

WHAT WE BRING WITH US:  
INVESTIGATING THE IMPACT OF IDENTITY AND BACKGROUND ON THE ONLINE  
LEARNING EXPERIENCE

by

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## ABSTRACT

A student's identity and background play a significant role in their educational experiences. In higher education, these factors are often discussed while analyzing discrepancies in outcomes. However, a student's identity and background do not intrinsically affect learning outcomes; the impact that these two factors have on the student's educational experience causes discrepancies in outcomes. We have considerable research on the many ways that identity and background impact a traditional higher educational experience, but there is less research available exploring their impact on the online learning experience. Through a qualitative approach, this case study seeks to go beyond demographic- and outcome-based research to explore the core of the student experience through their own perspective. The selected case was a semester-long online graduate-level course in the Health and Human Development Field at a large research institution in the Mountain West. Data was collected through a syllabus review, observation of a live class session conducted via videoconferencing, and a semi-structured interview. Findings suggested that like in-person learning, a student's identity and background impact their feelings of community and belonging, their persistence and purpose, and their approach to learning in an online environment. Additionally, with fewer opportunities for interaction, instructors can cultivate feelings of community and belonging among their students by acknowledging the challenges associated with the course and demonstrating their support. They can also support student persistence by providing flexibility with assignments and deadlines and understanding when a student may have an outside factor impacting their ability to meet course requirements.



## INTRODUCTION

### Background

A student's identity and background play a significant role in their educational experiences and outcomes (Chang, 2002; Eliason & Turalba, 2019; Howard & Davies, 2013; Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021; Liu, 2017; Madrigal et al., 2021; McPherson, 2016; Richardson, 1994; Sutherland, 1999). From informal learning experiences to Pre-K through to higher education, how we conceptualize ourselves and are perceived by others impacts how we learn. Developed over time through our interactions with others and the world around us, identity is foundationally socially constructed (Delahunty et al, 2014). Background factors such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, and sexual preference influence how we see ourselves and are perceived by others, informing the social interactions that shape our identity, or how we define ourselves through our sense of self, personal traits, characteristics, behaviors, social relationships, and group memberships (Nurra & Oyserman, 2018; Oyserman et al., 2012).

In higher education, the context of focus for this study, identity and background factors are often discussed while analyzing discrepancies in outcomes (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Pope & Sydnor, 2010; Rapoport & Thibout, 2018; Wallace et al., 2022; White et al., 2016). For example, administrators and policymakers may consider mature-aged students in the context of 4-year graduation rates or socioeconomic status in the context of grade point average. However, these discrepancies are a result of the impact that identities have holistically on the higher education experience. In particular, identity and background have an impact on a student's feelings of community and belonging (Bean, 1990; Brown, 2008; Eliason & Turalba, 2019; Howard &

Davies, 2013; Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021; Madrigal et al., 2021; McPherson, 2016; Rankin, 2005; White, 2011), their purpose and drive to persist in their programs (Guillory, 2009; Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021; Liu, 2017; McPherson, 2016; Waterman, 2012), and their approach to learning (Chang, 2002; Eliason & Turalba, 2019; Fraser & Kick, 2000; Harper, 2007; Howard & Davies, 2013; Howard et al., 2006; Packard, 2013; Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Richardson, 1994; Sutherland, 1999; Taylor & Mateyka, 2011; Wells et al., 2009).

Over the past two decades, advances in educational technology and the expansion of high-speed internet access have made it more and more possible to conduct learning online (Pelletier et al., 2021; Ni, 2013; Verpoorten et al., 2020; Zawacki-Richter, 2020). Proponents of online education point to the many benefits that it can provide, from scheduling flexibility for the working parent (Dhawan, 2020; Foronda & Lippincott, 2014; Paudel, 2021; Shea, 2007) to access for rural learners and instructors (Place et al., 2012). Online education can be conducted at scale to decrease program costs and connect learners all over the world (Pelletier et al., 2001; Shea, 2007). Many students with disabilities can participate more effectively in an online setting (Foronda & Lippincott, 2014; Pearson & Koppi, 2002). As the field expands, more benefits will likely be identified.

### Problem

While research indicates that online programs can increase access for many learners, it also comes with new challenges. For example, the same rural students that could benefit from distance learning may not live in a place with a reliable internet connection (Leichty, 2021). The flexibility of a program without synchronous meetings may be a detriment to busy learners who rely on a regular class period to stay on top of assignments (Kahn et al., 2017; Moore et al.,

2003). The lack of interaction of a scaled educational program may provide persistence challenges (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2007; Kahn et al., 2017; Moore et al., 2003), and the fractional cost may still feel excessive depending on how it was adapted to serve hundreds of learners at a time (Fyfe, 2000 as cited in McInnery & Roberts, 2004).

When universities and school districts around the world went remote during the COVID-19 pandemic, research showed that marginalized learners experienced significantly more learning loss than their more privileged peers (Clark et al., 2020; Errisuriz et al., 2022; Foli, 2022; Goldberg, 2021). This was attributed to disparities in digital literacy, parental involvement, socioeconomic factors, household responsibilities, and limited internet access (Clark et al., 2020; Foli, 2022; Goldberg, 2021). The fallout of COVID-19 emergency remote teaching caused many to proclaim that online learning does not work for most learners, particularly for our most vulnerable learners (Esquivel et al., 2020; Hobbs & Hawkins, 2020). While there is research on how a student's identity and background impacted their success in COVID-19 emergency remote teaching, there is less research exploring its impact on online learning under typical circumstances. Although research from the COVID-19 pandemic can certainly provide some insight into this phenomenon, there is a need for more research on the impact of student identity and background conducted in established programs where participants have intentionally elected to learn online, and instructors are adequately prepared. Furthermore, educational research often approaches students' identity and background through survey or demographic information (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Pope & Sydnor, 2010; Rapoport & Thibout, 2018; Wallace et al., 2022; White et al., 2016). This research, instead, explored the impact of students' identity and background on their online learning experience from the perspective of the student using a

qualitative approach. It did not approach the well-researched area of identity formation within online communities of practice and how online learning experiences contribute to learners' sense of agency and identity (Duemer et al., 2002; Baxter, 2012; Baxter & Haycock, 2014), instead emphasizing the existing identities and backgrounds that students bring into the learning space.

### Purpose

Through an interpretive case study design (Merriam, 1998) focusing on the experiences of learners in a semester-long online learning course, this research investigated differences in perceptions of the online learning experience and how learner identities and backgrounds may have contributed to those perceptions. When evaluating educational programs, researchers often use data points such as learners' test scores or the proportion of learners that are proficient in the intended outcomes. When there are vast disparities in outcomes between learners within a program or between different programs, researchers often look to demographic information such as socioeconomic status, race, or parental educational achievement for insight into these disparities. However, demographics such as socioeconomic status or race are not themselves impacting achievement but can be indicators for a human experience that differs from another in a way that may impact achievement. For example, facing housing insecurity as a university student does not impact the student's learning outcomes, but may indicate that they do not have a comfortable place to study, struggle to meet basic needs such as food and sleep, and have a heightened stress level – all factors that can impact achievement. While research typically focuses on demographic information, this research sought to explore the ways that learners' identities and backgrounds impact how they experience distance learning from the perspective of the learner.

### Research Questions

The following research questions framed the investigation:

1. In what ways do a student's identity and background impact how they experience an online or distance learning setting?
2. In what ways are instructors effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance learning setting?

### Theoretical Framework

The methodology for this study was grounded in three major theories: Social Constructionism, Constructivism, and Critical Theory. These theories intersect in the context of this study to explain how identity is constructed, its impact on the learner perspective, and the effect that perspective has on the individual's learning experience. Delineated further, Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development Theory (1978) and Dewey's Inquiry-based Learning Theory (1938) were used to explain where learning occurs and how knowledge is constructed through both social constructionist and constructivist lenses. In the online space, the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000) was used to evaluate the effectiveness of learning and is grounded in both Social Constructionism and Constructivism. The following concept map demonstrates how each theory and construct described above intersect in the context of this study.

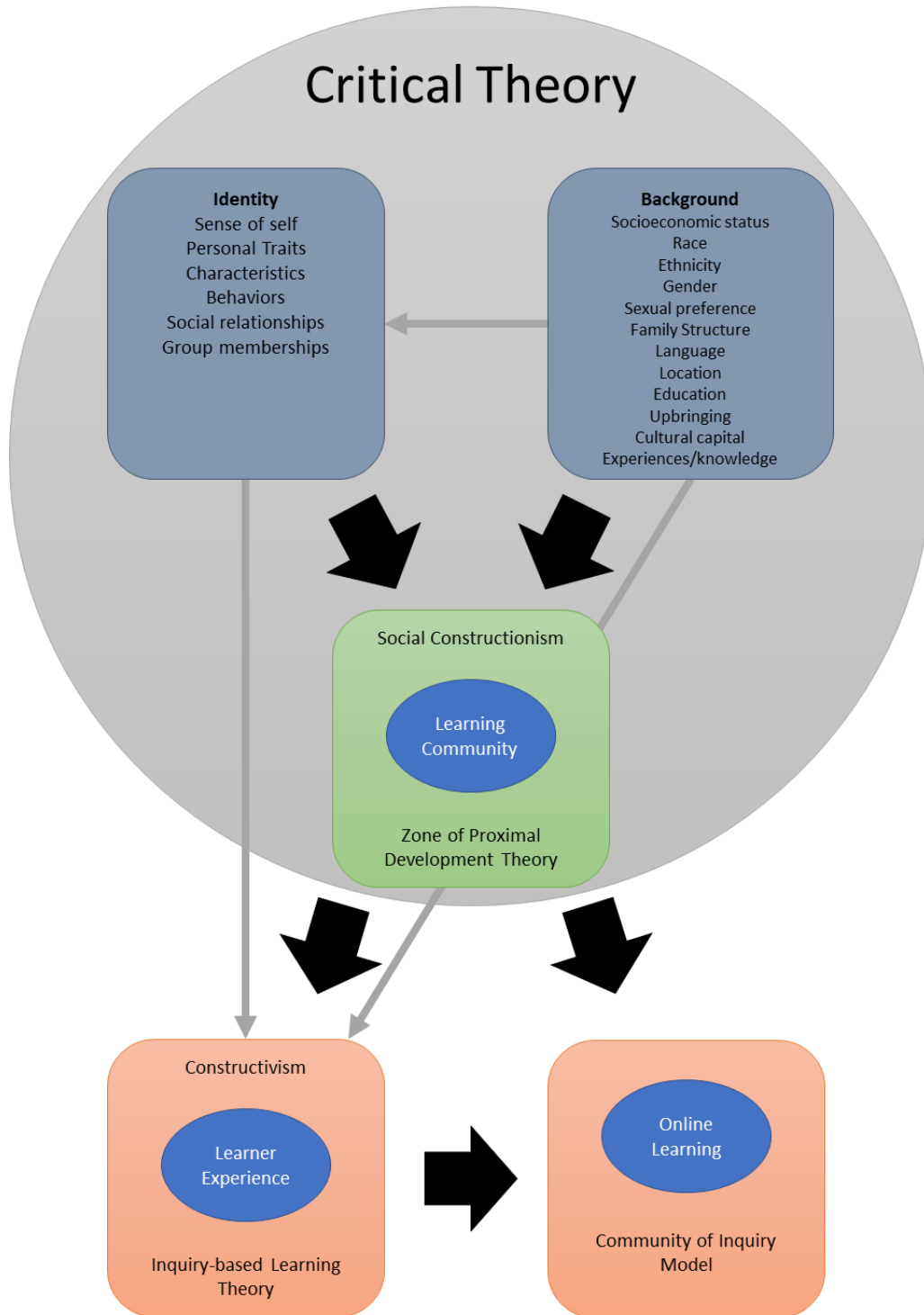


Figure 1. Concept map demonstrating how Critical Theory, Social Constructionism, Constructivism, and the constructs of Identity, Background, Learning Community, Learning Experience, and online learning interact in the context of this study

Critical theory is the overarching lens through which we can observe how an individual's identity and background relate to their learning experiences. These factors, which through a critical theoretical lens are a product of the power dynamics embedded in society, impact how an individual perceives themselves as learners and how others perceive them. Through a social constructionist lens such as the Zone of Proximal Development theory, these perceptions are paramount to how knowledge is formed: with individuals of diverse backgrounds and identities interacting in a social environment to co-construct understanding, also known as a learning community. In the case of the Zone of Proximal Development theory, members of the learning community act as More Knowledgeable Others (MKOs) as the group explores ideas and concepts. Following the learning that occurs through social interactions is the learning that occurs individually (Vygotsky, 1978). This is impacted by background and identity, both outright and through a learning community, as our conception of self shapes our understanding of the world around us (Dewey, 1938). This is a constructivist mindset, and the study will apply the Inquiry-based Learning Theory to approach how individuals construct knowledge through critical analysis, questioning, and challenging assumptions. Finally, both the social constructionist and constructivist perspectives contribute to the Community of Inquiry model for analysis of effectiveness in online learning.

