was my whole unrealistic expectation of time management....I didn’t anticipate any what-if’s, you know?”

Judy was also surprised by the self-paced, asynchronous course delivery format. “[I]t’s different for me as far as there’s no structure. It’s just—it is all you’re on your own....There’s no...having to check in or...you don’t all have to be online at one time. And...I’ve heard from other friends of mine that have taken courses, they had to be on at a certain day. And they had to...chat twice a week...to make sure that they—show that they were accountable and on line.” It wasn’t that her instructor was unavailable; her availability had been “wonderful.” The issue for Judy was not only time management, but something more fundamental—the course experience itself. “[F]or me I guess it would give that accountability and...make it feel more real...I don’t really feel so much as a grad student. I feel like I’m just having to complete a course.” She compared her experience to non-academic training she had completed to retain her nursing license. She thought that “feeling” like a student would increase her “incentive and motivation.”

Clarity of Course Expectations

Judy found the course expectations “very clear.” She summed up her experience: “[I]t’s pretty much if you do this, this, and that, you’ll get a great grade...it’s pretty clear cut.” She said some of the other students in the course expressed confusion, via the discussion board, about the instructions for one of the assignments. “Apparently, I took it the way I was supposed to take it because...I got a good grade on that assignment.” She noted that “if you didn’t use that chat room, you wouldn’t have known what [the instructor] was implying.” She thought that particular assignment was “tough” for some of her classmates, even though she completed it successfully.

Relationship with Instructor and Advisor

Judy reiterated that she had expected there would be some set times in her course to interact with her instructor. “But it’s pretty much, if you initiate it, she’ll be there. But if you don’t, she’s not. So I...don’t know if I expected that or not, but that’s what I know now. So it’s pretty much what you put into it, you’ll get out of it.” She reached that conclusion on her own.

Her advisor was the one who convinced Judy to stay in her course and try to finish. “[S]he was great when I had e-mailed and let her know what was going on...I was actually going to drop the course, is what I wanted to do.” But her advisor suggested that, since it was too late for her to obtain a refund, and encouraged her to try and finish the course. “Try to do what you can. You still have time. You’ve already paid. Get your credit for this course,” her advisor had said. So Judy stayed in her course. Her

advisor's encouragement was in line with her expectations of the service she would receive at Saint Joseph's College. "I like how Saint Joe's has that personal, small community feel. So I guess I did expect that from her." The encouragement she received from her advisor helped her to persist. "I just needed that (sighs), that affirmation...keep going...regardless of what you're going through. Give it a try anyway."

Difficulties with the Course

Though Judy did not have any trouble with the assignments, she found it necessary to work out her own strategy for using the textbooks. "The recommended text follows this course beautifully. The required text is confusing, and I don't quote it much...[S]o it's almost like those two should have been flipped. That the recommended should have been the required." So she ended up using the recommended text as her "base" text, then drew on the required text as a supplement.

Submitting her assignments was not problematic for Judy. "Otherwise, as far as the online thing and submitting it and sending the copy to the school...that worked great." She was referring to the requirement that all course assignments must be sent to the instructor for grading as an e-mail file attachment, with a copy to the College's Assignment Processing Department.

Academic Preparation

“I think I was adequately prepared, except for the ‘what-ifs.’” As she had mentioned earlier in the interview, Judy did not find the course itself difficult. What she could see in hindsight was how life events had disrupted her plans. She would approach her next course differently. “But now I know that I would be different going into my next course. I’d be on it right away. Where I think before I thought, ‘Oh, I have all this time. I’ll be fine.’ I think the pacing I won’t take for granted.” Time had gotten away from her.

Life Changes During Course

Since our first interview, Judy’s children were out of school for the summer, then returned for the fall. With her children back in school, she had more time for her coursework. “I can spend my time on my days off on my schoolwork and it not affect anybody. And I think prior to school starting...it was... ‘No...Mom has to work on her school stuff, so I can’t do this, but we’ll do this after I do my two hours worth.’ So it...went okay.” Now, unlike in the summer, she didn’t experience the guilt that came with putting off activities with her children. “I didn’t feel guilty...that I wasn’t doing something with them for the day through the summer.”

She advised others contemplating taking online courses, especially those with school-aged children, to wait and start when school was in session. “Definitely...if I were to speak to anybody that was supposed to start [a degree program], I would say don’t do it in the summer. Just so that you can get into a routine, and then as you go

through your first summer, you've already got that established. And are able to figure out what you do, how much time you will need....”

When Judy's mother was hospitalized over the summer, she needed to travel to help with her medical care. Her sister, who lived near her mother, could not handle everything alone. “And my father was a mess. And then my grandmother...my Mom's mother, had medical issues happen soon after my Mom did....So I felt that I needed to help and take over and guide the family and be there.” Because she was in the medical field, Judy felt particularly obligated to help. “And I think the expectation was that I would because of my profession.” She didn't mind taking on the extra duties, but it meant “that's basically what I did for the summer.”

Impact of Schoolwork on Relationships and Work

Given everything that had transpired over the summer, Judy delayed her coursework, so its effect on her family was negligible. She, on the other hand, had to deal with the fact that she was losing time to work on her course. “[B]ecause what I did was just stop. I didn't, I—I couldn't make it a priority. So I think it more impacted me and my stress level than it did anybody else's.”

After she started working on her assignments, she still thought that taking her course had minimal effects on those close to her. “I don't think so. I really don't, not with anybody in my immediate family or outside of that, no, I don't.” I asked her what she attributed that to. “Ah, just that I didn't allow it to,” she said. “And how did you do that?” I asked. “I guess with just setting out the time and setting the expectation and

saying, ‘For the next two hours I’m not going to be available.’” She worked things out with her husband so that she could work on her course without interruptions.

When she went back to doing some patient care during the summer, Judy found direct connections between her coursework and that job. “Because of the course content, it...wanted you to apply it to your current practice. And if I did it just as my current practice as an instructor, that was difficult. Because...the school [I teach for] has their own theory that we use for our teaching. So it’s a different model than the one I chose to focus on, that I use in my own practice.”

Changing Needs or Demands in Home/Social Life

Aside from her mother’s hospitalization, the needs and demands of those close to Judy did not “change much.” “Because I’ve always had to designate time where either I’m grading papers, or I’m putting together a presentation or whatever it is. I think in my own home, that’s an expectation that’s always been there.” From her family’s point of view, she thought that working on her course assignments wasn’t really any different than when she brought papers home to grade from her teaching job.

Self-Perception of Changing Role Responsibilities

According to Judy, there was no change in what she needed to do for others in her life while she was working on her course. “No, I don’t think so,” she said.

A Typical Day During Course

Judy's daily routine changed dramatically after her course began. The classes she was teaching at the university ended for the summer. Then a home care job she anticipated taking over the summer fell through at the last minute. "I was anticipating having this one job, and they had to put a hold on different things because they were restructuring....I was supposed to be in for orientation...and they called that day and said, 'We have a hiring freeze.'" She wound up working on a per diem basis at the hospital where she taught her clinical course. "So my direct care ended up being at the hospital that I instruct at....I've been working just per diem for the hospital...." Judy found working on a per diem basis advantageous because it made it easier to do her course. "[I]t worked great that on the days that I worked, I didn't do schoolwork. And on the days that I didn't, then I would."

Because her children were out of school during the summer, their daily routine changed, too. Judy wasn't dropping them off at school and picking them up after school. They were at home during the day. "I wanted to make sure they had a fun and fulfilling summer. And stayed active. So for me it was having to designate my time for my schoolwork around making sure that I—we did something fun. So I guess there was more effort in...that piece." Judy changed her schedule to accommodate her children being at home during the summer months.

Conflicts and Resolution During Course

Judy drew a distinction between the major conflict presented by her mother's and grandmother's illnesses, and other, minor, conflicts between her schoolwork and her life. She didn't recall any specific occurrences of minor conflict. "Oh, no, not really. I mean it's...hard because of what happened, but I would say, if I took that [major conflict] aside, no, I wouldn't say there was." But in general, any minor conflicts that came up were successfully dealt with through scheduling changes. "I mean it wasn't...something that I couldn't just adjust and adapt....The timing of things." I confirmed that what she meant was things like appointments and other logistics.

Emotional and Instrumental Support During Course

About her spouse's support during her course, Judy said, "Oh, met my expectations for sure. How did he?...[F]or instance he took them hunting the other day, and said, 'Mom's got to work on her schoolwork, so let's go for awhile and make the house nice and quiet.'"

Judy felt that her "50-50" relationship with her spouse made it easier for the children to cope with their mother being in school. "I think because we're 50-50, then it's not an issue for them to spend the day with Dad and not with Mom. And then...me making sure that we do something all together as a family after that....I don't even think they would blink twice about it. I really don't because...there's times that I will take them, and Dad needs time to go and do whatever."

A colleague of Judy's, who was one of her supporters, was also enrolled in the master's program in nursing at Saint Joseph's College. "So she...also encouraged me even during all of my troubles, was saying, 'Don't worry about it. Just do what you need to do to take care of you and your Mom, and then come back to it.'"

Judy's supervisor for her per diem position didn't yet know that Judy was in school. "But as far as my dean...he's always supportive. I mean he...even just said...'How's it going, where are you at?...Let me know if there's anything I can do.'"

Her friends supported Judy during the time her mother was in the hospital. "I guess their support was greater with the issues I was dealing with this summer...I would voice to them you know I feel stressed because I had already started the course and blah blah, and they would just say the same thing, 'Do what you've got to do and then...deal with...school.'"

Judy's perception was that her instructor's role in her online course didn't include offering her support for personal matters. However, she did find her instructor approachable when informed about what was happening in her life. "I'd have to say that...she was supportive after I...had e-mailed her. But I would have to say, ah...there's not much of a relationship there for me to—I wouldn't even go there. For the support." She took pains to explain why she didn't seek out her instructor's support. "[I]t's a distance course, so I really didn't...feel that I had to (pauses) I guess I didn't want any of, I didn't need any support from her around what was going on. But as far as for the course, she stated she understood and just...encouraged me to keep going."

Judy felt similarly about personal support from her advisor. She felt there was only so much she could expect of her advisor. "Same thing. Although her

encouragement was what kept me going. But it's not like we've talked more than that. You know there's really not that much of a relationship there." From her perspective, her advisor's role was primarily an administrative one, helping with paperwork and more mundane issues.

Suggestions for the College

When I asked her what the College could do in the future to help her and others like her to complete courses, Judy focused on a point she had made earlier regarding structured times to check in with the instructor and other students in the course.

"Something where we have to check in once a week, to be accountable. I think because we have a life outside of getting our master's...that it would help....I guess there might be some out there that just don't need that, but I think I would need that. I think it would be great. And then I think I'd feel more like a student." For Judy, increased interaction with her instructor and other students would not only help her keep pace in her course; it would also reinforce her identity as a student.

Coping Strategy

Before her course started, Judy exercised Type I coping behavior (structural role redefinition). She and her husband planned her course enrollment "as a couple...as far as the finance part, as far as the timing piece." Given her "50-50" relationship with her husband, she anticipated that they were "just going to do what we have to do to work

around my studies” (Type I coping). She had also enjoyed the flexibility of her home care job, which allowed her to schedule around her children’s needs (Type III coping – reactive role behavior). When scheduling conflicts came up, she wrestled with guilt feelings and tried to resolve them by altering her perception of what she needed to do (Type II coping – personal role redefinition). “[M]y whole thing is being able to let go of the guilt part of it and be thankful that their Dad is able to be there for them.”

When her course started and her mother and grandmother had urgent medical needs, Judy prioritized her role responsibilities to attend to her family, temporarily suspending her learner role demands (Type II coping). “[W]hat I did was just stop. I...couldn’t make it a priority.” Once the situation with her mother and grandmother was stabilized, she requested a time extension for her course (Type I coping) and resumed her studies. She set aside blocks of uninterrupted study time (Type II coping), during which her husband took care of the children and household matters (Type I coping). After resuming her course, she did not recall any specific conflicts between school and other aspects of her life; nothing that she couldn’t schedule around, that “wasn’t something that I couldn’t just adjust and adapt” (Type III coping – reactive role behavior). When she found the assigned readings in her supplemental textbook more applicable to the subject than those in the required text, she shifted her emphasis to the supplemental text (Type II coping).

A family medical crisis caused a shift in Judy’s coping behavior around her course, from Type I to Type II. Once the crisis was over, she reintroduced Type I coping, relying once again on her husband’s support while she studied. She used Type III coping both before and after the family crisis.

Joyce

It was late spring when Joyce spoke with me from her home, where she, her husband, mother, recently college-graduated daughter, and assorted pets live, at 9:00 in the morning, her local time. She had recently enrolled in the Bachelor of Science in Health Care Administration program, and she was two weeks into her first online course, HC205. We had rescheduled the interview to allow some extra time for her informed consent form to be finalized. Since one of her two daughters was graduating from college at about the same time, we scheduled the interview to take place after that event. Her other, older, daughter was no longer living at home.

Other aspects of Joyce's life were in a state of flux. During our initial conversation, when I talked to Joyce about her potential participation in the study, she told me that the company she had worked at for 10 years recently had a reduction of force, resulting in the loss of her position. She was in the midst of a job search. She was also taking a 16-hour certification course through the state board of nursing, so she could be an independent contractor, teaching medical aides at healthcare providers about medicine administration. She found it challenging to no longer be on a regular, routine schedule. Her eating and workout routines had been upset. Other things in her life were filling up time, such as professional seminars she was attending as part of her job search.

At the time of our second interview, nearly four months later, Joyce's course end date had passed, and she had not yet submitted an assignment. Approximately one month after that, her advisor sent her an official, standard letter from the College offering to

extend her course for the \$100 extension fee. Because she did not respond to the College's offer to extend her course, she was withdrawn with a failing grade.

Pre-Course

Enrollment Decision

Joyce's decision to enroll in her degree program was a direct result of the loss of her position. "Because of the downsizing of my job." She had experienced an earlier layoff years ago and had vowed then to be better prepared if she were to go through another downsizing. "I had made up my mind that should this ever occur to me again, it would never impact me or my family the way it did [then]." She obtained several professional certifications but hadn't set her sites on an academic degree until more recently. "So once I rallied back from the first time, I set goals, different certifications. I looked into...getting a degree, but just elected not to do it. I don't need a degree for the work that I've been doing for 26 years."

For Joyce, her second downsizing was a catalyst for personal growth. "I just decided that I was going to take this as an opportunity and move forward with getting a degree. And it being a personal growth opportunity....So, I just saw this as an opportunity of, 'Why not?'It's the one thing I've contemplated that I've never pursued professionally."

Academic and Technological Readiness at Enrollment

Though Joyce had substantial experience working in the health care field, she anticipated some challenges with the textbook reading. “The subject matter I’m okay on. Of course, the material that—how I’ve read from a trade perspective, like going through my different certifications and my day-to-day work is in a different context than textbook. You know, so just the way a textbook is written.”

She was also thinking about the importance of establishing a study routine. “Part of it too I think is just it’s very easy to be distracted. You know, with the home, so...I find that I’m reading it and the flow is not as what I’ve been used to.” To compensate for this, she was planning some study strategies. “So I may have to re-read it. I’m kind of doing like a preliminary read (laughs) and—for it to sink in perhaps...I have to actually go into quiet. I have to make sure that I’m removed from everything, I have good lighting....”

That her course was online and self-paced presented an additional challenge in establishing a study routine. “And...being distance learning, not having the opportunity of having a face to face. I mean there’s chat opportunities which I have not gone on...because I...need to get myself back into pretty much a regimented...time slot.”

Compounding her challenges was the fact that she was still reeling from the recent upheaval in her life. “[M]y whole life has...been turned upside down the last two months. From a professional perspective.” Her full-time job search was now a primary focus. “And I’ve had some interviews. And I’ve gone to some seminars, and it’s been very beneficial. But...I’ve made this commitment to go forward with these courses, and I

have every intention of doing that. But even now where my time is relatively free, using the word loosely...I have to put myself into a regimen where I have...designated times where I'm going to do this. Because hearing the TV on in another room or my mother walking down the hall talking to me are distractions that I don't think I can afford to do to put myself on the right path."

Joyce did not anticipate any particular concerns about the technology used in her course. "I mean at this point I think it's too soon...I don't know about...the chat opportunities, I haven't gone on and looked at that. And I think probably I'll be more laid back about using it. I think I'll go on it and see how it works...but initially...I'll be independent." When I asked her for clarification, she responded, "I think it's just me getting adjusted to coursework, whether I was in a classroom or whether I was online."

