International Journal of the Whole Child
2023, VOL. 8, NO. 1

The Importance of Community in a Fully Online Program: Establishing Equity, Inclusion, and Access with Nontraditional Students in an Early Childhood Licensure Program

Maryham Sadat Sharifian[a], Chelsey Bollinger[b], Shin Ji Kang[c], Jordan Perlish[d], Madison Masters[e]
[a-e]James Madison University

Maryam S. Sharifian is the Director of Early Childhood Initiatives at James Madison University and an assistant professor of early childhood education. Dr. Sharifian addresses educational issues relating to children and teachers in areas of armed conflict (their wellbeing and resilience strategies) and equity and access to high-quality education in marginalized populations.

Chelsey Bollinger is an assistant professor of literacy education. Her research interests include writing instruction, technology integration, and professional learning with teachers. Her scholarship can be found in *Early Childhood Education Journal*, *Journal of Interactive Technology, and Pedagogy*, *Reading Horizons*, *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy,* and *Online Learning Journal*.

Shin Ji Kang is a professor of the Department of Early, Elementary, and Reading Education at James Madison University. She has taught early childhood methods, diversity and social justice in education, and practicums in early elementary. Her scholarly passion includes refugee education and critical pedagogies guided by spirituality and love.

Jordan Perlish is a graduate student working on her MAT in elementary education at James Madison University. She earned her bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies with a minor in elementary education from James Madison University.

Madison Masters is a graduate student working on her MAT in elementary education at James Madison University. She earned her bachelor's degree in Interdisciplinary Liberal Studies with a minor in elementary education from James Madison University.

Abstract

The educational landscape requires an increased variety of teachers entering the field. The Early Childhood Education Bachelor of Individualized Studies program is a new online program within a teacher preparation institution located in a comprehensive university on the east coast of the United States. It is designed for students who have earned their Applied Associate of Science in Early Childhood Education (ECE) from a community college to pursue teacher licensure. This teacher education program was developed to respond to a statewide teacher shortage for teachers who already had earned an Early Childhood Associates degree from a state community college. This program advocates for non-traditional students and continues to be refined as we (the researchers) continue to work to find better ways to support our students. This online early

childhood program aims to increase access to students who have valuable attributes to contribute to the field of education (Kaplan & Bellwether Education Partners, 2018).

The purpose of this study was to understand the students' sense of community in the online educational environment. As a faculty community of practice, we, the researchers, created and sent out a qualitative survey to students (N=31) to gather participants' perspective of community and perceived barriers of an online licensure program in which 24 students completed the survey. To enhance our knowledge about the sense of community, we utilized Rovai's (2002a) Classroom Community Scale (CCS) to collect data from the most recent cohort of students (N=17). The data suggest that both senior and junior students perceive a relatively high level of Connectedness and Classroom Community, with mean scores above 40. The mean score for Learning was slightly lower, with both groups scoring below 23 on average. In addition, the following themes emerged from the result of the qualitative study followed by interviews:1) there is a transition period for non-traditional students from the community college to the University online setting, 2) it is important for faculty to be intentional in creating a culture of care and sense of community, 3) licensure assessments are a key barrier, and 4) coaching and mentorship are critical for students' success.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to examine non-traditional students' perspective of community and their perceived barriers in an online 4-year bachelor's program preparing PK to 3rd grade teachers. This pilot teacher education program was recently developed to respond to the statewide teacher shortage and to grow future teachers who already earned an Early Childhood associate degree from a state community college. With limited knowledge and experience working with non-traditional students in an online space, the instructors of the program aimed to create a desirable learning environment where non-traditional students could make smooth transitions, felt like they belonged, and successfully met the academic requirements. While each course was thoughtfully designed and implemented to support the students' meaningful learning, it warrants a systematic study to identify and address barriers to continue to improve the program.

This study is significant for several reasons: The reviewed literature indicates a research gap in non-traditional preservice teachers' experiences and perspectives in the field of early childhood education (ECE) who had earned an associate degree at a community college. Most research has been conducted on post-baccalaureate teacher certification programs allowing non-traditional students to pursue teaching careers with a Graduate Diploma upon completion (Crosswell & Beutel, 2017; Walsh, Abi-Nader, & Poutiatine, 2005). Little research is documented on these students who were enrolled in an online teacher licensure program during the pandemic. It is imperative to better understand their experience so that we can theorize teacher development and quality teaching.