### Delimitations, Limitations, and Assumptions

Given the intimate nature of exploring how identity and background impact learning experience, a case study approach was selected as the research approach. As the purpose of the case study is to provide deeper insights into the experiences of a few individuals, the small sample size of the case study limited the generalizability of findings toward a larger population.

The most significant limitations of this study involved the sample under investigation and participation of participants. Participants were not required to participate and those who chose to do so likely had more disposable time to share, which could have eliminated some participants who may have relevant identities and perspectives. Additionally, participants may have entered the course with prior experience with online learning. This experience could have been positive, negative, or neutral, and could have informed their perspectives on how identity and background impact the online learning experience prior to the case study. Delimitations relate to scope and generalizability, with the study exploring one course time bound to one semester. While the study described pedagogical decisions and other details of the course, it was focused on the learning experience of the individual and not the overall quality or effectiveness of the course. Notable assumptions included that participants elected to participate in an online learning experience and were not required to do so, and participants provided an honest and accurate account of their experiences with online learning.

### Operational Definitions

*Background:* Demographic information such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, religion, family structure, language, and location; as well as social factors such as upbringing, cultural capital, cultural expectations, education, and any other experiences or knowledge in a person's past (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023).

*Identity:* How an individual defines themselves and who they might become through one's sense of self, personal traits, characteristics, behaviors, social relationships, and group memberships (Nurra & Oyserman, 2018; Oyserman et al., 2012).



*Intersectionality*: How an individual's multiple identities and social categorizations interact to create interconnected systems of domination and marginalization (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006).

*Learning community*: Where individuals with different backgrounds and perspectives collaborate and exchange ideas to support each other's understanding (Popkewitz, 1998).

*Learning experience*: For the purpose of this study, learning experience will refer to the interactions, courses, programs, or experiences in which learning takes place within the context of higher education.

*Learning management system (LMS)*: An information technology tool that facilitates e-learning and provides education with time and place constraints (Ain et al., 2016).

*Marginalize*: To relegate a person or group of people to an unimportant or powerless position within society (Pratt & Fowler, 2022).

*Mature/mature-age students*: Students who enter higher education beyond the age of 21 (Howard & Davies, 2013).

*Online, remote, distance, or e-learning*: The effort of providing access to learning for those who are geographically distant (Moore et al., 2011), or have otherwise chosen to engage with learning programs outside of a classroom setting.

*Persistence*: The efforts of an individual to advance through an educational program to completion (McPherson, 2016).

*Social learning*: The process in which individuals learn through interaction with and imitation of other learners (Bandura, 1977).

*Synchronous/Asynchronous learning*: Synchronous learning involves simultaneous interactions between teachers and students either in-person or via text, voice, and video chat, while

asynchronous learning does not require real-time interaction and can be delivered through many different content formats (Phanphech et al., 2022).

### Positionality

My interest in the intersections between identity, background, and online learning stems from my position as an instructional technologist in a university setting. My role is to help instructors improve their pedagogy and learners improve their educational experience through the use of technology. I identify and procure tools that instructors can implement in their teaching, integrate the tools into our institutional learning environments, train faculty on how to use them effectively, and support instructors and students with technical issues related to the tools. Given my stake in the field, I have an inherent bias toward the positive impact of educational technology on student success. However, I am committed to continuous improvement in the implementation of educational tools to best serve students. With a background teaching in underserved communities and a focus on educational policy, issues of identity and equity are forefront in my practice. As more learning is conducted online, I seek to understand how the factors of identity and background continue to play a role in higher education, with a goal of supporting marginalized students.

I had both an insider and an outsider perspective as it pertains to this research. As a heterosexual, white, cisgendered male with an affluent background I generally reflect the dominant population in American higher education. This rendered me with an outsider perspective in relation to participants who did not. However, as a learner in a predominantly online graduate program, I had some shared experiences with participants. As a learner with a disability, I brought my own perspective on how my identity and background influence my

online learning experience. Therefore, I as the researcher was inherently unable to set aside my experiences and bracket myself from the study. This aligned with the study's social constructionist framework, as our interpretation of the world around us is subjective and filtered through the lens of our own experiences, which in turn are shaped by social interactions (Heidegger & Sallis, 1978).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Organization and Search Process

This review of literature will discuss research related to the following key concepts and theories: (a) Constructivism and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) Theory, (b) Social Constructionism and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Model, (c) Critical Theory, and (d) identity and its impact on an individual's perception of a learning experience. Literature around Constructivism, Social Constructionism, and Critical Theory was selected to provide insight into the theoretical frameworks that ground the study. Literature regarding identity and its impact on an individual's perception of a learning experience details the existing knowledge around the concepts of interest to the research questions.

Relevant literature was identified through three databases with access provided by Montana State University: Academic Search Complete, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), and TRAILS (Treasure State Academic Information & Library Services). The search protocol contained the following key words: "online learning OR e-learning OR distance learning," "identity," "background," "social constructionism," "constructivism," "zone of proximal development," "community of inquiry," "critical theory," "learner experience," and "learner perception." Literature was filtered to peer-reviewed journal articles published between the years of 1992 and 2022 with an emphasis on research published in the last 10 years. However, works by authors that are foundational to constructivist and social constructionist learning theories such as Piaget (1929), Dewey (1938), and Vygotsky (1978) are discussed in this review despite falling outside these parameters.

## Review of Literature

### Constructivism and Social Constructionism

This research was grounded in constructivist and social constructionist learning theories. In the context of education, constructivism and social constructionism are two related theories for how individuals make meaning and construct knowledge from learning experiences. Constructivism describes the cognitive processes of learning while social constructionism focuses on the actions that contribute to knowledge construction. In the context of this study, the central tenets of these learning theories indicated how individuals experience learning and were therefore used to examine how identity contributes to that experience.

In education, constructivism stems from both developmental cognitive psychology and epistemology. Drawing upon the works of Piaget (1929) and Dewey (1938), constructivism represents a diversion from the rationalist belief that knowledge is certain and instead contends that the mind constructs knowledge subjectively (Baechtold, 2013). Piaget claims that phenomena are dependent on “the systematic framework of existing judgements into which the observer pigeon-holes every new observation” (Piaget, 1929 as cited in Solomon, 1994, p. 4). As such, the individual’s judgements that predate the learning experience are as relevant to their understanding of the topic as the information presented by the instructor. In his contribution to constructivism, Dewey built upon these ideas by valuing the instructor’s ability to facilitate learning above their ability to present information, emphasizing critical thinking and critical inquiry above rote learning. According to Dewey, these skills involve the construction of experience and knowledge through the following exercises: critically analyzing subject matter, questioning, and challenging assumptions (Dewey, 1959). The result of Dewey’s constructivist

conception of learning was his inquiry-based learning pedagogy (Dewey, 1938) that is foundational for many contemporary active learning practices.

Building upon the principles of constructivism, social constructionism also contends that individuals make meaning and understand the world by developing a subjective perspective. An individual's perspectives are based on experiences within their social environments, interaction with others, and historical context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructionists believe that through interaction with instructors, peers, and course materials, learners co-construct knowledge to form an understanding that exceeds individual perspectives. Crucial to learning in the social constructionist paradigm is the establishment of a learning community, where individuals with diverse backgrounds and perspectives collaborate and exchange ideas to support each other's understanding (Popkewitz, 1998). Vygotsky (1978) advanced social constructionism through his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, which establishes that learning occurs first through social interactions and second individually. The Zone of Proximal Development is the area between the developmental level of the individual, or their independent problem-solving abilities, and what they have the capacity to accomplish by problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). The instructor(s) or learner(s) providing support are known as a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). This process of learning at a potential development level outside of an individual's independent capabilities with the support of an instructor or other learners is known as scaffolding. For example, within a learner-learner social interaction, "students can help each other by filling in the gaps in each other's knowledge and/or by 'demonstrating' particular tasks" (Dixson, 2015, p. 145).

Principles of constructivism and social constructionism are found throughout many online learning experiences. While it may look different than the social learning that occurs in a traditional classroom, online learning programs use tools like learning management systems, discussion boards, synchronous videoconferencing, and peer reviews to facilitate collaboration and knowledge co-creation (Bernard et al., 2009; Delaney et al., 2009; Halabi & Larkins, 2016; Knapp, 2018; Agopian, 2022). Agopian states that “it’s up to the instructor to create a learning environment that facilitates the incorporation of the principles of constructivism, thus making online instruction as educational and beneficial as face-to-face instruction” (Agopian, 2022, p. 86). To evaluate the effectiveness of learning in an online experience, Garrison et al. (2000) developed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model based upon the principles of Dewey (1938), constructivism, and social constructionism, including critical inquiry and social interaction. In the CoI model, “Students listen to one another with respect, build on one another’s ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences from what has been said, and seek to identify one another’s assumptions” (Lipman, 2003, p. 20). Garrison et al. (2000) identify three main tenets of online learning environments: teacher presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. Social presence consists of the interactions that individuals have with each other and the content within an online learning community. Teacher presence refers to the course facilitation, from course design and material selection to learning activities to instructor feedback. Finally, cognitive presence is the reasoning, questioning, and reflection that individuals experience as they engage with the course.

Through the constructivist and social constructionist lenses, learning occurs where an individual's identity, background, and life experiences come in contact with new material and new perspectives. Learning occurs in the space beyond an individual's independent capabilities in a community of peers. Knowledge is not static or certain and is co-constructed through interaction with others. From this theoretical perspective, it is clear that an individual's identity and background play a factor in how they experience learning. This study sought to understand how that may occur in an online learning setting.

### Critical Theory

In addition to examining how individuals experience learning, this study explored elements of an individual's identity and background and how they relate to their experiences with online education. To provide a framework for how identity and background factors may influence their experience, this study was grounded in Critical Theory. Rooted in Marxism and foundational to socially critical philosophical approaches like Feminism, Critical Race Theory, and Post-Colonial Theory, Critical Theory considers the injustices that permeate through the structures of society and the capitalist system.

Established by Horkheimer (1936) and his followers known as the Frankfurt School (Brookfield, 2014), Critical Theory seeks emancipation for all people from socially constructed oppressive forces. Horkheimer defines Critical Theory with three core assumptions:

- (a) That apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities;
- (b) that the way this state of affairs is reproduced as seeming to be normal, natural, and inevitable (thereby, heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of



dominant ideology; and (c) that critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a prelude to changing it. (Brookfield, 2014, p. 418).

Fundamentally, Critical Theory seeks to expose the freedom and equity so celebrated by liberalism as an illusion, instead revealing the realities of oppression in our society: “For example, the bourgeois ideals of fair exchange and equality of opportunity can be confronted with the reality of ‘deepening social injustice’ inherent in the development of capitalism” (Horkheimer, 1974 as cited in White, 1983, p. 151). While Critical Theory is most focused on dismantling capitalism, the ideological perspective provided this study with a framework to approach how folks with unique identities and backgrounds may have different experiences with online learning.

Additionally, Critical Theory aligns with the constructivist and social constructionist view that knowledge is not objective but is socially constructed: “The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character of the perceiving organ” (Horkheimer, 1937 as cited in Ingram & Simon-Ingram, 1992, p. 242). Both Horkheimer and Adorno describe a strong interconnection between knowledge and social critique, with Horkheimer referring to it in a “social philosophy” and Adorno a “social theory” (Renault, 2020). Neither subscribe to a normative foundation of social critique, as norms are contingent upon beliefs and conceptions that vary depending on experience. The critical theoretical perspective on social critique, that conceptions of justice are socially constructed, can reasonably extend to conceptions of knowledge and understanding, as well.