Emotional and Instrumental Support at Enrollment

Joyce said that her husband was "accepting" of her decision to enroll in courses. "[I]f anything he feels that I commit too much, whether it be work or activities with the kids over the years, or whatever....I've always been a working manager, so if that meant that I had to work 50 hours a week, I did 50 hours a week....[I]f I need to go to a class, if I need to drive somewhere...he's accepted it. He may not always like it, but he accepts it." The couple have an understanding that Joyce's "first commitment is to make sure the household's resolved. You know, that those bills are paid....[W]e'll just see how that progresses. You know, with the number of courses." Still, she felt her husband was supportive and proud of her educational and professional goals. "[H]e's very proud about

what I do. But he's a very quiet person....So I mean...he's very supportive....But when he came home and I said, 'Well, I was on the phone today and finding out information. I've signed up for courses,' you know, he barely blinked an eye." She felt she could count on her husband to help her if she asked him and that he would respect her "study boundaries, definitely."

As for the others in her immediate family, her mother and two daughters supported Joyce's enrollment decision. About her daughters, she remarked, "[T]hey think it's great that I'm doing it....That they're very proud of me. I said, 'Well, I may need some tutoring.' Both of them said that's fine." Her daughter who had just graduated from college was using her parents home as "her base" and was looking for work. She did not have her own apartment yet. Because she had been a graduate student, she could help her mother with computer skills and research techniques, or even proofreading papers. The other, older, daughter was a teacher and did not live at home. Joyce felt she could ask her for help with writing papers or preparing for exams. Her mother, now widowed and living with her, was also generally "very supportive" of Joyce's plans. However, they were "still too new" for them to have had much discussion about them. [O]nce I set the boundaries, she'll be very...respectful of that. Be there to pick up some other responsibilities if need be...whether it's gophering, or switching the laundry" or helping with dinner.

Her former supervisor did not know of Joyce's plans to pursue a degree. It wasn't until after the downsizing that she made the decision to enroll in courses. So the two had not discussed the idea.

Others in Joyce's support network included friends, sister and brother-in-law, and in-laws. Her friends generally "all think it's a great move" for her. "If I just need to talk to somebody about the frustrations...would be fine." One friend within driving distance "actually took courses through Saint Joseph's." Her sister, who had a graduate degree, and her brother-in-law, who was a professional health care practitioner, were "very supportive." According to Joyce, "they think it's great." Her sister is a teacher and can help her write papers. Her in-laws lived very close by, "a phone call away," and Joyce felt she could ask for their help with family affairs, if needed, at any time.

A Typical Day

Since losing her job during her employer's downsizing, Joyce was finding it difficult to establish a new daily routine. "[I]t's not structured," she said. "[A]nd that is an issue that I'm having. Because I do much better on a structured environment." She still got up early in the morning to take care of others' needs. "I'm now getting up at say, five or six o'clock...I go fix my husband's lunch. I fix his breakfast. I feed the animals. I let the animals out. I let the animals in. I have usually gone on a walk. I come back, deal with whatever issues it is for my Mom; if she's going to run errands." Then she started her day, which varied. "I have some volunteer work I've been doing. I have been working on my resume...e-mails. Maybe watch a television show. It's...not very structured." It was hard for her to settle into her coursework. "I read for an hour or two. I mean this weekend...I started but then...I prepared some dishes, I went to a picnic. I went in town with my husband." In the evening she had dinner, might watch some TV,

then head for bed sometime between 9:00 and 11:00. “Like last night I didn’t come to bed until almost 1:00 because my husband got me watching a...movie,” she laughed.

The month she signed up for her course was especially full. Her volunteer work took up more time than usual, and her daughter’s college graduation was at the end of the month. She noted, “And then there were a couple seminars I had planned to go to.”

Conflicts and Resolution

Now that her full-time position had ended, Joyce did not have specific conflicts between her volunteer work, job search, and schoolwork. The biggest challenge she faced was getting “organized” to the point where she could begin her coursework. About her schedule, she said, “It’s been...very laid back with certain commitments or functions stuck in the middle. You know, helter skelter on different days.” For two months she had wrestled with it. “And when those commitments have been...on the calendar, I fill in around them. Checking e-mails, doing job search, research. It’s almost like being on a vacation. You have certain doctor’s appointments to deal with.” She hoped that, with most of her personal obligations now “behind” her, she could start “this week with...a clean slate.” She was trying to map out blocks of study time each week, even though she could not predict when she would be called for job interviews.

When I asked her how she resolved conflicts that came up between her job search and home life and volunteering, she thought for a few moments, then replied, “Well, at this point the amount of time I volunteer is minimal.” She was confident she could adjust her volunteer schedule if needed. “There’s fundraisers that occur, but they usually occur

on weekends. That I can elect to go to or not....So I have a lot of flexibility with the volunteerism.”

One conflict she thought might come up would be finding quiet time when her older daughter and two children came for an extended visit over the summer. “If I’m working it’s one thing. If I’m not working, it’s still going to be an issue. Because I’ll need to have that quiet time. Now it might be that if I can’t get that quiet time here, I may have to leave home and go to the public library....But my kids are very supportive of me doing that.” She thought that setting some “ground rules” about the time she needed for her job search and studying would suffice.

During Course

A few days after her course ended, I called Joyce to schedule her second interview. We spent several minutes on the phone, and she enthusiastically updated me, briefly, on what had transpired for her since our first conversation. She had a new road job working for a health care agency, with regular hours—8:00 to 4:00—and had just completed the second day of her orientation. Prior to securing her new position, she had worked long days for eight weeks over the summer as a traveling nurse for another agency, leaving her home at 6:00 a.m. and not returning until 8:00 to 10:00 at night.

Joyce had not yet submitted an assignment for her course. At the beginning of the course, she had an introductory exchange with her instructor via the course discussion board but no further contact. Later, she e-mailed her advisor for assistance. When she received no response to her e-mail, she verified her advisor’s address with an Admissions

staff person. Then she called her advisor, who left a voicemail message for her, with the number to call back. That was the last connection she had with the College.

When I called to conduct our second interview, I spoke with Joyce's mother, who helped me get in touch with her. Joyce had forgotten our appointment that evening and called me back to apologize and proceed with the interview, which lasted approximately 60 minutes. She explained that until her orientation was over, her hours would be longer than usual. "I didn't get off until 5:30 tonight, and I'm supposed to be getting off at 4:00. But once the consultant's out of here, then that schedule...will be better."

Her new job, as a clinical documentation specialist, was exciting and challenging for her. "This is a totally new project, which is really kind of like cutting edge. It's kind of like a new field in health care." She talked to me about some of the aspects of her job and mentioned she now carries a small wireless laptop with her in the field "to document and note things."

Then we talked a bit about her course. "You know I...actually took all my information to try and call the school about the [course] extension. So I'm going to do the e-mail tonight. But my instructor never did respond to my other e-mails." We spent a few moments clarifying whether it was her instructor or advisor whom she had tried to contact. "I think it was the instructor. But...it might have been my advisor...I have to look in my file." Later in our interview, Joyce was able to determine it was her advisor she had contacted but not spoken with about extending her course.

Expectations and Experience of the Course

Joyce had tried to do some of the readings from the textbook but found the writing style unfamiliar, “because I’ve been so much in practical, and I had taken different certifications and it’s some of the same information. But I found it very difficult to follow. And I think it’s because of...how it’s written...Clinical versus academic, you know the academia.”

The online delivery of the course was pretty much what she expected, though the self-paced format was problematic for her. The consultant she was working with in her new job was also taking an online course, from another institution. They had compared notes about their courses. “I think it’s what I expected...[T]he consultant is enrolled in [another school’s program]...[H]er time [to complete] is the same as a regular semester. So it’s very disciplined. And that is something that probably would have been better for me. During the period of turmoil. Because that would have kept...the organization that I needed...Where this is self-directed, for all intent and purposes.”

She was hopeful that she could continue with her course, now that her professional life was back on track. “And I’m still committed to doing this...I certainly haven’t given a fair try to say that it wouldn’t work. But I think...I need some structure in multiple facets of my life...which would allow me then to...put this in a structure.”

Clarity of Course Expectations

As far as she could tell, without having submitted an assignment, Joyce thought the course expectations were “very straightforward...I may change my mind when I get

an assignment back....But...the information...seems to be clear. Directions as to writing style or the kind of response that's expected. You know the reference information is...provided. The resources.”

Relationship with Instructor and Advisor

Joyce had limited interaction with her instructor and her advisor, and she wasn't entirely sure how much she should expect from them. She had a brief e-mail exchange with her instructor at the beginning of the course. “I believe I did send an e-mail to the...instructor [who] sent me an e-mail wanting to know something about me....And I responded, and she thanked me for that....I mean the instructor did send out a greeting and introduced herself....So from the instructor I had nothing negative that I could say. There was no follow up: hey where are you? I haven't gotten anything. But I don't know if that's really reasonable to expect. I'm an adult, and the expectation is I would follow through.”

She was more ambivalent about her relationship with her advisor. “I don't want to be negative....I haven't done anything in the last two months to follow up.” Still, she expected a different response from her advisor when she e-mailed her. “[B]ut that did surprise me. I expected an e-mail response....I never...got an error message saying it didn't go through. So...I'm not sure what that...was. If it was timing. I mean, but then like I said, I called, I left a message. She called me back, left me a message. But didn't address the questions [I had]. But....I haven't had the opportunity to actually talk with

her, to see what was happening at that time.” She wondered if she had completed an assignment, perhaps her advisor would have been more responsive to her.

Difficulties with the Course

Not having taken college courses “for years and years,” Joyce felt disadvantaged when trying to complete her reading assignments. “I have not been in the academic setting...I think that is something that’s a deterrent. I mean...that...I wasn’t expecting that awkwardness.”

She tried to set up a better study environment but became discouraged, and she did not discuss the difficulty she was having with her instructor or advisor. “Instructor, no. Because I just never went far enough. I was to the point of doing the assignment, and then...how I basically tried to resolve it was to get myself into a quieter area. To...focus.” The disorientation caused by the upheaval in her professional life, however, prevented her from focusing. “I think the fact that my professional life was in a quandary. You know I have to have a certain amount of structure in order to create more structure.”

Academic Preparation

When I asked her how adequately prepared for the course she was, Joyce did not revisit academic issues but instead focused on the timing of her enrollment. She concluded that the timing of her decision to enroll was ill fated and that she got her

textbook too late. “Probably the timing was not the best....[W]hen I made the decision to do it, if I could have started it in May, I think I had the momentum. But by the time...I got my book, and it was pushing more to June, I was losing momentum. Just in...my control of my life....[I]f I...had gone back to work immediately and had order [in my life].”

Life Changes During Course

Other than the effects of her job loss and job search, there were no other changes in Joyce’s life or those close to her, that she could recall. “Yes, that was the biggest, just the floundering. The big thing was lack of job. Lack of...job, lack of structure.”

Impact of Schoolwork on Relationships and Work

In her view, the limited amount of work she was able to do in her course had no measurable effect on her or those close to her. “[N]o, I see that it really didn’t. Because it was something I was trying to do during the day.”

When she tried to begin her course, Joyce was not employed but was actively looking for work. I asked her how taking the course affected her job search, and she said, “No.” It had not.

Changing Needs or Demands in Home/Social Life

In Joyce's opinion, the needs or demands of those in her home or social life did not change after she enrolled in her course. "No, it really didn't. And I really don't see it."

Self-Perception of Changing Role Responsibilities

Joyce's perception of what she needed to do in response to the needs of others in her life did not change after she enrolled in her course. "Not in the needs of others, no. Just organization of my time."

A Typical Day During Course

When I asked Joyce whether her daily routine had changed since we last spoke, I recalled from our previous interview that she got up at 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning. "Yeah, it changed because what ended up happening was I stopped exercising early in the morning....Sometimes I would walk, or I would...get on the treadmill. But unfortunately I let that go by the wayside the last two months as well."

She was still doing some volunteer work, however. "I did a couple of things. I mean I'm still on...my board of directors, which I had to miss this week because I'm with the consultant. But...I'll finish out my tenure. I don't have the free time now to do as much. But I will go to my monthly meeting...."

During her eight-week stint with the agency over the summer, she left home at 5:45 in the morning and got home at 7:00 or 8:00 at night. “My original contract was for four weeks, and then...because they weren’t ready to start this job, it was extended.”

Her study routine changed, also. Rather than reading her textbook at night, she “switched to where I was doing it in the daytime. Because I was home, and I went to the library, or tried different avenues.” With her new work hours, she had a new study plan. “What I will be doing is doing it at night and weekends. Because this job is even better, because either I can stay at the hospital, or I can be home, on a normal day, 5:00, 5:15. Have dinner. And by 6:00, 6:15 I’m free. [S]o I can get easily an hour in...two hours...”

Conflicts and Resolution During Course

Joyce did not think there were any times when she had felt conflicts between her schoolwork and what she needed to do as a spouse, mother, or friend. “No, no...and I think part of that is the fact that I...didn’t have small children.”

Emotional and Instrumental Support During Course

Though she did not mention any specific ways in which her spouse offered her support while she tried to work on her course, Joyce felt that her being home more made him “happier.” “[W]e’re very much home people,” she said. The night we spoke, her husband was just getting home for dinner near the end of our interview. “[S]ee he’s just

getting home, that's a rarity that he's working this late....But this...would be typical for me before. Us eating at 8:00 at night.”

She was anticipating settling into her new routine soon, once her job orientation was over. “I should be able to go and do [school] work. And still be able to sit and watch TV with him for an hour. And it's still not a late night.”

While both of her daughters offered her “moral support” while she tried to work on her course, “My youngest one keeps trying to keep me on target....[S]he's very much a schedule person....has her little stickies and has her day planner....And...she checks her list.” She would check on her mother's progress. “Have you done any work today?” she would ask. Though Joyce hadn't completed any assignments yet, she would not hesitate to ask either daughter for assistance. “[I]f I had written something and I wanted some critique, both of them would readily provide support there.”

Her sister, who taught at the local college and whom she mentioned in our first interview, was also someone she could turn to for help. “And then of course my sister's a professor....so...I have a lot of resources from that perspective.” Then she laughed, “And she was trying to keep me on target, too....‘What have you done? How [are] you doing?’....[B]ut she knew, too, my life was in topsy turvy.”

Because Joyce began her course after her original position was cut, she had no work supervisor then. Though I did not determine whether her new supervisor knew of her enrollment, she was not actively working on her course at that time.

Friends also supported Joyce while she was “trying to, anyway” work on her course. “Well, yeah, moral support,” she said, without elaborating.

When I asked her about the support she received from her instructor and advisor, she said she found her instructor encouraging and available, though she hadn't called on her for support. "I mean the instructor, it was, again, very brief, very elementary. But certainly that e-mails were open. She was available." As for her advisor, she said she "never even got an e-mail response back from the advisor." Then she asked me whether she should contact her instructor or her advisor about continuing in her course.

Extended family members "were a little surprised" at Joyce's decision to enroll in a degree program. "Yeah, I mean everybody realizes I don't need it for my job....But more power to me....[is] basically what they would say."

Suggestions for the College

The most helpful thing the College could do for her, Joyce thought, was "any assistance...to keep me on task." She found the self-paced nature of the courses to be a stumbling block. "If you know that, and that's really contrary to the program that's set up. I mean the program's set up so you have a window of time to do a course....But that's something I have to assume the responsibility for." She hoped that by getting her "life...back in order," she could now move forward with her education.

Coping Strategy

The upheaval Joyce experienced from the loss of her position and ensuing job search disoriented her to the point where she was unable to focus on her course. She

found herself “floundering.” Compounding her difficulties were her struggle with the “academic” nature of the assigned readings and the self-paced format of the course. She had not discussed, with her instructor, the trouble she was having (Type III coping – reactive role behavior). Her attempt to reach her advisor resulted in confusion and frustration. Though family members and friends were supportive of her educational goals and available to help, she found it too difficult to get organized enough to formulate a workable study plan (Type III coping). She tried setting up a quiet study area in the house (Type II coping – personal role redefinition) but was unable to concentrate long enough to complete her reading assignments. With her new professional position securely in place, she hoped she could start over and was thinking about contacting her advisor to resume her course.

Amy

Amy, married and the mother of two college-aged daughters, spoke with me from the quiet of her hospital office, where she directed multiple units. I called her at 10:00 in the morning, her local time. Our first interview lasted 45 minutes.

Her course had started approximately a month before our conversation took place. She had enrolled in NU500, in the master’s program in nursing. The last time she had taken a college course was in the 1970’s. At that time, she had to drop out, due to an accident suffered by her husband.

Answering my questions methodically and clearly, she told me that her father was deceased, and her mother lived within driving distance from her. She spoke daily by

phone with her mother. One of her brothers lived with their mother; the other brother “lives right next door to her.”