Background

This program started in 2019 to provide non-traditional students a flexible, online teacher licensure track that could be completed asynchronously. The variability offered provides students

the ability to achieve their degree alongside working full-time and, for many, family responsibilities. Upon completion of this program, students will earn a four-year degree and become eligible for a state license to teach students in grades Pre-Kindergarten to third grade. The program was developed due to the statewide teacher shortage as an initiative to qualify students that have earned an Early Childhood Associates Degree from a state community college who seek to earn a Bachelor of Individualized Study. This seamless pathway was initiated with a signed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between Virginia Community College Systems and a few four-year higher education institutions. Students who work at public or private early childhood centers receive funding for tuition to cover the cost of two courses per semester and textbooks. In order to continue partnership with community colleges, The Transfer Virginia established a collaboration among the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) and Virginia's colleges and universities to provide students with transparency in college transfer across the Commonwealth. There is a strong collaboration across the state between VCCS, Virginia's colleges and universities, and the Virginia Department of Education to support this pathway long-term and improve the quality and accessibility of the program.

The pilot program started as a small cohort of 7 students in the spring semester of 2019. Successful recruiting increased the number to 60 students in 2022. Continued growth is expected for future cohorts as internal procedures such as external marketing, building relationships with public schools across the state, and advocating for increasing the number of teaching assistants from private preschool providers are continually developed to support success. Classes are offered fully online to provide accessibility to students across the state. The program offers part-time and full-time options to students to follow the track that meets their schedule. This can take four to eight semesters depending on summer course load. The course load includes two practicum placements and a student teaching experience. The program offers flexibility for students to complete one of their two practicum placements in their own classrooms in order to support their financial stability. In addition, the University Education Support Center (ESC) works closely with the state’s school systems and private preschool providers to arrange student teaching opportunities in their own classroom. Since the program is fully online, students’ localities are distributed across the state. The ESC arranges student teaching placements based on student requests to either be placed in their own classroom or in a school near their residence.

The majority of the student population in this program include teaching assistants, substitute teachers, or those already working in early childhood centers in different capacities. Many of these students also have second or third jobs to be able to provide for their families. This is the reality for teachers with low salaries in the early childhood education field. Therefore, the program is designed as a fully online, asynchronous delivery method to support full-time, non-traditional adult learners. Through extensive reflection and discourse with students, the program started to offer one-hour, weekly synchronized sessions for each course during the evening time to build a sense of community and improve content learning opportunities. Each synchronous class is recorded and students who cannot participate have access to the recorded session.

Literature Review

Non-Traditional Students

A term for non-traditional college students has been used to describe students with diverse backgrounds in terms of age, enrollment patterns, financial and family status, and professional work experience. As the enrollment of the non-traditional students has increased in the US colleges, recruitment and retention of these students became a critical consideration for higher education innovation and the need for accurate understanding of non-traditional students grew (Chao & Good, 2004). Previous literature described that non-traditional college students were not only older in age but had other characteristics that were different from traditional college students: they tended to demonstrate financial independence, be the first generation of college goers, have dependents in their families, be racial/ethnic minorities, and/or have low-income status (Adams & Corbett, 2010; Brown, 2012; Chao & Good, 2004; Scott & Lewis, 2012; Wladis, Conway, & Hachey, 2015). These factors may connotate negative assumptions regarding non-traditional students' achievement and performance in higher education settings. In fact, Scott and Lewis (2012) found that some non-traditional students taking classes with traditional college student peers experienced hostile or uncomfortable learning environments that impede their learning. Minimal peer interactions between the non-traditional and traditional students resulted in feelings of separation and uneasiness.

Brown (2012) explored math teaching efficacy beliefs of 141 non-traditional preservice teachers working toward a bachelor's degree and teacher certification in community colleges in Florida. This particular program was created to address the state's teacher shortage by intentionally recruiting non-traditional students who had limited access to college education (Brown, 2012). Brown (2012) found that the math teaching efficacy scores were positively correlated with the age of the students, lower division math history, and math methods course performance. However, their failed attempts on high-stakes teacher certification exams were not correlated with the math teaching efficacy scores. The results of this study informed the newly created teacher education program of the non-traditional students' teaching efficacy beliefs and specific implications to support the non-traditional preservice teachers' learning and development.