According to the principles of the Zone of Proximal Development and Community of Inquiry models, collaboration, interaction, and presence are paramount to how the individual perceives a learning experience. The synthesis of Critical Theory with these two models provides context around what socially constructed factors and dynamics influence an individual's identity, which in turn impacts their learning experience. Crucial to the co-construction of knowledge are the experiences and historical context that each individual brings to the learning group. Through a critical theoretical lens, those same experiences and historical contexts vary from individual to individual based, among others, on influences of oppression such as the empirical realities of economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination. While influences of oppression were not the primary determinants of an individual's identity and background in this study, the Critical Theory perspective ensured that they were considered.

### Identity and Background

Given the significance of the terms identity and background to the research questions, it was necessary to define them in the context of this study. Identity is first and foremost "socially constructed, being forged through human involvement in social activity" (Delahunty et al., 2014, p. 255). It is both self-conceptualized and a reflection of how we interact with and are perceived by others. According to Oyserman, "*self-concept* and *identity* provide answers to the basic questions 'Who am I?', 'Where do I belong?', and 'How do I fit (or fit in)'" (Oyserman, 2001, p. 499). Identity encompasses our personal and social considerations (Stryker, 1980; Tajfel, 1981), our consciousness (Lewis, 1990), and our personality, or what we know about ourselves (Markus & Cross, 1990). For the purpose of this study, the term "identity" represented how an individual defines themselves and who they might become through one's sense of self, personal traits,

characteristics, behaviors, social relationships, and group memberships (Nurra & Oyserman, 2018; Oyserman et al., 2012).

While identity refers to the individual's conception of self, "background" encompassed the external factors that impact a person's life. For the purpose of this study, background included demographic information such as socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, religion, family structure, language, and location; as well as social factors such as upbringing, cultural capital, cultural expectations, education, and any other experiences or knowledge in a person's past (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2023). These background factors contribute to an individual's identity as they shape their conceptions of self and the world around them. Through a constructivist lens, an individual's self-conception reflects their interactions with that world, and from a critical theoretical perspective, the power dynamics surrounding their identities and backgrounds dictate the nature of those interactions.

### Identity and Background in Education

The focus of this study was how an individual's identity and background impacted how they experience online or distance learning. As such, this review of literature does not discuss the well-researched impact of identity and background on learner outcomes — for example how race, gender, or socioeconomic status impact test scores — and instead focuses specifically on the perspectives and experiences of learners. The review will next explore how identity and background impact the learning experience in traditional educational settings, and then will expand to the more limited literature around how identity and background impact the learning experience in an online or distance learning setting. The three major themes that emerged during

the review of literature are: (a) community and belonging, (b) purpose and persistence, and (c) approach to learning.

Community and Belonging. The most significant theme that emerged from relevant literature is that identity and background impact how students engage with the learning community and feel a sense of belonging. For example, Eliason and Turalba (2019) found that identity and background had an impact on class participation:

Power and privilege issues found in the broader society are often reproduced in the college classroom, allowing for some students' voices to be heard and valued, while others are not (Ochoa & Pineda, 2008). Structural oppression reflected within the university setting can adversely impact class participation and the student's learning experience, particularly for students from stigmatized minority populations (Eliason & Turalba, 2019, p. 1258).

Eliason & Turalba (2019) found that cultural, ethnic, religious, and sexual identity impacted class participation patterns for students that identified with marginalized groups. Participants who identified as Asian explicitly mentioned their ethnicity or culture when describing their participation: "I'm Asian so I am typically stereotyped as being smart and quiet in class' ... 'I think growing up Chinese American has been a big factor' ... I was raise (sic) in a culture that students couldn't ask too many questions in class'" (Eliason & Turalba, 2019, p. 1271). This trend held for Latinx participants as well, with many identifying their cultural identity as an inhibitor of class involvement. According to Brown (2008), "Latinx values of group solidarity, community, and cooperation tend to clash with the traditional university norm of individual achievement and competition" (Brown, 2008 as cited in Eliason & Turalba, 2019, p. 1261).

Additionally, many participants across ethnic and/or racial minority groups also cited having an accent as a barrier to participation.

In a 2011 study, White revealed that first generation Native American, African American, and Hispanic/Latinx students reported lower levels of participation due to: (1) differences in language and discourse commonly used in college classrooms, which reflect “White” behaviors and norms that conflict with their own cultural background and upbringing; (2) their fears of feeling academically inferior to their White counterparts, primarily resulting from inequitable academic preparation in high school; and (3) their resistance to assimilation to the status quo, as a way of maintaining their cultural identity and pride. Hutchinson & Buckingham corroborated these findings in their 2021 study of Alaska Native students’ cultural identities, with many participants viewing them at odds with their higher education institutions: “[Alaska Native students] fear they have no choice between assimilating into mainstream culture and disconnecting from their cultural identities, on the one hand, and dropping out of a university to maintain their cultural identities, on the other” (Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021, p. 213). According to one participant, westernized teaching methods were incompatible with their cultural identities: “As soon as you step foot in one of the classrooms, you can feel the overpowering rhetoric that’s happening. This Westernized mentality that you’re kind of expected to succumb to. There’s not really a way of addressing that or fighting with it because that’s what you have to endure to get a degree and deal with the classes” (Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021, p. 226). However, Alaska Native students in this study reported connections through support services, student organizations, classes, housing, and events that allowed them to be around other Indigenous students was supportive of their cultural identities. This feeling of belonging and

community was enhanced when there were spaces dedicated to making Indigenous students feel at home, especially those from a rural background.

Rankin (2005) found that students who identify as LGBTQ experience discrimination, harassment, and violence on college campuses more frequently than their non-LGBTQ peers and are less likely to feel safe in the classroom. In their study of sexual and gender minority identity in undergraduate medical education, Madrigal et al. (2021) found that sexual and gender minority students were more likely to experience mistreatment which impacted their career trajectories. Some of these forms of mistreatment include: “misgendering and derogatory comments regarding sexual orientation or gender identity” (Madrigal et al., 2021, p. 9). These incidents of bullying and exclusion were noted to contribute to poor mental health, depression, and suicidal ideation (Hill et al., 2020; Lapinski et al., 2014; Meyer et al., 2021; Nama et al., 2017; Rood et al., 2017; Silenzio et al., 2007).

Community and belonging are key factors to the learning experience for students who identify as parents or non-traditional students due to age. In a study of low-income mothers in higher education, McPherson (2016) found that the influence of marriage, family obligations, and children played a significant role in how participants engaged with the learning community. In fact, it was much more likely that these obligations defined social integration – the informal student-peer and student-faculty relationships and associated support systems cultivated within a community of higher education (Bean, 1990) – than interaction with peers and faculty. In a 2013 study on attracting mature students into higher education, Howard & Davies found that students who enter higher education beyond the age of 21 did not see themselves as learners, and “this constructed identity as a ‘non-learner’ may therefore prevent mature individuals from feeling

able to integrate and identify with the existing student community” (Howard & Davies, 2013, p. 770). However, the study found that participants of the course constructed a shared social identity centered on students’ backgrounds, group memberships, goals, and challenges that facilitated assimilation into the broader student community.

Persistence and Purpose. A second theme that emerged from the literature is that students’ identities and backgrounds had an impact on their purpose for attending higher education and their persistence as they work through courses and programs. In turn, these factors influenced their learning experience. McPherson’s study of low-income single mothers (2016) found that degree utility was a significant driver of program of study for mothers that identified as the sole provider for their families. Some of the study participants chose to compromise their career aspirations in order to pursue a degree that would likely lead to higher income and a more sustainable career: “for example, Tammy’s early career interests focused on journalism; however, as a result of her goals as a mother she said, ‘I am not going to make any money at that job.’ Assessing her degree program options related to income, Tammy decided she wanted to be a traveling nurse” (McPherson, 2016, p. 9). Their identities as sole providers were also foundational to their decision to persist with their programs, as many felt they had no other option but to overcome any obstacles and complete their degrees.

Liu’s 2017 study on intersectionality in social work education found that having multiplicity of identities, for example being black and female with a learning difficulty, impacted their program persistence. According to Ghazala (2004), “people with learning difficulties who are also from ethnic minorities face double discrimination and exclusion in all areas of their lives” (p. 38). While Liu’s research showed that personal characteristics did not have any

negative impact on academic performance for participants in the program, “the intersectional effect of black, female, and learning difficulties contributes to non-completion in the programme” (Liu, 2017, p. 235). This non-completion was attributed to the challenges of developing good interrelationships and difficulties arising from cultural differences for social work students that identified with one or more minority groups.

Hutchinson & Buckingham (2021) corroborated these findings in their study of Alaska Native students in higher education, who have the lowest retention rates among any cohort in the United States (Guillory, 2009):

Universities may fail to understand differing worldviews, perceptions, and values held by AN/AI students (Brayboy, Solyom, & Castagno, 2015 as cited in Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021). For example, university settings may include elements--curriculums, behavioral expectations, educational styles--that unintentionally devalue the cultures of Indigenous students and conflict with students' cultural identities, leading to feelings of isolation, depression, and eventual disengagement from school (Huffman, 2001; Larimore & McClellan, 2005 as cited in Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021, pp. 213-214).

The motivations and purpose for many Alaska Native students to attend higher education institutions are to gain certifications and skills needed to contribute to their families and communities (Waterman, 2012). This may differ from many of their peers who are attending higher education institutions for more individual reasons and can impact their degree choices and programs of study.



Approach to Learning. The third theme that emerged from the literature is that a student's identity and background impact their approach to learning. For participants of the following studies, background and identity played a role in how they chose to contribute and participate in the classroom, their orientation to understanding concepts, and what they took away from course material. According to Eliason & Turalba, one's "cultural, ethnic, religious, or even sexual identity influenced their class participation patterns" (Eliason & Turalba, 2019, 1270). For example, Howard et al. (2006) found that age was a significant factor in class participation and that students aged 25 years and older tend to participate in class more often than those younger than 25 years old. Harper (2007) found low class participation among college students who identified as African American due to reported feelings of intellectual inadequacy and academic inferiority. Additionally, participants in Eliason & Turalba's study (2019) stated that they were often in positions where they felt they had to speak for their entire community, which some felt comfortable with, and some did not.

In their study on attracting mature students into higher education, Howard and Davies (2013) identified a difference in how mature students approached learning and understanding new concepts. In particular, mature students were more likely than younger students to adopt a deep approach to learning (Richardson, 1994; Sutherland, 1999), defined as an orientation to understanding concepts; which differs from a surface approach to learning, defined as a memorizing orientation (Entwistle, 2001). Howard and Davies described these mature students as more likely to "engage with learning tasks by employing a deep approach, being intrinsically motivated to learn and demonstrating a sensitivity to identification of the contextual cues necessary to develop satisfactory 'understanding'" (Howard & Davies, 2013, p. 772).

Racial identity also impacts how students approach course material. Chang (2002) found that black and white students have differing perspectives on many issues, including free speech, the death penalty, drug testing, consumer protection, and the prevalence of discrimination in society. Students with different racial backgrounds therefore engage with course material in significantly different ways. For example, Black students are much more likely to address issues of social class as they relate to racism, while White students are more likely to omit racial factors when discussing class and socioeconomic issues (Packard, 2013). This aligns with previous research that indicates race impacts student perceptions, leading students to interpret similar events differently depending on their racial identity (Fraser & Kick, 2000; Pager & Shepherd, 2008; Taylor & Mateyka, 2011; Wells et al., 2009).

### Identity and Background in Online Learning

As the above literature describes, one's identity and background have an impact on how they experience community and belonging in higher education, why they choose to persist in their programs, and even how they approach learning. However, colleges and universities in the US often share distinct characteristics that reflect the dominant majority. As Hutchinson & Buckingham state, "Universities have a unique ability to affect cultural identity through their cultural structures, which are predominantly Eurocentric/Western, and through exposure to other cultural groups" (Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021, p. 212). Most college campuses encourage some level of assimilation into the perceived identity of the American college student, which is not feasible or of interest to some students depending on their identities and backgrounds. This next section will explore the more limited literature around identity and background in online learning. Does that campus experience carry over to online learning? Do students that do not

reflect the dominant majority on American campuses feel more comfortable in that setting? Or does the online learning experience reflect that of the campus experience?