I could not reach Amy by phone or e-mail to schedule a second interview. I left two voicemails for her at work and sent an e-mail request to her but received no response. Her advisor e-mailed her approximately two months after her course began to check on her progress. The only student database entries for her after that indicate that she was sent a letter indicating her pending inactive status. Her course ended before she had submitted an assignment. Seven months after our first interview, she was withdrawn from her course with a failing grade.

Pre-Course

Enrollment Decision

Her reasons for enrolling in her course were “multi-faceted,” and Amy spelled them out for me. “One, I’m in a position as a director of multi units at [named hospital]....[M]any of my peers are at the master’s level....I want to feel adequate. I want to feel that I am as prepared as I could be at that level. Number two is we recently passed a resolution that our first-line supervisors needed to be at the BSN level....And I feel that it’s only right and fair that I go back to school, and that I require that of myself if I’m going to require that of my supervisors. Third, my children are in college....I have a need to feel worthwhile...that life just isn’t over now that my child-rearing years are closing....[F]ourth...there’s so much to learn that will help me in my position.” When I

suggested that it sounded like she was in transition, she continued, “I’m an empty-nester. I’m transitioning to middle age, that sandwiching period of my life. I don’t want to feel old. I want to learn. I want to...do more.” Though some of her peers and staff near her own age talk about retirement, she feels “very far from retirement...I feel this is something to reenergize me, to keep me moving in that direction.” She related how she started a course a year ago on a college campus but had to stop when her husband had a serious accident. She thought “doing something online would be a better fit for me,” which is why she selected Saint Joseph's College.

Academic and Technological Readiness at Enrollment

Writing papers in APA (American Psychological Association) format was a concern of Amy’s because “putting it into the APA format is all new to me. So I will need tutors and help to learn the APA format.” When she was an undergraduate many years ago, she “never did that.” But the actual writing was not a concern of hers. “I feel fairly confident with that.”

Amy was confident that technology issues would not be a problem. “I use the computer every day. I mean my life at work revolves around e-mail.” However, she was “nervous about not having interaction with the professor and hesitant to contact the professor.” As for the reading and taking notes on the material, that was as she expected. “So I’m pretty okay,” she said.

Emotional and Instrumental Support at Enrollment

When I asked Amy how others in her life felt about her decision to enroll in courses, she said her spouse was “pretty indifferent.” She commented further, “Uh—he’s happy for me to do it. He—he’s—he’s ah, he’s proud to tell others that I’m in class as long as it’s not interfering with him and our life together.” While her two daughters, both of whom were in college, were proud of their mother for going back to school, she thought their reaction was similar to her husband’s. “[I]n my view it’s the same. It’s very good that I’m going back to school...as long as it doesn’t interfere with what they’re doing.” They had made comments like, “Oh that’s great. Mom, that’s so good. You may graduate before I graduate.”

Her supervisor at work didn’t yet know of her decision to enroll in courses. “Well, I have—I have to umm ask her for a supervisor recommendation for the College. So I’ll be submitting that to her. But she’s very supportive. She was very supportive when I went to [another college]. I’m sure that she will be very happy.”

Next I asked her how her friends, brothers, and mother felt about her taking courses. She said two friends in particular did not understand her decision. They had remarked to her, “I don’t know why you would want to do that. It’s not going to bring you any more money, why are you stressing yourself like that?” When speaking about her brothers, she paused momentarily as if to form words in her mouth. “My brothers umm it’s—it—it’s okay. They really don’t say one way or the other about it. Education isn’t important for them, and they know very little about my work life and what it involves.” She compared their sentiments to her husband’s. “As long as it doesn’t

interfere with my taking care of my mother or what they need from me, it's okay." I asked her if her mother knew about her taking courses. "I haven't told my mother. But I can tell you she would say, 'I don't know why you're doing that.'" When I questioned, "Why is that, do you think?" she explained the dynamics with her mother. "The long version is mothers and daughters are very competitive. And she doesn't want me to do anything more than what she was in her life. And being a mother and a wife is all that I should expect....The short answer is, it takes time away from her."

One of the people Amy counts on the most for support is her administrative assistant, who is supportive of her decision to enroll in courses. "She works very hard to help in scheduling my days, to see that I get out of here in the evenings. [She] is asking me about the class, is helpful to keep me on track with what I need to do."

Other family members and friends offered varying degrees of help to Amy while she was managing everything in her life. Her husband was "a good listener" and helped with chores around the home. "He doesn't question me or begrudge me the money to go, which I think is a support." Amy's daughters had both been in college for three years or more, so she was used to them being away from home. One close friend offered her "a lot of support by just listening to what I'm worried about, what I'm concerned about, what I'm doing." Another, who felt Amy tended to put too much pressure on herself to succeed, encouraged her to not set unrealistic expectations about school. "If I don't finish, if I don't do well, it's not the end of the earth. It—it's whatever I learn will be—will be good. And it will be enough." When I asked her about her brothers and mother, she took a deep breath and said, "Ah, I'm not going to get any support from them. I'm not going to get any support from [my mother], either."

She didn't think her supervisor would be very flexible in accommodating Amy's schoolwork. "She has expectations that need to be met. And...it's not an option to not meet those expectations....I'm sure that if I went...to her about a specific concern or asked for a specific request, she would be good about that." However, Amy didn't feel she could make such requests just because she was in school.

A Typical Day

Amy had, in her words, "typical weeks, not days." But she told me that she started her day at about 6:00 in the morning. She did "normal things at home, start a load of clothes to wash, pick up." She got to work typically by 8:00, and started her busy day at the office. "By 8:30 I've rounded in my departments. I'm off to a...meeting, which is every morning. Throughout the day it's multiple meetings, problem solving, dealing with physicians, nurses....I leave here normally between 5:00 and 6:00 in the evening." Once home, she began her other tasks. "I pick up, read the newspaper turn on the news usually, fix some dinner, have dinner with my husband. And then by 7:30, 8:00 in the evening, I've folded up our clothes, I've practiced my [musical instrument], and then I sit down and read. Either I'm reading for pleasure or I'm reading my textbook for the class, and I'm in bed usually by 10:00 or 11:00." At some point during the evening she usually talked to her mother and her two daughters by phone.

Conflicts and Resolution

In response to my question about any times when she felt conflicts between her work and personal responsibilities, Amy said she had a conflict coming up that weekend. She was scheduled to play music for an event at her daughter's college. She was leaving on the weekend and had planned to stay until the following Wednesday. However, an important meeting at the hospital was scheduled for early Wednesday morning. To work around the conflict, she thought she would work all night on Tuesday, "go to the 6:45 meeting, and then go home and sleep." But then another meeting was scheduled later on Wednesday morning. "So I'm in kind of a quandary as to whether I will come into work and just stay up for all of that and then go home—I'm not sure exactly how I'm going to handle that." She didn't feel she could get out of her work commitments to attend her daughter's event at school.

Amy had to deal regularly with other, family-related conflicts. "I have a conflict with my mother all the time," she noted. "Most of her needs are needs to deal with her loneliness....And she doesn't have any real grasp of what my needs are. So on the weekends there's always a struggle. Do I go to my mom's, do I stay home with my husband, do I just take time for myself. So I try to balance that in months at a time. I went to see my mother last week, now I won't go this week....That's always a conflict." Matters are complicated (though she didn't elaborate as to how) by the fact that one brother lives with their mother, and the other lives next door to her. Amy talked to her mother "at least once a day" on the phone.

When I asked her how she typically resolved conflicts while trying to manage all the aspects of her life, Amy cited some more examples for me. She took a deep breath. “Well, I—I’m a good nurse. I problem solve....Most often, I am the one who pays the price in—in resolving the conflict, I will do what’s most difficult for myself personally to resolve the conflict rather than—than deal with someone else.” Rather than ask the physician to change the meeting which conflicted with her daughter’s event at college, she said, “I’m going to adjust to him. And I do that with my family as well. I adjust. It could be that it’s the path of least resistance, but it just seems to be easier.” She talked about a conflict that had just occurred the previous Sunday, Easter Sunday. She wanted to be with her family but got a call from the hospital in the afternoon. “And I overreacted to the response of the staffing tech who was talking to me....[W]hat she said just hit me like cold water....I ended up coming in to work and spent the night here at the hospital because I became uneasy. I felt I wasn’t doing my job. I felt...that codependency came into play. And I recognized it. But...the easiest way to deal with it was just to come into work.” She told me she saw herself acquiescing to the needs of others often.

Coping Strategy

Amy relied exclusively on Type III coping behavior (reactive role behavior) as she grappled with ongoing conflicts between her work and personal life. Her perception was that the only way she could resolve the conflicts she faced was to work harder or more efficiently. In one instance, she tried to work around multiple scheduling conflicts by juggling her calendar (Type III coping), though the conflicting meetings were

arranged by others. When her attempts were unsuccessful, she resolved to “work all night, go to the 6:45 meeting and then go home and sleep” (Type III coping).

When conflicts with family members occurred, she also went into a reactive mode. “I do that with my family as well. I adjust” (Type III coping). On most weekends she had to resolve competing claims on her time and attention from her family. “I have a conflict with my mother all the time. Most of her...needs...deal with her loneliness....And she doesn’t have any real grasp of what my...needs are. So on the weekends there’s always a struggle. Do I go to my mom’s, do I stay home with my husband, do I just take time for myself.” Her solution to that conflict was through scheduling, “to balance that in months at a time” (Type III coping).

Summary

While all seven study participants shared characteristics in common, there were key differences among them. Each woman was married and had at least one child. All of the women fell within the modal age range for students at the College and resided within the United States. Each woman was enrolled in a single course, the first course in her online degree program. Only one of the women (Dee) had previously taken an online course, at another institution, just a month before her enrollment at Saint Joseph’s College. All but one of the women were employed in healthcare related positions at the beginning of their course. The one exception was Joyce, whose employer had recently “downsized” staff, resulting in the loss of her healthcare related position, after 10 years with the organization. At the time of her second interview, however, she had taken a new

position, also within the healthcare field. Each woman exhibited some form of role strain or role conflict, either at enrollment or during her course.

Beyond the characteristics they held in common, however, were important differences in the life contexts of these seven women. Each woman's experience of her daily life and course was shaped by her particular situation. Four of the women were grandmothers, three of whom were helping raise one or more grandchildren. Two of the women lived in extended family households, both of which were intergenerational. The two women in the study who had children at home under the age of 18 both faced medical crises with their parents during their course. The levels and types of support these women received varied, both before and during their course, as did their patterns of coping with role conflict and strain. In Chapter 5, I discuss the similarities and differences in detail.

Chapter 5

Discussion

In addition to a study's stated research questions, standard questions to be addressed by a researcher include:

What connections are there among the experiences of the participants you interviewed? What do you understand now that you did not understand before you began the interviews? What surprises have there been? What confirmations of previous instincts?... (Seidman, 1991, p. 102)

Answers to these questions are contained in this chapter.

In-depth interviews, such as those conducted for this study, are vital to gaining a “deeper understanding and appreciation of the amazing intricacies and, yet, coherence of people’s experiences,” including “the power of the social...context of people’s experience” (Seidman, 1991, p. 103). The rich description provided by the individual profiles in the study findings afford glimpses into the individual life-worlds (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) of seven adult women online learners, over a period of several months. As with all individuals, the women emerged as actors within and subject to their respective social contexts but also as shapers of them.

The life-world, understood in its totality as natural and social world, is the arena, as well as what sets the limits, of my and our reciprocal action. In order to actualize our goals, we must master what is present in them and transform them. Accordingly, we act and operate not only within the life-world but also upon it. (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 6)

The women in this study differed in the extent to which they were able to master or transform particular aspects of their life-worlds—specifically role strain and conflict—in order to achieve their goals of completing the first courses in their online degree programs. The type and severity of role strain or conflict experienced by these women varied, as did the supports available to them and the coping strategies they employed.

Indeed, the variety across these women's life contexts and experiences was striking. There were some common threads, such as their reliance on the support of others (generally family, friends, and work colleagues) to achieve their educational goals. But the specific individuals within their support networks varied, along with the quantity and quality of support they received from those individuals.

Equally striking, however, were the commonalities among the women who shared similar results regarding their enrollment. At the time of writing the study findings, their enrollment outcomes fell into three categories: withdrew; extended time (with satisfactory progress); or persisted to completion.

Withdrew

Joyce and Amy, the two women who were administratively withdrawn with a failing grade, without having submitted a course assignment, were enrolled in different degree programs and courses. Joyce, like Elizabeth and Dee, was enrolled in HC 205 and had the same instructor as Dee. However, she had a different advisor from both Elizabeth and Dee. Amy was enrolled in NU 500 and had the same instructor and advisor as the other participants in the MSN program: Estelle, Susan, and Judy.

When I spoke with Amy during her first interview, she was employed full-time. I could not reach her to conduct a second interview to assess her perceptions of support she may or may not have received from her family, work environment, or school environment. Joyce was unemployed at the time of her first interview but had just obtained a full-time position in health care when I talked with her for the second time.

Joyce

Perceptions of Household and Employer Support

During her first interview, Joyce described her husband as “accepting” of her enrollment decision, though she also said he “feels that I commit too much, whether it be work or activities with the kids over the years, or whatever.” Her perceived level of support from her spouse appeared to be low, both at enrollment and during her course. She said that when it came to her work-related activities generally and the amount of time they took, “He may not always like it, but he accepts it.” She seemed somewhat skeptical about how long he would remain supportive of her taking courses, since their “first commitment is to make sure the household’s resolved. You know, that those bills are paid....[W]e’ll just see how that progresses. You know, with the number of courses.” During her second interview, Joyce did not mention any specific ways in which her spouse supported her while she tried to work on her course. She said simply that her being home more made him “happier.”

The support Joyce anticipated and received from her mother and daughters appeared to be higher than that from her spouse. Joyce had not had much discussion with her mother about her educational plans, but she felt she would respect boundaries around her need to study, once they were set. She also believed her mother would “pick up some other responsibilities if need be...whether it’s gophering, or switching the laundry,” or helping with dinner. Joyce said she could also count on both of her daughters for help with schoolwork, whether with computer issues or writing papers. She later reported that her daughters were available and willing to help her. Her youngest daughter, a recent college graduate, who was living with her, tried to assist her with time management strategies, checking on her progress and asking her, “Have you done any work today?”

Because she decided to enroll in her degree program after she was laid off from work, Joyce had not discussed her educational goal with her former supervisor. During her second interview, she did not say whether or not her new supervisor knew of her enrollment. She appeared to be working more closely with an outside consultant who was providing job training than with her new supervisor at that time.

Perceptions of Instructor and Advisor Support

Joyce had minimal contact with her instructor and advisor. She said her instructor was “available,” even though she did not call on her for support. Her perception of the support she received from her advisor, however, did not meet her expectations. She “never even got an e-mail response back from the advisor.”

Amy***Perceptions of Household and Employer Support***

Amy appeared concerned about how little support from her family and employer she had reported anticipating during her first interview, at the end of which she asked, “Am I normal?” She had described her husband as “pretty indifferent” about her educational goals, and it was only after further probing that she said he was “proud to tell others that I’m in class as long as it’s not interfering with him and our life together.” She said her husband “doesn’t question me or begrudge me the money to go, which I think is a support.” Though she felt her daughters were proud of her for returning to school, she said, “But in my view it’s the same. It—it’s very good that I’m going back to school...as long as it doesn’t interfere with what they’re doing.” Amy also compared her brothers’ stance regarding her degree plans to her husband’s. “[F]or them it—it’s kind of like my husband. As long as it doesn’t interfere with my taking care of my mother or what they need from me, it’s okay.” When asked about any support she typically received from her brothers, she took a deep breath. “Ah, I’m [short pause] not going to get any support from them.” And about her mother, she said, “I’m not going to get any support from her, either.”

Amy’s supervisor was unaware of her decision to enroll in courses. “She doesn’t know yet.” However, she believed her supervisor would be supportive when asked to provide “a supervisor recommendation for the College” since she had been supportive of her previous coursework at another school.

Joyce and Amy Pre-Course

Joyce and Amy shared many characteristics in common, though they enrolled in different degree programs and courses. Both women were in their early fifties and both had not taken a college course since the 1970s. Both had two children, with all but one in college. Their fathers were both deceased. Though both women were actively caring for their mothers, Joyce's mother lived with her, while Amy's mother lived within driving distance.

Both women participated occasionally in church-related activities and both had social or self-improvement interests; for Joyce, it was a quarterly social and support couples group, while Amy took weekly music lessons. Both women had close friends they turned to for moral support when needed.

Both women felt confident about their computer skills and did not anticipate technical problems with their courses. However, both women had some concerns about their academic preparation for their courses. While Joyce was encouraged by her familiarity with her course's subject matter, she thought absorbing the assigned readings might be challenging. Amy felt "very prepared" for her course, except for the APA formatting requirements for the written assignments.

