

SHIFTING FOCUS, IMPROVING OUTCOMES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY  
OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENT AND FACULTY PERCEPTIONS  
OF LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS

by

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## ABSTRACT

Community colleges, like all American higher-education institutions, are held accountable for preparing individuals to advance personally, professionally, and civically. In recent years, an increasing number of American higher education graduates, including those in community colleges, have proven ill-equipped to meet the demands of a changing world. The gap between expectations and actual learning outcomes of American community college graduates is widening.

Obsolete college policies and practices have been blamed, in part, for shortfalls in student learning. With the prevalent focus of the American education system on the teacher, many students are passive participants in their own learning. These unengaged college students often become graduates who lack requisite knowledge and skills.

For decades, national leaders and education experts have sounded urgent calls for higher education reform and improvement. A shift to a learner-centered focus has been suggested as a remedy to increase learning, and to help students develop the skills and abilities necessary to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The response has been slow and progress has been minimal.

Although the problem of the declining quality of learning outcomes is prevalent throughout all of higher education, this study focused on a single community college. The purpose of this study was to (1) identify faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and learner-centered practices at a small rural Midwest American

community college, and (2) to assess the alignment of faculty and student perceptions on learner-centeredness and their respective roles in applying learner-centered practices on their campus. Data were collected using interviews, questionnaires, observations, and a review of documents.

Results of the study indicated that participants support learner-centered principles and practices. These results were used to make recommendations for this community college to expand its learner-centered focus to improve the knowledge, skills, and abilities of its students.

## DEDICATION

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### INTRODUCTION

At the heart of human nature, human beings seek to learn (Shuell, 2013). Psychologists consider learning to be one of the most significant activities in which humans engage. Learning occurs in many ways—on an individual basis, or as part of a group; by seeing, hearing, or doing, or a combination of these three; in an unstructured manner, or as part of formal education. Although most learning occurs outside of school, it is considered “the core of the education process” (Shuell, 2013, para. 1).

For centuries, experts have studied the characteristics of learning, how it occurs, and how one person can influence another’s learning through teaching and other activities (Shuell, 2013). The results of these studies indicate that knowledge of learning principles is crucial, and recognizing the key role the learners play in their own learning is essential. However, this knowledge alone is not enough. Also required is the understanding of how to create the conditions and the environment to promote learning (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010).

To provide the structure, systems, processes, and resources to support learning, an effective system of education is needed. This system facilitates the formation of a partnership between the learner and the learning institution. The intended outcome of

this system is a well-educated populace, which in developed nations, such as the United States, is considered a prized national asset. Well-educated citizens are necessary to sustain the nation's complex business, cultural, social, financial, economic, and political systems (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2013).

One vital component of the American education system is higher education. As the culmination of the formal education process, the objective of higher education, also known as postsecondary education, is to provide students with resources and opportunities to learn, and to equip them with important life skills (OECD, 2013). As they learn, students earn academic credentials, prepare to further their studies, acquire the skills required in the workforce, and develop the ability to appropriately respond to the varied responsibilities of adult life.

The level of education attained by its citizens impacts a nation's safety, status, and well-being. Communities with a high number of educated people benefit from reduced crime rates, enhanced standards of living, and healthier residents (OECD, 2013). Additionally, those who possess a formal education are more likely to engage in civic activities and responsibilities that contribute to the overall sustainability of the community. Adults who have attained higher education degrees are more engaged in "voting, volunteering, political interests, and interpersonal trust" (OECD, 2013, p. 2). An effective education system empowers its learners to acquire the necessary attributes—including knowledge, skills, competencies, responsibilities, and attitudes—that equip them to thrive in a complex and rapidly evolving world. Historically, in the United States, its educated and highly-skilled citizens have contributed to fortifying the nation's

position as a world economic and political power. These educated individuals have helped to develop and sustain the viability, finances, and healthy socioeconomic status of America. Further, Americans enjoyed the acquisition of knowledge as part of their pursuit of *The American Dream*, in which the attainment of a high quality education credential provided opportunities for upward economic mobility (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2012).

In its report on the status of education in the U.S., the American Association of Community Colleges communicated a grim warning: “The American Dream is at risk” (AACC, 2012, p. vii). Once considered a most desirable and cherished asset, the value of an academic credential from an American higher education institution is now often questioned. The effectiveness of higher education in the United States has been, and continues to be, subject to close scrutiny and criticism (AACC, 2012).

### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

By many measures, the American higher education system is broken (AACC, 2012). In recent decades, it has largely proven ineffective in empowering its learners to master the important skills and competencies productive and progressive society demands. It is failing to produce the learning outcomes needed for the nation to flourish. Despite the claims of experts that learning is natural, research indicates that American college students are not learning enough (AACC, 2012).

The shortfalls of the American education system in general, and higher education, specifically, should not be startling news. For more than 30 years, calls for

reform of the American higher education system have abounded. Several federal initiatives were funded to study and recommend changes to higher education. Additionally, numerous education experts, researchers, and state and national agencies have sounded alarms about the substandard learning outcomes experienced by American students. They have all urged immediate action to improve.

Some of these warnings are summarized in the table below.

Table 1: *Calls for Reform of Higher Education*

Year	Authors	Title	Messages/Warnings
1983	National Commission on Excellence in Education	<i>A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Education Reform</i>	Mediocrity abounds in America regarding education. At risk is the opportunity for all citizens to acquire a high quality education. America's position as a world leader is being jeopardized. World competitors are surpassing the nation in educational and skill attainment.
1988	American Association of Community and Junior Colleges	<i>Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century</i>	Community colleges should focus on the student and should be designed to meet the needs of the 21 <sup>st</sup> century. Communities of educated citizens should be formed.
1990	National Center on Education and the Economy	<i>America's Choice: High Skills Or Low Wages! The Report of the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce</i>	Americans who do not possess high levels of skills will not receive high levels of pay. Lower skilled jobs will go to workers in countries with lower labor costs. America must increase the skill level of its workers to maintain a competitive edge in the workforce.
1993	Wingspread Group On Higher Education	<i>An American Imperative: Higher Expectations For Higher Education</i>	An evolving, more open and global society requires corresponding changes in the skill levels of its citizens. American undergraduate education is insufficient in evolving to meet changing societal needs.
1995	R. B. Barr & J. Tagg	<i>From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm For Undergraduate Education</i>	Learning outcomes are insufficient. Higher education should aim to produce learning, not merely to provide instruction. A shift is needed from a focus on the teacher to a focus on the learner.



Year	Authors	Title	Messages/Warnings
1997	Terry O'Banion	<i>Creating More Learning-Centered Community Colleges</i>	The structure of the American education creates significant limitations on its schools. It is traditionally time-bound, place-bound, bureaucracy-bound, and role-bound. Efforts to improve education outcomes should aim to make education less subject to these constraints, remove administrative barriers, and redefine roles of learning for facilitators, students, and administrators.
2002	Association of American Colleges & Universities	<i>Greater Expectations: The Commitment To Quality As A Nation Goes To College</i>	College education not only benefits students, it also benefits the nation. An overhaul of undergraduate education is needed to provide learning that students need, to meet workforce needs, to operate in a diverse democracy, and to navigate a global world.
2003	Vincent Tinto	<i>Taking Student Learning Seriously: Rethinking the University of the Future</i>	Colleges claim to center their practices on students, but most reform efforts are ineffective. Student learning must be central to the institution.
2006	U.S. Department of Education	<i>A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education</i>	The past success in higher education outcomes has contributed to current complacency. Urgent reform is needed. The health of the nation requires educated citizens who can work faster and smarter.
2007	National Center on Education and the Economy	<i>Tough Choices or Tough Times: The Report of the New Commission on the Skills of The American Workforce</i>	This organization's follow-up to its 1990 report reveals that even high-skilled jobs are being awarded to workers in countries with the lowest labor costs. Manual skills alone are insufficient; employee creativity and innovation are now needed to compete with global counterparts. Employers will reward the most competent and innovative employees with higher pay.
2008	U.S. Department of Education	<i>A Nation Accountable: Twenty-Five Years After a Nation At Risk</i>	The nation is even more at risk now than it was in 1983. The world continues to evolve; yet American education is not keeping up with the changing demands. American students are being surpassed by those from other countries in education attainment.

Year	Authors	Title	Messages/Warnings
2009	Gunder Myran	<i>Reinventing the Open Door: Transformational Strategies for Community Colleges</i>	Granting access to all students regardless of their capabilities produces inherent challenges—primarily low success rates of students. Community colleges must do more to ensure improved learning outcomes of students.
2011	Vincent Tinto	<i>Taking Student Success Seriously In The College Classroom</i>	The design and delivery of instruction significantly impacts student success. An effective education system is critical in securing America’s economic health and the nation’s ability to compete globally.
2012	American Association of Community Colleges	<i>Reclaiming the American Dream: A Report from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges</i>	The American Dream is in danger, as its current generation of students is no longer surpassing its ancestors in attaining upward mobility. America is losing its global rank as a leader in education. Major reform efforts are needed if America is to remain a world leader.
2013	Mary Ellen Weimer	<i>Learner-Centered Teaching: Five Key Changes To Practice</i>	Despite increased research findings that support learner-centeredness, much has remained unchanged during the past decade. Teacher-centered, rather than learner-centered practices, still abound in higher education.
2015	American Association of Community Colleges	<i>Community College Completion: Progress Toward Goal of 50% Increase.</i>	Some progress toward reaching Goal 2020 has been made; however, completion rates are lagging. More analysis will occur as updated information becomes available.

The multitude of warnings, including those described above, has been largely ignored, or the response has been shamefully slow. One reason for the meager response to these messages is that many American education institution leaders believe they are performing at acceptable levels and do not need to improve (Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). Others believe that new methods of teaching that more actively involve learners may work for higher-level learners, but not for beginning

students in a general education course (Weimer, 2013). For instructors who attempt improvement, most find it difficult to move beyond the two most common and familiar traditional approaches of teaching—lecturing and leading discussions (Fink, 2003). With limited time to help learners advance intellectually in the classroom, instructors must quickly determine how to best present, and how students should engage with, the course content. Most faculty members are not taught how to accomplish this, and are left to rely on teaching in the manner that their finest teachers taught them (Doyle, 2011). When instructors decide to realign course policies and practices to make students more involved and responsible for their own learning, students often resist, leaving instructors frustrated and discouraged (Weimer, 2013). Further, when remedies have been attempted, they have often proven ineffective (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Research indicates that although increased learning is stated as the intended goal, many reform efforts have failed to achieve desired learning outcomes (AACC, 2012).

## **THE DEVELOPMENT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF AMERICA'S PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM**

The history and development of the American education system is provided below. This will serve to place this study within the context of existing knowledge and to emphasize the importance of education to the nation. From its inception, the American education system was highly valued. The establishment of this nation's public education system was strongly influenced by Thomas Jefferson in the late 1700s and early 1800s. As a strong supporter of public education, Jefferson believed that the provision of high-quality education to its people was essential to America's liberty, wealth, and power.

Years before serving as our nation's third president, Jefferson envisioned a system of common schools to benefit society as a whole, rather than any specific individual. Jefferson viewed education as vital to improving the status and condition of individuals. In his 1786 address to George Wythe (noted scholar, law professor, and Virginia judge) Jefferson said, "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness" (Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2015a, p.1). Jefferson echoed his high regard for education in his 1818 statement, "If the condition of man is to be progressively ameliorated, as we fondly hope and believe, education is the chief instrument in effecting it" (Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1900, p. 273).

Jefferson viewed education as essential to Republicanism, an ideology that stressed a deep commitment to liberty and unalienable rights of humans, a deep scorn for corruption, and a rejection of aristocracy (Thomas Jefferson Foundation, 2015b). These principles of Republicanism formed the basis for the American Revolution in the late 1700s, the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and the United States Constitution in 1787. Indeed, Jefferson equated an educated American population with a high level of freedom, security, and equity (Smith, 2012).