According to Hughes (2007), there is little evidence to suggest that online learning communities are more inclusive and welcoming toward diverse learners than traditional higher education. In fact, “they may be less so, as flexibility provides learners with more opportunities to disengage as well engage” (Hughes, 2007, p. 709). While there are known structural reasons for exclusion such as access to computers and the internet (Selwyn, 1998; Kirkup, 2001), digital literacy (Miller et al., 2000), and language or writing skills (Hughes & Lewis, 2003), there is still limited research on how identity and background impact the learning experience beyond exclusion due to lack of access.

Hughes (2007) studied how identity and background impact the formation of cohesive groups within e-learning communities, discourse, and participation in online courses. Given the social construction of identity, Hughes identified discourse, or the micro- and macro-level interactions and the learner’s interpretation of them, as crucial to the concept of identity congruence. Hughes describes identity congruence as an indicator of group cohesion and a driver of participation:

[Identity] congruence will occur when an individual’s social identities, such as ethnicity, nationality, gender and occupational status, are consistent with the topics and patterns of communication and associated discourses of identity that are made available by an online group or community. Where there is identity congruence, we would expect an individual to be much more likely to participate fully in a group than where there is incongruence (Hughes, 2007, p. 714).

However, the age of Hughes' research limits the concept of discourse to text-based communication, while advances in information technology have expanded the possibilities for interaction to new formats and platforms.

Delahunty's et al. (2014) more recent literature review on identity, belonging, and learning in online interactions found that identity continues to play a factor in social interaction and community participation. Distance education students who identified as mature age often had other responsibilities such as families and jobs, and developing relationships with other learners was often of a lower priority (Rovai et al., 2005). Owens et al. (2009) corroborated these findings, describing mature-age students as goal-oriented and more focused on completing their courses than social interaction. While researching ESL/EFL participation in online courses, Birch and Volkov (2007) found that ESL/EFL students would choose not to participate in discourse that was not mandatory, which aligns with Hughes' and Lewis' (2003) conclusions that language skills are a barrier to participation. However, even in 2014 research on discourse and interaction in online learning was mostly restricted to written communication: "In online environments, when the social meeting space is entirely a construct of written language, lacking any of these contextual factors, the evidence of identity construction must be found in the disembodied text of discussion boards or chatrooms" (Delahunty et al., 2014, p. 255).

Ragusa's and Crampton's (2018) study on sense of connection, identity, and academic success in distance education aligned with Rovai et al. (2005) and Owens et al. (2009) in that students not participating in higher education until years after graduating secondary school were motivated by the goal of completion. As one participant states, "I've been in the job fifteen years and all the other new guys are coming through, so I'm doing it because I need to, not 'cause I

necessarily want to ... for me it's just checking boxes and getting through" (Ragusa & Crampton, 2018, pp. 130-131). These students identified as mature age, and many chose to participate in distance education because they felt "disadvantaged" by entering a classroom of undergraduate students as an adult (Ragusa & Crampton, 2018).

While there is considerable research describing the structural barriers many marginalized students face when attempting to learn online, these barriers are not a product of the learner's identity and background but of the power dynamics and social construction that surround them. With that in mind, this study seeks to address the more limited research into identity and background beyond structural factors, specifically their impact on the experience of online learning. As the above review indicates, there is evidence that in traditional educational settings identity and background impact how learners experience community and belonging, what motivates them to persist, and their approach to learning. This also appears to be the case in online settings; however, the available research has not kept up with emerging information technology and trends in online education.

## METHODOLOGY

Method

This research took a case study approach and narrative research lens to describe and analyze how identity and background impact the online learning experience. A case study can be defined in terms of the research process (Yin, 1994), the unit of study (Stake, 1995), or the end product (Merriam, 1988; Wolcott, 1992). In the context of this research, the case study referred to all three: the research process, “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context” (Yin, 1994, as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 27); the unit of study, a bounded system (Stake, 1995); and the end product, “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit” (Merriam, 1988, p. 21). A case study design was selected as the research approach because it is difficult to separate the phenomenon, the learner experience, from the context, the course in which they are participating in (Merriam, 1998). Additionally, the unit of study was bound to a single semester-long course which is conducive to a case study approach.

The case study was interpretive in nature. Merriam describes interpretive case studies in relation to descriptive case studies: “Rather than just describing what was observed or what students reported in interview, the investigator might take all the data and develop a typology, a continuum, or categories that conceptualize different approaches to the task” (Merriam, 1998, pp. 38-39). This research resulted in a suggestion of relationships among variables, but given the scope of the study, did not construct a theory or provide any broad generalizations about the impact of identity and background on the online learning experience outside of this specific case.

Merriam states that with narrative research, “emphasis is on the stories people tell and on how these stories are communicated – on the language used to tell the stories” (Merriam, 1998, p. 157). In the context of this study, the narrative is a first-person account of one individual’s experience that is bound by the case. Narrative analysis was employed due to the richness of the experience shared by the study participant, providing a deep dive into their perspective of how identity and background has impacted their online learning experience within the case. This narrative, coupled with the data collected from additional sources within the case as described in the Data Sources and Data Collection Methods section below, serve as the foundation for the interpretive case study design.

#### Role of Researcher

Given the study’s theoretical alignment with constructivism, the role of the researcher was an instrument for observation and analysis as well as a unique data input. As an online learner with my own identity and background, I inherently brought my experiences into my interactions with research participants as well as my own biases to the analysis process. Merriam (1998) describes this phenomenon:

Because the primary instrument in qualitative research is human, all observations and analyses are filtered through that human being’s worldview, values, and perspective. It might be recalled that one of the philosophical assumptions underlying this type of research is that reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality. The researcher thus brings a construction of reality to the research situation, which interacts with other people’s constructions or interpretations of the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 1998, pp. 22-23).

### Participants

The selected case was a semester-long graduate-level course taught fully online. The course was in the Health and Human Development field at a large research institution in the Mountain West and was led by an experienced online instructor. The course was selected using purposeful sampling, which is “based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 1998, p. 61). To ensure the case was information-rich and relevant to the topic of study, the following selection criteria were determined:

1. The course was taught fully online
2. The instructor had experience teaching this course online
3. The instructor engaged in active learning, social learning, and demonstrated an inquiry-based learning approach
4. The course was graduate level
5. The course was within a program with a history of attracting more diverse learners

The first attribute was essential because this study was focused specifically on the online learning experience. A blended, hybrid, or hyflex learning environment may have provided some level of in-person interaction which may have affected how identity and background impacted the learning experience. The second attribute was chosen because the goal of the study was not to evaluate how well an instructor adapted their course for and facilitating learning in a new environment, as that comes with additional and often unforeseen challenges for both learners and the instructor. An experienced instructor would have a more established online pedagogy and provide more stability throughout the research process. The final two attributes of the course



were selected with the goal of increasing the diversity of identities and backgrounds of learners in the course. For example, graduate-level courses often have mature-aged learners and learners with more heterogeneous family situations. The determination of whether a program has a history of attracting more diverse learners was conducted through informal conversations with instructors across departments at the research institution.

The selection of the interview participant was through convenience sampling. Upon selection of the case, the instructor shared a survey with the students in the course, which requested study participants. Out of the eight students in the course, one consented to being interviewed for this study. Naturally, they were selected to participate in the hour-long semi-structured interview and were the student of interest in the live class observation.

#### Data Sources and Data Collection Methods

There were three major sources of data for the study: (a) a review of the syllabus, (b) an observation of a synchronous videoconferencing class session, and (c) a semi-structured interview. The review of the syllabus provided insights into the expectations and tone of the instructor, which may have had an impact on the learning experience. The observation of a synchronous videoconferencing class session provided more insight into peer-peer and instructor-peer interactions. Finally, the semi-structured interview was the most significant instrument for understanding the perspective of the participant, providing them with an opportunity to share about their identity and background and how these elements impacted the participant's learning experience. This interview informed the narrative analysis, providing a rich description of one experience with online learning. Please see the interview protocol outlined in Appendix A.

### Ethical Considerations

Please note that the study initially also included a fourth source of data, observations of the online course environment in the Learning Management System (LMS). However, these observations were dropped in order to accommodate IRB requirements. The researcher intended to conduct three observations of the online course environment in the LMS over the semester to reveal peer-peer and instructor-peer interactions on activities like discussion posts and online group work. Due to the nature of how student interactions are displayed within the LMS, with all student names and educational data visible to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) deemed active informed consent from every student to be necessary to conduct these observations. Voluntary active informed consent from every student was not feasible for this course, which ultimately made these observations untenable. However, it may be possible to conduct these observations under different circumstances, which are outlined in the recommendations for future research within chapter five, Findings.

### Data Analysis Approach

This research aligned with Kalpokaite's & Radivojevic's (2019) approach to data analysis, which "synthesi[zes] the relevant advice of multiple qualitative research experts into a coherent series of analytic cycles: The Inspection Cycle, Coding Cycle, Categorization Cycle, and Modelling Cycle" (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019, p. 54). Drawing upon both inductive and deductive research practices, this approach provides a solid foundation for data analysis. When studying a phenomenon, the researcher engages in bracketing or epoche in order to

“remove, or at least become aware of prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation” (Katz, 1987, p. 37). As this research was grounded in constructivism, the researcher’s biases were considered throughout the data analysis process. This aligned with Kalpokaite’s & Radivojevic’s approach, as they believe the involvement of the researcher “permits a ‘healthy corrective for built-in blind spots.’ Resulting in not only a richer analysis but a more compelling one” (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019, p. 45).

With Kalpokaite’s & Radivojevic’s approach, coding and thematic development were conducted through three areas of analysis: the inspection cycle, coding cycle, and categorization cycle. Due to the nature of a case study and the preferences of the researcher, coding was an iterative, manual process without the assistance of any qualitative analysis software. The inspection cycle is a “preliminary analytic procedure” (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019, p. 51) where the researcher begins exploring and familiarizing themselves with the data. This provides the researcher with an opportunity to quantify and reflect on the data to understand what was collected before making any interpretations. Next is the coding cycle, which is the practice of “selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and/or transforming the data that appear in the full corpus of information” (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019, p. 51). The coding cycle is broken up into pre-coding, initial coding, and elaborative coding, which are used iteratively to select, focus, simplify, abstract, and/or transform the data to help answer the research questions. The final stage in Kalpokaite’s & Radivojevic’s approach to coding and thematic development is the categorization cycle, which “consists of developing a categorial or thematic organisation of the code list” (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019, p. 51). This involves analyzing and grouping codes into

“meaningful categories, themes, or constructs” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, as cited in Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019, P. 47). Beginning with focused coding, where the researcher begins to approach the data through the lens of the theoretical framework, the categorization cycle is where the researcher uses the context of the study to find conceptual similarities between the pared-down codes and identifies emergent themes.

### Trustworthiness

As Ratcliffe (1983) states, “one cannot observe or measure a phenomenon/event without changing it” (as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 202). However, there are several steps outlined by both Merriam (1998) and Lincoln & Guba (1985) to enhance internal validity in a qualitative case study, including (a) triangulation, (b) peer examination, and (c) researcher reflexivity. Triangulation of data will be used to corroborate findings and facilitate deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The multiple sources of data outlined in the above Participants & Data section used for triangulation were reviewed by a panel of education researchers at an R1 institution prior to the study. However, as Mathison (1988) states, triangulation through multiple sources of data may produce contradictory evidence, and so the data gathered through these sources was used to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Given that the study was conducted over the course of the semester, it met the qualifications for long-term observation. Peer examination, or the exposure of findings to colleagues for comment (Merriam, 1998), was used throughout the data analysis process. Finally, the researcher continued to engage in reflexivity until the study was completed. According to Malterud, “A researcher’s background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings

considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (Malterud, 2001, pp. 483-484). Given the significant impact a researcher has on qualitative research, I have outlined my positionality and role to allow the reader to determine how my biases may have impacted the study processes and resulting inferences.

Given the nature of a case study, reliability is not a priority in determining its trustworthiness. Replication of this case study naturally will not produce the same results, but that does not necessarily discredit findings:

Because of what is being studied in education is assumed to be in flux, multifaceted, and highly contextual, because information gathering is a function of who gives it and how skilled the researcher is at getting it, and because the emergent design of a qualitative case study precludes a priori controls, achieving reliability in the traditional sense is not only fanciful but impossible (Merriam, 1998, p. 206).