Work Support

Neither woman had spoken with a work supervisor about her educational plans. Because Joyce was between jobs during most of her enrollment, she did not have a

supervisor with whom to discuss her plans. Amy anticipated that her supervisor would be inflexible regarding her work duties while she was taking courses.

Both women enrolled in their degree programs during life transitions, while seeking direction in their lives because of losses they had experienced. Joyce enrolled after her job was eliminated and saw further education as a personal growth opportunity. “Why not?” she asked. She did not need her degree for employment, however, and obtained a new position after enrolling. Amy described herself as an “empty nester,” and “transitioning to middle age.” “I don’t want to feel old,” she said. “I want to learn. I want to...do more.” At the same time, Amy felt compelled to further her education since many of her peers at work were at the master’s level, and educational expectations for those under her had been raised.

Family and Social Support

When they enrolled in their courses, Joyce and Amy had similar responses from their spouses. Joyce described her husband as “accepting” and “quietly supportive” of her enrollment decision. He “barely blinked an eye” when she told him she had signed up for courses. As long as the bills were paid, she felt he would go along with her decision. Amy’s spouse was “pretty indifferent” about her decision, though he was “proud to tell others” about it, “as long as it’s not interfering with him and our life together.”

Clear differences emerged as to the support these two women had from other friends and family. While both enjoyed the approval of their daughters for their

enrollment decisions, Joyce appeared more likely than Amy to call on her children for support for tutoring and help with computer issues. Amy's daughters, like her husband, were proud of her for going back to school, "as long as it doesn't interfere with what they're doing." Joyce had the support of her mother and in-laws for her enrollment decision, and was confident her mother would respect her "study boundaries" and help around the house when needed while she was taking her course. In contrast, Amy viewed her goal of completing a degree program as a likely source of conflict with her mother, and she hadn't shared her plans with her.

Siblings of these two women also responded differently to their aspirations. Joyce's sister and brother-in-law, both college educated and professionals in their fields, were "very supportive," and available to help with writing papers. Amy's two brothers had little to say about her educational plans. "They really don't say one way or the other about it. Education isn't important for them."

While Joyce's friends "all think it's a great move" on her part to pursue a degree (one had even taken courses through Saint Joseph's College), Amy's friends were less enthusiastic. "I don't know why you would want to do that," they had said. "It's not going to bring you any more money. Why are you stressing yourself like that?" The one person Amy felt would support her unequivocally was her administrative assistant at work who helped manage her schedule.

Joyce and Amy During Course

Because I could not reach Amy to conduct a second interview, I could not assess the support levels she received from her supervisor, family members, or College staff during the time period of her course. Joyce was minimally engaged in her course from its beginning, all the way through her course expiration date. Information about Joyce's situation follows in the next section.

Work Support

Joyce had taken a new position just before our second interview and was in her second day of orientation. She did not appear to have established a relationship with her new supervisor at the time of her second interview.

Family and Social Support

When I asked Joyce about support received from her spouse for her course, she did not mention any. Instead, she shared that her being home more while she was unemployed made him "happier." She was optimistic, however, that when she settled into her new job, she could work on her course and still be able to do things with her husband.

Her daughters continued to lend their support to their mother. The younger daughter tried to help her become more organized and focused on her course by checking

on her progress. Joyce believed both of her daughters would help her write papers if she asked them.

Friends offered her verbal support. “Well, yeah, moral support,” she said. Other than her sister, who was a college professor, her extended family’s support appeared limited. “[E]verybody realizes I don’t need it for my job.”

Learner Support

Joyce had the same instructor for HC 205 as Dee, but a different advisor. From her limited engagement with the course, she thought it appeared to be “very straightforward,” but she hadn’t submitted an assignment. During our second conversation, Joyce initially confused her instructor with her advisor. After clarifying which was which, she indicated that her instructor’s interactions met her expectations. She based her assessment on an introductory e-mail exchange, in which the instructor had appeared encouraging and available. Joyce did not contact her instructor, however, about the difficulty she was having with the reading assignments.

Joyce was less satisfied with her advisor, though she wasn’t exactly sure how much to have expected from her. Communication between the two seemed to break down. When she e-mailed her advisor, she expected to receive an e-mail in response; instead, the two missed each other’s phone calls.

Coping Strategies

Joyce and Amy relied almost exclusively on Type III coping (reactive role behavior) before their courses when they faced role conflicts, and they acted alone to resolve them. Joyce continued to use Type III coping behavior primarily during her course, although she attempted, unsuccessfully, to incorporate Type II coping (personal role redefinition). Though the nature and severity of their role conflicts appeared differently (Joyce lacking a job and Amy struggling with conflicts between her job and home life), closer examination revealed similar underlying dynamics. Both women battled continually against intrusions on their time, space, and attention which kept them off balance. Amy constantly faced scheduling challenges at work. Between work and home, her days shifted markedly according to others' demands. Her possible advantages, her administrative assistant's management of her calendar and a structured home life, were offset by competing demands from family members. Although I was unable to interview her a second time to assess her intra-role strain or course experience, the first interview indicated her likely difficulties in finding time for herself to complete her course.

Joyce was challenged by establishing a study routine for herself and grasping the course reading material. She needed a structured environment to function well. That evaporated after her job loss. She could not seem to rebuild that foundation during her ensuing job search. Ironically, though Joyce had the support of those close to her, she did not avail herself of their help.

Extended Time

Two study participants, Susan and Judy, had requested course time extensions and were making satisfactory academic progress but had not completed their courses at the study's conclusion. The similarities between them were remarkable, though there were important differences. They were both enrolled in NU 500, pursuing their master's in nursing, and had the same instructor and advisor. Each had taken a college course in the 1990s.

Susan

Perceptions of Household and Employer Support

Susan described her spouse's support in somewhat ambivalent terms in her first interview. After repeated probing for information about his feelings regarding her taking courses, she said he was "really very supportive." She also said, "I think he's also excited for me. He was a little bit nervous about the money because he's very frugal with money and is always worried about our future, that we're going to have enough to live on." She added that a "small scholarship" and her eligibility for a student loan appeared to ease his financial concerns. "So that has kind of taken a little burden off of him." Upon further probing, she indicated that at family gatherings he "brags to everybody that I've been accepted and will be working on my master's." Then she mentioned he had a friend install a wireless network in their home and "made sure" that Susan had a laptop so she could work in any room in the house. Finally, she said he offered emotional support,

“just hugging me and telling me that he’s proud of me.” Later in the interview, Susan indicated that she thought her spouse was “very good at” supporting her emotionally. During her second interview, Susan seemed more certain of her husband’s support. “He’s very supportive. He’s always asking, ‘Are you keeping up on your assignments?’ And he’s always offered to read [my] papers ahead of time.” Susan’s cell phone rang several times during her second interview. When I asked her if she needed to take the call, she reassured me, “Oh it’s my husband. He just left a voice message. No that’s alright. He’s already called three times.”

Though her son was “really excited” that she was accepted into her master’s program, Susan pointed out that he was “busy with his life, too” and that, “It’s I don’t think as big a thing in his life as it is in my husband’s and my life.” She would “expect support from him only during major crisis or major family problems.” Because her daughter had just moved in with her parents after her marriage plans fell through, Susan didn’t “expect too much support from her....”

Susan did not look to her parents for support, since they were grieving the loss of Susan’s sibling. “I wouldn’t go to them for support at this point,” she said, because “it’s hard to do any serious taking with them at this time.”

When talking about her supervisor, Susan clearly felt she could count on her support. Without hesitation, she said, “She is very supportive,” then explained that her state was moving closer to requiring a master’s degree for her position. “And anytime a scholarship announcement comes up, she’ll ask me if I had seen it.” She described her supervisor’s door as “always open” to her when she needed support for issues she faced in her personal life as well.

Perceptions of Instructor and Advisor Support

Susan said her relationship with her instructor “met my expectations.” Susan appreciated her instructor’s feedback. “And I don’t know how she does it, but she’ll return the paper to me with comments on the side....So I appreciated that rather than just getting an e-mail that said your grade for this paper is ‘B.’”

Her advisor did not provide as much support as Susan would have liked. That relationship did “really not” meet her expectations, “because I only have interacted with her once when my computer crashed, and that was it. I’m sorry to say I can’t even tell you what her name is. I thought maybe she might either e-mail me or call me and just ask how I was doing. Did I need any help...just some type of connection, maybe every three to four weeks.”

Judy

Perceptions of Household and Employer Support

Judy felt her husband, who worked from an office in their home, supported her unconditionally in her schoolwork and that he “will help with anything and everything to help me achieve it.” She said he would be “understanding that I...may not be available for a couple of hours each night. Extremely supportive. I—I can’t even tell you how great that is that I have that backup.” Later in the interview, Judy stressed how helpful her husband was generally. “I’ve got the greatest spouse because it’s always been a 50-50 in everything in our marriage....I just feel I’m so lucky to have someone in my life

who is 50-50. I have tons of friends who have spouses who would...say, 'Well, you're just gonna have to figure out how you're gonna juggle that, because I can't.' Or, 'I won't.' And I don't have that problem. I never have." During her second interview, Judy said her husband's support during her course "met my expectations for sure." She confirmed that her relationship with her spouse was, "absolutely" 50-50. Though her children were young, Judy thought that because of her 50-50 relationship with her spouse, "they're going to adapt like it's just no other big deal because everything that we've done has always been either mom or dad there. And that's not going to change."

At the college where she taught, Judy felt she had the support of two professors in particular ("my lead instructors"), as well as her dean. She said they were "encouraging me, that they think that my niche is in education, and that they would like to see me go further. So, that's really helpful...that the people I'm working with are supporting me in that way, too." While taking her course, the dean checked in with her and offered to help. "[H]e's always supportive," Judy told me during her second interview. One of Judy's colleagues at work was enrolled in the same program she was--the master's in nursing program. Judy said, "[S]he also encouraged me even during all of my troubles, was saying, 'Don't worry about it. Just do what you need to do to take care of you and your mom, and then come back to it.'" Her support "made a difference" to Judy.

Perceptions of Instructor and Advisor Support

Her instructor, in Judy's view, did not offer her much support. "Well I'd have to say that she was supportive after I had e-mailed her. But I would have to say, ah [pauses]

I would say there's not much of a relationship there for me to—I wouldn't even go there. For the support.” Judy struggled to articulate how she felt about the relationship she had with her instructor. “[I]t's a distance course, so I really didn't, I didn't feel that I had to [pauses] I guess I didn't want any of, I didn't need any support from her around what was going on. But as far as the course, um she stated she understood and just, you know, encouraged me to keep going.” In her recommendations for the College, Judy emphasized the need for greater interaction with her instructor.

About her advisor, Judy said, “Same thing. Although her encouragement was what kept me going. But it's not I like we talked more than that. You know there's really not much of a relationship there.”

Susan and Judy Pre-Course

Susan and Judy were both married, and each had two children. Yet the women were in different life stages. Susan was a grandmother who was helping to raise her son's two children, one of whom had special medical needs. Her adult daughter had moved back in with her parents after her marriage plans fell through. Judy had two pre-teen children and cared for her mother and grandmother when they required urgent medical attention. Both Susan and Judy were involved in activities outside of work. Susan was active in her church, while Judy spent time with her children during school field trips and other events.

Both Susan and Judy were nervous about having been out of school for some time and were anxious about mastering APA formatting guidelines. Neither woman was

worried about technological readiness, because they routinely used computers in their work.

Work Support

Both Susan and Judy worked on academic calendar schedules and typically supplemented their incomes with summer work. Both women had compelling reasons for pursuing a degree at the time they enrolled. For Susan, a master's in nursing had "always been" a personal goal, and had already been offered a teaching contract at a local college contingent upon receiving her graduate degree. Because she would receive a sizable raise for the upcoming school year, Susan could take the summer off rather than work per diem at the local hospital, enabling her to devote more time to studies. Judy, who performed direct care in the summers, needed her master's degree to become full-time faculty at the university where she taught.

Each woman's work supervisor was demonstrably supportive of her educational goals. Susan's state seemed poised to require master's degrees of all school nurses, and her supervisor routinely routed scholarship information to her. Two of Judy's professional colleagues served as references for her application to graduate school, and her dean thought it was "fantastic" she was "going for it."

Family and Social Support

The spouses of both women supported their enrollment and offered to help however they could. Susan's husband got her a laptop computer and had a friend hook up a wireless network in their home. He was willing to do "anything" to "make it easier" for her to study. Judy and her husband made a pact to work together as a couple to "do what we have to do to work around my studies."

Susan's and Judy's children were supportive of their mothers' decisions to go back to school, but their ability to help was limited. Susan's son was preoccupied with his own family obligations and her daughter was dealing with a major life disappointment. Judy's children were too young to help her, yet they were very curious about how their mother's online course and what a graduate degree entailed.

Their parents' support was also limited. Susan's college-educated parents were still coping with the death of her sibling and were basically removed from her world. They had expressed approval, however, and her father had even offered to loan her money for tuition. Judy, a first-generation college student, felt her parents and siblings supported her enrollment decision but were quizzical about why she would want more education. Because she and her husband had relocated, they were separated by geographical distance from Judy's family.

Friends were enthusiastically supportive of both women. Susan's best friend, though not college educated, was especially curious about how an online course would work and, through Susan, was eagerly learning about computers. Susan had additional support from her parish priest before her course and then a seminary student at her church

during her course. One of Judy's friends, a registered nurse, was "very excited" for her and saw Judy as a model for her own plans to earn the same degree.

Susan and Judy During Course

Both Susan and Judy experienced major shifts in their daily routines after their courses started. Susan, who normally worked summers, took the summer off due to her upcoming salary increase. She spent the summer taking care of her grandchildren, vacationing with her husband, and working slowly on her course. Judy's summer did not unfold as she expected. She was unable to take the summer job she anticipated, so had to find another position. Her mother, who lived at a distance, was hospitalized and needed her advocacy. Her grandmother required medical attention soon after. At the time of my second interviews with both women, Susan and Judy had returned to their academic year duties in their regular positions.

Work Support

Susan continued to see her supervisor monthly and talked with her about her course. She also received a scholarship from her statewide professional association. A nurse colleague who was working on her bachelor's degree in nursing traded "information back and forth" about their coursework, "both bemoaning the APA format." Judy's per diem supervisor over the summer was not aware she was taking her course. One of her colleagues, who was enrolled in the same degree program at Saint Joseph's

College, had encouraged Judy to focus on looking after her mother over the summer, then return to her coursework. Her dean remained “very supportive” and checked on her progress occasionally, asking, “How’s it going? Anything I can do?”

Family and Social Support

The spouses of both women offered help during taking their courses. Susan’s husband checked on her progress (“Are you keeping up on your assignments?”) and gave her feedback on the mechanics of her papers. Judy’s husband met her expectations in his support “for sure.” He took the children out of the house so she could have quiet time to study. Though their children’s support was limited, it matched their expectations.

Friends also remained supportive of both women, although Susan’s best friend had gone south for the winter, and her parish priest was caring for his ill father, making him less available. Fortunately, though, she had developed a friendship with a seminary student at her church. Because Judy’s friends all lived far away, they offered moral support over the phone.

Learner Support

Susan and Judy had different experiences of their studies, even though they were enrolled in the same course, had the same instructor, and the same advisor. Susan’s computer crashed at the beginning of the course, stalling her progress for more than a month, during which she took notes in longhand.

While she said the course was “pretty much what I expected,” Judy thought the course “would be harder” and that she would have real-time interactions with her instructor and other students. She was disappointed that she did not “feel so much as a grad student.” Susan did not especially enjoy the course subject matter, which was theoretically focused, and she missed being able to “raise your hand in class and ask” questions. Neither woman had difficulty with assignment instructions, though some others in the course were confused over one particular assignment.

Susan was satisfied with interactions with her instructor, and appreciated her prompt acknowledgement of submitted assignments, grading feedback, and spiritual tone. Susan had limited contact with her advisor, however, and said that she had not heard from her “for a long time.” She had anticipated that her advisor would contact her “maybe every three to four weeks” to check on how she was doing; instead she recalled having only two e-mail exchanges with her advisor.

Judy concluded about her relationship with her instructor, “what you put into it, you’ll get out of it.” She found her advisor’s encouragement to try and finish the course helpful, noting the “personal, small community feel” at Saint Joseph's College.

Coping Strategies

Susan and Judy experienced marked shifts in their coping strategies during their course, though their coping patterns differed. Though somewhat reticent about acknowledging all the sources of conflict she faced, Susan was “learning to say ‘no’” to excessive role demands in order to protect her health. She had made new forays into

Type I coping (structural role redefinition) just before her course started, by enlisting the help of her husband with her computer setup and renegotiating her babysitting commitments to her son. During the summer, she largely abandoned her coursework to reenergize herself, a form of Type II coping (personal role redefinition).