## **THE AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM TODAY**

More than 200 years after Jefferson's influence, America continues to depend heavily on its formal education system. Due to this significant reliance, both the

expectations and the stakes are high. As a result, the American education system is charged with several massive responsibilities. Various stakeholders hold the formal education system accountable for accomplishing the arduous task of fulfilling four societal roles:

- Providing opportunities for individuals to grow personally
- Equipping them to contribute to the workforce and society
- Enabling individuals to develop as responsible citizens capable of fulfilling civic responsibilities
- Empowering them to live out and carry forward their traditions and values (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

These roles have been termed the “great expectations” of education (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 12). For many stakeholders, however, these great expectations have become immense disappointments. The nation’s education system has largely fallen short of meeting these goals.

Disturbingly, evidence indicates that these substandard learning outcomes are prevalent throughout the entire American education system (Doyle, 2011). For many American students, it’s in grades kindergarten through twelve (K-12) that they become accustomed to passive learning, relying on teachers and others to bear the major responsibilities of the education process, rather than taking an active role in their own learning (Doyle, 2011; Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Further, statistics show an alarming level of illiteracy among American teens, a high drop-out rate from secondary schools (grades 9 – 12) and high school graduates who are not prepared to accomplish college-level work (AACC, 2012).

Another component of American education is higher education. Comprised of a variety of institutions that offer many levels of credentials and degrees, including public and private universities, technical schools, and community colleges, higher education has historically played a crucial role in the nation's prosperity (OECD, 2013). Like the K-12 level, higher education has its own set of short-falls: unacceptable levels of student attrition, the perpetuation of passivity with students taking little to no responsibility for their learning, and learning outcomes that fall short of meeting the demands of adult life. Many college students and graduates enter the workforce unprepared to achieve the level of work required by employers, lacking critical thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills (AACC, 2012).

One subsystem of higher education is the community college. Since the founding of Joliet Junior College in 1901, the oldest public two-year college in existence, to the mid-1940's establishment of a network of public community colleges developed as the result of the Truman Commission on education, and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, community colleges have assumed a key position in American postsecondary education (AACC, n.d.). Enrolling nearly half of the nation's 2014 undergraduate students community colleges are a major player in higher education (AACC, 2016). For many students, community colleges provide the important start to their postsecondary education and serve as the gateway to more advanced studies at universities. Other students prepare themselves for careers and gainful employment through their community college studies.

Community colleges are expected to achieve the same high level of learning outcomes as other postsecondary education institutions, yet they experience inherent challenges, resulting from their open-door policy. Coined “democracy’s college” (Myran, 2009, p. 2; Pusser & Levin, 2009, p. 4), for decades, community colleges have been highly valued for providing post-secondary education opportunities for *all* students, particularly those who may not be able to afford or qualify for admission to universities with higher tuition and fees, and tighter, more rigorous admission policies. In recent years, however, just like the overall system of higher education, community college accolades have often been replaced with criticism, as many community college students do not complete their academic goals. Community colleges have been disparaged for high attrition rates when students decide to leave academia. Like other higher education institutions, they are falling short in producing graduates who are prepared to meet the needs of the American workforce and responsibilities of society. Critics argue that it isn’t enough to get students through the doors and into the classrooms of community colleges; more efforts are needed and expected of community colleges to keep students in school (AACC, 2012).

Exacerbating the situation, of those students who persist in college, many graduate with a diploma in one hand and sizeable student loan debt in the other, with dismal opportunities for earning a comfortable living (AACC, 2012). Alarmingly, many of these individuals complete their college careers possessing minimal knowledge, deficient in the skills necessary to fulfill one or more of the above-described responsibilities of adult life (Doyle, 2011). What is needed and expected from citizens to

flourish and to sustain a strong nation is often lacking. These graduates are losing the competitive battle with their counterparts in other nations (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007).

Each of the above-described deficiencies is of vital concern. They are also intrinsically linked. While open access addresses the provision of higher education opportunities, it serves no meaningful purpose if students do not persist in their college studies. For those students who persist, a quality curriculum consisting of relevant content is necessary, in order for students to master desirable knowledge and skill levels. This importance of quality in the education system is emphasized by The Lumina Foundation with its establishment of what is known as *Goal 2025*, which aims to increase to 60% the percentage of Americans possessing a high-quality degree or credential by the year 2025 (Lumina Foundation, 2013).

## **FOCUS OF THE STUDY**

The analysis of the American education system, including its significance to society, the challenges faced, and improvements needed, is broad in scope. To narrow the focus, this study centers on American community colleges, and more specifically, one small rural Midwestern community college. This study will obtain perceptions of students and faculty about learner-centeredness and their respective roles in learner-centered practices at their college.



## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM**

For many reasons, the substandard performance of many college students and graduates is of vital concern to America. Because the link between the nation's education attainment and its wealth and influence is "direct and powerful" (AACC, 2012, p. vii), poor learning outcomes threaten America's global economic and political status.

One impact of unprepared American workers is the negative effect on the workforce. In recent decades, the characteristics of the nation and world have changed—from an agricultural age to an industrial age, and presently to a knowledge age (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). In the workforce, the demands of this knowledge age require highly-skilled workers who can adapt to technology changes, respond appropriately to revised company policies, and effectively carry out their job responsibilities. Many graduates of American colleges lack these skills and are, therefore, not prepared to meet neither the most basic of employer needs, nor the more challenging demands of a progressively complex and increasingly globally competitive 21st century world (AACC, 2012).

This skills gap in American students and graduates often leads to an employment gap. Many jobs in the United States go unfilled due to a lack of qualified applicants for the positions. This negatively affects the profitability of American employers. Large businesses with training budgets may respond by providing targeted training to prospective employees. Small businesses, however, may find it financially unfeasible to provide customized training to elevate the skill level of workers to meet their workforce needs. As a result, employers who cannot find qualified employees often face difficulties

in completing the requirements to meet their customer expectations for high quality products and services.

To reduce this negative impact, many employers fill job vacancies with qualified workers from other countries. This leads to a decline in domestic employment for Americans (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). Reduced employment negatively impacts individuals, their families, and their communities, as lower employment levels mean less available dollars for spending and investing in the community, thus deteriorating the community's financial health.

When American college graduates do fill job positions, but do not perform with high quality, they are less valuable to their employers. Lower-valued employees become lower-paid employees (National Center On Education And The Economy, 1990). Compensated at a rate commensurate with the lower quality of skills they offer, these employees fall into lower income levels. One result: "The great American middle class is shrinking" (AACU, 2012, p. 3). Recent census data reveal disturbing results: due to lower earnings, almost 50% of Americans are classified as either low-income or living in poverty (AACU, 2012). The American Association of Community Colleges (2012) reports that although the median income in America was level during the years 1972 to 2000, it has declined by 7% since 2000. This same report warns that, not only are current employees affected, the nation's children and grandchildren will also be adversely impacted by this downward trend.

Another challenge for America is the increasing demand for higher levels of innovation and creative thinking in the workforce. Higher-skilled jobs that once paid

higher wages are becoming more difficult to find. With today's global competition, even those tasks requiring increased skill levels can be accomplished by lower-paid workers. Many eager workers from countries such as China and India are willing to perform highly-skilled tasks for lower pay than many American workers demand (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). Traditional work environments are being replaced by environments employing individuals who are competent and comfortable socially, and who possess investigative and entrepreneurial skills. While employees need to develop higher levels of creative thinking and innovation skills in order to be more highly compensated, most American schools do not produce these higher levels of creativity and innovative thinking in their students; rather, they emphasize memory and analytical skills. Lacking these desirable skills, American employees will experience higher levels of unemployment and lower wage rates (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007).

Other important attributes, coined "21<sup>st</sup> century skills" by various authors and researchers, are also lacking in students and graduates of American schools. Trilling & Fadel (2009) describe these as "learning and innovation skills, digital literacy skills, and career and life skills," while Harris & Cullen (2010) identify these as "problem-solving and critical thinking skills, writing and verbal communication skills, and creative and innovative thinking." All too often, students in American schools passively glide through their educational careers without developing these important skills. The result is an underprepared nation of citizens who are not equipped to face the challenges and opportunities of adult and family life required of adults by an increasingly complex

world (Harris & Cullen, 2010). As student ability declines in acquiring the skills needed to carry out the varied responsibilities in their roles as family leaders, employees, business owners, neighbors, and citizens, the achievement gap between the expectations and actual outcomes of United States college graduates widens (AACC, 2012).

More distressing news: America, once lauded as the world leader in college degree completion, has lost its superior rank. In 2010, a report by the Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) indicated that globally, the United States dropped from *first* to *tenth* in the percentage of college degree attainment for young adults (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2010). Just two years later, the 21st-Century Commission on the Future of Community Colleges reported a drop in rank to #16 in the world for American 25- to 34-year-old college completers (AACU, 2012).

Many students commence their postsecondary education with high aspirations—but for a variety of reasons, they do not persist—and leave college before earning the credential they set out to achieve. Sadly, of those students who do complete their college studies, many fail to achieve high-quality learning outcomes (AACC, 2012). This is a disturbing trend that if not reversed, will result in an ongoing plunge in global rank for United States higher education.

At stake is the *American Dream* (AACC, 2012). The American Dream has been defined as the opportunity for college graduates to rise to a higher socioeconomic standard than their parents. For decades, generations of American families celebrated the academic accomplishments of their sons and daughters as they surpassed the prior

achievements of older family members. This is no longer the case. Today's American college graduates are increasingly worse off socio-economically than their preceding generation. In short, the American Dream is dying (AACC, 2012).

To equip students to meet the Lumina Foundation's goal of attaining high-quality credentials, the higher education system needs to be redesigned to foster high levels of learning. However, even a first-rate curriculum design proves unbeneficial if the content is not learned. To remain competitive in a global society, and to preserve its status as a world leader, it is important that American students actually learn. They need to not only master the competencies and skills established in the curriculum, but must also possess a keen ability to problem solve, think critically, and make responsible decisions.

Although evidence indicates that it is crucial to increase the quality and quantity of learning, in recent decades American schools often fail to improve learning outcomes. The nation is producing ill-prepared citizens, and, as a result, America is losing its economic and political status (AACC, 2012; Harris & Cullen, 2010).

## **CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM**

Past research has identified various contributing factors to the shortfalls of American schools. One factor is the use of ineffective and outdated policies throughout the campus (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Like the majority of K-12 schools, as well as universities, most community colleges continue to implement and maintain stagnated and obsolete practices. Throughout the nation, it is business as usual for most

community colleges, operating much the same as they have been for more than half a century (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Prior studies conducted for more than 25 years, report that American colleges have not kept up with changes in student demographics and characteristics, workforce needs, continuously-evolving technology, and the increasingly complex and competitive global society (Pusser & Levin, 2009). They have not adapted to the knowledge age of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). As a result, higher education is outdated (AACC, 2012; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Harris & Cullen, 2010; O'Banion, 1997).

Other cited causes of poor higher education learning outcomes include the varied financial, economic, and personal obstacles to college success faced by students (Myran, 2009), as well as lack of student preparedness for the responsibilities of postsecondary education (AACC, 2012). Traditional age students, (those 24 years old and younger and often those recently graduated from high schools), enter the halls of postsecondary education bearing the experiences and expectations from the K-12 system. Often lacking is an alignment between K-12 and college expectations (AACC, 2012). Nontraditional students (those 25 years of age and older) also often commence their college studies absent the skills needed for student success.

High school students report that they often don't know what will be expected of them in college. Because there are few flourishing partnerships between the K-12 and community college education systems, a very limited exchange of information occurs. New college students often rely on information from high school teachers and counselors, as well as from family and friends, regarding college expectations

(McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012). Much of this information may be inaccurate, outdated, or incomplete, due to the changing environment of higher education and lack of communication between representatives of the K-12 system and those of higher education. Greater efforts to build working relationships between the K-12 and community college faculty and administrators are recommended by education experts to establish, implement, and communicate requirements and expectations for successful college completion (Watson, 2009).

Yet another identified cause of limited-learning outcomes is the continued focus on the institution and teachers, rather than what is best for learners (Doyle, 2011). Many colleges primarily practice what is beneficial to and convenient for the institution, its faculty, and its staff, keeping what is best for learners at the bottom of the priority list. Recruitment, admission, enrollment, orientation, placement, funding, and other college functions are often designed to fit the needs of the college.