Rather than focusing on how to achieve the same results, Lincoln and Guba encourage “dependability” or “consistency” as a function of reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 288, as cited in Merriam, 1998, p. 205). To ensure dependability, outsiders should be able to establish that the results make sense and are consistent with the data collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). This can be done through researcher positionality and triangulation, which have both been described above, as well as by the researcher creating an audit trail through a description of the data collection and analysis methods.

External validity, or generalizability, is “the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam, 1998, p. 207). As with reliability, case studies are inherently not entirely generalizable and are not conducted to provide sweeping conclusions

about whole populations. This research was limited to findings about the phenomenon in the context of the specific case: the impact of identity and background to the experience among learners in a semester-long online course in the Health and Human Development field at a large research institution in the Mountain West. It is up to the reader to determine how applicable this research is to their case, known as reader or user generalizability (Merriam, 1998). However, the researcher has an obligation to encourage reader generalizability by providing rich, thick description of the case and context.

## FINDINGS

### Introduction

There were three major sources of data for the study: (a) a review of the syllabus, (b) an observation of a synchronous videoconferencing class session, and (c) a semi-structured interview. The course was selected in August 2023 with the consent of the instructor. The instructor then shared the syllabus in September 2023, prior to any observations and interviews. During the first week of the Fall semester 2023 course, the instructor posted recruitment materials in the learning management system. Six students responded to the survey indicating that they were willing to allow me to observe their interactions within the learning management system, and one also indicated that they would be willing to be interviewed for the study. Two students did not respond to the survey.

### Data Collection Challenges

Active informed consent was necessary from all students in the course in order for the researcher to observe the course environment in the learning management system as well as the synchronous class session conducted via videoconferencing. This requirement was due to FERPA restrictions on third party access to student educational records, which included their interactions in the learning management system and participation in the live videoconferencing session where their names were visible to the researcher. Therefore, the lack of response from two members of the course restricted the researcher from any observations at all in the learning management system and required adjustment to the observation of the live videoconferencing session: rather than joining the videoconferencing session as a silent observer, the instructor

shared an audio recording following the live class session where the researcher could not view any names associated with student participation, protecting those students who chose not to provide consent. Upon receiving consent from one participant, the researcher scheduled an hour-long interview with that participant. The interview was conducted via videoconferencing in October 2023. The researcher received the audio recording for one live class session in November 2023.

This investigation seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. In what ways do a student's identity and background impact how they experience an online or distance learning setting?
2. In what ways are instructors effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance learning setting?

### Emerging Constructs

The following section presents constructs that emerged from the participant interview, syllabus review, and observation of a live synchronous class session conducted via videoconferencing. During the coding process, these constructs were classified under three major themes identified in the literature review as the ways in which identity and background impact learning in a traditional setting: (a) community and belonging, (b) persistence & purpose, and (c) approach to learning. The intent of this classification was to reveal the similarities and differences between how identity and background impact the traditional learning experience and the online learning experience. These themes relate directly to the first research question: In what ways do a student's identity and background impact how they experience an online or distance



learning setting? Community and belonging are characterized as how students engage, assimilate, and feel a sense of belonging within the learning community (Eliason & Turalba, 2019; Howard & Davies, 2013; Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021; McPherson, 2016; White, 2011). Persistence and purpose are the driving factors behind why a student chose to engage with their program and what brings them to continue course after course and semester after semester (Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021; Liu, 2017; McPherson, 2016). The individual's approach to learning is how they choose to contribute and participate in the classroom, their orientation to understanding concepts, and what they took away from course material (Chang, 2002; Eliason & Turalba, 2019; Harper, 2007; Howard & Davies, 2013; Howard et al., 2006; Packard, 2013).

The final major theme, support for learners, relates to the second research question: In what ways are instructors effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance learning setting? Support for learners emerged as the primary way that instructors engaged with and helped learners to overcome any barriers associated with their identities and backgrounds and is characterized by the emotional support and understanding or flexibility instructors provided learners based on their unique needs.

### Summary of Emerging Themes

The below table describes the major themes that emerged throughout the data analysis process. The intent of this table is to provide transparency around how the codes and themes were determined, which allows outside readers to establish that the results make sense and are consistent with the data collected. This supports the reliability of the study by ensuring dependability of the data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998). Please

note that this is only a sample of the quotes provided, and a more complete set can be found in Appendix B.

Table 1. Excerpt of the codebook used in this study

Theme	Codes	Exemplar Quotes
Community & Belonging	Sociopolitical Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I’m a Christian and I have a lot of Christian values.”</li> <li>• “I am pretty conservative and I feel like I am in class with a lot of more liberal minded people and so I tend to maybe say things a little differently and tend to hold back in discussing some things that I feel like we might not necessarily agree on. It definitely impacts what I bring to the classroom.”</li> </ul>
	Progressive language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Our medical and nursing and physical assessment knowledge are based greatly in white, Judeo-Christian, cis-gender viewpoints.”</li> <li>• “Systemic racism, experimentation, and exclusion continues to have devastating impacts on reproductive health for too many Americans.”</li> </ul>
	Professional identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I identify as a nurse and with the medical community, I feel we’re pretty tight knit and they become your family when you’re working together. Even people that I haven’t worked with in ten years we’re still close and I know that I could count on them for anything.”</li> <li>• “You can find out someone’s a nurse and you’re immediately friends, because you just have similar experiences and backgrounds that nobody else can understand.”</li> </ul>

Table 1 Continued.

Persistence & Purpose	Rural identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I identify as a mom, as a ranch wife.”</li> <li>• “I identify with the agriculture community. That’s really important to my upbringing and our livelihood now, we live and work on my husband’s family’s ranch.”</li> </ul>
	Commitment to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I actually acquired a real passion for community health.”</li> <li>• “I coached basketball. I did 4H. I go chaperone.”</li> </ul>
	Identity as hard-working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My mother-in-law always uses the quote “if you need help, go find the busiest person you know” – because we don’t know how to say no. So unfortunately I’m that person.”</li> <li>• “I was raised to be a hard worker, and I think that I can contribute my successes to that in the Grad school, and the online program in general. I ‘m responsible and I make sure that I am checking deadlines and logging in enough that I’m not missing something.”</li> </ul>
Approach to Learning	Non-traditional/older learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I’m, you know... when I was in undergrad there was always that nontraditional student that drove us all crazy because they had all the answers and all the questions and I don’t want to be that person.”</li> <li>• “I think a lot of these younger people in their twenties would not even know how to function in school how I did, it was just so very different.”</li> </ul>
	Rural identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “As far as my ranch background, I feel like I really understand what it’s like to be living in a rural area.”</li> <li>• “There’s just all these little things that I have had the privilege of understanding from being in a rural area. You send a patient home with a central line, or a wound to change or whatever it may be, and they can’t just get back to the clinics, so we take care of our own out in these rural areas and it’s really an awesome thing.”</li> </ul>

Table 1 Continued.

<p>Support for Learners</p>	<p>Emotional support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “MSU strives to create a culture of support and recognizes that your mental health and well-being are equally as important as your physical health. We want you to know that it’s okay if you experience difficulty, and there are several resources on campus to assist you in succeeding emotionally, personally, and academically.”</li> <li>• “It’s been my experience this time that the professors are all very approachable and caring and helpful. They truly, I feel, understand what we’re all going through, because without even asking they will offer “We know this is tough. We know that you’re feeling like there’s no way you can do this. We know you’re feeling scared or whatever. They talk us off the ledge because they recognize that it’s normal and obviously experienced it either themselves or have seen a lot of students go through struggles.”</li> </ul>
	<p>Understanding/ flexibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “They are very responsive to email. Most of them will give us their phone number. They’ll text or they’ll have office hours. They’re so available and not only that, nearly all of them are like “family comes first, if there’s something in your life do not suffer in silence. Don’t struggle, reach out to us if you’re sick, if there’s something awful going on in your life, we want to know about it so we can support through this.”</li> <li>• “I had professors that, you know, were going to give me extensions or whatever I needed. I was even able to use some of my hours in providing his hospice care, his comfort care to meet some of the requirements in the class.”</li> </ul>

ResultsResearch Question 1

In what ways do a student's identity and background impact how they experience an online or distance learning setting?

Community and Belonging. The participant felt that their identity as a Christian woman with more conservative values impacted their participation within the course because they perceived the course community to share a more progressive ideology:

*I am pretty conservative, and I feel like I am in class with a lot of more liberal minded people and so I tend to maybe say things a little differently and tend to hold back in discussing some things that I feel like we might not necessarily agree on. It definitely impacts what I bring to the classroom ... I feel like [in] the University systems in general you have a lot of professors [who] tend to be more liberal and so as a conservative, I just... I don't know, I don't want people to judge me for that. And I'm not going to change the way I am. I'm kind of proud of who I am, and I believe what I believe. And I know why I believe what I believe. And I believe everyone feels the same way, so there's no use in trying to change anybody's mind, but I also don't want to be judged for that or I don't want it to affect the way people treat me or anything like that, so I tend to just not expose that side of myself.*

There were two passages in the syllabus where the instructor endorsed a more progressive ideology. The instructor used inclusive language such as a broad diversity and inclusion statement validating individuality and respecting the differences of other people's perspectives,

behaviors, and worldviews. Additionally, the instructor included a statement on justice within health care, acknowledging the existence of systemic racism:

*Our medical and nursing and physical assessment knowledge are based greatly in white, Judeo-Christian, cis-gender viewpoints. Systemic racism, experimentation, and exclusion continues to have devastating impacts on reproductive health for too many Americans. Our course will explore reproductive health across a variety of races, cultures, religions, LGBTQ+, socioeconomic groups, populations, and individuals.*

The instructor also used progressive language in the live class conducted via videoconferencing, for example referring to a “bed partner” rather than a husband or wife. The participant may have perceived these examples, in addition to some of the interactions they had with their peers, to indicate a norm among the class community that does not align with their conservative Christian values.

Throughout the interview, the participant expressed a desire to cultivate professional relationships with their peers in the medical community. This was a key reason for them to enroll in this program and return to higher education:

*As a school nurse, you're just kind of on an island and you don't really fit in and no one really understands what you do. I just really wanted to be back with the medical community around people that understood me and appreciated me.*

Their background as a nurse had a strong impact on their feelings of community and belonging in the online course. They found interpersonal connection to be challenging in a distance setting, and relied on their shared professional identity to overcome distance barriers and build community with their peers:

*A few peers that I've done project work with and got to know better, we can let our guard down a little bit and have a little bit more fun together. I do miss that aspect of in-person learning, especially as a nurse. It's hard working with people you've never seen in real life, and it's hard to make connections with classmates that you've never seen in person. I think [our] identity probably plays a part, especially identifying as nurses, I think that's a huge part of it. You can find out someone's a nurse and you're immediately friends, because you just have similar experiences and backgrounds that nobody else can understand.*

Persistence and Purpose. The participant's background as a member of a tight-knit rural community had a strong impact on their motivations and purpose for engaging with their online program. Their perception of rural identity is a community that pitches in and supports each other based on an all-in-this-together mentality. The participant chose this profession and continues to persist through their program in part due to their commitment to their rural community:

*I coach basketball. I did 4H. I go chaperone ... I took a job as a school nurse more as community service because I was the only nurse in town, and they needed someone to kind of check the boxes for what was required by the state of schools that only a nurse could do. And I've just kind of held on to that job through my period of illness so that I could get back in nursing ... I liked being part of the school and, you know, kind of seeing my kids there and that sort of thing. And then when covid hit, it was like, a huge job and I actually acquired a real passion for community health.*

The participant feels ownership over their community and is pursuing a nursing degree in part because of its broader utility to those around them.