The reviewed literature indicates a research gap in non-traditional preservice teachers' experiences and perspectives in the field of early childhood education who had earned an Associate degree in community colleges. Little knowledge was documented on these students who were enrolled in an online teacher licensure program during pandemic. It is imperative to understand these students in such programs so that we could theorize teacher development and quality teaching and recommend better avenues to address teacher shortage.

A major barrier for most non-traditional students seeking an Early Childhood Education degree is the financial burden of post-secondary education. Many do not qualify for federal funding and grants because of the limitations to the number and variety of classes they can take while working full-time and caring for a family. The formulas used to calculate financial aid awards do not take these considerations into account and ultimately impede these students from receiving the funding to cover the expense of their education (Kaplan & Bellwether Education Partners, 2018). In addition to not getting the financial aid necessary, there is no guarantee for increased pay, so "it makes little sense for students with financial insecurity to take on financial debt to fund higher education" (Kaplan & Bellwether Education Partners, 2018, p. 12).

Online Programs

There is concern surrounding the reportedly high rates of attrition in online classes compared to face-to-face classes (Bloemer, Swan, Day, & Bogle, 2018). Undergraduate students are poorly prepared and lack the student agency necessary for success in the online learning environment (Stephen & Rockinson-Szaokiw, 2021). To address the lack of persistence of undergraduate online students, universities must create and implement interventions that prepare students for the online learning environment and help them develop as autonomous learners.

Not all factors associated with online student persistence are within the institution's control. Rovai (2002b) emphasized that students must be skilled in time management, computer literacy, information literacy, and computer-based interaction before admission and that they have additional needs (i.e., goal commitment, learning preferences, study habits, interpersonal skills and relationships, self-esteem, accessibility to services) throughout an online class or program influencing their persistence. Yet, undergraduate online students continue to enroll in online classes despite lacking these necessary pre-admission student skills (Broadbent, 2017; Parkes, Stein, & Reading, 2015) and without developing the necessary student agency to persist (Kizilcec, Pérez-Sanagustín, & Maldonado, 2017; Schommer-Aikins & Easter, 2018; Song, Kalett, & Plass, 2016). Rovai (2002b) argued that if institutions are to promote persistence, they need to consider helping students develop student agency, so they can "seek to persist" (Tinto, 2017, p. 254). Hence, institutions must assume a key responsibility in helping online undergraduate students develop mechanisms of student agency to persist.

Online student orientation, regular advisement, technology training, and the use of self-assessments to determine student readiness for online learning are some of the strategies that institutions of higher education can employ to support students' agency, and thus, their persistence (Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011). For example, one institution's required orientation centered on the online class environment (i.e., navigation, tool use). An examination of the effectiveness of the orientation found a decrease in online student class withdrawals and an overall increase in student grades (Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015). Another institution of higher education also experienced an increase in online student retention after implementing an online orientation focused on technology use, help-seeking, virtual communication, and tips for success as an online learner (Jones, 2013). While these studies are promising and support the positive impact of such interventions, they were primarily concerned with developing skill and self-efficacy with technology, and the literature surrounding the outcomes and impact of such interventions is sparse (Parkes et al., 2015). Interventions facilitating technology use may enhance technical skills, but students need to develop additional elements of student agency to persist in undergraduate online classes and programs. Those interventions intended to develop student agency need to be examined to determine their impact on online undergraduate student persistence. A study on undergraduate student preparedness for online learning found that students did not feel prepared to navigate an online class, manage their learning, engage with others online, interact with class content, and manage their time (Parkes et al., 2015).

Online Community Building

The convenience and accessibility of online courses have made this mode of learning increasingly popular. Students are able to participate via distance, using a schedule that works for them. However, this distance learning opportunity can cause feelings of isolation for both students and instructors. How can this concern of isolation be mitigated by building community?

When meeting face-to-face, creating a classroom community typically consists of ice-breaker activities, personal introductions, and reviewing the course syllabus. These activities set the stage for the semester and help create connections between students and instructors. These types of interactions are important and should be incorporated into online learning, as well. Some students and educators may have negative dispositions regarding online courses, believing that face-to-face learning is the only manner in which a course should be delivered (Phirangee & Malec, 2016). Drouin (2008) found that community building in the classroom can help students eliminate feelings of isolation.