When Susan's favored method of coping, using to-do lists, became insufficient after she added her learner role, she tried other methods. Her lack of success with studying while receiving intravenous iron treatments at a local facility, for her anemia, led her to attempts to compartmentalize her learner role within her home (Type II coping – personal role redefinition). During times when she needed to “catch up” on studying, she stayed at home while her husband and daughter went out to eat.

Judy's “50-50” relationship with her spouse was put to the test not only when she started her course but when her mother was hospitalized. During her family's medical crisis, when Judy traveled to advocate for her hospitalized mother, her husband remained at home with the children. She ceased working on her course during the episode (Type II coping – personal role redefinition).

Judy's children were her first priority, as was evident in her choice of jobs that would afford her time with her children. Additionally, over the summer, she spent time with them, fitting her course around their time together (Type II coping – personal role redefinition). She did not want to feel guilty over lost time with her children.

When her normal academic year resumed in the fall, Judy returned to her course, setting aside blocks of study time (Type II coping – personal role redefinition), with the support of her husband, who served as a backup for her with the children's needs (Type I

coping – structural role redefinition). Then she could prevent or resolve most conflicts that arose through careful scheduling (Type III coping – reactive role behavior).

Persisted to Completion

Elizabeth, Estelle, and Dee all completed their courses before the study's conclusion. Elizabeth and Dee, who both received an "A" in their courses, were enrolled in HC 205 but had different instructors and advisors. Dee was the only woman in the study who had both requested a time extension and finished her course. Estelle, who completed her NU 500 course with a "B" grade, had a different instructor and advisor from Elizabeth or Dee.

Elizabeth

Perceptions of Household and Employer Support

Elizabeth counted on her husband for support in running their household on a daily basis. When his mother suffered a complication from surgery she had a few months before Elizabeth started her course, he stepped in. "At midnight she called...I could not drive her to the hospital and stay there all night, but he did. He's really good that way. He's just really good, period." Elizabeth noted during her first interview that she did not feel a need to consult her husband on enrolling in her degree program. "[T]he day I did it I did not call him first and say, 'I'm doing this.' I just did it. And he...was *so* excited. He just thought it was great." She wasn't entirely sure how long he would view her

decision positively, however. “I don’t know how it’ll be after a few—you know—after the demands of it get to you....He seems to be in my opinion very happy.”

During her second interview, Elizabeth described her spouse as “so not needy. You know, he’s just not. And so he just totally encouraged [my studying]. And if I said, ‘I need to study tonight,’ that was fine.” When speaking about her spouse’s support during her course, Elizabeth affectionately referred to him as “my husband, my darling husband. He was terrific....And he is certainly now very supportive of me....And if I really need something done, he *always* helps me.” She related how her spouse helped her run a banquet for a large group function they were involved in. “[H]e and [my daughter] both really helped me a lot with that, setting up and getting ready....So yeah...he’s great. Never, ever does not support me. Never. He’s very good.”

Elizabeth was not sure how her teen-age daughter would respond to her taking courses, though she was trying to understand her mother’s point of view. “[S]he’s not sure that this is really necessary. I don’t know how it will be when it impacts her....She’s very generous-hearted but she seems fine with it right now.” During her course, Elizabeth’s daughter did pitch in and help around the house. “Most of the time she would—and this is what I really appreciated—she would always like, ‘Mom, do you want a snack or something to eat while you’re studying?’ Very, very—most of the time very helpful.”

She also appreciated the limited help her elderly father and handicapped brother offered her, especially their good intentions. About her father, she said, “Oh...he supports everything I do. He’s real good. He’d pay for [the tuition] if [my employer] didn’t. I mean that’s just the way he is.” Her brother “supports everything. He’s happy

for everybody. He's just got that kind of personality." In her second interview, Elizabeth said her brother was "very sweet. He...does whatever you ask him to do," such as picking up dirty dishes and transporting the laundry to and from the laundry area.

When Elizabeth talked about her supervisor's enthusiastic support, she mentioned she was a friend. "We've been friends for years. She was like, '*Go for it, girl!* That's great.' She "signed the forms right away and sent them on their way." Once her course was underway, Elizabeth commiserated with her supervisor about the challenges of caring for a parent while raising a teenager. "[S]he has a teenage daughter also, and we have a lot of similar things happen. Her mother's very sick, and so we, ah, talk a lot about the pressures on all of us."

Perceptions of Instructor and Advisor Support

Her instructor "was awesome," in Elizabeth's opinion. "She was so positive and made you think about your answers and was totally willing to discuss with you...your opinion, her opinion. Answered right away, which for me is the main thing."

She was also impressed with how promptly her advisor answered her questions. "Oh she's great....They really are so responsive there. I'm almost really so surprised by it. That you don't wait days and weeks for a response. You just don't. I think [my advisor] has never taken more than 20 minutes to answer me. And it always surpri—I'm like, 'Don't you ever go home?!'"

Estelle***Perceptions of Household and Employer Support***

Though somewhat more reticent than the other six women participants in sharing her thoughts regarding the levels of support she anticipated and received while taking her course, Estelle seemed to appreciate what her spouse and children did for her to ease the extra burden of coursework. She thought her spouse was supportive. “I was surprised. I think he’s very supportive, although he doesn’t understand I don’t think how much time it does take.” She indicated her husband had supported her decisions to go through nursing school and later re-entry for her bachelor’s degree. “And he’s very supportive this time.” When asked whether her husband had said things to indicate his support, she said, “Well, you know, after [many] years, you know.” Her husband typically helped her only when asked. “I think he misses out on the areas that need support. Has to be asked directly for help when needed.”

Her daughter, who was also in nursing school, was, according to Estelle, “very enthused” about her going back to school. “[S]he’s excited about us kind of doing this together.” Her son, on the other hand, was “indifferent” to her educational goals. “I think he’s so overwhelmed with taking care of the baby right now that, as long as he’s got babysitters, he doesn’t care what I do.” But she referred to her son as “always...my biggest cheerleader. Telling me I can do it...he’s probably the one who tells me I’m intelligent enough to get through this.” Estelle said her daughter would “do anything for me. When she’s home, she helps out. And...she’s my cheerleader....She’s very supportive.”

While she did not look to her work supervisor for emotional support, she mentioned that the organization she worked for was “flexible” in order to help employees further their education. Her supervisor thought she “was crazy” to go back to school and was “a diploma nurse who will not go back for her bachelor’s” but was “very flexible with my hours.”

When asked during her second interview whether others in her life offered her support while taking her course, she said simply, “Ah, I don’t think they ever saw a need to. So, I mean if I’d have been stressed out, I’m sure...somebody would have stepped up. But there was never a need to.” When probed further about whether others helped her with meal preparation or household chores, she reiterated, “No, no problem.”

Perceptions of Instructor and Advisor Support

Estelle perceived low support from her instructor and somewhat higher support from her advisor. When asked whether her relationship with her instructor met her expectations, she replied, “No, it didn’t meet my expectations at all. First of all, she wouldn’t answer e-mails. I had to call her on her cell phone. Second of all she never really answered your question. I mean it was very vague, very indirect answers and...not at all what you needed when you were floundering and lost. No direction at all.” Estelle did not perceive her instructor to be approachable. “I did talk to her a couple times. I didn’t think it was very informative. I thought it was kind of short and ah like I had interrupted something.” Estelle felt as though her instructor did not take enough time to explain things to her. “In about the third paper, she said—it was something—and the

tone to me was nasty... 'I've told you before about [this issue]. I'm not going to tell you again in this paper.' Well I went back to my papers, and it was never mentioned, *ever*. So she doesn't know her students at all."

In contrast, Estelle usually found her advisor helpful. "Oh, she was real sweet. She helped me whenever I needed it. Although I have an e-mail and a phone call out to her right now. I'm not getting an answer... In the past it's not been a problem." She said her advisor typically responded to her requests within "a couple of days," but complained about her instructor's turnaround time with assignments. "Well, one paper took over two weeks to get back."

Dee

Perceptions of Household and Employer Support

Dee perceived her husband to be indifferent about her decision to enroll in her degree program. "I don't think he really has an opinion one way or the other. He knows I need to do it for work, so it's okay." She mentioned that he helped with household chores, "like food shopping and whatever... tasks that previously I would really be doing a lot of," while she was taking her course. She also said that members of her household "were already helping because of my illness. So it wasn't really where they had to put any more effort into helping me because I was in school."

Dee did not think her adult children "really have much of an opinion" about her taking courses. Because her son-in-law was also back in school taking online courses, he

shared his experiences with her. “But...it’s like I’m not the only student in the house,” she said. Her children generally helped “with housework and cooking and taking some of that stuff off, too.” During her second interview, Dee said that “everybody’s like really been pitching in helping” with running the household. “And basically I only have to cook about two days a week, which isn’t bad.” Dee and her daughter, who became ill while Dee worked on her course, swapped off household chores depending “on how each one of us is feeling at the time.”

Shortly before Dee became unable to work, soon after her vacation, she reported to a new supervisor. Because of the brevity of their working relationship, Dee did not perceive much support from her. “I was only back three and a half weeks....But I did get the feeling that she was very supportive of my unit....and she really wanted to see the unit succeed....which is different from my last boss.” Dee mentioned that her new supervisor was less flexible about her work hours than her previous supervisor. “Like my last boss was, ‘Okay, if you’re not feeling good, you can leave at 3:00 or whatever.’” The two never did discuss Dee’s course. “No, we were too busy getting ready for [major work event].”

Perceptions of Instructor and Advisor Support

While Dee did not report that she perceived a high level of support from her instructor, she did not expect much from her. “I mean we’d e-mail once in a while, but we didn’t have really a relationship. Because I didn’t really need to go with her for...advice or anything, or problems with the work.” Dee was the only study participant

who had previously taken an online course, and she was the only participant who had taken a college course within a year of her participation in the study. “I really didn’t have expectations about the relationship, because I kind of always just thought that learning on your own and doing it online was more of really a self exercise. So other than someone like to guide you and grade and offer feedback, I really didn’t, for myself, see anything else that I needed in the relationship with my instructor.”

When asked about any support her instructor may have provided her while she was taking her course, Dee said, “Ah no, but like I said, I did the assignments. I got them in...she gave me the feedback. I don’t think I needed a lot of support in the course. I’m going into the final with an ‘A.’ It’s...like I said, I’m lucky I’ve always been a good student.”

Dee appeared to have felt more support from her advisor than from her instructor, though when asked about her advisor, she said, “I think everyone through Saint Joseph’s has been really nice and supportive.” She said her advisor “was really...supportive. She sent me supportive e-mails when I kept her up on, you know, on what was going on with me. And that I needed the extension and why and everything.” In her suggestions for the College, Dee pointed out, “I can’t really...see Saint Joseph’s being able to do any more than they’re already doing. I mean the advisor, the advisor’s always there for advice....[Y]ou can e-mail your instructor if you need to find out things. Everyone’s been very pleasant.”

Elizabeth, Estelle, and Dee Pre-Course

All three women lived in intergenerational family units. Elizabeth and Estelle were in their mid to late forties; Dee in her early fifties. Estelle and Dee were grandmothers, each helping to raise grandsons on a daily basis. Dee's daughter, son-in-law, and grandson lived with her, but Estelle's son, a custodial father, did not live with his mother. However, Estelle cared for her grandson every afternoon and evening. Elizabeth's father and brother with special needs were both part of her household, along with her husband and high-school age daughter.

Elizabeth and Dee were both enrolled in HC 205 but had different instructors and advisors. Both women considered themselves to be good students, and both received an "A" grade, although Dee requested a time extension in order to finish her course. Dee was the most confident of the two going into her course. Elizabeth, who enrolled in the summer but with a fall deferral start date, was "nervous" and bought her textbooks ahead of time to review before her course started. Estelle, who was enrolled in NU 500, completed her course on time, with a "B+" grade. She had misgivings about her course's independent study format soon after enrolling. She had the same instructor and advisor as Susan, Judy, and Amy, the other study participants enrolled in NU 500. Elizabeth and Estelle had most recently taken a college course in the 1990s. Dee, the only woman in the study with previous online education experience, completed an online course at another institution approximately one month before enrolling at Saint Joseph's College. Elizabeth and Dee had no concerns about technical issues of taking online courses. Elizabeth used a computer extensively in her work, and Dee had recently completed an

online course. Estelle, whose computer had crashed just before her course started, was anxious about whether she would experience additional technical problems.

All three women worked in the healthcare field. Estelle worked half time in order to help raise her grandson. Elizabeth worked from home, processing insurance claims. Her husband, a business manager, also had an office in their home. Dee was the director of a hospital unit until illness forced her to leave her position shortly after she began her course.

Each of these three women participated in activities outside of work. Elizabeth, whose brother was handicapped, attended weekly group meetings with him. Dee had an exercise/personal training regime once a week. Estelle was a member of a crafts group that met monthly.

Work Support

While Elizabeth and Estelle had been thinking about pursuing a master's degree for a long time, Dee's decision to enroll was precipitated by a mandate from her employer to gain the degree. She had a new supervisor whom she did not know very well. Elizabeth's supervisor was enthusiastically supportive of her goal and "signed the forms right away" for tuition assistance. Estelle, whose back problems prevented her from returning to bedside nursing, wanted to keep career options open. Her organization encouraged its employees to further their education and had proven flexible in the past when she needed to adjust her schedule to care for her grandson. However, her supervisor, a diploma nurse, thought she was "crazy" to pursue a master's degree.

Family and Social Support

Families of these three women expressed varying levels of support for their pursuit of a degree. Elizabeth's husband was "so excited" when she told him she had signed up for her first course. She thought he would "be the best one" in her support network. She said her brother and father supported "everything" she did and would go along with her educational plans. Estelle said her husband "has always supported" her educational goals, ever since nursing school when they were newlyweds, although she was surprised at his favorable reaction. She wasn't sure he realized "how much time it does take" but thought he would help with housework and errands, if she asked him directly. Dee felt that her spouse had no opinion "one way or the other" about her enrollment, but he understood she needed the degree for work, "so it's okay." She felt he would pick up household tasks, such as food shopping, that she normally performed.

Although their children were supportive, the women anticipated varying levels of help from them. Elizabeth thought that her teenage daughter would continue to help with some meal preparation and other light household tasks. Dee's son-in-law, who was also in school, was someone she could talk with about school-related matters. Her daughter and son-in-law, who both lived with her, routinely helped with cooking and housework. Estelle's son, though her "biggest cheerleader," was "pretty overwhelmed" with his responsibilities as a single father. Her daughter was away at college, in nursing school, but was enthused about her mother's educational plans.

Friends of these three women differed in their views about their enrollment decision. Elizabeth's friends thought what she was doing was "really great," partly

because, as Elizabeth said, it “won’t really affect their lives.” Estelle’s closest friend, who had a high school education, held the view that “if it fulfills you, then she’s all for it” and would do “anything” Estelle needed, in order to help her. None of her crafts group members were supportive, however, as Estelle’s course would take time away from them. Some of Dee’s friends at work had recently finished their degrees and were supportive of her decision to work toward her degree. Her girlfriend was also finishing her advanced degree. As Dee said, “everybody’s in the same boat,” and she could count on her social contacts to provide her with emotional support.

Elizabeth, Estelle, and Dee During Course

After these three women started their courses, their lives unfolded very differently. Estelle’s daily routine remained virtually the same as before her course, and she experienced no major life changing events. In contrast, Elizabeth gained and was relieved of family responsibilities. Elizabeth’s father was hospitalized for surgery, but her daughter got her driver’s license, so she could transport herself to and from school. Dee faced major challenges for herself and her family. Dee suffered a debilitating illness and lost her position at the hospital where she worked. Her daughter’s health declined, and her son lost his job.

Work Support

Estelle's course "didn't affect" her work role, and she had no need to adjust her schedule to accommodate her studies. She did not mention any specific support for her studies from her supervisor or work colleagues. Elizabeth, who worked from home, said she did not need anything from her employer while taking her course other than processing her tuition assistance forms. However, she talked with work colleagues "about the pressures on all of us" and things that were happening in their lives. Before the loss of her position, Dee had a new supervisor who was more supportive of her hospital unit than her previous supervisor, but more demanding and less flexible.

Family and Social Support

Family and friends of these three women provided the support these new online learners had anticipated. Elizabeth's husband helped with dinner and church commitments. He said to Elizabeth, "If you need to study, that's fine." Her daughter helped around the house and drove Elizabeth's brother to group functions. Her best friends understood that she and her husband could not socialize as they had before her course. Elizabeth also drew on the support of her church community who offered their prayers and occasionally brought her food.

Estelle did not think her family and friends "ever saw a need to" help her, since she had not asked them. In her view, "there was never a need" for her friends to intervene.