Central to the participant's identity is their perception of themselves as a hard worker. They described their family origins and the values instilled in them growing up as a factor in this identity. Additionally, their experience raising a family in a rural area that lives and works on a ranch contributes to their hard-working persona. This identity impacts how they engage with their online program and contributes to their persistence and success:

*I was raised to be a hard worker, and I think that I can contribute my successes to that in the Grad school, and the online program in general. I'm responsible and I make sure that I am checking deadlines and logging in enough that I'm not missing something.*

Approach to Learning. As a non-traditional learner returning to higher education, the participant frequently cited the differences in which they interacted with the online learning space compared to their peers. They perceived their peers to be digital natives who were comfortable learning online and better understood the expectations associated with interacting with the learning management system. On the other hand, they had a difficult time viewing any assignments that were to be written up and submitted as low stakes, even those designated to simulate informal discussion:

*A lot of the younger students have experience with more of an online platform. In undergrad I had literally one class that used anything online. I never even owned a computer until I was a junior in college. It's vastly different, I mean, there's seriously no comparison. And so I think a lot of these younger people in their twenties would not even know how to function in school how I did, it was just so very different ... I've noticed that*



*when I talk to some other students, they're so used to submitting discussions online. Like it's no big deal. And to me, I feel like I have to write this perfect four page paper every time I write a comment that has to be detailed and perfect and they're like, it's a discussion, you just have to put something in. So I think we are coming from very different perspectives and backgrounds.*

The participant also felt that their background as an older, non-traditional student impacted their class participation:

*I feel insecure about talking too much sometimes when we have our group meetings, and the professor will ask questions, and I hate that everyone just sits there on mute and won't give the answer. And sometimes I do, and then think ugh I'm that person, I should just keep my mouth shut and not talk, they're going to think I'm, you know... when I was in undergrad there was always that non-traditional student that drove us all crazy because they had all the answers and all the questions and I don't want to be that person.*

This perspective was corroborated through the live class session conducted via videoconference. When the instructor posed questions to the group, the participant was frequently the first voice to break any longer pauses in dialogue, particularly when the instructor prompted the group with phrases like “anybody?” or “be brave.” However, it was evident as the class went on that the participant attempted to refrain from responding first to each question, even when they had an answer.

Finally, the participant's background as a member of a rural community impacted their orientation to understanding concepts and what they took away from the course material. Their experience in an isolated environment allows them to approach content differently than their

peers and to consider how to adapt the concepts they are learning to meet the needs of their community:

*As far as my ranch background, I feel like I really understand what it's like to be living in a rural area. Even getting hospice care for my father-in-law, we live 10 miles out on a dirt road and people would get thoroughly lost trying to find us. It was going to take a nurse two hours to get here, if not longer, from the time we called. There's just all these little things that I have had the privilege of understanding from being in a rural area. You send a patient home with a central line, or a wound to change or whatever it may be, and they can't just get back to the clinics, so we take care of our own out in these rural areas and it's really an awesome thing. I think it gives me the unique perspective of how to approach things differently or how to be creative to care for people that don't have the resources readily available to them. A lot of people coming from more urban areas don't quite appreciate, so sometimes I think that I can relate differently than some of the people with maybe less experience, or work in a setting other than the big hospitals where they have everything available to them right there.*

The data indicated that a student's identity and background impacted how they experience an online or distance learning setting in three key areas: community and belonging, persistence and purpose, and approach to learning. The participant's identity as a Christian woman with conservative sociopolitical ideology, as well as their background as a nurse, impacted their feelings of community and belonging among their peers in the course. Their background as a member of a rural community and their identity as a hard worker impacted their purpose for enrolling in a nursing graduate program and why they persist from semester to

semester. Finally, their background as a nontraditional learner as well as a member of a rural community impacted their approach to learning through their class participation, orientation to understanding concepts, and what they took away from course material.

### Research Question 2

In what ways are instructors effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance learning setting?

Support for Learners. The participant expressed positive feelings about the support they received as a learner throughout the course. The approach that the instructor took was to acknowledge the challenges associated with engaging in a graduate program as well as the unique subject matter of the course. This helped the learners to relate to the instructor and feel more comfortable expressing themselves:

*It's been my experience this time that the professors are all very approachable and caring and helpful. They truly, I feel, understand what we're all going through, because without even asking they will offer "We know this is tough. We know that you're feeling like there's no way you can do this. We know you're feeling scared or whatever." They talk us off the ledge because they recognize that it's normal and obviously experienced it either themselves or have seen a lot of students go through struggles ... They're so available and not only that, nearly all of them are like "family comes first, if there's something in your life do not suffer in silence. Don't struggle, reach out to us if you're sick, if there's something awful going on in your life, we want to know about it so we can support you through this."*

The instructor's approach is outlined in the syllabus, where the instructor provides a trigger warning speaking to the unique subject matter of the course:

*Many nurses (and therefore students) have experienced trauma in their lifetimes.*

*Sometimes this course can trigger uncomfortable feelings or painful memories. If, at any time a conversation or topic in this course is uncomfortable, feel free to take a break, lean in and discuss, share, or dialogue about the impact it has on you.*

Additionally, the instructor demonstrates empathy and a commitment to support for mental health:

*MSU strives to create a culture of support and recognizes that your mental health and well-being are equally as important as your physical health. We want you to know that it's okay if you experience difficulty, and there are several resources on campus to assist you in succeeding emotionally, personally, and academically.*

The participant also felt that the flexibility and understanding demonstrated by instructors helped them to persist through challenges they had in their personal life. When they had a death in the family, their instructor worked with them to adjust an assignment so they could still meet the course requirements:

*Last fall my father-in-law died and I went part time because he had cancer and I didn't know what the timeline would be, but I suspected that I wouldn't want to be a full-time student getting ready to start clinicals right when he was dying and I knew he was going to need my help. He and my husband have ranched together their entire lives, and I was here taking care of him. It was such a comfort knowing that whenever that happened it wasn't going to be the end of the world. That I had professors that, you know, were going*

*to give me extensions or whatever I needed. I was even able to use some of my hours in providing his hospice care, his comfort care to meet some of the requirements in the class.*

Finally, the participant expressed that there was more that their instructors could have done to effectively engage students with a variety of identities, particularly by being more cognizant of religious holidays and other calendar events that may impact a student's ability to meet deadlines. In one case, they described a 40-page assignment that an instructor in their program scheduled to be due in the evening on Easter Sunday. As their Christianity is a significant part of their identity, they had a very difficult time finishing up a heavily weighted assignment while also juggling their religious and family commitments on Easter.

The data indicated that in the context of this course, the instructor effectively engaged students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance setting by demonstrating support for students and providing flexibility and understanding when students had challenging situations arise. The instructor demonstrated empathy for learners struggling with the course content as well as difficulties outside of the course. However, instructors across their program could've more effectively engaged students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance setting with more consideration of religious holidays and other calendar events that may impact a student's ability to meet deadlines.

Summary

Through the syllabus review, semi-structured interview, and observation of a synchronous class session, four major themes emerged that related to the two research questions. For the first research question, results from this study suggested that a student's identity and background impacted their feelings of community and belonging, their purpose for participating in the program and why they chose to persist, and their approach to learning. The participant cited their sociopolitical identity and their background as a nurse as factors impacting their feelings of community and belonging. They referred to their rural community and identity as a hard worker as factors that drove their purpose and reasoning for persistence. They also cited their rural identity when considering their approach to learning course content, and their background as a nontraditional learner which impacted how they operated in the online learning environment and their perception of their peers.

Regarding the second research question, the participant referenced the support instructors provided to their learners as a way that they were effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance learning setting. In the context of the course, this support came through the feelings of emotional support that the learner experienced, as well as the flexibility and understanding they were granted when facing challenges in their personal life. Additionally, the participant specified a deadline that coincided with a religious holiday to indicate another consideration that instructors can take to support their students when developing courses.

## DISCUSSION

### Introduction

This study investigated the impact that a student's identity and background have on their online learning experience. First, this chapter provides a summary of the study's case selection, participants, data collection, and data analysis process. Next is a discussion of the study's findings and interpretations when considered in the context of the existing research described in the literature review. Findings and interpretations will be presented in a way that addresses each research question: (1) in what ways do a student's identity and background impact how they experience and online or distance learning setting, and (2) in what ways are instructors effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance setting? The chapter will also address the study's limitations and culminate with recommendations for future research and conclusions.

### Background

The selected case was a semester-long graduate-level course taught fully online. The course was selected using purposeful sampling (Merriam, 1998), with the following selection criteria: (a) the course was taught fully online, (b) the instructor had experience teaching this course online, (c) the instructor engaged in active learning, social learning, and demonstrated an inquiry-based learning approach, (d) the course was graduate-level, and (e) the course was within a program with a history of attracting more diverse learners. This criterion was determined to ensure relevance to the research questions and to align with the paradigm established by the theoretical frameworks.

The selected course was in the Health and Human Development field at a large research institution in the Mountain West and was led by an experienced online instructor. The course included several opportunities for active and social learning such as discussion posts and interactive live synchronous classes conducted via videoconferencing. The course had eight students enrolled, and one student agreed to participate in the semi-structured interview for the study.

Data was collected from three sources: (a) a review of the syllabus, (b) an observation of a synchronous videoconferencing class session, and (c) a semi-structured interview. The purpose of the syllabus review was to provide insight into the expectations and tone of the instructor. The class observation allowed the researcher to view the peer-peer and instructor-peer interactions. Finally, the semi-structured interview provided an opportunity for the participant to share their perspective, their identity and background, and their experience with online learning.

The data analysis for this research used Kalpokaite's & Radivojevic's (2019) approach to data analysis, which steps through a series of analytic cycles: The Inspection Cycle, Coding Cycle, Categorization Cycle, and Modelling Cycle. Rather than bracketing the experiences of the researcher, this approach permitted their involvement to acknowledge the impact that their experiences had on their findings and to provide a richer, more compelling analysis. This aligned with the constructivist framework of the study. Coding and thematic development occurs in the first three stages of Kalpokaite's & Radivojevic's approach, where the researcher begins exploring and familiarizing themselves with the data, focusing and transforming the data, and developing a categorical and thematic organization of the code list (Kalpokaite & Radivojevic, 2019). Analysis resulted in the data classified into four broad themes, each with several



associated codes: community and belonging, persistence and purpose, approach to learning, and support for learners.

### Research Question 1

This section discusses the study's findings for the first research question: in what ways do a student's identity and background impact how they experience and online or distance learning setting? The section is organized into the three overarching themes identified in the literature review and the study's data: community and belonging, persistence and purpose, and approach to learning. For each theme, there will be a description of the ways in which identity and background impact the construct, followed by a comparison with existing research to reveal any similarities or differences.

#### Community and Belonging

As with the existing literature about how identity and background impact a student's experience in a traditional classroom setting, the study found that the participant's identity and background impacted how they experienced community and belonging in an online or distance learning setting. For example, the participant referred to their perception that the instructor and their peers shared a more progressive ideology that did not align with their own worldview. This caused them to "*hold back in discussing some things*" for fear of judgement or of their peers treating them differently. Their perception of the community as a more progressive space was validated by language in the syllabus and comments made during the live class session. They felt that progressive ideology was established as the norm in this community, which conflicted with their own perspective. The participant's experience with their political identity as it relates to the

case demonstrates the importance of two of the key elements of a learning experience within the Community of Inquiry model: teaching presence and social presence (Garrison et al., 2000). The instructor developed a strong teaching presence through their design and organization of the course as well as how they facilitated discussion, therefore their perceived ideology permeated through the learning experience. Additionally, the participant's feelings of community and belonging were impacted by their social presence within the learning community, as they felt their ideology played a part in their peer-peer interactions.

Other research has found that students' racial and cultural differences that do not align with the norms they are experiencing in the classroom can result in a lack of participation for some students. For example, White (2011) found that students who are racial minorities reported lower levels of participation due to differences in language and discourse commonly used in college classrooms, which reflect "White" behaviors and norms that conflict with their own cultural background and upbringing. While White's study focused on racial differences rather than the religious and ideological differences that the student in this study experienced, it might help explain why the student felt that they should mask their opinions and at times were more reserved in their peer interactions and engagement in class.