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), community is ‘‘a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together’’ (p. 9). Rovai (2002a) defines community in terms of four dimensions: spirit, trust, interaction and common expectations. Spirit is the “recognition of membership in a community and the feelings of friendship, cohesion, and bonding that develop among learners as they enjoy one another and look forward to time spent together” (Rovai, 2002a, p. 4). Trust shows a willingness of members in the community to rely on each other and have confidence in each other. Rovai (2002a) distinguishes between two types of interaction: task-driven interaction and socio-emotional driven interaction. The latter is more likely to strengthen the classroom community. The final dimension of community is common expectations. In the context of examining the sense of community in higher education, the common expectation would be learning.

Dawson (2006) surveyed 464 undergraduate and postgraduate education students using the CCS. The students that communicated more with classmates and instructors were found to have experienced a higher degree of sense of community. Rovai (2002a) studied a collection of literature on sense of community and found seven factors across his literature review that are positive correlates to sense of community: transactional distance, social presence, social equality, small group activities, group facilitation, teaching style and learning stage, and community size. Many of these patterns and factors that researchers have identified overlap and show a common theme that meaningful interactions among classmates and instructors correlates to a higher sense of community.

Low sense of community has been found to have negative impacts on students’ success in higher education. Rovai (2002b) collected 314 completed surveys from graduate students in education and leadership courses. The average age of the participants was 39.25 years old. Rovai used the CCS and found that “the common factor affecting both dropout rate and cognitive learning may be a sense of community in online courses and programs” (Rovai, 2002b, p. 328). Likewise, Rovai (2002b) found students who had a stronger sense of community to have greater satisfaction with their academic programs and therefore lower dropout rates.

Theoretical Framework: Communities of Practice

A social theory of learning defines that competence is historically and socially established by *Communities of Practice* (CoP), which shape experiences of their members (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Wenger (2000) notes that learning is an "interplay between social competence and personal experience" as well as a "two-way relationship between people and the social learning systems in which they participate" (p. 227). We situate our study in the framework of CoP and aim to better understand how students negotiate competence and experience as they participate in the online degree program as new members. The expected competence has been defined within the teacher education institution both explicitly and formally (e.g., course syllabi) as well as ambiguously and informally (e.g., communication styles), which is not always known to new students.

The nature of engagement of non-traditional students is presumably diverse since their histories, repertoires, and competences are different from the traditional 4-year, full-time, residential college experience. Their "non-traditional" ness as college students, thus, may create tensions and conflicts as soon as they begin their course work in the program. Wenger (2000) calls these spaces of conflict, *Boundaries*. Without shared practice in the new community, the non-traditional students might have experienced the boundaries as they navigate their belongingness. We aim to articulate how *boundaries are perceived* and processed by the students.

Our ultimate goal is to create bridges between identified boundaries to sustain the new teacher education program as a learning community where participants becoming competent in a deeper level at the center.

Participants

The majority of the students in this program are considered non-traditional students: All of them are situated in rural communities with uneasy access to a 4-year teacher education institution. The majority are the first going to college in their families, have school-aged children to take care of, have part- or full-time jobs in various educational settings, and often have second or third jobs to overcome financial struggles. The study consisted of two surveys: Alfred P. Rovai's Classroom Community Scale (CCS) and a qualitative survey created by the researchers to gather students' perspective of community and perceived barriers of an online licensure program. The total number of students in this study was 31 in which 24 students completed the qualitative survey and 17 students completed Rovai's CCS. Table 1. displays the demographic data from the qualitative survey for all participants who completed it.

Table 1

The Demographic Data

Factor	Number	Percentage
Ethnicity	24	

Caucasian	17	71%
African American	7	29%
First Generation College Student	24	
Yes	19	80%
No	5	20%
Number of Children	24	
None	9	37%
1	4	17%
2-4	9	37%
More than 4	2	9%
Annual Income	24	
Less than $25,000	5	21%
$25,000-$50,000	9	39%
$50,000-$100,000	9	39%
Prefer not to say	1	1%
Age	24	
18-28	8	33%
29-38	8	33%
39-48	5	21%
49-58	2	9%
59-68	1	4%

Methodology and Data Collection

The research question that guided our study is:

- How do students describe the sense of community in our fully online early childhood program?

This study is a mixed methods study. "Mixed methods research is a rapidly growing approach to inquiry that combines qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study to understand complex phenomena from multiple perspectives" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 4).