The members of Dee's extended family household continued to function interdependently, as they had before she started her course. Her husband and son-in-law did most of the food shopping and cooking. Her daughter, whose health declined after my first interview with Dee, helped when she could, swapping household chores with her, depending "on how each one of us is feeling...." Dee's girlfriend, who was pursuing her own graduate degree, offered emotional support.

Learner Support

Elizabeth and Dee, who were enrolled in the same course, HC 205, but with different instructors and advisors, had very positive first-course experiences. Both women felt "very prepared" to start their course. Both thought the course expectations were expressed "clearly," and neither woman had any academic or technical difficulties, earning "A" grades. While Elizabeth stressed the quality of interactions she had with her instructor and advisor surpassed her expectations, those relationships were less important for Dee. She "didn't really have expectations about the relationship" with her instructor, because she was prepared to do her coursework on her own. Our second interview was abbreviated out of respect for her health, and I did not ask about her experience with her advisor.

In contrast, Estelle, who was enrolled in NU 500, was dissatisfied with her first course and was planning to decide whether to continue in her program at Saint Joseph's College based on her experience in her second course. Estelle found the independent study and self-paced format of the course problematic. She said the course was "totally

different than what I expected,” with no online lectures and very little input from the instructor.

For Estelle, the course expectations were “very vague,” and she felt “lost.” She preferred contacting her instructor via e-mail, but her instructor preferred communicating by cell phone, which was off-putting to Estelle. She thought her instructor missed the point of some of her questions and took longer to grade and return papers than she expected. When she received her instructor’s feedback on some of her papers, she disagreed with it, even though she “struggled with” writing them. On the other hand, she found her advisor responsive, helpful, and prompt. “Oh she was real sweet,” she remarked.

Coping Strategies

Both Elizabeth and Dee expanded their coping behavior repertoires after starting their course; namely, by adding Type II coping (personal role redefinition) in response to the added pressures they faced from their new learner role and events that upset their daily routine. Both women came to the realization that they could not do it all; that is, perform the expectations of all their life roles as they had prior to starting their course.

Estelle’s daily life remained largely intact after starting her course. She reduced her participation in her crafting group (Type II coping – personal role redefinition) and scheduled her studies around her grandson’s care (Type III coping – reactive role behavior). She attempted to resolve the role strain she encountered in her new learner

role by seeking the assistance of her instructor (Type I coping – structural role redefinition) but was frustrated by the results of her efforts.

Summary

For all seven women in the study, Type III coping (reactive role behavior), cited in the study's literature review as the type most often used by women facing role strain and conflict (Beutell & Greenhaus, 1983), was a necessary but insufficient coping strategy to achieve role integration. It was the only coping type used by all seven women, both before and during their courses. The two women who were withdrawn from their course, Amy and Joyce, both used Type III coping (reactive role behavior) almost exclusively before starting their course. Joyce continued, primarily, with that strategy during her course. Amy could not be reached for a second interview to assess her course experience.

Susan and Judy, who had each requested a time extension and were making satisfactory academic progress in their course, and Dee, who had completed her course within an extended timeframe, demonstrated the importance of Type I coping (structural role redefinition) within the learner role. Having the option to redefine the time expectation for their course enabled them to persist.

The women who exercised all three coping behavior types during their courses, even those who had used only two types previously, had either finished their course or were making satisfactory progress at the study's conclusion. This evidence partially supports the notion that coping Type II (personal role redefinition) and Type III (reactive role behavior), without Type I (structural role redefinition), may be inadequate long-term solutions to role strain and conflict (Hall, 1972). This finding also supports the claim that combining coping behavior types is more effective in resolving role conflict than reliance on one type alone (Hall, 1972). While, as previous researchers have noted, adult distance learners' successful integration of the learner role may result from "renegotiation of previously accepted social positions and status" (Kember, 1995, p. 88)—Type I coping (structural role redefinition)—the women in this study used other strategies as well. Perhaps most importantly, this finding strongly suggests that a woman can learn to expand her coping behavior repertoire, even while she is under stress, within the timeframe of a single course.

The study findings suggest that inter-role conflict, difficulty in meeting the conflicting expectations of two or more roles simultaneously, assessed simply in terms of numbers of roles or intensity of demands, may not be a reliable predictor of withdrawal from a course. Elizabeth, who had arguably the highest potential for role conflict among all seven participants, was the most successful of the group. She completed her first course on time with an "A-" grade. Though she subsequently experienced major medical events within her extended family, she continued her studies, earning an "A" in her second course, after requesting a time extension. At the study's conclusion, she was embarked on her third course, making satisfactory academic progress, while increasing

the size of her already large household. This finding supports an “expansionist” view of role strain and conflict (Marks, 1977), in which an individual’s time and resources are flexible and can accommodate the taking of multiple roles. In this view, it is not the number of roles held per se but the combination of roles held and available supports (Epstein, 1986) which determine the level of role strain and conflict experienced.

Not only was Elizabeth a good student, but she perceived the most extensive and positive support of the seven participants, from across her work, family/social, and school milieus. In contrast, neither Amy nor Joyce, who withdrew from their courses, perceived support from their spouses or work supervisors. Perceived support from their children and friends was mixed. While Joyce had a positive, though limited exchange with her instructor, she was frustrated by an apparent communication gap with her advisor. This finding lends credence to the claim that role strain and conflict may result from interactions among intrapersonal factors, objective demands of roles, and “the situational constraints or resources that provide the context in which roles are enacted” (O’Neil & Greenberger, 1994b, p. 118). These findings support assertions by Kasworm and Blowers (1994) that positive relationships with faculty, along with individualized advising, affect the success of adult learners.

These findings also provide evidence of the importance of support from family, friends, and supervisors in reducing role conflict and increasing the likelihood of an adult learner’s success (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Kember, 1995; Kramarae, 2001; O’Neil & Greenberger, 1994a). In a particularly poignant example of family support, Dee’s extended family household members quickly adjusted to her devastating illness. Dee requested a time extension in order to complete her course, earning an “A” grade. With

her solid academic skills and the help of her extended family, including her ill daughter, she was able to use the extra time she had after her job loss to keep working on her course, even though her level of functioning was drastically reduced.

Some evidence, though inconclusive, emerged from the study findings in favor of the supposition in the study's conceptual framework, that learner role-work role congruence (a work role condition) may be a factor in the level of role conflict experienced by a new online learner and thus, her persistence. Elizabeth's degree program, for example, was directly related to her daily work and wholeheartedly backed by her supervisor. In contrast, Joyce viewed furthering her education as a personal growth opportunity. She did not need her degree for her job and obtained a new position without it after enrolling in her course. She was between jobs when she enrolled, and she had not discussed her educational plans with her previous supervisor or with her new supervisor before she withdrew. But Dee, whose degree was mandated by her employer, persisted in her course even after her major illness resulted in the loss of her position, making her career plans uncertain.

Findings from this study also suggest that intra-role strain; that is, difficulty in meeting the expectations of a single role, in and of itself, does not necessarily prevent an adult woman learner from satisfactorily completing her first course. Estelle struggled with her written assignments and had an unsatisfactory experience with her instructor, although she found her advisor helpful. Perhaps her role strain was offset by her use of coping strategies and low levels of role conflict. Estelle was one of only two women in the study who reported exercising all three types of coping behavior before and during

her course. She also experienced relatively low levels of role conflict both before and during her course.

Dee, the only woman in the study who had previous experience taking an online course, reported the lowest level of intra-role strain of all seven participants. Nearly all of the other women described one or more instances in which they needed to learn or adjust to the expectations of their new learner role, whether by surmounting APA formatting guidelines or technical problems, or by deducing the roles of their instructors or advisors. This finding supports the notion that first-time online learners undergo a role adjustment process (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2004) in their new learner role.

Occasionally, the expectations some participants had for their instructors or advisors were incongruent with actual behaviors of those individuals. This finding strengthens previous claims of discrepancies between students' and faculty's conceptions of their respective roles (Lennard et al., n.d.). Such incongruence between expectations and actual behavior has been advanced by role theory researchers as a form of intra-role strain (Secord & Backman, 1946); a form which, according to the study's conceptual framework, may deter persistence.

That Estelle's plan to continue in her degree program would rest on her second course experience, given that her first was unsatisfactory, emphasized the importance of early course experiences. Estelle's example indicates that a learner's experience in her first one or two courses may affect her persistence in her degree program.

The seven women in this study reported varying needs and desires for social interaction with their instructors, advisors, and peers. Elizabeth, for example, appreciated that she could get to know her instructor personally. In contrast, Dee did not express

such sentiments but saw the role of her instructor as a primarily functional one. This finding supports the view that social interaction with an instructor or peers may be less important than specific assistance, for some adult women learners (Coulter, 1989).

Based on the study finding that Type III coping (reactive role behavior) was a necessary but insufficient strategy for women attempting to integrate the online learner role into their lives, institutions who support adult women must look beyond well-intentioned prescriptions for time management as keys to their success in online learning. Elizabeth and the other study participants demonstrated that it is not necessarily the degree of potential role strain and conflict but how adeptly a woman copes with role strain and conflict in her life that determines whether she is able to persist in her studies. Although it is impossible to infer from the study data whether Joyce or Amy, who withdrew from their courses, would have persisted if the College could have helped them cope with the challenges they faced, that question remains compelling.

Elizabeth was the only woman in the study who reported that her interactions with both her instructor and advisor surpassed her expectations. More frequent, positive contact between new women online learners and their instructors and advisors may provide an extra level of support that can help these new learners persist in their first courses of study.

Amy and Joyce, who withdrew from their courses, perceived some of the lowest levels of support, among the participants, from their work environments. Amy perceived the lowest level of familial support, of all seven participants, for her educational goals. This finding provides compelling evidence for institutions of higher learning, who reach out to the families of traditional-aged, residential students through various types of

mailings and other activities, to practice similar low-cost outreach efforts to engage the families and employers of their adult women online learners, as proposed by others (Simpson, 2003).

Finally, the magnitude of many challenges that these seven women faced, ranging from lack of family support to disabling illness, was no less a threat to their persistence than such issues would be for on-campus students. Institutions serving adult women online learners must, as part of any systematic retention effort, take their challenges seriously and investigate ways to direct these learners to appropriate support services, such as online counseling.

Table 5.1 contains a summary of supports and hindrances to academic progress reported by the seven study participants, grouped by enrollment outcome. The women who completed their courses by the study's conclusion routinely received instrumental support from their spouses and/or other family members in the daily functioning of their households. This finding suggests that ongoing instrumental support from immediate family members may be more important for a woman's academic progress than emotional support alone. The women who completed their courses by the end of the study also reported specific instrumental supports from their employers, such as flexible work hours and employer-paid tuition. The same women reported, on the whole, the most positive relationships with their instructors and advisors in terms of the responsiveness and proactive behaviors of those individuals. Instrumental supports in her home, work, and school environments may tip the scales in favor of an adult woman's academic progress in her first course of study.

Table 5.1

Table 5.1: Supports and Hindrances to First-course Completion

	Withdrawn		Extended with Progress		Completed	
	Supports	Hindrances	Supports	Hindrances	Supports	Hindrances
Family	Emotional support from adult children, sibling. Spouse listened.	Spouse taciturn or indifferent. Limited household help. Competitive mother. Unsupportive siblings.	Spouse set up computer. Spouse negotiated household tasks, childrearing. Emotional support from adult children. Parent offered loan. Spouse proofread papers.	Spouse concerned about financing. Primary caregiver for ill parent.	Spouse unconditionally enthusiastic or accepting. Spouse helped routinely with household. Children helped routinely with household.	None
Work	None	Supervisor absent or unaware of enrollment	State may mandate degree. Scholarship info, advice from supervisor. Colleagues wrote references.	Inflexible hours.	Employer mandated degree. Employer paid tuition. Flexible work hours and arrangements.	New supervisor unaware of enrollment.
School	None	Advisor communication breakdown. Instructor interaction limited.	Responsive instructor. Helpful instructor feedback. Help with APA format. Encouragement from advisor.	Unstructured instructor interaction. Weak relationship with instructor. Insufficient advisor communication.	Responsive instructor. Proactive/responsive advisor.	Unresponsive/unapproachable instructor.

Chapter 6

Summary and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the process by which degree-seeking adult women online learners at the study site tried to integrate their academic pursuit into their life context through their first course of study. The study focused on how these adult learners faced the challenge of adding the online learner role, with its concomitant expectations, to a pre-existing constellation of other life role expectations.

Nationally, enrollments in credit-granting distance education courses increased four fold between 1994-95 and 2000-2001, to nearly three million (U. S. Department of Education, 1999, 2003). Adult women are the primary users of online education in North America, with several studies reporting their participation rate ranging from 60 to 80 percent of enrollments at various institutions (Thompson, 1998). Yet women face significant barriers, not usually experienced by men to the same degree, in pursuing their academic goals (Kramarae, 2001). For example, women with children are less likely than their male counterparts to have a quiet room available, without interruptions, for studying (von Prümmer, 2000).

Becoming an adult learner involves a role learning process (Kasworm & Blowers, 1994; Schlossberg, Lynch & Chickering, 1989), and adults who are trying to learn at a distance for the first time “often feel overwhelmed by the new way of learning and fail to adjust themselves in the new environment” (Chyung, Winiecki, & Fenner, 1998, p. 98).

This study was intended to help faculty, staff, and program planners at Saint Joseph's College of Maine provide more effective support and interventions for its distance learner population, comprised largely of adult women.

Research Questions

The study findings and conclusions provided answers to the stated research questions, which were, “What is the process by which adult women learners incorporate the online learner role into their lives?” as the main question; and “Which factors contribute to the ways in which these women negotiate the strain and conflict of adding the online learner role?” as a sub-question.

Conceptual Framework

Role theory provided the theoretical foundation for this study's conceptual framework. The concept of role is particularly salient for adult women taking the online learner role, in conjunction with all the expectations of their other life roles. A role is the set of behaviors expected of an occupant of a social position, such as online learner.

When an adult woman takes her new online learner role, upon enrollment in her first course, she may be experiencing one or more forms of “role conflict” in her life due to her multiple work, family, and social roles. The terms “role conflict” and “role strain” have been used by sociologists and social psychologists to refer to “difficulty in conforming to role expectations” (Secord & Backman, 1964, p. 468). Though the two

terms have been used interchangeably, they have separate and distinct connotations. Role conflict describes the felt difficulty of meeting the conflicting expectations of two or more roles simultaneously. Strain within a role may result when there is a poor fit between a person and role expectations, when expectations for fulfilling the role are unclear, or when the person in the role finds that role partners do not meet their own expectations. In this study, role *strain* pertained to the experience of *intra-role* difficulty with the added, learner role

At enrollment, a new online learner may experience role conflict between her work and family role obligations, which may be influenced by the supports she receives at work and at home. As a first-time online learner, she must also adjust to her new online learner role (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2004). She may experience intra-role strain if she is inadequately prepared to meet the expectations for her new role; or if expectations for the role are unclear; or if the behavior of role partners, such as instructors and advisors, run counter to her expectations (Secord & Backman, 1964).

The ways in which a new adult woman online learner negotiates the strain and conflict of adding her learner role may depend partly on the coping strategies she uses. Three major coping strategies, Type I (structural role redefinition), Type II (personal role redefinition), and Type III (reactive role behavior) (Hall, 1972), may not have equal merit as solutions to role strain and conflict, over time. Type I coping behavior, which involves structural role redefinition, is exhibited by a woman who negotiates expectations for one or more of her roles with role partners. That is, the role is mutually redefined, and responsibilities are adjusted or shared. In Type II coping (personal role redefinition), a woman alters her own perceptions of a role's expectations. For example, she may decide

that studying every night is not feasible, so she adjusts her study schedule to twice per week. In the third type of coping (Type III—reactive role behavior), a woman tries to fit the extra demands of the learner role in with or on top of her other role demands, without making adjustments to any of her roles.

The interplay of factors such as role conflict, role strain, and coping during an adult woman online learner's course experience may influence her enrollment outcome, resulting in persisting to completion (integration having been achieved); course time extension; or withdrawal.

According to the study's conceptual framework, her persistence to course completion would indicate that she has integrated the learner role during her first course; that is, she has managed to perform the expectations of the learner role as well as meet the expectations of her other life roles.

Methods

This exploratory study employed orientational and realist approaches. "Orientational qualitative inquiry begins with an explicit theoretical or ideological perspective" (Patton, 1990, p. 86); in this instance, role theory. The researcher's perspective was that of a social psychologist who understands that individuals act according to the role expectations that they perceive others hold for them and that they hold for themselves. When challenges in life arise, an individual may experience difficulty when her own and others' expectations are incongruent, compete with one another; or when the individual is ill-equipped to perform the expectations of a role.