Howard's and Davies' 2013 study on attracting mature students to higher education found that older learners struggled to identify with the existing student community but were able to overcome this challenge by constructing a shared social identity centered on students' backgrounds, group memberships, goals, and challenges that facilitated assimilation into the broader student community. Additionally, these challenges were heightened in the online learning space where there are fewer opportunities for community-building, collaboration, and

social learning (McInnery & Roberts, 2004). The participant confirmed this phenomenon, indicating that their background as a nurse had a strong impact on their feelings of community and belonging in the online course. They frequently referenced their desire to interact with their professional community and how easily they were able to build connection with others who share the same professional experiences, for example: *“I feel like a lot of the doctoral students in my program are exactly like me, we’re all type A people. We’re professionals, we’re nurses and we’re working and we have professional goals and that’s why we’re here.”*

While there were similarities between how a student’s identity and background impact their experience in both a traditional classroom and an online or distance learning environment, the key difference was that the distance format put more pressure on individuals to find common ground through their shared interest in the course or professional interests, as there were fewer opportunities to have informal conversations that facilitate connection. In discussing their sociopolitical ideology, the participant remarked upon how the online setting offered only a few opportunities with group work and discussion posts for them to get a sense of the identities and backgrounds of their peers. To overcome this barrier, the participant relied on professional experiences that all their peers could relate to: *“you can find out someone’s a nurse and you’re immediately friends, because you just have similar experiences and backgrounds that nobody else can understand.”*

### Persistence and Purpose

Waterman (2012) found that the motivations and purpose for many Alaska Native students to attend higher education institutions was to gain certifications and skills needed to contribute to their families and communities. While this participant did not identify as an Alaska

Native, they did share this motivation but based it upon their own background as a member of a tight-knit rural community. The participant frequently referred to their rural community as a source of pride, but also as a way of life that requires unique investment and commitment that those who grew up in a different environment may not understand. This was often coupled with their pride in being a hard worker, which they attributed to their upbringing and life on a ranch. Their identity as a hard-working rancher in a rural community has a profound impact on why they are continuing their education and how they persist through their program: to support their community, and because they consider hard work to be a way of life.

The participant described their online program to have different demands and expectations than traditional higher education experiences that they have had in the past. They expressed that it required more administrative management to stay on top of assignments, readings, and deadlines in the learning management system. They attribute their ability to succeed in the online setting on their hard-working persona: *“I was raised to be a hard worker, and I think that I can contribute my successes to that in the Grad school, and the online program in general.”* Additionally, they expressed that it was unlikely that they would even be able to participate in an in-person program given their rural location and the distance between their home and a university, so it was truly their only opportunity to pursue higher education:

*I chose an online program because I need to be able to do a lot of my schoolwork from home. I live an hour away from Billings and so 3 hours away from Bozeman, so finding a university to do it in person would not be possible.*

### Approach to Learning

The participant's identity and background had a significant impact on how they approached learning in an online or distance setting. Based upon the findings of the study, the introduction of a learning management system as the main platform for operating the course impacted how students with various identities approach assignments and learning activities. As an older, non-traditional learner, the participant perceived their peers to be more comfortable with technology and they interacted with the learning platform in a different way. For example, they cited discussion posts and other low-stakes assignments as places where their peers with previous experience in a learning management system felt comfortable submitting more informal work, while they still worked to submit more polished posts despite it not being a requirement. Paired with their more frequent contributions in the lived class sessions conducted via videoconferencing, the impact of the participant's background as an older learner on their online learning experience reflected the existing literature. For example, Howard et al. (2006) found that age was a significant factor in class participation and that students aged 25 years and older tend to participate in class more often than younger students.

Given their background as an older, nontraditional learner with real-world experience as a health care provider in a rural area, the participant took on the More Knowledgeable Other role as described in Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development Theory (1978) in their interactions with other students. As an older, nontraditional learner, they were confident sharing their perspective in the live class session, despite their apprehension with occupying space. They challenged their peers to consider the unique obstacles associated with rural medicine, and pushed the thinking of their peers in a way that they would not have been able to without the

presence of the participant in the course. As Dewey outlines in his 1938 Inquiry-Based Learning Theory, the critical analysis, questioning, and challenging of assumptions demonstrated in these peer-peer interactions is a crucial component of an effective learning experience.

### Research Question 1 Summary

The findings from this study indicated that a student's identity and background did indeed impact how they experienced learning in an online or distance setting. In particular, they impacted the individual's feelings of community and belonging, their purpose for pursuing higher education and why they chose to persist through their program, and their approach to learning. The study's findings reflected much of the existing literature about the ways in which a student's identity and background impacted their learning experience in a traditional classroom setting, but a few differences stood out. First, the distance format limited the frequency of informal peer-peer and instructor-peer interactions, which put more pressure on individuals to find common ground through their shared interest in the course or professional interests that brought them into the space. Second, the online experience had fewer touch points without a regular meeting, which resulted in more administrative expectations from students and required them to stay on top of assignments independently in order to persist through their program. Third, the introduction of the learning management system resulted in students taking different approaches to online-based modules, assignments, and activities depending on their backgrounds.

## Research Question 2

This section discusses the study's findings for the second research question: in what ways are instructors effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance learning setting? The overarching theme that emerged in relation to how instructors effectively engage students was support for learners. There will be a description of how students are experiencing this support based upon the study's findings. Finally, there will be recommendations for educators who seek to effectively engage students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance learning setting.

### Support for Learners

The study's findings indicated that the instructor in this case was able to effectively engage students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance setting by demonstrating support on a professional and personal level as well as offering flexibility and understanding when outside forces impacted their lives. Within the Community of Inquiry model, this falls under the category of teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). The instructor indicated their support for learners first through language in their syllabus acknowledging the challenges associated with the course material and pursuing higher education in general. The instructor also used the syllabus to provide resources supporting students' mental health. The participant expressed that these topics first discussed in the syllabus carried through discussion posts and live synchronous class sessions, and that they felt supported throughout the course. The instructor's acknowledgement of the realities of the program and demonstration of empathy for students who may be struggling helped to foster community and belonging among

the students in the course, with the participant describing moments when peers stepped in to support each other in times of need. Creating a feeling of community and belonging is a significant challenge in a course conducted fully online (McInnery & Roberts, 2004), and is a strong demonstration of both teaching and social presence as described by the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000).

For the instructors in this program, expressions of support such as those visible in the case study were not simply an empty gesture; when a situation arose that made it difficult for the participant to complete course requirements, they were met with flexibility and understanding that helped them persist through their program. This included extensions for assignments, and in one case, a complete restructuring of fieldwork so they could support their family emergency while still meeting course requirements. Like many students who identify as mature-age or nontraditional, the participant had responsibilities outside of the classroom such as a family and a job (Rovai et al., 2005). They are extremely family-oriented and would certainly prioritize the needs of their family members over their schoolwork. Without flexibility and understanding from their instructor with assignments and deadlines during this challenging time, it is possible that they may not have been able to meet the requirements of the course and persist through their program.

### Research Question 2 Summary

There were two noteworthy ways that the instructor was able to effectively engage students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance setting. Demonstrating support for learners by acknowledging the challenges associated with the course material and pursuing higher education can help learners of any identity with any



background feel like they belong. Providing flexibility and understanding when students are faced with challenges outside of the classroom can help all students, but especially nontraditional students or marginalized students who may already struggle with persistence (Hutchinson & Buckingham, 2021; Liu, 2017; McPherson, 2016).

### Recommendations for Educators

Findings from the first research question revealed the ways in which identity and background impacted the participant's learning experience. These findings provided context to the areas in which an instructor can focus their efforts toward inclusion. The second research question, the ways in which instructors are effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance learning setting, informed a set of recommendations for educators. These recommendations include:

1. Demonstrate support for learners

For educators wishing to reach students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance setting, this study found that demonstrating support for learners can help foster a sense of community and belonging among peers. Acknowledging that course material and the pursuit of higher education can be a considerable challenge for anybody, and that there are resources available to support mental health and student success, can be a powerful tool to help students of any identity and with any background. Educators can indicate their support from the onset in syllabus language and should reiterate their support throughout the course through the various touch points they have with students. Within the Community of Inquiry model, these

interactions would be considered a component of both teaching and social presence (Garrison et al., 2000).

2. Provide flexibility and understanding

Another significant take-away from this study was that providing flexibility and understanding with assignments and deadlines helps to support student persistence. This is of course helpful for students of all identities and backgrounds, but this study found that it is particularly helpful for mature-age or nontraditional students who have considerable demands on their time from responsibilities outside of the classroom like a job or family.

3. Facilitate identity and background reflexivity among students

Students may find it helpful to consider their own identities and backgrounds as they relate to the three overarching themes: community and belonging, persistence and purpose, and approach to learning. Facilitating an activity where students explore these concepts will encourage students to reflect on their own needs and will provide the educator with insight into how to best support their learners. For example, an instructor could use students' reflections to inform administrative elements such as their course policies, the frequency and format of office hours, and assignment deadlines. They can also inform requirements for discussions and other learner interactions that fall under social presence within the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison et al., 2000). Finally, these reflections can shape elements of teaching presence such as lectures and instruction, content and course material, assignments, and assessments. Some suggested prompts are:

- a. What makes me who I am?

Students can use the operational definitions of identity and background outlined in chapter one, Introduction, or the educator can come up with more appropriate definitions for their population.

- b. What can I do to ensure that I become a part of the learning community?
- c. What can my instructor do to help me belong?
- d. What drives me to complete my online program?
- e. What is a barrier for me to completing my online program?
- f. What can my instructor do to help me persist through my online program?
- g. How do I learn best, and in what ways do my identity and background impact how I learn?
- h. What can my instructor do to support me with how I learn?

### Limitations of Study

There were several limitations to this case study. Consequently, caution should be taken when considering the external validity or generalizability of the findings. A narrative inquiry case study approach was taken because it provided an opportunity for rich, thick description of the phenomenon based on lived experience. However, the drawback of this approach is that with a sample size of one, there are limitations to the generalizability of the findings.

As discussed in the Trustworthiness section of chapter three, Methodology, the nature of a case study does not promote external validity or generalizability. A case study provides insight into the phenomenon in the context of the specific case: the impact of identity and background to the experience among learners in a semester-long online course in the Health and Human

Development field at a large research institution in the Mountain West. Due to the sample size of one, this could be limited even further to the impact of one student's identity and background on their experience in a semester-long online course in the Health and Human Development field at a large research institution in the Mountain West. With that caveat, the reader should be wary of extending the findings, recommendations, and conclusions of this study to any other case.

One aspect of the study's initial design was the use of observations within the course's learning management system environment to corroborate any findings from the semi-structured interviews. This was to be a pillar of verification that supported the trustworthiness of the data. While there were two other data points in the syllabus review and observation of live synchronous class sessions that were deemed an acceptable form of triangulation by a panel of education researchers at an R1 institution prior to the study, observations of the learning management system environment could have further enhanced internal validity. Peer-peer and peer-instructor interactions within the discussion area, instructor announcements, assignment instructions, and many other components of the course in the learning management system could have been used to corroborate data gathered in the semi-structured interviews or provide further insight into the two research questions.

#### Recommendations for Future Research

Given the limitations above, this case study should be used as a pilot for a broader case study with a larger sample size. During the interview, the participant struggled to separate the specific case from the broader program of study. This resulted in data of interest to the research questions to be deemed irrelevant as they were not bound to the case. Rather than restricting the case to one semester-long course, it is recommended that this study be conducted for an entire

online program, for example an online graduate program. Expanding the scope of the study to include an entire online program would facilitate a broader sample of students. In turn, this would allow the researcher(s) to conduct maximum variation sampling and interview students with a variety of identities and backgrounds. This approach would ensure that any findings are not bound to any specific identity or background. Finally, expanding the case study to include an entire program would increase the scope of the long-term observation, which would enhance internal validity.

#### Recommendations for Research Conducted within an LMS

Institutional Review Boards provide a critical service to both researchers and study participants, protecting the integrity of the research and the safety of the individuals involved. As institutions and instructors continue to expand upon educational experiences facilitated through learning management systems, it is increasingly critical that researchers are thoughtful about the ethical considerations of conducting research within these tools. Researchers should take great care in collecting data, as student names and educational data are visible in many places within the LMS. This marks a divergence from traditional classroom observations, where students are generally anonymous faces to the researcher. From a logistical perspective, it is recommended that the lead researcher partners with several co-researchers who are themselves instructors in the program that is the subject of the case study. This approach would accommodate IRB requirements surrounding observations in the learning management system, as the research group would have access to observe the interactions in their own course environments. From a paradigm perspective, the Community of Inquiry model is an excellent framework with which to observe a course within the LMS. Noting the impact of teaching presence, cognitive presence,

and social presence upon the phenomenon of interest can shape findings and drive recommendations.