Data collection began in April 2022 with an email invitation to complete a 35-question survey that the researchers generated. The qualitative survey was sent to current students in the program (N=31) in which 24 students completed the survey. Questions included Likert scale and open-ended questions focused on various aspects of the two-year online Bachelor of Individualized Studies program. In June 2022 the researchers conducted 30-minute individual virtual interviews. The interview questions focused on deepening our understanding of responses to the survey questions.

The qualitative survey created by the researchers consisted of 5 categories: transition of non-traditional students to university, creating a culture of care and a sense of community, licensure assessments and barriers, coaching and mentorship, and transition from a teacher assistant position to a full-time licensed teacher. Each category contains 2-9 Likert scale questions followed by short response prompts. The Likert scale questions were scored as follows: 0 - strongly disagree to 4 - strongly agree. The maximum score for the survey is 72, and a higher score denotes a more positive experience in the online program. In addition, participants who agreed to follow-up interviews completed a 30-minute Zoom session with researchers as a focus group.

Then, the researchers reflected on their interest to increase our knowledge of sense of community through progressive investigation by adopting Rovai's Classroom Community Scale (CCS). The researchers acknowledge that the first cohort of participants already graduated from the program and were unavailable to complete the CCS. Therefore, there is a discrepancy between two cohorts of participants in data collection.

Many researchers (Dawson, 2006; Ouzts, 2006; Rovai, 2002b; Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012; Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016) have used Rovai's Classroom Community Scale (CCS) to measure perceptions of sense of community in higher education. The CCS uses 20 Likert-type scale questions to survey students' feelings of community. The survey generates a total score for classroom community by combining two sub-scores for connectedness and learning (Ouzts, 2006). The CCS has been evaluated for reliability and validity. Reliability for the CCS was .93 and reliability for the connectedness and learning subscales were .92 and .87, respectively (Rovai, 2002b).

The 20 Likert-type scale questions in the CCS are split into two subscales: connectedness and learning. The questions that fall into each subscale receive a score of 0-4. To find a participant's total classroom community score, the scores from the two subscales are combined. The maximum score for the connectedness subscale is 40, the maximum score for the learning subscale is 40 with the total score for the CCS being 80.

Data Analysis and Results

As a mixed method study, the researchers utilized two sets of data to create a comprehensive understanding of participants in this study. The first step of qualitative data analysis included numerous iterations of thematic coding. The analysis of the data included initial coding of participants' responses to both survey and interview questions. Then, the research team split in half. Each group employed descriptive coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) by assigning phrases that summarized passages of participants' responses. Then, the two groups reconvened and employed pattern coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994). They examined the descriptive codes for commonalities and consolidated them into a smaller number of categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This iterative, recursive process continued until the researchers reached a consensus on the themes to be discussed in the findings.

Through quantitative study a total of 17 study participants were measured using the Classroom Community Scale (CCS). Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics for the completed CCS survey for two groups, senior and junior students, disaggregated by academic year. The CCS survey measures two constructs: connectedness and learning. For the senior group, the mean score for connectedness was 22.11, with a minimum score of 18 and a maximum score of 28. The mean score for learning was 22.55, with a minimum score of 20 and a maximum score of 26. The mean score for the total Classroom Community Scale was 44.66, with a minimum score of 39 and a maximum score of 50.

For the junior group, the mean score for connectedness was 22.75, with a minimum score of 19 and a maximum score of 26. The mean score for learning was 21.12, with a minimum score of 16 and a maximum score of 25. The mean score for the total Classroom Community Scale was 43.87, with a minimum score of 41 and a maximum score of 51. The data suggest that both senior and junior students perceive a slightly high level of connectedness and learning with mean scores above 22 and 21, respectively. Overall, the descriptive statistics suggest that academic seniors and juniors had similar levels of connectedness and learning in the classroom community as indicated by similar mean scores for the CCS measures. However, the standard deviation indicates some variabilities among the two cohorts.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for all who completed the CCS disaggregated by academic year as senior and junior.

	Min	**Max**	**Mean**	**S.D.**
Academic Senior (n=9)				
Connectedness	18	28	22.11	3.10
Learning	20	26	22.55	1.81

Total Score (Classroom Community Scale)	39	50	44.66	3.31
Academic Junior (n=8)				
Connectedness	19	26	22.75	2.37
Learning	16	25	21.12	2.74
Total Score (Classroom Community Scale)	41	51	43.87	3.31

The data from the qualitative survey created by the researchers indicated that the participants generally had a positive experience with the university ECED BIS program. The mean score for the total responses is 62.09 out of a possible 85, which indicates an overall positive experience. Participants' responses in each category are indicated below.