In the classroom, despite research findings indicating that individuals who actively engage in the learning process achieve the highest levels of learning, most college faculty continue to use teacher-centered practices (Doyle, 2011). Teacher-centered instruction finds the teacher performing much of the work, leaving learners as passive participants in their own education (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Doyle, 2011; Weimer, 2002; Weimer, 2013). This results in significant limitations in student learning that leads to a lack of preparedness of college graduates to be able to manage the responsibilities of adult life.

## **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

As described above, one identified cause of poor higher education learning outcomes identified by prior studies is the lack of focus on learners. This researcher seeks to garner information about the possible impact of a learner-centered focus on student learning at a community college.

The purpose of this study is to (1) identify community college faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and learner-centered practices at a small rural Midwest American community college, and (2) to assess the alignment of faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and their respective roles in applying learner-centered practices on their campus.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Guiding research questions of this study include the following:

1. What are faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness at this Midwest community college?
2. To what extent do the perceptions of faculty and students align regarding learner-centeredness and their respective roles in establishing, implementing, and improving learner-centered practices at this community college?
3. How does this alignment impact the effectiveness of learner-centered practices at this community college?

## **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Currently, a credential from an American higher education institution is less valuable than it once was (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2012; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Doyle, 2011; O'Banion, 1997; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Higher



education learning outcomes are often insufficient to equip graduates with the knowledge and skills to compete in demanding domestic and global markets. As a result, learners and other stakeholders demand higher accountability for colleges to effectively use resources to provide more relevant and effective opportunities for learning, aimed at producing high-quality credentialed learners (AACC, 2012). A significant and prompt response to this call for revisions and improvements is needed if the United States is to remain as a coveted source of quality education.

Prior research indicates that one appropriate response aimed at elevating the quality and quantity of learning is to move closer to learner-centeredness, focusing more on the learner, rather than on the institution or teacher (AACC, 2012; Barr & Tagg, 1995; Doyle, 2011; O'Banion, 1997; Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005; Weimer, 2013). Education experts assert that a learner-centered focus can increase the effectiveness of learning outcomes and may prove to be the vital link between the requirements of living and working in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the development of skills and abilities to meet those requirements (AACC, 2012; Pusser & Levin, 2009).

In spite of the above recommendation, transitioning from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness has been a slow and challenging process (AACC, 2012; O'Banion, 1997). A review of existing literature, described in detail in chapter two of this dissertation, describes several factors that cause the slow transition from teacher-centeredness to learner-centeredness.

What is not known from previous studies are the perceptions of faculty and students at one small Midwest American community college regarding learner-

centeredness, and perceptions of their respective roles in learner-centeredness at this community college. Also not known is the degree of alignment in their perceptions of their respective roles in learner-centeredness. Prior studies have identified practices that can increase learner-centeredness and the resulting improvement in learning outcomes at various higher education institutions. However, a study of learner-centeredness at the community college that is the subject of this study has not been previously conducted.

Just as for other higher education institutions, increasing the level of learning outcomes is crucial for this college. Each college and each campus across the nation possesses unique demographics, characteristics, resources, and constraints. A one-size-fits-all philosophy of learner-centeredness may not be appropriate for all higher education institutions. Therefore, it is important to understand the perceptions of faculty and staff at this community college about their respective roles in learner-centeredness on their campus.

Obtaining a deeper understanding of existing faculty and student perceptions may prove beneficial to this community college in adopting policies and practices that are more learner-centered than that which are presently practiced. By focusing on learners, the institution's administrators, faculty, staff, and students can identify authentic learning needs; design and develop relevant curriculum and courses; establish systems, processes, and practices to support learning; assess the degree of learning, and make necessary revisions to help foster and improve the effectiveness of learning outcomes for the learners they serve.

## DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study was designed to capture perceptions of community college faculty and students, and, therefore, excluded other types of higher education institutions, such as universities. Additionally, a single community college was selected for this study. This researcher teaches on a full-time basis at *this* college. She chose to research perceptions of *some* of its students and faculty to gain insights that may be combined with the researcher's experience and knowledge of the institution to make recommendations for learner-centered policy and practices that could benefit the college and its students.

Although community colleges adopt a mission much like their counterparts, and many share similar visions, each community college possesses unique institutional characteristics. These differences are manifested in the policies, procedures, and practices of the respective colleges. By utilizing just one community college, the faculty and student perceptions regarding learner-centeredness at other community colleges are excluded from this study. Inclusion of multiple community colleges and universities would most likely change the results of this study.

The scope of this study is limited: Only faculty with a minimum of two years of full-time teaching experience at this community college and student subjects with at least two semesters of full-time studies at this community college were included in the population of potential subjects. As a result of this design, this study excludes first-semester and second-semester full-time students, new faculty with less than two full-time years of community college teaching experience, and all part-time students and faculty. The results of this study with a narrow scope may differ from a study that

includes a broader scope of subjects. However, it may provide insights and information about learner-centeredness at the subject college that can be used to improve the extent and effectiveness of its learning outcomes.

## **ASSUMPTIONS**

This study includes the following assumptions:

- Based on past and present experiences, students and faculty possess insights and opinions on the degree of effectiveness of various types of learning policies, practices, and activities.
- Given the opportunity to share those insights and opinions, students and faculty will be interested in sharing and willing to share these insights.
- Given assurance of the confidentiality of their responses, participants will be willing to provide an honest, straightforward assessment of the effectiveness of past learning experiences, and will offer insights into possible causes for resistance to a shift towards learner-centeredness, as well as suggestions from their perspective of how this shift might occur more swiftly and smoothly.

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

To help understand this study, the following is a list of terms, defined according to how they are used in this research.

**Learner-centeredness:** refers to an emphasis on learners, with learners as the direct focus, coupled with a focus on learning. Learner-centeredness considers the unique characteristics of learners and applies pedagogy appropriate to these unique learner characteristics, the content to be learned, and the knowledge about education practices that most effectively enhance learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Weimer,

2013). Learner-centeredness is described and discussed more extensively later in chapter two of this study.

**Learner-centered practices:** the strategies, plans, and activities that are designed to focus on learners. Learner-centered practices are in contrast with *teacher-centered practices* that focus on the teacher, or *institution-centered practices* that center on the institution. Learner-centered practices recognize the unique characteristics of learners and the resulting need to attend to those characteristics through the design and implementation of learning activities.

**Learning:** “Real, observable physiological growth in the brain that occurs as a result of sensory input and the processing, organizing, and pruning it promotes” (Kovalik & Olsen, 2005, p. 1.1). Learning improves the learner’s performance and can lead to future learning (Weimer, 2002). “The richer the sensory input, the greater the learning that will be wired into long-term memory” (Kovalik & Olsen, 2005, p. 1.1). Kovalik & Olsen (2005) describe a two-step process to learning. First, as an individual learns, the brain seeks to identify patterns from which to create meaning. Second, the brain stores these patterns in mental programs, which can subsequently be accessed and recalled to help promote further learning.

**Learning design:** plans and strategies utilized by faculty, including the development and implementation of learning activities aimed at achieving specified learning outcomes. This includes multiple learning methods and structures that work for learners with varying abilities, interests, experiences, and characteristics. Based on learning results, current methods are evaluated and revised to maximize learning and

success (Barr & Tagg, 1995). Learning is designed to answer the question, “How will your instructional decisions optimize the opportunity for students to learn the skills and content of the course?” (Doyle, 2011, p. 2.)

**Learning Outcomes:** the results and effects of the learning process. Learning outcomes also refer to the targeted goals and effects of the learning process.

**Engagement:** (also known as *active learning*) refers to a high level of participation and involvement of learners in their own learning. It is in contrast to passive learning, where students do not actively participate in learning activities. Engaged students shape their own learning (Schumacher, Englander, & Carraccio, 2013).

## **ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY**

The remainder of the study is organized into five chapters, a reference list, and appendices. Chapter 2 presents a literature review of prior research and reports on the status of American higher education learning outcomes and the use of learner-centered practices to improve learning outcomes. Chapter 3 describes the research design and the methodology of the study. This includes a description of the instrumentation, the research procedures employed, and the criteria used to select the research sample. In Chapter 4, the data analysis is described, and a report of the findings is presented. The final chapter, Chapter 5, summarizes the study, discusses the implications of the study, conclusions drawn from an analysis of the data, and suggested recommendations for further action and research. The final section of this study includes the reference list and appendices.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to (1) identify community college faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and learner-centered practices at a small rural Midwest American community college, and (2) to assess the alignment of faculty and student perceptions on learner-centeredness and their respective roles in applying learner-centered practices on their campus. To obtain a better understanding of the existing problem of poor learning outcomes and to explore learner-centeredness as a proposed approach to improving these outcomes, the existing literature was reviewed to ascertain what researchers, authors and experts have already discovered and reported. The first part of the literature review focuses on the problem of American higher education poor learning outcomes, and the significance of the problem to the nation and its citizens. The second part of the literature review explores the existing knowledge about how learning occurs, and the various recommendations by multiple experts to shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered focus for improved learning outcomes.

The results of this literature review serve to inform the researcher, and help to shape the design and execution of this study. The literature review also serves to place

this study within the broader scope of knowledge on learning outcomes in higher education and learner-centeredness.

### **EXISTING PROBLEM OF POOR LEARNING OUTCOMES**

A review of existing literature revealed that throughout the past thirty years, many studies have been conducted and much has been reported about American higher education. The word is out, but it is old news: American higher education is failing to produce high quality student learning (AACC, 2012; AACU, 2002; Barr & Tagg, 1995; National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990 & 2007; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Goodman, Finnegan, Mohadjer, Krenzke, & Hogan, 2013; Pusser & Levin, 2009; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). Students from other countries are often out-performing American students. This warning emphasizes the significant reliance placed on the nation's education system to provide the foundation, structure, resources, and support needed for its students to learn.

The nation's reliance on the education system is illustrated in the message of one team of authors who describes the "great expectations" of education in fulfilling four important societal roles in America (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 12), as introduced in the initial chapter of this dissertation. They point out that America expects its formal education system to provide its citizens with opportunities for personal growth and development, equip them with workforce and societal skills, develop characteristics of good citizenship, and encourage them to live out and pass on to their children their traditions and values (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The authors view these four pillars as



foundational to society and constant throughout time, and they compare these mainstays with Maslow's hierarchy of needs in their timeless applicability. Trilling & Fadel describe three ages of time in modern America, including the Agrarian Age, when agriculture was the major work of society; the Industrial Age, with a shift from farming to factory production; and the current Knowledge Age, where "brainpower replaces brawnpower, and mechanical horsepower gives way to electronic hertzpower" (Trilling & Fadel, 2009, p. 15). They describe ways in which the nation's education system can assist citizens in achieving each of their goals.

Personal growth and the development of one's talents can be enhanced when the education system provides technological resources and training necessary to effectively use global resources and opportunities for lifelong development of talents. The education system can help citizens contribute to work and society by providing coverage of content in specific subject areas, but it must also help individuals master technology, innovation, learning, and career skills, which are necessary to revitalize the nation's workforce and prepare them to meet the rigorous demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> century workforce. In helping students develop effective skills and good citizenship, the education system helps them manage information through the development of literacy skills, critical thinking and communication skills. It also helps them learn to collaborate, problem solve, build community, and participate in civic functions. The education system can help learners acquire and integrate new knowledge resulting from the blending of core principles and traditions of a specific field of knowledge with that of other fields. While 21<sup>st</sup> century learners develop and maintain their unique identities

and traditions from all that are available to them, they also learn to understand and value the differences in identities and values of others (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

The authors emphasize that although these four expectations remain constant, the manner in which learners' needs are met should vary in accordance with the changing characteristics of specific time periods. They conclude that while the nation's children are expected to achieve these four goals, many education institutions are failing to adapt existing policies and practices to meet the changing needs of evolving eras. Far too often, institutions continue to use ineffective and outdated policies throughout the campus, which contributes to the failure of many students in accomplishing these four goals (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

The opinion of Trilling & Fadel is echoed by that of many other critics, who maintain that the educational institutions that are expected to provide the necessary resources and support to achieve these goals have often fallen short in their provisions (AACC, 2012; AACU, 2002; National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990 & 2007; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; Wingspread Group On Higher Education, 1993. As evidenced in this literature review, the problems of the American education system, as well as calls for reform and improvement, have been sounding repeatedly for decades.