In the realist view (Robson, 2002), individuals are subject to social structures such as role expectations, but can also ignore them or try to change them. For example, a woman who feels compelled not to let laundry accumulate longer than two days, either because of her own self-expectations as a partner or mother or because of expectations of her held by others in her household, may decide to ignore those expectations and wait three or four days to do the laundry. Or, she may ask another member of her household to do laundry. Thus, the realist approach accounts for subjectivity and human agency.

The study was conducted through the Division of Graduate and Professional studies (GPS) at Saint Joseph's College of Maine, a small accredited liberal arts Catholic-affiliated school with signature programs in health care. The College's GPS distance education division enrollment, prior to the study's conclusion, exceeded 4,000 students, representing most of the 50 United States and many foreign countries. Most of the students (84 percent) were women, the majority of whom were between the ages of 35 and 54. Seventy-nine percent of students worked full time, and 56 percent had one or more children at home. Over 50 percent had household incomes in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range.

Much of the school's success with its distance education programming had been attributed to its faculty-directed independent study model and eight full-time student advisors, who maintained contact by phone and e-mail with individual students throughout their programs of study. Nearly all of the College faculty were adjunct.

Online courses at Saint Joseph's College were delivered via the World Wide Web through a course management system called WebCT, which students used to retrieve course materials and connect with their instructors and other students via course

discussion boards. Study participants were enrolled in one of two entry-point courses for two different degree programs. HC 205 American Health Care Systems (renamed HA 205 during the study), was the point of entry for the College's most popular program, the Bachelor of Science in Health Administration. A second course, NU 500, Conceptual Bases for Nursing, was the first-in course for the College's Master of Science in Nursing program.

Seven U. S. adult women between the ages of 35 and 56, with a spouse/partner and at least one child (of any age, whether living at home or not), were solicited from new enrollees as they took the online learner role. Participants were purposefully selected on the basis of their likelihood of manifesting role strain and role conflict constructs, through their work, partner/spouse, employee, and parent roles, as well as having been out of school for a year or more. One participant, Dee, was selected as a disconfirming example for the study. She was the only woman who had previously taken an online course and who had taken a college course within a year of her participation in the study. The additional information she provided about her previous online course experience in relation to her course at Saint Joseph's College was helpful in and of itself but also by informing the experiences of the other women. Dee's expectations of her course experience were more congruent with her actual experience than for some of the other participants, such as Estelle or Judy

During each intake phone call, according to explicit Human Participants protocols, each prospective participant was screened to assess her appropriateness for the study and her willingness to participate. No potential candidate declined to participate during her recruitment or intake phone call. However, two potential candidates could not

be reached to schedule their first interview after their intake phone call, and they were withdrawn from the sampling pool.

Two structured, open-ended, tape recorded interviews were conducted with each participant, except for one, who could not be reached for her second interview. The first interview was conducted as soon as possible after enrollment. A second telephone interview was conducted with each participant upon one of three conditions: at course completion; upon requesting a time extension; or upon withdrawal. Data collection began in June 2005, when the first interview was conducted. Data collection ended 16 months later, in October 2006, with the completion of the final second interview.

After the written transcript for each interview was produced, data reduction was achieved through coding, according to concepts identified in the study's conceptual framework, relevant sections of each transcript to a matrix display. (The matrix ultimately contained an overview of each woman's information, side-by-side with the others.)

From the matrix display, interview transcripts, and researcher memos composed at the time of each interview, a case narrative for each participant, was crafted. The goal at that stage of analysis was to reveal, in each participant's own words as much as possible, the realities of her situation, focused by the study's conceptual framework. Cross-case analysis began, and continued, once the fourth and remaining case narratives were written.

Findings Summary

The rich description provided by the individual profiles in the study findings afforded an in-depth exploration into the individual life-worlds (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973) of seven adult women online learners, over a period of several months. The women in the study differed in the extent to which they were able to master or transform particular realities of their life-world—namely, role strain and conflict—in order to achieve their goal of completing the first course in their online degree program. The type and severity of role strain or conflict experienced by these women varied, as did the supports available to them and the coping strategies they employed before and during their course. Enrollment for the seven participants resulted in one of three outcomes: persistence to completion (integration); course time extension; or course withdrawal.

Indeed, the variety across these women's life contexts and experiences as a group was striking. There were some common threads; most relied on the support of others (generally family, friends, and work colleagues, as well as their instructors and advisors) to achieve their educational goals. But the specific individuals within their support networks varied, along with the quantity and quality of support they perceived and received from those individuals. Several of the women were grandmothers, helping to raise their grandchildren. Three lived in extended family, intergenerational households.

Equally striking, however, were the commonalities among the women who shared similar results regarding their enrollment. A brief discussion of findings by participants' enrollment statuses follows.

Withdrew

The two women who were withdrawn from their course, Amy and Joyce, both used Type III coping (reactive role behavior) almost exclusively before starting their course. Joyce continued with that strategy during her course. Amy could not be reached for a second interview to assess her course experience.

Neither of these women had measurable support from her spouse or work supervisor. Joyce, who was unemployed during most of her course enrollment, held a wait-and-see view of her husband's support for her academic pursuit. She was not sure his acceptance of her plans would hold beyond her initial coursework. She did not mention, despite probing, any forms of support he offered her while she grappled with her first course. Amy, whose supervisor did not yet know of her enrollment decision, described her husband's attitude about her enrollment as "pretty indifferent."

Support for these women from other family members was mixed. Amy said that her daughters would go along with her enrollment decision "as long as it doesn't interfere with what they're doing." It seemed clear to her that she would not receive any support from her brothers or mother. Joyce, however, reported that her two daughters were available to help her, and her younger daughter tried to help her get organized for studying.

While Joyce had a positive, though limited exchange with her instructor, she was frustrated by an apparent communication gap with her advisor. She experienced a high degree of learner role strain, as she was unable to absorb the course reading assignments or carve out sufficient study time for herself.

Extended Time

Susan and Judy, who had requested a time extension and were making satisfactory academic progress in their course, exhibited different coping patterns before their course, but similar patterns during their course. Both women ultimately used all three types of coping (Type I, Type II, and Type III) during their course.

These two women received emotional and instrumental support from their work supervisors and spouses, plus moral support from their parents, children, and friends. Judy emphasized her “50-50” relationship with her husband and believed she received more support from him than many of her friends would from their spouses were they to enroll in courses. She believed her children, though young, would not really object to her studies because she had solid support from her husband “as backup.” Though she did not think she would have much “leeway” at work around her course, Judy felt the enthusiastic support of her colleagues and dean. Once Susan was able to ease her husband’s initial financial worries about educational expenses, she felt more strongly supported by him. Susan perceived her supervisor’s door was “always open,” and she had additional support from her church community. Her children provided her with moral support.

The interactions Susan and Judy had with their instructors and advisors were both positive and negative; that is, positive with one (Susan with her instructor, Judy with her advisor), and negative with the other (Susan with her advisor, Judy with her instructor).

Persisted to Completion

Three women in the study—Elizabeth, Estelle, and Dee—successfully integrated the learner role in order to complete the first course in their degree programs. Interestingly, they were the three study participants who lived in intergenerational households.

These three women perceived varying levels of household, employer, and learner support. Though Elizabeth had, potentially, the highest risk for inter-role conflicts because of the needs of her extended family members, she also enjoyed the most unequivocal emotional and instrumental support across her support network of all seven study participants. The support she anticipated (during her first interview) from her husband, daughter, father, brother, and supervisor did in fact materialize while she was taking her course. Elizabeth also reported that her interactions with both her instructor and advisor, especially their prompt answers to her questions, surpassed her expectations. Elizabeth remained positive in her outlook despite several medical crises that erupted not only while she was taking her first course, but during her second and third courses as well. At the study's conclusion, Elizabeth's father-in-law, who was receiving hospice care, and her mother-in-law had recently moved in and become part of her extended family household as she continued her studies.

Though Estelle reported only minimal help from her spouse and children, she did not appear to need much from them. She said if she had “been stressed out, I’m sure...somebody would have stepped up. But there was never a need to.” Though her immediate supervisor, a diploma nurse, thought she was “crazy” to pursue a master’s

degree, Estelle enjoyed somewhat flexible hours at work. She reported that her daughter, who was also in nursing school and was very interested in her mother's online course, helped her around the house when she was home from college.

Estelle was dissatisfied with her course and interactions with her instructor, whom she perceived as unavailable and not as helpful as she would have liked. In contrast, she found her advisor pleasant and helpful.

Dee thought that, since her degree was mandated by her employer, her husband accepted her enrollment decision. From her perspective, however, Dee's husband and two adult children had no strong feelings one way or the other about her coursework. She said that since her son was also in school, studying became a normal part of the daily routine in their house. Dee sometimes worked on her course while babysitting her grandson, who occupied himself with projects she would give to him. Even before she became too ill to work or do much around the house, Dee said her husband, son-in-law, and daughter all helped with household tasks.

While Dee did not interact much with her instructor or advisor, she did not expect much from them, since she assumed her online course would be "more of really a self exercise." She looked to her instructor primarily for feedback on her assignments and to her advisor for administrative support, such as granting her a time extension for her course.

The women who completed their courses by the study's conclusion routinely received instrumental support from their spouses and/or other family members in the daily functioning of their households. This finding suggests that ongoing instrumental support from immediate family members may be more important for a woman's

academic progress than emotional support alone. The women who completed their courses by the end of the study also reported specific instrumental supports from their employers, such as flexible work hours and employer-paid tuition. The same women reported, on the whole, the most positive relationships with their instructors and advisors in terms of the responsiveness and proactive behaviors of those individuals. Instrumental supports in her home, work, and school environments may tip the scales in favor of an adult woman's academic progress in her first course of study.

Although the three women who successfully integrated the learner role ultimately used all three types of coping behavior during their course, Elizabeth and Dee expanded their prior coping behavior repertoires by adding Type II coping (personal role redefinition) as they incorporated the learner role into their lives. They each realized they could not, in Dee's words, "do it all anymore." Elizabeth's schedule was simply too full to add her learner role without making adjustments, and Dee was forced to reconceptualize what she could do on a daily basis when she fell ill. Both women also applied Type I coping (structural role redefinition) more strenuously during their courses than before enrolling, re-negotiating with role partners in her household the expectations of their familial roles.

Elizabeth and Dee perceived low levels of intra-role strain regarding their learner role. They self-identified as good students, and Dee had previously taken an online course, the only woman in the study to have done so. Both women were satisfied with the interactions they had with their instructor and advisor, and Elizabeth especially so.

Even though Estelle experienced a relatively high level of intra-role strain in her learner role, she was able to offset that added pressure partly because of her low

incidence of role conflict. Before enrolling in her course, she had established a workable daily routine for herself with family members. This routine did not change perceptibly during her course, and she was able to carve out the time and space she needed to focus on her studies.

For all seven women, Type III coping (reactive role behavior), cited in the study's literature review as arguably the type most often used by women facing role strain and conflict, was a necessary but insufficient coping strategy to achieve role integration. The women who exercised all three coping behavior types during their course experience had either finished their course or were making satisfactory progress at the study's conclusion. The two women who reported using only one coping strategy—Type III coping (reactive role behavior)—withdrew from their course.

Implications for Future Research

Further research is needed to better understand how role strain and conflict are connected to persistence. While this study sheds light on conditions which may affect role strain and conflict, no assumptions regarding causality can be made. Working propositions tested with larger samples, such as women with young children, women who are grandmothers, and women with particular health statuses may lead to generalizable findings.

How or whether individual characteristics, such as one's perceived ability to role negotiate (Miller, Johnson, Hart, & Peterson, 1999), affect one's ability to ameliorate role strain and conflict through particular coping behaviors or other mechanisms is a subject

for future study. The women in this study all demonstrated how they attempted to resolve conflicts when they arose, yet the study reveals little about their innate abilities or particular stress responses.

Possible relationships between role strain and coping and factors believed to affect student role adjustment, such as student role commitment and self-good student role incongruence (Chartrand, 1990), were not assessed in this study. Additional research may also shed light on whether conation (striving), as applied to learner involvement and goal setting in a distance education environment (Atman, 1987), is related to coping style or persistence.

Future studies should explore the relationship between role integration and internalization of the learner role. Internalization may be a psychological dimension of integration. Internalization has been described as a socialization process, during which norms, a form of expectations, are adopted by an individual through identification and interaction with other members of the groups to which he or she belongs (Secord & Backman, 1964). Daniel and Marquis (1983) maintained that students will do better in their studies if they can accept and internalize the learner role as part of their adult lives and that counseling support services ought to be part of the means to that end. Knowles (1984) espoused a similar view:

The dominant thrust of society's expectation and equally of his [sic] [adult learner's] self expectations is that for an adult the learning role is not a major element in his repertoire of living. Thus, both society and the adult view himself as a non-learner. Our theory is that this failure to internalize the learner role as a central feature of the self is a substantial restraint in the adult's realization of his learning potential. Or more positively stated, if and when an adult thinks that studying, learning, and the intellectual adventure is as much a part of life as his occupation and obligation to this

family, he will be much more likely to achieve a higher level of intellectual performance. (Knowles, p. 167)

The nature of the open-ended interviews used in this study allowed some issues that were not in the original framework to emerge as important factors in the persistence of several women in this study. Two examples include health status of the adult women learners or members of their families and needs of extended family members. Health status issues alone did not prevent the women in this study, affected by them, from completing their course or making satisfactory academic progress. Support from family members, flexible work requirements, and course time extensions were additional factors that helped these women cope with changes in health status. These health and extended family issues should be more fully explored in future research.

The degree to which ethnic and cultural norms may have influenced the perceptions and efforts of these women as they attempted to integrate their new learner role into their lives was not addressed in this study. Information regarding each woman's ethnicity was not collected. Additional research is needed to examine the interaction of cultural and institutional normative pressures with an individual's self-efficacy in resolving role strain and conflict.

Implications for Practice at Saint Joseph's College

Careful analysis of the study data provided touchpoints for best practice within the College's Division of Graduate and Professional Studies, to supplement current efforts to increase academic quality, student satisfaction, and retention. Opportunities for improvement exist both during the enrollment process and after new learners begin their

first course. The study findings make clear that while ad hoc improvements could be effective, they are partial solutions to a complex problem requiring systematic review.

Evidence from the study findings presents a composite profile of an at-risk, first-time, adult woman online learner. Her first course in her degree program is not directly related to her job or career goal; or, she does not have a well-defined educational goal. She has a high incidence of role conflict at enrollment, coupled with a limited coping behavior repertoire and low levels of emotional and instrumental support from significant others in her life. During her course experience, her incidence of role conflict remains high, and her coping effectiveness and support levels remain low. She manifests high intra-role strain within the learner role due to inadequate preparation for the technological and academic demands of her course. Support from her instructor and advisor runs counter to her expectations.

Role Conflict and Coping

The study findings suggest that an adult woman's pre-existing sources and ameliorators of role conflict at enrollment, as well as her coping patterns, may affect her ability to integrate the learner role into the rest of her life-world. Assessment of these factors during the enrollment process could alert new students and their advisors of potential barriers to persistence, against which focused interventions could be applied.

While the Division's open admission policy precludes screening out potential applicants on the basis of the study findings or assessments developed from them, such assessment tools could be used effectively as self-selection and support mechanisms.

Voluntary self-assessment by applicants may enable them to defer enrollment until they are in a better position to take on the learner role. Or, once individuals are enrolled, advisors could use such assessments to better support them, either through direct interventions or by referring them to online orientations and discussion groups.

Although identification of likely role conflicts at the time of enrollment may be illuminating, the actual life experiences of these seven women before and during their course demonstrate that it is not possible to anticipate every life contingency. Adult women online learners who receive additional, targeted support and guidance from their advisors or instructors may be better able to cope when unexpected events occur in their lives. Materials developed specifically for and by advisors and instructors on issues of role conflict, strain, and coping, perhaps using the hypothetical cases of “Ann” and “Sonya” from the study’s opening chapter as examples, could help empower them by enabling them to offer additional solutions to challenges faced by their adult women learners.

Some evidence from the findings indicates that women may occasionally need help in identifying role conflict in their lives. Susan, for example, related an incident when her husband forgot to tell her about a church commitment they had, on a morning she had planned to study. Then she said, “I really don’t have a problem at home with school or any...conflicts. Because everybody, well my husband and my daughter, know how much this means to me.” She enjoyed the support of those closest to her, and if she were able to recognize different forms of conflict and possible solutions to them, she might integrate the learner role more effectively.

At the study's conclusion, the Division was developing a series of online orientation modules addressing issues such as time management for new online learners. The study findings provide additional information to include in such an orientation; specifically, information about role conflict and coping strategies. Focused online discussion groups for adult women taking courses through GPS could also provide support to new online learners. Topics for discussion, based on the study findings, should include role conflict, role strain, and coping strategies.