Transition of Non-traditional Students to University. Most respondents agreed that they received the same attention at the university as they did at their community college, indicating that the university provided an adequate level of attention and support. The majority of the respondents felt that the online modality helped them gain access to the program, suggesting that online learning can be an effective way to reach non-traditional students. Similarly, a vast majority of the respondents did not feel that the online modality hindered their learning, which is an encouraging sign for the continued use of online education.

Creating a Culture of Care and Sense of Community. Most respondents felt that they were able to build connections and relationships with professors and classmates in their online courses, which is crucial for developing a sense of community in an online environment. Participants generally felt a sense of belonging to their cohort community, which is another important factor in creating a supportive learning environment. Most respondents felt that their professors cared about their wellbeing and were fair and inclusive in their practices, indicating that the university provided an environment that was conducive to student success.

Licensure Assessments and Barriers. For licensure, the state requires students to take four assessments: a core math assessment, a core literacy assessment, an elementary subject test, and a reading assessment measuring their knowledge of elementary reading and writing skills and reading development. A majority of respondents felt that participating in the tutor program supported them in passing licensure exams, suggesting that the university's support programs are effective. Respondents were split on whether they had trouble scheduling licensure exams, which may indicate that there is a need for improvements to be made in this area.

Coaching and Mentorship. Most respondents received helpful and regular feedback from their clinical educators, tutors, and advisors indicating that the university provided strong support in the form of coaching and mentorship. The University's Education Support Center (ESC) matched students with clinical educators during their practicum and student teaching placement. Clinical educators provided support for student teachers and practicum students in the classroom during their required hours. Students observed the clinical educator, received feedback during meetings after teaching hours, and obtained mid-term and final evaluations from the clinical educator on their effectiveness in the classroom. In addition to traditional support from clinical educators, the program offered two tutors who were available to meet with students weekly in the evenings during the semester via Zoom. Both tutors were licensed teachers with experience in public and private settings. One of the tutors provided support in preparation for the core math assessment and elementary subject test. The second tutor provided support in preparation for the core literacy assessment and reading assessment. Both tutors provided mentorship in navigating the program throughout students' education to process the university's required general education courses, summer program, scholarships, and the program course sequence. Respondents were split on whether they saw their tutors as their mentors, which suggests that there may be some room for improvement in this area. Most respondents felt supported by their professors and advisors, which is another important factor in creating a supportive learning environment.

Transition From Teacher Assistant Position to Full-Time Licensed Teacher. Most respondents felt prepared for their first teaching position, which is an encouraging sign for the university's teacher education program.

Overall, the data show that the university program provided a positive experience for non-traditional students transitioning from community college, with strong support in the areas of online learning, community building, coaching and mentorship, and licensure exam preparation.

Twenty four out of 31 completed the survey and 14 agreed to participate in follow up interviews. The themes from the survey and follow up interviews included the importance of: 1) understanding the transition of non-traditional students to the University online setting, 2) creating a culture of care and sense of community, 3) guiding students through the licensure assessments and barriers, and 4) coaching and mentorship for students. Several students mentioned their transition from a non-traditional student to a university student. A student explained,

> *I'm so glad that this program exists because for the longest time it was just you can get your associates, but if you got your associates at a community college that never transferred over and so you'd have to start all over…that was like my predicament. I didn't go to a university right off the bat, where I could just do the whole thing in one spot. I mean to be honest like who, who can financially support themselves, I mean the income is very low especially for what we do, it's insane.*

We learned that, even though our program was fully online, students indeed felt a culture of care and a sense of community. For example, students mentioned that weekly virtual discussions,

while they seemed difficult to schedule, allowed students the opportunity to meet others in the program. Once these groups were created the students kept in touch with each other throughout the entirety of the program. A student explained, "*The University is quite different, because you love your Zoom meetings and those meetings give us a chance to meet each other. I have a couple of students' phone numbers and relationships grow from there. I've felt more included having these relationships."*