### Summary of Findings

The case that was the focal point of this study was above all a community of learners exploring their shared professional and personal interests in community health care. They took an inquiry-based approach to content and concepts through discourse during live synchronous videoconferencing class sessions as well as within the course environment in the learning management system. The learners were not merely vessels for information to be transmitted to, but unique individuals with a variety of identities from a wide range of backgrounds. These identities and backgrounds grounded their critical analysis of course material, informed their questioning of each other and the instructor, and provided a foundation for them to challenge each other's assumptions. In some areas, their experiences allowed them to be More Knowledgeable Others, driving their peers beyond their individual abilities and into a Zone of Proximal Development. In other areas, their peers acted as More Knowledgeable Others driving the co-construction of knowledge.

Our conception of self shapes our understanding of the world around us (Dewey, 1938). Informed by their identities and backgrounds, the individuals participating in this course brought their unique understandings of the world to the learning community. In the case of the interviewee, they brought their experiences and perceptions of themselves as a professional nurse, a nontraditional student, a mother, a ranch wife, a hard worker, and a member of a tight-knit rural community to the group. Each of these characteristics comes with its own cultural capital and place in society, which informs how the interviewee perceives themselves and the

world around them. The identities and self-perceptions that the interviewee and the rest of the learning community brought to the course were all significant contributions, driving interactions and refining the direction of the learning experiences. Without each learner bringing their unique identities and backgrounds, the course experience would fundamentally change.

### Conclusion

From a critical theory perspective, an individual's identity and background are the lens in which they experience the world, and the world experiences them. While online learning is conducted primarily behind a keyboard and monitor, the principles of constructivism and social constructionism still dictate the experience, with learners continuing to engage in social learning through collaboration, knowledge co-creation, and communities of inquiry. This research explored questions of identity and background and whether these constructs impact the online learning experience in a similar way to a traditional classroom setting.

Findings indicated that a student's identity and background did indeed impact how they experienced online or distance learning. With both online and traditional learning, the broad themes remained the same: a student's identity and background impact their feelings of community and belonging, persistence and purpose, and approach to learning. These themes echoed the existing research on the impact of identity and background in a traditional setting, but elements unique to online learning such as reduced facetime and new platforms for learning shifted how students related to each other, prioritized elements of the course, and chose to participate.

Finally, a new theme emerged that informed recommendations for educators who seek to effectively engage students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement

in an online or distance learning setting: support for learners. With fewer opportunities for interaction, instructors can cultivate feelings of community and belonging among their students by acknowledging the challenges associated with the course and demonstrating their support, even from a distance. They can also support student persistence by providing flexibility with assignments and deadlines and understanding when a student may have an outside factor impacting their ability to meet course requirements. While there were limitations associated with the sample, this study can be used as a pilot to inform broader exploration into the impact of a student's identity and background on their online or distance learning experience and what instructors can do to effectively engage students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in those settings.



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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## **Facilitator Overview**

**Purpose:** To gather data from learners regarding how their identities and backgrounds impact their online learning experience.

**Format:** Open-ended questions

**Approximate completion time:** 30-60 minutes

## **Facilitator General Notes**

- Less structured with minimal moderator involvement; follow-up prompts asked as needed
- Conversations will be conducted via WebEx and recorded for later transcription.

## **Facilitator Introduction Talking Points**

- Introductions
- Thank participants (e.g. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. I will honor your time by making sure that we wrap up in the next 60 minutes)
- Audio recording (e.g. Do you mind if I record this for my records? I won't share the recording with anyone other than myself.)
- Explain purpose of interview (e.g. My primary purpose with today's interview is to gather information to help me better understand how a learner's identity and background impact their online learning experience.)
- Safety & Confidentiality (e.g. This is a safe space. You are free to share your experiences with me without risk of it impacting your course or your life outside of this interview. If there is anything that you wish to share with us at a later date that will help this research, please email the comments to me or set up a time to meet with me. Additionally, I will provide you with an opportunity to review my findings before completing the research to ensure that I have accurately captured your perspective. I hope this encourages you (if you need encouragement) to speak freely.)
- Final questions (e.g. Any questions before we start?)

## **Questions**

### ***Part 1: Identity and Background***

**Talking points:** We want to begin by asking you some questions about your identity and background. Note: topics of identity and background are personal and can be sensitive.

Interviewer should come across as warm and friendly throughout the introductions to improve internal validity in terms of subject responses.

1. How would you describe yourself as a person?
2. What is important to you and what are your priorities?
3. What groups or people do you identify with?

4. Please describe your background – things like where you grew up, what your family is like, and what cultures you feel that you are a part of.
5. How do you think others perceive you? Do you agree or disagree with those perceptions?

***Part 2: Learning Experience***

**Talking Points:** I'd also like to learn more about your experiences with this course.

6. Why did you choose to participate in this course?
7. Have you had a positive, negative, or neutral experience so far, and what is contributing to that?
8. What in your background or identity have influenced the way in which you engage in class?
9. What are some of the successes that you have had in your program and what are some of the challenges?
  - a. Do you believe that your identity and background play a factor in these successes and challenges? In what way?
10. What is your relationship like with your instructor and peers? What kind of interactions do you have?
  - a. How do you think your instructor and peers perceive you?
  - b. Do you believe that your identity and background play a factor in these interactions and relationships? In what way?
11. How is your experience in this course shaping you as a learner and a person? Is it the topic/content or is it the process/experience?

**Research Question Alignment**

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Interview Question</b>
In what ways do a student's identity and background impact how they experience an online or distance learning setting?	1-5: Establishment of identity and background 7-9, 11: Impact on learning experience
In what ways are instructors effectively engaging students whose identities and backgrounds may create barriers to achievement in an online or distance setting?	7, 9-11: Impact of instruction



APPENDIX B

QUOTES, CODES, AND THEMATIC ALIGNMENT

Theme	Codes	Exemplar Quotes
Community & Belonging	Sociopolitical Ideology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I’m a Christian and I have a lot of Christian values.”</li> <li>• “What guides me in life is staying true to my Christian values and what God wants of our life, and just trying to live my life to glorify him and do what’s right, both morally and ethically.”</li> <li>• “I have a very traditional home with a husband and kids, my life is just very different than some of my friends who maybe do not have the same values or for whatever reason are living under different circumstances.”</li> <li>• “I am pretty conservative and I feel like I am in class with a lot of more liberal minded people and so I tend to maybe say things a little differently and tend to hold back in discussing some things that I feel like we might not necessarily agree on. It definitely impacts what I bring to the classroom.”</li> <li>• “I feel like the University systems in general you have a lot of professors tend to be more liberal and so as a conservative, I just... I don’t know, I don’t want people to judge me for that.”</li> </ul>
	Progressive language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I support an inclusive learning environment where diversity and individual differences are understood, respected, appreciated, and recognized as a source of strength.”</li> <li>• “Our medical and nursing and physical assessment knowledge are based greatly in white, Judeo-Christian, cis-gender viewpoints.”</li> <li>• “Systemic racism, experimentation, and exclusion continues to have devastating impacts on reproductive health for too many Americans.”</li> <li>• “bed partners”</li> </ul>
	Professional identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I just really wanted to be back with the medical community around people that understood me and appreciated me.”</li> <li>• “I identify as a nurse and with the medical community, I feel we’re pretty tight knit and they become your family when you’re working together. Even people</li> </ul>

		<p>that I haven't worked with in ten years we're still close and I know that I could count on them for anything."</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I feel like a lot of the doctoral students in my program are exactly like me, we're all type A people. We're professionals, we're nurses and we're working and we have professional goals and that's why we're here. And none of us would be doing this if we didn't take our job seriously. So I think we are all kind of on the same page with that."</li> <li>• "I do miss that aspect of in-person learning, especially as a nurse. It's hard working with people you've never seen in real life, and it's hard to make connections with classmates that you've never seen in person."</li> <li>• "You can find out someone's a nurse and you're immediately friends, because you just have similar experiences and backgrounds that nobody else can understand."</li> <li>• "I think especially those that are working to pursue a higher education, we all kind of have similar personalities in some ways, and a lot of ways are different. In your own professional group, you just have this unspoken understanding amongst each other."</li> </ul>
Persistence & Purpose	Rural identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I identify as a mom, as a ranch wife."</li> <li>• "I identify with the agriculture community. That's really important to my upbringing and our livelihood now, we live and work on my husband's family's ranch."</li> </ul>
	Commitment to community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I actually acquired a real passion for community health."</li> <li>• "I coached basketball. I did 4H. I go chaperone."</li> <li>• "I am a 4H volunteer and that's pretty important to my family."</li> </ul>
	Identity as hard-working	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "I just wanted to work"</li> <li>• "I had taken a job a year after I graduated in addition to full time work as a school nurse in my hometown."</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “My mother in law always uses the quote “if you need help, go find the busiest person you know” – because we don’t know how to say no. So unfortunately I’m that person.”</li> <li>• “I am a German that comes from extremely hard working individuals that do not value idleness.”</li> <li>• “I was raised to be a hard worker, and I think that I can contribute my successes to that in the Grad school, and the online program in general. I ‘m responsible and I make sure that I am checking deadlines and logging in enough that I’m not missing something.”</li> </ul>
<p>Approach to Learning</p>	<p>Non-traditional/older learner</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I’m, you know... when I was in undergrad there was always that non traditional student that drove us all crazy because they had all the answers and all the questions and I don’t want to be that person.”</li> <li>• “A lot of the younger students have experience with more of an online platform. In undergrad I had literally one class that used anything online.”</li> <li>• “I think a lot of these younger people in their twenties would not even know how to function in school how I did, it was just so very different.”</li> <li>• “I’ve noticed that when I talk to some other students, they’re so used to submitting discussions online. Like it’s no big deal. And to me, I feel like I have to write this perfect 4 page paper every time I write a comment that has to be detailed and perfect and they’re like, it’s a discussion, you just have to put something in. So I think we are coming from very different perspectives and backgrounds.”</li> </ul>
	<p>Rural identity</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “As far as my ranch background, I feel like I really understand what it’s like to be living in a rural area.”</li> <li>• “There’s just all these little things that I have had the privilege of understanding from being in a rural area. You send a patient home with a central line, or a wound to change or whatever it may be, and they can’t just get back to the clinics, so we take care of our own out in these rural areas and it’s really an awesome thing.”</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I think it gives me the unique perspective of how to approach things differently or how to be creative to care for people that don’t have the resources readily available to them.”</li> <li>• “A lot of people coming from more urban areas don’t quite appreciate, so sometimes I think that I can relate differently than some of the people with maybe less experience, or work in a setting other than the big hospitals where they have everything available to them right there.”</li> </ul>
Support for Learners	Emotional support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Many nurses (and therefore students) have experienced trauma in their lifetimes. Sometimes this course can trigger uncomfortable feelings or painful memories.”</li> <li>• “MSU strives to create a culture of support and recognizes that your mental health and well-being are equally as important as your physical health. We want you to know that it’s okay if you experience difficulty, and there are several resources on campus to assist you in succeeding emotionally, personally, and academically.”</li> <li>• “It’s been my experience this time that the professors are all very approachable and caring and helpful. They truly, I feel, understand what we’re all going through, because without even asking they will offer “We know this is tough. We know that you’re feeling like there’s no way you can do this. We know you’re feeling scared or whatever. They talk us off the ledge because they recognize that it’s normal and obviously experienced it either themselves or have seen a lot of students go through struggles.”</li> </ul>
	Understanding/ flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “They are very responsive to email. Most of them will give us their phone number. They’ll text or they’ll have office hours. They’re so available and not only that, nearly all of them are like “family comes first, if there’s something in your life do not suffer in silence. Don’t struggle, reach out to us if you’re sick, if there’s</li> </ul>

		<p>something awful going on in your life, we want to know about it so we can support through this.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• “I had professors that, you know, were going to give me extensions or whatever I needed. I was even able to use some of my hours in providing his hospice care, his comfort care to meet some of the requirements in the class.”</li><li>• “I was pretty upset to spend – I was hosting Easter dinner and had to have dinner for like 15 people in my house and was stuck in my office finishing up this paper when I had company at my house. I felt like that was a huge challenge where, I kind of appreciate hard deadlines, I feel like I get why it’s necessary, but they need to be cognizant of these hard deadlines they’re choosing.”</li></ul>
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