## **A CLOSER LOOK AT FEDERAL INITIATIVES ON EDUCATION**

A review of the existing literature provides valuable insights regarding the history and role of the American education system, including both the K-12 system and

postsecondary education, in building the nation's economic and social posterity. This literature review included a search for what has been reported about the role of community colleges in America, positioned within the larger higher education arena. Results of the literature review indicate that community colleges played a central historic role in educating American citizens, as described below (Gilbert & Heller, 2010; Hunt & Tierney, 2006; Hutcheson, 2007).

Just as Jefferson had envisioned, the United States earned its position as the world's economic leader during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with much credit given to the nation's two-year and four-year public and private institutions for their contributions to attaining that position (Gilbert & Heller, 2010). Before World War II, American college attendance was low, with a mere 15% of American's 18-to 20-year-olds attended college in 1937 (Hunt & Tierney, 2006). However, with federal policy implemented at the end of World War II, higher education institutions offered opportunities to a wider range of Americans, helping to develop the workforce to support substantial economic growth. The *Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944*, also known as the *GI Bill*, was established to provide financial scholarships to servicemen and servicewomen upon their return from serving in World War II (Hunt & Tierney, 2006). Fearing a lack of jobs to employ the influx of those returning, political leaders developed a plan to promote their college education to improve their education and skills while avoiding high levels of unemployment. As a result of the GI Bill, public junior colleges experienced significant enrollment increases (Gilbert & Heller, 2010). Financial assistance was awarded to eligible veterans, enabling significant numbers of students to

earn college credentials. The scholarships provided to these veterans greatly influenced the financial aid practices still in existence today. College faculty found the returning veterans focused on their studies, and excelling in community college courses. This changed previous faculty perceptions of who could succeed in higher education (Hutcheson, 2007).

The nation's expectations about education delivery and attendance were considerably altered with the release of the 1947 *President's Commission on Higher Education* report. The Truman Commission report provided a platform for national discussions about the significance and expectations of higher education. The interest of federal leaders in the American higher education system continues through the present day (Gilbert & Heller, 2010). The Commission report set out to establish two goals: to "educate college students in a broad program of general education and to improve college teaching" (Hutcheson, 2007, p. 108). The report emphasized that the critical time for educating individuals was the first two years of higher education, stressing the importance of community college involvement.

The Truman Commission recommended action in three fundamental areas: 1) improving college access and equity; 2) expanding the role of community colleges; and 3) restructuring and expanding the federal government's role in funding higher education institutions (Gilbert & Heller, 2010). In making these recommendations, the Commission recognized the inequitable access to higher education that had been occurring after World War II. It asserted that higher education opportunities were weighted too heavily on the highest levels of student ability. The Commission did not

propose that all potential students receive the identical opportunity for higher education; rather, it asserted that higher education opportunities should be provided to students according to their varying skills and prior training. The Commission charged higher education with the responsibility to recognize and meet the diverse needs and abilities of students. At the same time, students would be expected to put forth their best effort and aim for their highest potential of performance.

Because community colleges were deemed vital to the plans set forth in the Truman Commission, expanding the role of community colleges was deemed necessary. Community colleges were relied upon to provide higher education opportunities to a wider range of Americans, helping to develop the workforce to support substantial economic growth (Gilbert & Heller, 2010). The name change from *junior college* to *community college* provided clarification of the multiple roles of these institutions. Junior colleges implied that their students would move on to four-year institutions. While this was the plan for some students, many others relied on the community college to complete their two-year terminal degree. Community colleges were designed to be local or regional; controlled by local governing boards; structured to fit within a statewide higher education system; and able to serve both their entire state and the needs of their local communities (Gilbert & Heller, 2010).

By the late 1940s, Truman's Commission Report clearly emphasized the need for higher education to "change whom it admitted and how it taught students" (Hutcheson, 2007, p. 109). The Commission recommended changes to better meet the needs of students and the nation. However, despite the need for improved teaching methods,

college teachers did not adapt higher education content and pedagogy, but continued with familiar practices. Teaching methods, therefore, did not change much over the next four decades, leading to an even more urgent need for reform and update (Hutcheson, 2007).

The Truman Commission's concern about the need to improve the quality of American higher education is echoed in subsequent federal reports. Several organizations described these problems, outlined the dangers, and called for immediate and swift action to rectify the situation (AACC, 2012; AACU, 2002; National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990 & 2007; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983 & 2008; Wingspread Group On Higher Education, 1993).

In 1983, U.S. Secretary of State Terrence H. Bell, serving under President Ronald Reagan, signed a report on the deteriorating status of American education. Entitled *A Nation at Risk*, this report from the National Commission on Excellence in Education exposed grim findings on the plummeting performance of U.S. primary, secondary, and postsecondary education, and the declining skills of U.S. citizens (National Center on Excellence in Education [NCEE], 1983). Included in the list of risks faced by Americans were:

- Inferior results of performance on international exams compared to counterparts from other countries
- An alarming illiteracy rate among American teenagers
- Declining performance on standardized tests, and an increase in the need of new college students to complete developmental courses prior to commencing college-level studies (NCEE, 1983).

In this report, the Commission expressed concern not only for the impact of substandard education outcomes on business and industry, but also for “the intellectual, moral, and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society” (NCEE, 1983, p.100). The report stressed the importance of high-quality education in maintaining America’s free, democratic society. The Commission cited Thomas Jefferson and his reference decades earlier to the role of education in producing enlightened citizens who possess societal powers. This report advocated the broad-scale pursuit of excellence—by learners, schools, colleges, and society—in order to be prepared to properly respond to challenges presented to them (NCEE, 1983). The Commission noted five areas of concern, and made recommendations for improvements in the following areas: curriculum content, standards and expectations for students, the time devoted to education, the quality of teachers, and financial and leadership support of education (NCEE, 1983). The Commission also encouraged the formation of a Learning Society to afford all Americans—no matter their socioeconomic status—the opportunity to expand learning as the world evolves. In short, it proposed a system of lifelong learning, and encouraged learning from many sources.

Twenty-five years later, the U.S. Department of Education (2008) resounded the above warning that the deteriorating quality of American education and the need for improvement. This follow-up study to the 1983 analysis by the National Center for Education Excellence assessed the progress made in the five areas outlined in the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*. This study indicated that, while some progress had been made,

the education system needed to “push harder” to meet the requirements necessary to improve learning outcomes of students in the American public education system and to remain competitive with global counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2008, p. 20). Further standards were implemented, such as the establishment of basic standards and minimum high school graduation requirements to include required courses in English, math, science, and social studies. This reform came about as a result of observed low-completion rates of higher education, as only about 25% of students who started school in 1988 completed a college degree by the year 2007 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Just two years prior to the issuance of the above 2008 update report, the importance of the provision of higher education opportunities for all Americans and was emphasized in the U.S. Department of Education’s 2006 Commission Report, commonly known as the *Spellings Report*, named after Margaret Spelling, the U.S. Secretary of Education. The Spellings Report recognized the accomplishments of American higher education, including its once-held position as the world leader in educating its citizens (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2006). The report also identified higher education’s shortfalls, noting that American higher education’s past successes contributed to its current complacency regarding the need to remain current and relevant. The Spellings Report included a set of goals that encompassed what citizens may expect from American higher education. This includes “all public and private education that is available after high school, from trade schools, online professional-training institutions and technical colleges to community colleges, traditional four-year



colleges and universities, and graduate and professional programs” (USDOE, 2006, p. xi). These expectations described in the Spellings Report recommended the development of a higher education system capable of accomplishing several tasks. These include: equipping students to create new knowledge; empowering its citizens; contributing to the nation’s economic prosperity; developing its global competitiveness; providing access to education for all Americans at any stage in their lives; providing high-quality, affordable instruction; developing strong, yet flexible, workplace skills in its students; and helping students adapt to a technologically changing world (USDOE, 2006).

Although their reports were issued at different times and each focused on varying details, many organizations, authors, researchers, education leaders, and college stakeholders shared similar concerns about unacceptably low levels of learning (AACU, 2012; AACC, 2012; Barr & Tagg, 1995; National Center on Education and the Economy, 1990 & 2007; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983; O’Banion, 1997; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993). These reports communicate a common theme: American college undergraduates are not learning enough, the negative impacts on America and its citizens are powerful, and swift reform of the America higher education system aimed at producing higher levels of learning is urgently needed to rectify the situation. As evidenced by the volume of studies and the extensive time span in which their findings are reported, the problem of poor learning outcomes continues to be a crucial national issue of significant concern that seems to continue to be fundamentally disregarded.

## **OTHER STUDIES AND REPORTS ON THE AMERICAN EDUCATION SYSTEM**

In addition to the federal government, higher education organizations studied and assessed higher education practices and outcomes over a period of several reports. Their reports, described below, align in large part with the findings of the federal initiatives. The 1988 Commission on the Future of Community Colleges report, *Building Communities: A Vision for a New Century*, warned that the methodology used in teaching and learning. (American Association of Community and Junior Colleges [AACJC], 1988). It recommended updates to help shape the future of community colleges to meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The primary theme of the 1988 report was on “building communities” which were comprised of educated citizens (AACJC, 1988, p. 11).

One reform effort recommended in the 1988 report was to increase the focus on students, demonstrating the community college’s commitment to the advancement of students, regardless of age, race, sex, disability, or ability (AACJC, 1988). Community colleges were encouraged to begin working with students while still in junior high and high school to establish a relationship with them early on to ensure their success in college.

Sharing these concerns, the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce issued a report recognizing that America needed to make a choice in order to remain a competitor in an increasingly competitive world-wide market: either reduce wages and increase working hours for American workers in order to be price competitive, or maintain higher wage levels by shifting to the development of high-level skills that could provide high-value added products and service (National Center on Education and the

Economy, 1990). This report indicated that in advanced nations like the United States, demand for low-skilled jobs would continue to diminish. Citing falling prices in transportation and technology, the report opined that high-cost wages paid for low-skilled workers would be replaced with lower-cost wages paid for low-skilled work in lower-cost countries. At the conclusion of its study, the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce advised that primary and secondary education should focus on developing high-level skills, and for adults already working, it recommend that a set of skills standards be developed, and that job training be provided to raise the skill level of these workers (National Center On Education And The Economy, 1990).

Further literature review emphasizes earlier reports that little progress was made in rectifying the American education system's problem of poor learning outcomes. In its 2007 report, the new Commission of the National Center on Education and the Economy emphasized the critical status of the skills of the American workforce, noting that global competition was fiercer than the Commission had imagined it could be when it issued its 1990 report on the same topic (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). It stressed the importance of the American workforce in attaining high-level skills in mathematics, reading, writing, science, writing, speaking, literature, history and the arts, to serve as the foundation for the development of high levels of creativity and innovation (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007). This report admonished the use of an outdated education system, one that was designed decades earlier to provide more rudimentary type of skills to its students, and stated that employers will pay for the highest levels of competence, creativity, and innovation. Its

members advocated the establishment of a new education system to address ten critical existing problems in the American education system at that time, including:

1. A history of recruiting a disproportionate number of teachers with low scholastic abilities
2. Extensive waste of resources in the system
3. The growing inefficiencies of the present system
4. The expanding inequality in family incomes that cause a disparate level of student achievement
5. Failure to motivate students to enroll in challenging courses
6. A teacher compensation system based on service time, rather than on quality of learning outcomes
7. Ineffective assessment of learning systems
8. A bureaucratic education system that often limits the authority of those responsible for taking specific action
9. An extensive number of citizens in the existing workforce who lack high level skills
10. Limitations on working adults to professionally develop and acquire new skills (National Center on Education and the Economy, 2007).

For each of the above ten problems, the Commission offered a remedy, which included a budget for accomplishing the reform. (National Center On Education And The Economy, 2007).