Intra-Role Strain

Difficulty with the online learner role, experienced as intra-role strain, was not the sole determinant of persistence for participants in this study; however, it was a stumbling block for several of them. Assessment of a new enrollee's technological readiness, academic skill level, and level of self-directedness could help new learners, their instructors, and advisors identify potential difficulties in these areas. Such information could be used by all of these individuals, not only to raise learners' awareness of these issues, but also to direct them to appropriate support interventions.

For example, several of the study participants said they had difficulty with APA formatting guidelines. At a minimum, learners should be directed to resources that can help them with that requirement. For example, the Division has partnered with a third-party vendor to provide free online writing assistance to all GPS students. At least one instructor has used a course discussion board assignment to diagnose students' writing

abilities, then refer them to the free online writing service as needed. This model should be recommended for more general use by other instructors.

Though the women in the study expressed varying needs for emotional and instrumental support from their instructors and advisors, they all sought assistance from one or both of those individuals in one form or another during their course. Quality benchmarks for the services of instructors and advisors, in a format similar to Course Design and Review Quality Standards adopted by the Division, could help ensure greater consistency in approaches to first-time students' needs, preventing the occasional support gaps apparent across the experiences of these seven women. At a minimum, given some participants' confusion over expectations for their instructors and advisors, expectations for those two roles need to be more clearly defined for learners.

The College's recent adoption of emerging national course design standards, including information on instructor availability and response times for learners, partially addressed this issue. Internal Course Design and Review Quality Standards were developed based on the Quality Matters FIPSE project rubric (www.qualitymatters.org). These standards targeted several aspects of course design, including learner interaction with the instructor. In particular, the College adapted one standard in that category to include "clear standards...for instructor availability; response times (turnaround time for e-mail/grading, etc.); and learning guidance, including constructive feedback" (Section 301, GPS Policy Manual).

Additionally, the Division has revised its adjunct faculty teaching contract stipulations and remuneration. New contract language stipulated that instructors maintain an active presence in their online classrooms, via their course discussion boards and

regularly updated course materials. This stipulation was addressed by the Division not only as a faculty performance issue, but also as a course design strategy. By adopting a 15-week lesson format for course content presentation and learner activities such as discussion, as well as providing for greater faculty autonomy in course updates, the Division was ensuring greater instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction through its course design practice. Though most of the Division's courses were still designed for a self-paced online learning format, the smaller, structured lessons, coupled with more active usage of course discussion boards by instructors, could help combat the isolation experienced by some new online learners. Several instructors within the Division have implemented weekly check-ins or discussion on current topics for learners, despite the self-paced nature of the GPS courses.

The Division implemented a four-week, online, skills-based seminar for new faculty in March 2004 through its Course Design and Delivery department. The focus of the program was technology training, online communication, and pedagogy. A majority of faculty had completed the program by the study's conclusion, with plans to develop additional training modules and online workshops. Strategies for increasing instructor-learner and learner-learner interaction in courses should be included as training topics for faculty.

Two study participants mentioned spirituality as being important to them, either through their own spiritual practice, as a form of stress reduction and coping, or simply in their interactions with a faculty member. Given the College's mission, based on the Sisters of Mercy tradition and education of the whole person, the Division could explore ways to foster connections with adult women learners along spiritual lines. For example,

an online audio meditation, developed in collaboration with a Sister of Mercy on campus, was the focus of a pilot outreach project at the study's conclusion.

Summary

Based on the support needs identified by the women in this study, institutions could better serve adult women online learners by tailoring services to their individual needs. The adult women learners in this study faced challenges that some were ill-equipped to meet in order to persist in their studies. Systematic, focused support interventions addressing role conflict, role strain, and coping strategies can enhance the first-course experience for these women and help them integrate their new online learner role into their lives.

When institutions claim that the quality of their distance programs are on par with their residential programs, they have an obligation to include their learner support services within that claim. Given that the majority of U.S. students taking online courses are women (Kramarae, 2003; Thompson, 1998), and given the traditionally higher rates of attrition observed in distance education nationally (Carr, 2000), the rewards for doing so may be great, not only for women availing themselves of this mode of education, but for the institutions who serve them.

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Appendix A

Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Form for Social Science Research

The Pennsylvania State University

Title of Project: Role Integration of Adult Women Online Learners

Principal Investigator: Lynn Hunter, Instructional Designer
Saint Joseph's College of Maine
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INSTRUCTIONS: Please read the information below and sign **both** copies of this form. Keep one copy for your records. Return the other copy, using the self-addressed, postage paid envelope provided.

1. **Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this research study is to explore the experiences of degree-seeking adult women online learners as they attempt to fit schoolwork into their busy lives, through their first course of study. Also of interest is whether there are ways in which colleges can support adult women online learners.
2. **Procedures to be followed:** You will be asked to participate in two individual, taped telephone interviews: the first to be scheduled as soon as possible after your course enrollment; the second as soon as possible after your course completion or withdrawal. The first interview has 9 questions; the second interview has 20 questions. You will also be asked to review a copy of the researcher's written case notes, produced from your interviews, for accuracy and completeness.

Please indicate your preference for being audio-recorded:

Yes, I agree to be audio-recorded during the personal interview

No, I do not agree to be audio-recorded during the personal interview

3. **Benefits:** You might learn more about yourself by participating in this study. You might have a better understanding of your needs relative to taking courses online.

This research might provide a better understanding of the needs of busy adult women who are taking courses online. This information could help in planning programs specifically for adult women learning online.

4. **Duration:** It will take about 45 minutes to complete the first interview and about 60 minutes to complete the second interview.
5. **Statement of Confidentiality:** Any documents produced from your interviews will use a fictitious name in place of your real name. You may select your own fictitious name if you wish. The interview tapes will be stored and secured at Saint Joseph's College in a locked file cabinet or locked security box in a locked office. Interview tapes will be hand carried by Lynn Hunter to a paid, professional transcriber in the Greater Portland, Maine, area, for production of the written transcripts. In the event of a publication or presentation resulting from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.
6. **Right to Ask Questions:** You can ask questions about this research. Contact Lynn Hunter at (207) 893-7982 with questions. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, contact The Pennsylvania State University's Office for Research Protections at (814) 865-1775.
7. **Voluntary Participation:** Your decision to be in this research is voluntary. You can stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

You must be 18 years of age or older to take part in this research study. If you agree to take part in this research study and the information outlined above, please sign your name and indicate the date below.

Please keep one copy of this signed and dated consent for your records. Return the other copy in the self-addressed, postage paid envelope provided. Thank you!

Participant Signature

Date

Person Obtaining Consent – Lynn Hunter

Date

Appendix B

Interview Protocols

Role Integration of Adult Women Online Learners

Script for Admission Counselors for Permission to Contact Potential Participants

Principal Investigator: Lynn Hunter, Instructional Designer
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Would you like to be contacted about participating in a study concerning adult women online learners, and how our services for adult women might be improved?

- If asked who is conducting the study: The study is being conducted by a doctoral candidate in Higher Education at Penn State University. Her name is Lynn Hunter, and she also works at Saint Joseph's College in Course Development (Graduate and Professional Studies Division).
- If yes, which days and times are most convenient for Lynn to contact you by phone?

Role Integration of Adult Women Online Learners
Interview #1: At Enrollment (Page 1 of 3)

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Carol L. Colbeck, Director
 Center for the Study Of Higher Education
 The Pennsylvania State University
 400 Rackley Building, University Park, PA 16802-3202
 clc15@psu.edu

Recruitment Script - Prospective Participant Screening

(Name of Admission counselor) forwarded your name and phone number to me as someone who would like more information about a study I am conducting here at St. Joseph's. I want to thank you for your interest. I can tell you a little bit about the study and then answer any questions you might have about it. Then, if it sounds interesting to you, I would just need to verify some basic information to see if there would be a good fit, research-wise, before getting written permission from you to continue. Would that be okay with you?

I am a doctoral candidate at Penn State University doing research on adult women online learners, and I work in Course Development here at the College. I am studying how adult women taking online courses manage fitting their coursework into their busy lives. What I would be asking you to do is, with your written permission, answer a series of questions in two telephone interviews, which I would tape and then study closely. Do you have any questions you would like me to answer about the procedures?

Now I will verify some basic information. Then, if everything seems to fit, we can proceed with the written consent process and the interviews.

- a. Your age _____ (must be 35-54)
- b. Your occupation _____
- c. Your marital status _____
 (must be married or in a committed relationship)
- d. Number of children 18 or younger living at home _____
- e. The ages of your children _____
- f. Any volunteer activities outside the home _____
- g. Any other activities that you engage in on a regular basis such as church or socializing _____
- h. Your academic program at Saint Joseph's College (must be BS in Health Care Administration or MSN in Nursing) _____
- i. Course(s) you are currently enrolled in (must be enrolled in HC205: U.S. Health Care Systems or NU500: Conceptual Bases for Nursing) _____
- j. Last time you took a college-level course (must be at least 1 year ago) _____

**Role Integration of Adult Women Online Learners
Interview #1: At Enrollment (Page 2 of 3)**

Prospective Participant Screening (continued)

If prospective participant does not meet the required criteria:

Each of the individuals participating in the study must (state the criterion). Though that does not apply to you, I would like to thank you for your interest. Would you like to receive a free copy of the book, “Inner Peace for Busy People,” by Joan Borysenko? We are considering using this book for an experimental online women’s reading/support group.

If prospective participant meets the required criteria:

Thank you for answering these preliminary questions. You meet all the criteria for participating in the study. Before we can continue with the interviews, I will need to send two copies of the written consent form to you via U.S. mail, so that you can sign them, return one to me, and keep a copy for your records. May I have your mailing address?

Would you like to schedule a time for the first interview now, far enough out to allow time for your consent form to be completed?

(With Written Consent) Baseline Information—Role Strain

1. How well prepared academically do you feel for this course? Please explain. [role strain-academic preparation]
2. What issues do you anticipate with the technology used in the course? Please explain. [role strain-technological preparation]

(With Written Consent) Baseline Information—Role Conflict

3. What are the reasons for your enrolling at this time? [work role conditions: learner-work role congruence]
4. Next, would you describe a typical day in your life. [role conflict, pre-course]
5. Please tell me about any times when you feel conflicts between work and personal responsibilities when trying to manage all the aspects of your life? Can you give me some examples? [role conflict, pre-course]
6. How do you resolve conflicts as they come up? Can you give me some examples? [coping, pre-course]

**Role Integration of Adult Women Online Learners
Interview #1: At Enrollment (Page 3 of 3)**

(With Written Consent) Baseline Information—Role Conflict (continued)

7. Next, I would like to know, in your opinion, how others in your life feel about your taking your course right now. As I mention each person, would tell me how that person feels about this: **[emotional and instrumental support, pre-course]**
 - a. Spouse/partner
 - b. Child/children
 - c. Work supervisor
 - d. Friend
 - e. Other

8. Lastly, I would like to explore some of the ways others in your life typically offer you support when you are trying to manage everything in your life. As I mention each person, would tell me whether or not that person is likely to offer you support and how or how not: **[emotional and instrumental support, pre-course]**
 - a. Spouse/partner
 - b. Child/children
 - c. Work supervisor
 - d. Friend
 - e. Other

This concludes our first of two interviews. Thank you so much for your time today. I would like to contact you for a second and final interview when you finish your course, or should you withdraw from your course or request additional time to complete your course. Good luck until we talk again!

Role Integration of Adult Women Online Learners
Interview #2: At Course Completion, Course Withdrawal, or Time Extension
(Page 1 of 2)

1. **a. (at course completion)** Congratulations on completing your course! First, do you anticipate continuing taking courses? Why or why not?
or
b. (at course withdrawal) I want to follow up with you since your withdrawal from your course. First, do you anticipate starting coursework again in the future? Why or why not?
or
c. (at time extension) I want to follow up with you since your request for a time extension for your course. How much time have you extended your course for?
2. **(If “yes” to question 1a or 1b above)** Do you think you will take your courses at Saint Joseph’s College? Why or why not?

Role strain questions

3. Next, I would like to ask you some questions about your experience during your course. How did your experience in the course compare with your expectations? Please explain. [role strain-perceived actual demands of course]
4. In your opinion, how clearly were the expectations for the course expressed? Please explain. [role strain-clarity of learner role expectations]
5. In what ways did your relationship with your instructor meet your expectations? Please explain. [role strain-role partner behavior vs. expectations]
6. In what ways did your relationship with your advisor meet your expectations? Please explain. [role strain-role partner behavior vs. expectations]
7. What difficulties, if any did you experience with the course? Please explain. [role strain overall]
8. How did you try to resolve any of the difficulties you experienced? Please explain. [coping, during course]
9. Looking back on your experience, how adequately prepared for your course were you? Please explain. [role strain-academic preparation]

Role conflict questions

10. What – if any -- any changes in your life or the lives of those close to you had an impact on you while taking your course? Please explain. [family/social role conditions]

11. How did you deal with the change(s)? [coping, during course]
12. How did adding schoolwork to everything else in your life impact you and those close to you, if at all? Please explain. [role conflict, during course]
13. How did taking your course affect your work role? [role conflict, during course]
14. How did the needs or demands of those in your home or social life change since you started coursework? If so, how? [perceived demands in family/social role conditions]
15. How did your perception of what you needed to do in response to the needs of others in your life change during your course? If so, how? [coping, during course]
16. Please describe a typical day in your life while you were taking your course. [role conflict, during course]
17. Please describe any times when you felt conflicts between your schoolwork and what you needed to do as a wife or mom or friend or employee? Can you give me some examples? [role conflict, during course]
18. How did you resolve conflicts as they came up? Can you give me some examples? [coping, during course]
19. Next, I would like to explore some of the ways others in your life may have offered you support when you were trying to manage everything, including your schoolwork. As I mention each person, would tell me whether or not that person offered support, and how or how not: [emotional and instrumental support, during course]
 - a. Spouse/partner
 - b. Child/children
 - c. Work supervisor
 - d. Friend
 - e. Instructor
 - f. Advisor
 - g. Other
20. What could Saint Joseph's College do in the future to help you (or others like you) complete your courses?

This concludes our second and final interview. Thank you so much for your time!

Appendix C

Interview Data Coding Matrix Sample

Conceptual Framework	Question Number	Participant 1	Participant 5
conflict pre-course	5 typical day pre-course	106-177 5:15am to 11pm	78-110 Arise 5:15. Work 6:30-11:30 (half time); baby-sit 'til 7:00. Study 'til 10-11. Did Bible study before enrolling.
conflict pre-course	6 conflict pre-course	194-231 "I feel a lot of pull" (not being able to be in 2 places at once) 216-223 I'm gonna make time for me....And I've already told everybody, 'When I'm in school, you're just gonna have to learn to handle it yourself.' <u>Type I coping</u>	114-118 Taking on babysitting grandson required adjustments.
coping pre-course	7 resolve conflict pre-course	236-266 "I check my voicemail a lot." (scheduling strategies) "I'm real quick at typing." "I pray a lot." "I get my nails done, that relaxes me." <u>Type III coping</u>	120-156 Negotiated flexible work hours to help raise grandson. Be at home afternoons, with morning daycare arrangements. <u>Type I coping</u> Worked things out with son to have daycare in mornings. <u>Type I coping</u> 130 "If it gets too slow, I start to have a nervous breakdown."
emotional/instrumental support at home	8a spouse_feel pre-course	277-285 "..he was SO excited. He just thought it was great."	167-183 Has always supported her educational goals. "I was surprised."

VITA

Lynn Hunter

EDUCATION

Certificate of Study in Distance Education

The American Center for the Study of Distance Education and The Adult Education Program
The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA ~ June 1996

M.Ed., Student Development in Higher Education

Counseling Concentration
University of Maine, Orono, ME ~ May 1994

B.S., Business Administration

Husson College, Bangor, ME ~ May 1985

POSITIONS HELD

Instructional Designer. Saint Joseph's College of Maine

Division of Graduate and Professional Studies
Standish, ME ~ November 2002 to present

Computer Trainer / Site Coordinator. AmeriCorps 1700-hour Member, Project GO@LS

Portland Public Library, Portland, ME ~ September 2001 to August 2002

Computer Instructor (Independent contractor). University College at Bath/Brunswick

Brunswick, ME ~ August 2001 to April 2002

Program Specialist / Distance Learning Program Coordinator. University of Maine System

Advanced Technology Education Center, South Portland, ME ~ August 1998 to June 2001

Senior Assistant Dean for Admissions. Unity College

Unity, ME ~ August 1996 to August 1998

Graduate Assistant (Computer Support). The Pennsylvania State University

Center for the Study of Higher Education, University Park, PA ~ August 1994 to July 1996