Students felt licensure assessments and other barriers felt complicated and this is something as teacher educators in a CoP want to examine more closely. A student shared, "*The science and the social studies exams have been difficult. I just got my test results back. I was like one or two points away. That's really hindered me like crazy."*

Coaching and mentorship was a common theme among study participants. One student mentioned that she "*learned through watching other teachers during my practicum experiences. I also got my CDA before I got my Associates, so that experience has helped as well*." Another student shared, "*The stability that our advisor provided has been helpful. She was right there to answer questions and to make sure that we understood what we were doing."*

With these themes in mind, we, the researchers and teacher educators were in pursuit of the truth and now that these barriers have been uncovered, we will now systematically decide how to make improvements to our program. We learned about non-traditional students' perceptions and experiences in an online program. In the future, it warrants comparing how students perceive a community in a face-to-face setting in a similar licensure program. It is critical to reflect on the lack of confidence in non-traditional students in preparation for licensure exams. This issue has been overlooked in teacher preparation programs and needs to be addressed to provide equitable measures for non-traditional students. Non-traditional students typically represent a diverse background in terms of ability, ethnicity, language, and age. Traditional licensure exams might have been developed without considering teacher candidates' cultural diversity in mind which leads to major success rate gaps between traditional and non-traditional students because of their backgrounds that serve as a disadvantage. This study guides us to take concrete steps toward advocacy for equitable licensure opportunities for non-traditional students through policy makers in state and national legislature.

Scholarly Significance

Creating a culture of care and sense of community as one of the main themes of this study and is supported by Ouzts (2006) study that identified five patterns in courses rated high in sense of community. The five patterns were "good teacher characteristics, strong student connection related to assignments, a change in personal perspective, quality learning, and satisfaction" (Ouzts, 2006, p. 291). Teachers in highly rated sense of community courses were described as interactive, present, open, honest, and human. Students in highly rated sense of community courses interacted frequently through discussion and group work and felt that they learned from each other. Similarly, Dawson (2006) found a "significant relationship between student frequency of communication and sense of community" (p. 160).

Researchers have provided recommendations of ways to increase sense of community and promote positive student outcomes. Shackleford and Maxwell (2012) suggest that instructors "provide sufficient direction and support to improve the chances that this teamwork will be positive and contribute to a sense of community" (p. 241). Shackleford and Maxwell (2012) also recommend allowing students the opportunity to work collaboratively, share stories of personal experiences, and interact in multiple ways. Rovai (2002a) recommends that instructors provide students with increased effective support by promoting a strong sense of community. This will help increase retention of students in higher education, reverse feelings of isolation, and provide students with a larger base of academic support.

In addition to the sense of community, creating measurable and achievable infrastructure to support the transition from community college to a four-year higher education institution is essential to improve the teacher education non-traditional pathway. For instance, dedicating a summer-long semester prior to starting the program would be a practical strategy to provide sufficient time for students to take one general education course at the university and learn about navigation of licensure requirements, course sequence, and degree requisites.

Since faculty are the key players to create sustainable, high-quality education and training for students, there must be continuous professional development to increase their understanding and knowledge about non-traditional students, their needs, strengths, and challenges. Non-traditional students carry a major burden of responsibilities that requires a significant understanding and care from faculty to support them throughout their education. The extra support would be essential to prevent social, emotional, and mental health challenges for students during their education.

There will inevitably continue to be barriers for these students, but by providing information on scholarship and financial aid opportunities, creating supportive communities between students, and flexibility for completion are of utmost importance to encourage success.

References

Adams, J. & Corbett, A. (2010). Experiences of traditional and non-traditional college students. *Perspectives, 2*(1), 1-29.

Bloemer, W., Swan, K., Day, S., & Bogle, L. R. (2018). Digging deeper into the data: The role of gateway courses in online student retention. In Farmer, T. S., Richardson, J. C. & Swan, K. (Eds.) Special conference issue: AERA Online Teaching and Learning SIG. Online Learning, *22*(4), 109-127. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i4.1515

Broadbent, J. (2017). Comparing online and blended learner's self-regulated learning strategies and academic performance. *Internet and Higher Education*, *33*, 24-32. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2017.01.004

Brown, A. B. (2012). Non-traditional preservice teachers and their mathematics efficacy beliefs. *School Science and Mathematics, 112*(3) 191-198.

Chao, R. & Good, G. E. (2004). Non-traditional students' perspectives on college education: A qualitative study. *Journal of College Counseling, 7*, 5-12.