Just two years later, Gunder Myran, (2009), an educational leader and author, highlighted the following inherent limitations of student access faced by community colleges as he reported that access to higher education without student success is not enough. He cited two factors requiring changes in the open-door policy—environmental

factors and the increasing diversity of students. According to Myran, environmental factors include demographic, economic, political, technological, cultural, social, and educational, while student diversity factors include race and ethnicity, national origin, gender, age, socioeconomic status, physical capacity, and education background (Myran, 2009, p. 4). As institutions assess their effectiveness, they must identify ways to revise their programs, services, and processes to better meet the diverse needs of their students. To effectively respond to changes in both external and internal environments, the community college open-door policy must be adjusted to include innovation (Myran, 2009).

Three years later, a disturbing report issued by the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC, 2012), *Reclaiming the American Dream*, conveyed dire statistics regarding the prosperity of the nation. The report exposed the nation's significant decline in its once-coveted position as a world leader in educational attainment for its citizens. It highlighted the fierce and real competition from global counterparts that threaten the prosperity and well-being of Americans, sounding the news that the American middle class is shrinking. It warned that "The American Dream is imperiled" (AACC, 2012, p. vii). The American Dream is the opportunity for each successive generation to advance in socioeconomic status as compared to the preceding generation. It describes the link between education and prosperity as "direct and powerful" (AACC, 2012, p. vii).

After warning of the perilous position the nation faces, the AACC urged major reform in the American education system, to the extent that it is capable of providing

opportunities for college graduates to be not only “globally competitive,” but also “globally competent” (AACC, 2012, p. viii). These calls for reform included the need to redesign educational experiences for students, reinvent the roles of education institutions, and reset the system to make colleges more accountable for uses of public and private resources and more transparent in reporting results (AACC, 2012). It established *Goal 2020* to significantly increase community college student completion rates. The specifics of this goal, as well as seven recommendations for implementation, are described below.

- Increase student completion rates by 50% by 2020. In doing so, preserve access, enhance quality, and eradicate income, race, ethnicity, and gender attainment gaps.
- Improve college readiness. Reduce by half the number of unprepared entering college students. Double the number of students who complete developmental classes and progress to college-level courses.
- Close the American skills gap. Equip students with skills and knowledge required or current and future jobs in regional and global economies.
- Refocus the community college mission. Redefine institutional roles to make them current with 21<sup>st</sup> century employment and education needs.
- Invest in support structures to serve multiple community colleges through collaboration with other institutions, as well as with philanthropic, governmental, and private sector partners.
- Strategically target public and private investments to create incentives for institutions and students to support the community college effort to reclaim the American Dream.
- Implement policies and practices that promote rigor, transparency, and accountability for results in community colleges. (AACC, 2012, p. x).

In a 2015 progress report regarding advances made towards Goal 2020, the American Association of Community Colleges described the complexities and limitations resulting from interpreting data from varying sources as well as from data that may represent more than one credential earned by one student (American Association of Community Colleges [AACC], 2015). The AACC acknowledges that, although progress has been made in increasing the quantity of credentials that are now available to community college students, the available data on completion rates indicates progress towards completion is behind schedule. The AACC acknowledges that additional time is needed to analyze emerging data as efforts to meet this challenging goal continue (AACC, 2015).

The review of the existing literature revealed startling and unsettling insights: American higher education is largely ineffective in producing quality learning. Responses to calls for reform spanning more than three decades have been small-scale, and the effectiveness of the responses has been minimal. The result is an underprepared nation of citizens, ill-equipped to navigate and properly respond to the immense challenges of a complex and rapidly-evolving world. The consequences are dire, as they threaten the socioeconomic status, security, and well-being of American citizens, as well as the core democratic principles that undergird the American society (AACC, 2012).

## **CAUSES OF AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION'S SHORTFALLS**

A review of existing literature indicates several causes for the poor student learning outcomes of the American education system. Some obstacles are attributable to student characteristics, while others relate to faculty and the college.

Many students face various obstacles that create barriers to college success (Myran, 2009). Vying for the time and attention of college students are jobs, family responsibilities, social relationships, financial pressures, health issues, and other personal matters that impede learning (Myran, 2009). Additionally, many new students are ill-prepared for the challenging demands of college (AACC, 2012). Traditional age students, aged 24 and younger, tend to continue past practices developed in high school, and are unaware of the increased responsibilities placed upon them in college. Nontraditional students, ages 25 and older, may have experienced a gap in school attendance for many years, and, as a result, may lack the skills and confidence to deal with college expectations and demands after a lengthy hiatus from the regimented school schedule (AACC, 2012). Further, communications between K-12 and college systems are often limited; thus the conveyance of college expectations to high school students is often limited, inaccurate, or nonexistent (McClenney & Arnsperger, 2012).

Other causes of poor student learning outcomes originate with the faculty and the college. Many continuing policies, described below, are the result of long-held and deeply engrained past practices, many of them obsolete (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Doyle, 2011; Goben, 2014; Harris & Cullen, 2010; O'Banion, 1996; O'Banion, 1997; Trilling & Fadel, 2009; Wingspread Group on Higher Education, 1993).



One outdated practice is the education system's continued practice of operating on an agrarian calendar, which served its purpose well when students were relieved from studies midday during harvest season and for the summer months entirely, to enable them to work on farms (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). Although equipment and technology have replaced human labor in many farm operations, schools continue to follow this agrarian timeframe. These practices have not been adjusted to the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century knowledge age.

Another outdated practice is the continued use of an industrial time clock, with definitive 50-minute time periods constraining learning opportunities. The Carnegie Unit was initially established as a standard unit for teacher pensions (Goben, 2014), as well as to provide a common currency in education (O'Banion, 1997). The Carnegie unit equates to one credit earned by students for a year-long high school course (O'Banion, 1997). Proposed in the nation's industrial age, the Carnegie unit was used in higher education to denote a 50-minute class period. Just as with time clocks in factories, when the bell sounded indicating the period ended, the learning opportunities for that class period ended, too. The Carnegie unit came to represent a standard measure of learning based on-seat time where the amount of time in class was constant, while the amount of learning varied. With the use of the Carnegie unit, learning is time-bound, subject to the imposed 50-minute limit, (O'Banion, 1996).

Also contributing to problem of poor learning outcomes is the use of outdated curriculum. Many traditional subjects, such as science, math, and language, which were first introduced in Colonial America, continue to be taught in the current century. While

these core courses continue to be important to learning, the curriculum of many American schools has not been updated to add new courses or replace and revise existing courses to meet the changing needs of the current era (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

In their book *Education and Identity*, Chickering and Reisser (1993) identify an additional barrier to effective learning. They report that few college professors view their primary role as *teacher*. They state that most professors, especially university faculty, tend to define themselves as professionals in their disciplinary specialty rather than in their teaching roles. Because of this view, little time and energy is invested in evaluating the effectiveness of one's teaching, discussing teaching strategies with colleagues, or focusing on improving instruction aimed at increasing student learning.

Yet another problem in higher education is the practice used by many faculty in utilizing classroom lectures as their principle method of teaching, even though research indicates that this teaching strategy has serious limitations. According to the authors, "lectures, which leave students the passive recipients of predigested information, create little impetus for student development" (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, pg. 371).

Also outdated is the focus on the teacher, rather than on the learner. More than two decades ago, the Wingspread Group (1993) reported the deficiencies of the American higher education system and recommended a change from its traditional approach to that which better meets the needs of learners. The authors of the study proposed the learning college and implored college faculty, staff, and administrators to "provide learning experiences any way, any place, and any time" (O'Banion, 1996, p. 56).

Despite these proposals, little has changed during the past two decades. Some community colleges responded with efforts to change the roles of teaching and learning on a campus-wide basis. Most colleges (and universities) in America, however, still center their practices on what is convenient for the faculty and the institution, rather than on the learner (Doyle, 2011).

### **LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS: A PROPOSED SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM**

One solution suggested to increase the effectiveness of learning outcomes is the adoption of learner-centered practices. One team of authors asserts that before discussing various methods of effective teaching, one must first understand how learning occurs (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010). As a result of almost thirty years of consulting with faculty about teaching and learning, as well as a review of research on this topic, these authors have developed seven principles of learning. Based on their conversations with thousands of faculty from a wide range of geographical locations, they found that these learning principles apply across varying institution types, disciplines, and cultures. These principles are grounded in the authors' definition of learning: Learning is "a process that leads to change, which occurs as a result of experience and increases the potential for improved performance and future learning" (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 3).

The authors' seven principles of learning are the following:

1. Students' prior knowledge can help or hinder learning.
2. How students organize knowledge influences how they learn and apply what they know.

3. Students' motivation determines, directs, and sustains what they do to learn.
4. To develop mastery, students must acquire component skills, practice integrating them, and know when to apply what they have learned.
5. Goal-directed practice, coupled with targeted feedback, enhances the quality of students' learning.
6. Students' current level of development interacts with the social, emotional, and intellectual climate of the course to impact learning.
7. To become self-directed learners, students must learn to monitor and adjust their approaches to learning (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, pp. 4-6).

The above seven principles align with research in cognitive, developmental, social psychology, and other studies (American Psychological Society, 2008, as cited in Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010; Pittsburgh Science of Learning Center, 2009).

The above authors adopted a holistic view to learning. They believe that learning is one of many of the learner's developmental processes and that these processes interact with each other. They also acknowledge that students possess not only skills, knowledge, and abilities, but also bring to their learning environment their past social and emotional experiences. These past experiences impact "what they value, how they perceive themselves and others, and how they will engage in the learning process" (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010, p. 4).

In addition to the seven principles of learning, these authors describe three critical elements of learning:

1. Learning is a process, rather than a product. Because learning occurs in the mind, however, students' products or performances must be observed to assess learning.
2. When one learns, change occurs in the learner's knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, or attitudes. This change evolves over time. It impacts the learner's future actions, as well as how they think.
3. Students learn by interpreting and responding to their experiences. Learning is not done to the students; rather, they themselves learn (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010).

### LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS DEFINED AND DISCUSSED

Learner-centeredness aligns in large part with the definition and principles of learning described above. But what does *learner-centered* mean? A review of the existing literature indicates that learner-centeredness is described similarly among leading education exemplars. The various sources included in the table below provide an overview of learner-centeredness as used by various authors and higher education leaders over a span of two decades. Although some differences in the definition exist, based on the unique focus or perspective of the researchers and authors, a high degree of similarities in the definition of learner-centeredness among authors was noted.

Table 2: *Learner-Centeredness As Defined by Several Authors*

Authors	Definition/Application of Learner-Centeredness
Meyers & Jones (1993)	"Learning is by its very nature an active process...different people learn in different ways...and in many ways, learners construct their own knowledge." p. 20.
Barr & Tagg (1995)	The aim of <i>the Learning Paradigm</i> is to do what is necessary to produce quality learning. Its interest lies in learning outcomes. It "supports any learning method and structure that works" and "requires a constant search for new structures and methods that work better for student learning and success, and expects even these to be redesigned continually and to evolve over time." p. 20

Authors	Definition/Application of Learner-Centeredness
O'Banion (1996 & 1997)	The entire college is learner-centered; it is called a <i>Learning College</i> . Characteristics include placing learning first; providing learning opportunities for learners "anyway, anyplace, anytime" (1996, p.56). Six principles of the learning college are described and include: learning produces significant change in the learners, learners are partners responsible for their learning, many learning opportunities are provided, collaboration in learning occurs, the facilitator's role depends on the needs of learners, and learning and growth is measured and documented (1997, p.47).
McCombs & Whisler (1997)	"The perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds, talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners)." p. 9
Huba & Freed (2000)	The authors describe a learning-centered paradigm. In this paradigm, students construct knowledge, are actively involved, use and communicate knowledge effectively, and apply it to real-life situations. Professors coach and facilitate learning. Learning is evaluated jointly by the professor and the students. Teaching and assessment are integrated. The purpose of assessment is to evaluate the degree of learning and to promote learning. Learning from errors and asking new questions is emphasized. Learning is directly assessed through a variety of assessment methods. An interdisciplinary approach to learning is adopted, rather than a single discipline approach. A spirit of cooperation and collaboration abounds. Professors learn along with the students. (paraphrased from Figure 1-2, p. 5)
Weimer (2002)	"Being learner-centered focuses attention squarely on learning: what the student is learning, how the student is learning, the conditions under which the student is learning, whether the student is retaining and applying the learning, and how current learning positions the student for future learning." p. xvi
McLennay (2004)	Six principles of a learner-centered institution are described, including (1) clearly defined student outcomes are established (2) systematic assessment and documentation of student learning occurs (3) Students participate in a variety of learning experiences aligned with required outcomes in accordance with good educational practice (4) Data about student learning is used to prompt reflection, decisions, and action (5) Student learning is emphasized in the institution's recruiting, hiring, orienting, deploying, evaluating, and developing personnel (6) Key institutional documents and policies, collegial effort, and leadership behavior consistently reflect a focus on learning.