Creswell, J. W. & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). Designing and conducting mixed methods research. Sage publications.

Crosswell, L. & Beutel, D. (2017). 21st century teacher: How non-traditional pre-service teachers navigate their initial experiences of contemporary classrooms. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 45*(4), 416-431.

Dawson, S. (2006). A study of the relationship between student communication interaction and sense of community. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *9*(3), 153–162. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2006.06.007

Drouin, M. A. (2008). The relationship between students' perceived sense of community and satisfaction, achievement and retention in an online course. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 9*(3), 267-284.

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.

Hart, C. (2012). Factors associated with student persistence in an online program of study: A review of the literature. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 11*(1):19–42.

Jones, K.R. (2013). Developing and implementing a mandatory online student orientation. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Network, 17*(1):43–45.

Kaplan, M., & Bellwether Education Partners. (2018). It takes a community: Leveraging community college capacity to transform the early childhood workforce. In *Bellwether Education Partners*. Bellwether Education Partners.

Kizilcec, R. F., Pérez-Sanagustín, M., & Maldonado, J. J. (2017). Self-regulated learning strategies predict learner behavior and goal attainment in Massive Open Online Courses. *Computers & Education, 104,* 1833. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2016.10.001

Lave, J. & Etienne, W. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 33, 29, 40.

Lee Y., & Choi, J. (2010). A review of online course dropout research: Implications for practice and future research. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 59*(5), 593–618. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-010-9177-y

McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: a definition and theory. Journal of Community Psychology, *14*(1), 6 – 23.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Ouzts, K. (2006). Sense of community in online courses. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *7*(3).

Parkes, M., Stein, S., & Reading, C. (2015). Student Preparedness for University E-Learning Environments. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *25*, 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2014.10.002

Phirangee, K. (2016). Students' perceptions of learner-learner interactions that weaken a sense of community in an online learning environment. *Online Learning*, *20*(4), 13–33. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v20i4.1053

Rovai, A. P. (2002a). Building sense of community at a distance. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *3*(1). https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v3i1.79

Rovai, A. P. (2002b). Sense of community, perceived cognitive learning, and persistence in Asynchronous Learning Networks. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *5*(4), 319–332. https://doi.org/10.1016/s1096-7516(02)00130-6

Schommer-Aikins, M., Easter, M. (2018). Cognitive flexibility, procrastination, and need for closure linked to online self-directed learning among students taking online courses. *Journal of Business and Educational Leadership, 8*(1):112–123.

Scott, L. & Lewis, C. (2012). Nontraditional college students: assumptions, perceptions, and directions for a meaningful academic experience. *The International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences: Annual Review, 6*(4), 1-10.

Shackelford, J. L., & Maxwell, M. (2012). Sense of community in graduate online education: Contribution of learner to learner interaction. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, *13*(4), 228–249. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i4.1339

Song, H., Kalet, A., & Plass, J. (2016). Interplay of prior knowledge, self -regulation and motivation in complex multimedia learning environments. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 32*(1), 31–50. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcal.12117

Stephen, J. & Rockinson-Szapkiw, A.J. (2021). A high-impact practice for online students: The use of a first-semester seminar course to promote self-regulation, self-direction, online learning self-efficacy, *Smart Learning Environment*, *8*(6). https://doi.org/10.1186/s40561-021-00151-0

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc.

Taylor, J., Dunn M., & Winn, S. (2015). Innovative orientation leads to improved success in online courses. *Online Learning, 19*(4):1–9. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v19i4.570

Tinto, V. (2017). Through the eyes of students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 19*(3), 254–269. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621917

Trespalacios, J., & Perkins, R. (2016). Sense of community, perceived learning, and achievement relationships in an online graduate course. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, *17*(3), 31–49.

Walsh, F., Abi-Nader, J., & Poutiatine, M. I. (2005). What do adult learners experience in a teacher certification program? *MPAEA Journal of Adult Education, 34*(1), 6-21.

Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice and social learning systems. *Organization*, *7*(2), 225–246. https://doi.org/10.1177/135050840072002

Wladis, C., Conway, K. M., & Hachey, A. C. (2015). The online STEM classroom: Who

succeeds? An exploration of the impact of ethnicity, gender, and non-traditional student characteristics in the community college context. *Community College Review, 43*(2), 142-164.