Authors	Definition/Application of Learner-Centeredness
Trilling & Fadel (2009)	The teacher is a learning coach. "Learning activities must be designed so that the students own much of the learning and teaching. Students' planning their work, doing research, sharing findings with other team members, asking questions, designing procedures, taking on leadership and group facilitation roles, analyzing their own results, getting feedback from others, and so on are all important parts of a good project design that builds 21 <sup>st</sup> century skills and deepens understanding of the learning content." p. 98
Harris & Cullen (2010)	"In the grammar of the <i>instructional paradigm</i> , <i>knowledge</i> is the subject and <i>control</i> is the verb. In the learner-centered paradigm, <i>learning</i> is the subject and <i>collaborate</i> is the verb." p. 40
Doyle (2011)	Learner-centered teaching is designed with the following question in mind: "Given the context of your teaching...how will your instructional decisions optimize the opportunity for students to learn the skills and content of the course?" p. 2. Learner-centered teaching is considered the optimal approach for maximizing these learning opportunities.
Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, Dutton, & Kleiner (2012)	Institutions that adopt a learning culture invite all in the system to increase their awareness, express their aspirations, and combine talents for the good of learning. Five disciplines can be used "for changing the way people think and act together." p. 5. These disciplines include systems thinking, personal mastery, working with mental models, building shared vision, and team learning. In this environment, the deepest aspirations of individuals can materialize, and long-term educational performance can be achieved.
Schumacher, Englander, & Carraccio (2013)	With the shift towards competency-based learning environments, a learner-centered focus that helps students develop lifelong learning skills is vital. Responsibility for the content and direction of learning is shared jointly by learners and teachers. Learners drive their own education process.
Weimer (2013)	Weimer describes the learning environment where the learner is the direct focus. She presents five learner-centered teaching practices to promote learning. These practices include the role of the teacher, the balance of power, the responsibility for learning, the function of content, and the purpose and processes of evaluation.

The following definition aligns with the descriptions and definitions compiled in the table above and it provides an overview of the philosophy of learner-centeredness:

**Learner-centeredness** creates substantive change for individual learners, engages learners as full partners with learners assuming responsibility for their own choices, creates and offers many options for learning, helps learners to create and participate in collaborative learning activities, relies on learners' needs to define learning facilitator roles, and uses documented improvement and growth in learning as indicators of success (Barr and Tagg, 1995, p. 47).

In addition to principles on learning defined by several authors and researchers, the American Psychological Association developed learner-centered psychological principles, organized into four broad categories (American Psychological Association, 1997). These categories—cognitive and metacognitive factors, motivational and affective factors, developmental and social factors, and individual differences factors, are described below.

#### Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors:

- Nature of the learning process. The learning of complex subject matter is most effective when it is an intentional process of constructing meaning from information and experience.
- Goals of the learning process. The successful learner, over time and with support and instructional guidance, can create meaningful, coherent representations of knowledge.
- Construction of knowledge. The successful learner can link new information with existing knowledge in meaningful ways.
- Strategic thinking. The successful learner can create and use a repertoire of thinking and reasoning strategies to achieve complex learning goals.
- Thinking about thinking. Higher order strategies for selecting and monitoring mental operations facilitate creative and critical thinking.
- Context of learning. Learning is influenced by environmental factors, including culture, technology, and instructional practices.

#### Motivational and Affective Factors

- Motivational and emotional influences on learning. What and how much is learned is influenced by the motivation. Motivation to learn, in turn, is influenced by the individual's emotional states, beliefs, interests and goals, and habits of thinking.



- Intrinsic motivation to learn. The learner’s creativity, higher order thinking, and natural curiosity all contribute to motivation to learn. Intrinsic motivation is stimulated by tasks of optimal novelty and difficulty, relevant to personal interests, and providing for personal choice and control.
- Effects of motivation on effort. Acquisition of complex knowledge and skills requires extended learner effort and guided practice. Without learners’ motivation to learn, the willingness to exert this effort is unlikely without coercion.

#### Developmental and Social Factors

- Developmental influences on learning. As individuals develop, there are different opportunities and constraints for learning. Learning is most effective when differential development within and across physical, intellectual, emotional, and social domains is taken into account.
- Social influences on learning. Learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication with others.

#### Individual Differences Factors

- Individual differences in learning. Learners have different strategies, approaches, and capabilities for learning that are a function of prior experience and heredity.
- Learning and diversity. Learning is most effective when differences in learners’ linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account.
- Standards and assessment. Setting appropriately high and challenging standards and assessing the learner as well as learning progress—including diagnostic, process, and outcome assessment—are integral parts of the learning process (American Psychological Association, 1997).

McCombs & Whisler (1997) define learner-centeredness based on the 1990 version of the above principles (twelve principles are defined in the 1990 version, and fourteen principles are defined in the 1997 revised version) developed by the American Psychological Association. They define learner centered as “the perspective that couples a focus on individual learners (their heredity, experiences, perspectives, backgrounds,

talents, interests, capacities, and needs) with a focus on learning (the best available knowledge about learning and how it occurs and about teaching practices that are most effective in promoting the highest levels of motivation, learning, and achievement for all learners). This dual focus informs and drives educational decision making. The learner-centered perspective is a reflection of the twelve learner-centered psychological principles in the programs, practices, policies, and people that support learning for all” (p. 9).

Throughout this dissertation, the terms *students* and *learners* will be used interchangeably to describe *those who enroll in college courses for the purpose of learning and/or earning a college credential or fulfilling another type of educational goal* (Weimer, 2013). However, for some scholars, a distinction exists between these definitions. For example, in her second edition book on learner-centered teaching, Weimer (2013) points out that various terms are used to describe practices that center on the learner, rather than on the teacher. These include *learner-centered teaching, learner-centeredness, learner-centered environments, student-centered learning, student-centered teaching, student-centeredness*, and similar terms. Weimer prefers to use the term *learners*, rather than *students*. The term *students*, Weimer contends, is often associated with the term *customers*, with many assumptions and questions addressing customers and customer rights. Weimer recognizes that the customer rights conversations are valid and should occur; however, they should not be the focus of learner-centeredness. Rather, Weimer advises to maintain the focus on learners, and

design and deliver instruction in a manner that best supports and facilitates learning (Weimer, 2013).

In her book on learner-centered teaching, Weimer (2013) describes five learner-centered principles, which include the role of the teacher, the balance of power, the function of content, the responsibility for learning, and the purpose and processes of evaluation. Characteristics of each are summarized below.

- *The Role of Faculty.* In the learner-centered environment, the teacher's role is to facilitate learning. The teacher contributes substantially to the learning process, but as a guide and facilitator, and one who empowers students, rather than as the sole content expert, or classroom authoritarian. The teacher lectures less and listens more. Weimer reports that no existing literature indicates that the teacher's role is diminished in this paradigm.
- *The Balance of Power.* Power is shared between the teacher and students. The extent of shared power is contingent on the students' abilities to handle it. Students may help design or choose learning activities and assignments. They participate in decisions regarding course policies, such as attendance, participation, classroom behavior, and assignment due dates. They have some say in the content that is covered. They participate in evaluation activities, including self-assessment.
- *The Function of Content.* In addition to coverage of content, the learner-centered classroom focuses on the development of various learning skills, such as reading, writing, outlining, and summarizing. As the amount of content increases, it becomes increasingly important that students know how to prioritize, analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information.
- *The Responsibility for Learning.* Students are held responsible for their own learning in the learner-centered environment. High standards of performance are established and students are expected to achieve those standards. Logical consequences are experienced. The teacher demonstrates consistency between what is said and actions that follow. A high commitment to learning and a caring relationship exist in this environment.
- *The Purpose and Processes of Evaluation.* In the learner-centered environment, evaluation is used to assess the level of learning, rather than for some other motive. Evaluation experiences are less stressful for learners

as they learn that the feedback obtained from the evaluation will help them make adjustments to improve their learning (Weimer, 2013).

Weimer describes learner-centered teaching as a type of teaching that focuses on learning, particularly on what the student is doing. In addition to her five principles of learner-centered teaching, Weimer outlines the following five fundamental elements of learner-centered teaching:

1. It is teaching that engages students in the hard, messy work of learning.
2. It motivates and empowers students by giving them some control over learning processes.
3. It is teaching that encourages collaboration, acknowledging the classroom (be it virtual or real) as a community where everyone shares the learning agenda.
4. It is teaching that promotes students' reflection about what they are learning and how they are learning it.
5. It is teaching that includes explicit learning skills instruction (Weimer, 2013, p. 15).

Weimer reports that learner-centeredness is not considered a stand-alone theory of education; rather, it is associated with several prevailing theories, including Attribution Theory and Self-efficacy, Radical and Critical Pedagogy, Feminist pedagogy, Constructivism, and Transformative Learning (Weimer, 2013).

Attribution Theory, developed by Heider (1996, as cited in Weimer, 2013) is illustrated when students attribute their academic successes and failures to either their ability or their effort. These attributions can significantly impact student behavior (Weimer, 2013). Similarly, self-efficacy deals with what students believe about what

they can or cannot accomplish. One team of researchers found that teachers can influence students' beliefs about self-efficacy by emphasizing that students can acquire skills to help them achieve learning (Stage, Muller, Kinzie, and Simmons, 1998, as cited in Weimer, 2013). Additionally, research indicates that teachers can challenge students to focus on measuring their own progress, rather than comparing their own accomplishments with that of other students, and they can encourage students to exert some control over their learning environment (Stage, Muller, Kinzie, and Simmons, 1998, as cited in Weimer, 2013).

Radical and critical pedagogy views education as an agent for social change (Weimer, 2013). This philosophy contends that education can serve to transform the world and can equip students to fight oppression (Stage, Muller, Kinzie, and Simmons, 1998, as cited in Weimer, 2013). In alignment with this radical and critical pedagogy, learner-centered teaching aims to diminish students' passivity and encourages students to accept responsibility for their own learning (Weimer, 2013).

Feminist pedagogy strives to change classroom power dynamics, aiming to lessen the authoritarian nature of teaching (Weimer, 2013). Male dominance, historically present in higher education, causes students to be treated differentially. Student learning is negatively impacted when the teacher's power dominates the learning environment, particularly for female students in male dominated programs of study. Feminist pedagogy aims to minimize this dominance, and to transition the teacher's role from that of power to that of facilitator of learning (Weimer, 2013). When

this power imbalance is lessened, students can gain the power necessary to accept the responsibility for their learning.

Constructivism focuses on the relationship between learners and content (Weimer, 2013). With this theory, learners do not passively receive what is communicated to them by their teachers; rather, learners construct their own knowledge (Stage, Muller, Kinzie, and Simmons, 1998, as cited in Weimer, 2013). According to Weimer, constructivism theory is commonly utilized to justify learner-centered teaching. Proponents assert that in learner-centered teaching, new information is paired with existing knowledge to create new meaning. Critics argue that constructivism can leave students floundering as they attempt to develop meaning on their own. In response to this criticism, constructivists explain that the role of teachers is to support learning, by offering guidance and opportunities for students to learn, rather than to direct student learning. Constructivists contend that learners place new knowledge within the context of existing knowledge to form meaning (Weimer, 2013).

Like constructivism, the theory of transformative learning addresses how learners use critical reflection to construct meaning. What differentiates transformative learning from constructivism is the impact of the learning on the learners. Transformative learning changes learners in significant and enduring ways. It “changes what they believe, how they act, indeed, who they are” (Weimer, 2013, p. 25). Weimer believes that transformative learning “should be the ultimate objective of education, especially higher education” (Weimer, 2013, p. 25).

Weimer also suggests that teachers may play a vital role in transformative learning. Specifically, she opines that learner-centered teaching approaches may increase opportunities for transformative learning experiences for learners. Weimer cautions that learner-centered teaching can transform some, but not all students. She posits that teachers can experience transformation in their beliefs about learning, as well as about their role in the learning process (Weimer, 2013).

McCombs and Whisler also offer five principles of learner-centeredness. They include:

1. Learners are distinct and unique.
2. Learners differ in their emotional states of mind, learning rates, learning styles, stages of development, abilities, talents, and in their learning needs.
3. Relevant and meaningful learning is most beneficial to the learner, and learning occurs when the learner is actively engaged.
4. A positive environment fosters learning.
5. Learning is a natural process. (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

College leaders need to attend to the above characteristics of learners as they design and provide opportunities for learning. Knowledge of these five principles helps college leaders develop learning experiences that best suit the individual needs of their students (McCombs & Whisler, 1997).

In line with the above views on learning, a team of researchers advised that education professionals and researchers should focus on the experience of learning, rather than just the activities of learning (Marton, Hounsell, and Entwistle, 1984, 1997,

as cited in Fink, 2003). In their report, they contrasted deep learning with surface learning. With deep learning, the researchers report, the learner aims to develop meaningful understanding, while surface learning merely regurgitates the information that was provided to them in class (Marton, Hounsell, and Entwistle, 1984, 1997, as cited in Fink, 2003). Similarly, another researcher connects deep learning (as opposed to surface learning) with transformative learning. The researcher values the kind of learning that produces qualitative changes in how one views and experiences the world, rather than the mere increase in the knowledge attained by an individual (Ramsden, 1988, as cited in Weimer, 2013).

Tinto (2003) echoes the reports of other experts in his views on the value of and need for deep learning. In his report describing the *University of the Future*, Tinto admonished colleges for failing to take student learning seriously (Tinto, 2003). He argued that they tout improvements, yet make little real advancement in student learning. Tinto exhorted them to embrace the objective of improved student learning outcomes and establish a student focus that is central to college reform efforts. He advises that a focus on the learners should not be limited to what happens in the classroom. Although Tinto acknowledged that what happens in the classroom is powerful, he challenged higher education institutions to stretch beyond the physical boundaries of the classroom and create campus-wide learning environments that significantly benefit students (Tinto, 2003).

Almost 20 years prior to Tinto's report, Barr & Tagg (1995), in a groundbreaking article, captured the attention of many higher education leaders, as well as that of



several other stakeholders. In their opening statement, they report: “A paradigm shift is taking hold in American higher education” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 28). Although the shift is occurring subtly, stated Barr & Tagg, its impacts are profound. They asserted that this shift is both necessary and wanted. They challenged colleges to transition from the *Instruction Paradigm*, which focuses on providing instruction, to the *Learning Paradigm*, which centers on creating student learning. In the Learning Paradigm, faculty are not the sole influence on student learning; rather, all college employees impact student learning through their activities that focus on students, and through their interactions with students. They point to the widening gap between what American higher education strives for and what it actually attains in student learning outcomes as a major reason for the need for this significant shift in focus.

To support this monumental shift in focus, Barr & Tagg advise that the institution’s structure be revamped. They define the structure as “the organization chart, role and reward systems, technologies and methods, facilities and equipment, decision-making customs, communication channels, feedback loops, financial arrangements, and funding streams” (Barr & Tagg, 1995, p. 32). They view the institution’s structure as the foundation that supports and drives all aspects of the campus. This systemic adaptation to the learning paradigm is deemed vital to the hope for success of this paradigm change (Barr & Tagg, 1995).

## **BENEFITS OF LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS**

The benefits of learner-centeredness are based on evidence. Much has been researched and reported about the benefits of adopting a learner-centered approach, and many authors, researchers, and education exemplars advocate learner-centered practices, as indicated below.

Research indicates that a focus on learner-centeredness is the most significant way to enhance student learning (Doyle, 2011). In his earlier writing, Doyle succinctly summarized the importance of student engagement in the learning process as he declared, “the one who does the work does the learning” (Doyle, 2008, p. 63). He considers the most important role of educators to be that of maximizing student learning. Doyle opines that learner-centered teachers need to create learning opportunities for students to learn on their own through the development of activities that require students to do the work. He cautions that students are not prepared to do this work, so teachers must equip them with skills to do so.

Weimer underscores Doyle’s position in her statement, “The hard and messy work of learning can be done only by students” (2013, p. 10). With the learner-centered approach, the role of faculty is not to do the work for the students. She contends that the role of faculty must shift away from that of possessing all the power, doing most of the work, and telling students what to do and what they need to know. Rather, faculty can serve as facilitators of learning as they create the environment that is conducive to learning, and empower learners to engage in learning experiences leading to the acquisition of their own knowledge (Weimer, 2013).

The views of Doyle and Weimer are echoed by McClenney (2004), who reports that engagement is beneficial to students, as engaged students learn more. Additionally, students who are more connected to one another, to faculty and other college personnel, and to the subject matter they are studying, are more likely to persist in achieving their educational goals (McClenney, 2004).

Harris and Cullen (2010) support the broad view of learner-centeredness described by Barr & Tagg (1995) in addressing the need for the entire education institution to support learner-centered practices. In their book focusing on campus-wide practices promoting learner-centeredness, Harris & Cullen emphasize the importance of the college in developing a campus-wide environment that supports the most effective levels of learning. According to the authors, a framework for learner-centeredness must be developed, including effective assessment tools that provide both formative and summative assessments to serve as effective drivers of change in learner-centered pedagogy. They contend that the development of a complete support system that meets the unique needs of learners and promotes learning is critical in order for the highest levels of student achievement to occur (Harris & Cullen, 2010).

Part of the suggested redesign was in the physical environments used by students. They advised that the selection of learning environments should help achieve the learner's needs and objectives and should be designed with flexibility to allow for layouts that would best accommodate learners' needs (Harris & Cullen, 2010). Currently, a new shift is occurring, from designing classrooms to designing learning spaces (Schoop, 2007). These include learning environments that extend beyond the

walls of a traditional classroom. In response to these suggestions, some higher education institutions have designed and created learning studios, information centers and common areas where students convene to network, collaborate, socialize, and learn (Harris & Cullen, 2010). Collaboration among learners, teachers, and the learning environment is necessary to produce desirable learning outcomes (Schumacher, Engander, & Carraccio, 2013).

For some learners, service learning and internships may provide more relevant and valuable learning opportunities than traditional classroom settings. What experts deem vital is the identification of unique student characteristics and their corresponding educational needs, and the design and delivery of learning experiences to meet those needs, which can potentially increase student learning (Harris & Cullen, 2010; Schoop, 2007).

Increasingly common is the design and use of online learning environments to meet the needs of students. Some students find that an online course format is more conducive to learning than a face-to-face class. For the student whose life responsibilities and schedule prevents regular attendance in face-to-face courses, an online learning option may prove beneficial. Although the use of e-learning is becoming widespread, the available guidance from validated research regarding the design of e-learning courses is limited (McCombs & Vakili, 2005). Many educators struggle with the design of instructional strategies that work in online environments. As they strive to foster a learner-centered online environment, they have found that what is effective in

a traditional environment may not necessarily prove effective in an online format (McCombs & Vakili, 2005).

Further, the ever-increasing volume and availability of content in the current information age causes a change in the purpose of an education system (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010). Whether in online, face-to-face, hybrid, or other form, in the current *Information Age*, subject content is instantly and readily available (McCombs & Vakili, 2005). As a result, education systems are increasingly realizing the need to move away from providing course content only. Rather than strictly focusing on delivering vast amounts of content, the 21<sup>st</sup> century education system requires educators to help learners develop effective problem-solving, critical thinking, technology, and global awareness skills that will equip them to find relevant information for themselves based on the issue at hand (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010). Educators are also moving toward the development of strong communication and collaboration skills for learners. The refinement of communication skills aims to equip learners to become proficient collaborators with faculty and their peers, which is key to processing and managing content and making meaning of it (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010; McCombs & Vakili, 2005).

Conducive to the online learning environment, and beneficial in overcoming the negative effects of the traditionally used, time-bound Carnegie unit, (where time is constant and learning varies), is the emerging use of competency-based education (CBE), where academic credits are awarded upon the student's demonstration of mastery of predefined learning outcomes, called competencies (Educause Learning Initiative, 2014). In direct contrast to the Carnegie unit, competency-based education

follows the philosophy that learning is constant, while the time required to learn is variable. CBE can reduce both time and costs for students in earning their credentials (Educause Learning Initiative, 2014).

Cynthia Wilson (2002) echoed Harris and Cullen (2010) as she stressed the importance of moving beyond the classroom borders in adopting learner-centered practices. She acknowledged the important role of college leadership in supporting the emerging theory and practices of the learning college. She labeled this support *leadership for learning*. She emphasized that leaders throughout the institution must adopt a systems approach to the organization and must employ holistic practices related to learning. To achieve this, Wilson states that two questions should be asked and answered before every decision in the institution is made:

1. Does this decision improve and expand learning?
2. How do we know? (Wilson, 2002)

Wilson opines that the leadership for learning philosophy directs the attention of all the education professionals to these two questions, resulting in an ongoing consideration of the impact of their policies, programs, practices and decisions on learning (Wilson, 2002). She advocated the training of college leaders, with a focus on developing top administrators into leaders equipped to consider global and holistic views of the organization. She pointed out that faculty are often quite focused on their specific disciplines and with their education and training, so they often work independently of the more global view of administrators. Rather than working in isolation, contends Wilson, faculty and administrators would produce more effective

results by working as a team to enhance student learning. This is emphasized by another educator and author, Cindy Miles, who describes the “*us versus them*” opposition that often develops between faculty and administrators (Miles, 2002, p. 20). In this relationship, faculty are often charged by administrators as being the greatest resisters to change.

One response to rectifying this opposition is to replace the “*us versus them*” with “*the power of and*” (Miles, 2002, p. 20). In this view, rather than considering faculty and administrator’s roles as exclusive of and in opposition to each other, faculty and administrators work together as partners to provide a learning environment that best supports student learning. In doing so, common values and goals of faculty and administrators can be identified, which can help create a shared vision, and initial steps can be made to effect true change.

Similar to Wilson (2002) and Harris & Cullen (2010), Miles advises that the cooperation of four groups of college professionals is needed to create leadership for learning (Miles, 2002). As faculty adopt the leadership for learning philosophy, they recognize their responsibility to increase collaboration with professionals across the institution when defining learning outcomes, creating the environment and activities that foster student engagement, develop appropriate assessment techniques to measure learning, and document learning outcomes that are not limited to the course grade and the credits earned (Miles, 2002).

For staff members who are neither faculty nor administrators, understanding their role in student learning impacts how they interact with learners and how they

contribute to improving or expanding learning through their practices. Students also play a vital role in this commitment to learning as they accept the responsibility for their own learning, rather than relying on faculty or others to do so (Miles, 2002). Students responsible for their own learning contribute to the establishment of learning outcomes, engage in learning activities, and assess their learning. Administrators also play an important role. Their responsibilities are not limited to carrying out the broad mission and vision of the institution. Rather, they must support all throughout the campus in their efforts to improve and expand student learning, by providing the resources and encouragement when and where needed (Miles, 2002).

Tinto (2003) describes five conditions for effective learning, including establishing high standards for student performance, providing academic and social support, providing ongoing feedback, providing the setting and activities for involvement or engagement, and making learning relevant. He asserts that in the classroom, teachers need to establish high standards of student performance. To help students meet these standards, the school must provide both academic and social support. They also must provide ongoing feedback to students so they can make adjustments and improve their learning. Tinto asserts that students also need to be involved in learning activities, and relevance is an important component of these activities. He notes that research shows that students learn more, and learn more deeply, when their interaction with knowledge is meaningful to them.

Tinto's four characteristics of effective classrooms (2011) closely mirror his five conditions for effective learning. One such characteristic is the establishment of high



expectations of students by faculty. Rigorous, yet attainable, expectations can motivate students to rise to the level expected of them, which produces greater learning. Providing support to succeed, including academic, social, and financial support, is another desirable attribute cited by Tinto. He opines that the support provided to students should align with the level of expectations established. Providing assessments of learning, accompanied by timely, relevant feedback, is another valuable characteristic of the effective classroom. As performance is assessed and feedback promptly provided to students, they are able to adjust their behaviors to improve their performance. The fourth attribute of value is academic and social engagement by students with faculty, staff, and peers. This is particularly important in classroom activities, as it contributes to student success (Tinto, 2011).

O'Banion's six principles of the learning college, designed for the benefit and convenience of learners, closely align with Weimer's five principles of learner-centered teaching. These principles include the following: the learning college creates substantive change for individual learners, engages learners as full partners with learners assuming responsibility for their own choices, creates and offers many options for learning, helps learners to create and participate in collaborative learning activities, relies on learners' needs to define learning facilitator roles, and uses documented improvement and growth in learning as indicators of success (O'Banion, 1997, p. 47).

In their book focusing on campus-wide practices promoting learner-centeredness, Harris and Cullen (2010) describe the importance of the development of a campus-wide environment to foster the most effective levels of learning. Harris and

Cullen contend that a framework for learner-centeredness must be developed, including effective assessment tools that provide both formative and summative assessments to serve as effective drivers of change in learner-centered pedagogy. The development of a complete support system that promotes learning is critical in order for the highest levels of student achievement to occur.

McClenney (2013) echoes Harris and Cullen on the importance of the entire campus embracing learner-centeredness. McClenney cautions that progress in moving the education institution towards learner-centeredness practices will be limited unless the entire organization adopts the learner-centered philosophy. The acceptance of learner-centeredness as the new way of doing business will not automatically happen because it is suggested or mandated. Rather, the culture of the organization must be transformed. To embrace this philosophy, the entire institution must undergo a corresponding culture change. Marginal change efforts will not suffice (McClenney, 2013).

The Lumina Foundation also values the focus on the learner. In its 2013-2016 strategic plan, the Lumina Foundation references its *Goal 2025*, which aims for 60% of Americans attaining a high-quality postsecondary credential by the year 2025. Lumina's definition of a high-quality credential is one that has "well-defined and transparent learning outcomes that provide clear pathways to further education and employment" (Lumina Foundation, 2013, p. 5).

Lumina points out that the pursuit of the increased number of college graduates is driven by the nation's need for the skills and knowledge represented by completion of

those credentials. The Foundation emphasizes the need for the college to focus on the high quality of the credential in order to produce a credential that proves valuable in meeting the demands of the American economy. Credentials without quality, it warns, will fail to provide the needed skills and knowledge.

Like many advocates of learner-centeredness, the Lumina Foundation recognizes the diversity of the current student population, which creates the need for a learner-centered education system. With this learner-centered focus, the design of instruction and credentialing must focus on each learner's unique needs for acquiring skills and knowledge.

#### **BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS**

Implementation of learner-centeredness has been a slow process. Many causes are cited for this limited progress in moving closer to learner-centeredness. Vincent Tinto (2011) reports that, although for more than two decades, higher education institutions have invested resources to improve learning outcomes, the impact on student learning has been minimal. He asserts two reasons for this limited progress. One reason is that efforts have not been large scale. They have touched a small group of students, rather than the masses of students. The second reason is that the efforts at improvement have largely proven ineffective in the classroom, which is the heart of student learning and engagement (Tinto, 2011).

Weimer offers reasons for limited classroom effectiveness. She contends that effective changes in the classroom have been stifled, in part, by the continuing focus on

the teacher. Although research indicates that a focus on students is beneficial to learning, faculty continue to prefer teacher-centered roles over learner-centered roles for a number of reasons (Weimer, 2013). One reason is that many teachers are accustomed to being the center of attention in the classroom. Their role as content expert seems more important than that of a facilitator. Additionally, the facilitating of learning is challenging for many faculty. The teacher's role transforms from content expert to learning guide, which is unfamiliar territory for many faculty (Weimer, 2013). In the more familiar teacher-centered classroom, assignment details are clear and teachers make most of the classroom decisions. Thus, the comfort of past practices often perpetuates teacher-centeredness (Weimer, 2013). Additionally, student responses to teacher-centered practices are more predictable in a teacher-centered classroom. As a result, the teacher-centered classroom is less vulnerable to surprising student behavior.

Learner-centeredness is often met with resistance by students because learner-centered practices create more work for students. They resist when teachers no longer establish all the rules, exert their power, explain concepts to passive learners, and perform most of the work. Students often question why instructors do less as they expect students to do more in the classroom (Weimer, 2013).

Expectations of students are underscored by Hansen and Stephens (2000) as they identify four pairs of student dynamics that can hinder learner-centered efforts. These include the student expectations of learned helplessness and self-appraisal. Students are preconditioned to believe that they cannot learn material unless it has

been “predigested by an instructor” (Hansen and Stephens, 2000, p.42). When expected to take the initiative for their own learning, they resist, considering this burden unfair. Learned helplessness provides an easy out for students, and they accomplish what they want—minimal work. At the opposite end of this dynamic are students who judge their own performance as unrealistically high. When they don’t perform well, they do not attribute it to their lack of preparedness or understanding, but rather, they blame faulty instruction for their poor performance. Unrealistic self-expectations hinder students’ opportunities to challenge themselves; thus, benefits derived from learner-centered action are limited (Hansen & Stephens, 2000).

Group dynamics also impede learner-centered approaches (Hansen & Stephens, 2000). Low tolerance for challenges is one end of the group dynamic spectrum. In group settings, low-performing students fail to make substantial contributions to the group project. Low-performers tend to do minimal work, and only if they receive feedback. Self-directed work, part of the learner-centered focus, results in less frequent instructor feedback; thus, low performers drop out. Another group dynamic impeding learner-centered progress is that of social loafing. In social settings, students attempt to get away with doing less work. When some group members are not contributing their share of effort, others in the group tend to expend less effort as well. This can undermine learner-centered activities (Hansen & Stephens, 2000).

The third dynamic group is environmental conditions. Political correctness can limit group discussions on values, as students often recognize their differences, rather than common characteristics. This creates an awkward and stifled discussion or

evaluation of a subject. Another group dynamic is that of consumer attitude. Many students view college as a service provider, with students passively relying on teachers and others to do the work for them. Learner-centered activities, on the other hand, require students to get involved in their own learning. This contradicts their comfortable passive bystander status and results in conflict about engaging in learning activities (Hansen & Stephens, 2000).

Evaluation demands are the fourth dynamic limiting the effectiveness of learner-centeredness. Peer-evaluation anxiety runs high during group activity sessions. Students need to develop a comfort level and a sense of trust with their peers before they can expose themselves to evaluation by those peers. Opportunities to develop community are, therefore, important to effective group performance. Product fixation is another hindrance to learner-centeredness. When working in a group to accomplish a task, many students don't recognize the value of the process, but rather focus on the end result. They are more interested in the grade earned for the activity, rather than the learning that occurred throughout the progress of the activity. Collaboration will suffer if the end is all that matters (Hansen & Stephens, 2000).

Many other barriers can get in the way of effective implementation of learner-centered practices. When an organization evaluates its policies and practices and identifies opportunities for improvement, the result can lead to increased effectiveness of learner-centeredness and the corresponding value this creates.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, a review of the literature described several shortfalls of the American education system and identified the need to improve the learning outcomes of American community college students. The advice to shift the focus of American higher education from faculty-centered and institution-centered to a learner-centered focus is supported by evidence from research. Despite this evidence, the response by American higher education has been slow and little progress has been made in improving learning outcomes on a significant scale.

## CHAPTER 3: DESIGN OF THE STUDY

### **INTRODUCTION**

This study aimed to gather faculty and student perceptions about learner-centeredness at a small rural Midwest community college. To facilitate the gathering of this information, a qualitative approach was utilized. This chapter provides the rationale and assumptions for this qualitative approach and also describes the research setting, population, methodology, instrumentation, research questions, data collection and data analysis used in the study. This chapter is organized into the following sections:

Introduction, Purpose of the Study, Research Design, Population and Sample, Sampling Procedures, Instrumentation, Data Collection Procedures, Data Analysis, Validating the Findings, Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations.

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study was to (1) identify community college faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and learner-centered practices at a small rural Midwest community college, and (2) to assess the alignment of faculty and student perceptions on learner-centeredness and their respective roles in applying learner-centered practices on their campus.



The study was designed to obtain answers to the following research questions:

1. What are faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness at this community college?
2. To what extent do faculty and student perceptions align regarding their respective roles in establishing, implementing, maintaining, and improving learner-centered practices at this community college?
3. How does this alignment impact the use of learner-centered practices at this community college?

Based on the results of the literature review described in Chapter 2 of this study, the researcher developed interview questions related to the above research questions for faculty and student participants. The interview questions are included in Appendix E of this study.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

Research design is the process of focusing on the research question and the purposes of the study to identify the best approach to answer the research question and to obtain the information (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The nature and purpose of the research problem and other factors impact the selection of the research methodology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Roberts, 2010). According to Bloomberg & Volpe (2012), the researcher connects the research problem, purpose and design by choosing the most appropriate approach, considering how to most effectively attend to the research questions. This is known as *research study methodological congruence* (Richards & Morse, 2007, as cited in Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012).

The research design strategy is the plan that places the researcher in the empirical world. As the plan to collect and analyze data, the research design serves as the link between the researcher and that which is being studied: the relevant research site, people, organizations, and documents (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). The research problem should not be conformed to fit a specific research approach; rather the chosen research approach should best support and suit the research problem” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The design is “a flexible set of guidelines that connect theoretical paradigms, first, to strategies of inquiry and, second, to methods for collecting empirical material (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 24).

Two general categories of research methodology are used in all research: *quantitative* and *qualitative* (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; Roberts, 2010). Quantitative research uses large sample sizes and is numerical based, focusing on *how many* or *how much*. Quantitative studies measure and analyze the cause and effect relationships between chosen variables (Merriam, 2009). In contrast to quantitative studies, the characteristics of qualitative studies include small sample sizes, a flexible research design, the researcher’s extensive involvement of “*time in the natural setting*” (Merriam, 2009, p. 17), and considerable interactions with the participants. This study utilizes a qualitative approach.

Qualitative studies focus on acquiring deep insights about the qualities and characteristics of a small sample. This small sample size enables the researcher to invest significant time with the subjects in the setting being studied to gain a full understanding of the subjects and the context of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Denzin & Lincoln (2013) report, “qualitative research has been haunted by a double-faced ghost” (p.24). One face is that of the researcher. Advocates of qualitative studies believe that qualified and competent researchers are capable of accurately observing and describing what they see, as well as what others experience in the world. The other face is that of the research participant. Qualitative researchers believe in “a real subject or real individual who is present in the world and able, in some form, to report on his or her experiences” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 24). Equipped with these beliefs, qualitative researchers purport to combine researcher observations with first-hand participant written and verbal accounts to thoroughly and accurately depict meaning in the world.

Critics of this philosophy argue that it is not possible for the researcher to objectively observe the “inner life of an individual” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p.24). Observations, rather, are subject to the filters of the researcher’s life experiences, beliefs, and attitudes, as well as “language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity” lenses (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p.24). Additionally, research subjects socially construct their reality by socially interacting with the world. As a result, qualitative research employs a multitude of research methods, aimed at describing the studied phenomenon in a more understandable manner, (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

Qualitative studies, indeed, recognize the notion of multiple realities, rather than one single reality (Creswell, 2013). Interpretive research, where qualitative research often lies, accepts the view of “multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). Both researchers and participants construct knowledge

(Merriam, 2009). Participants construct multiple realities, their unique perceptions of the world based on prior knowledge and experiences. The qualitative researcher, therefore, focuses on the participants' views of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). According to Merriam (2009), the qualitative researcher seeks to understand how people affix meaning to their experiences.

Denzin & Lincoln (2013), define qualitative inquiry as “a field of inquiry in its own right” that “crosscuts disciplines, fields, and subject matter” (p.5). Rather than a single preferred method or practice, qualitative inquiry uses a multitude of methods and practices, none with a preference over the other, to gather new knowledge and insights (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). As its name implies, a qualitative study focus on the qualities of the units studied. Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative inquiry does not analyze or assess, through experiments, the frequency of occurrence, quantity, amount, or intensity of the phenomenon studied. Qualitative studies socially constructs reality based on an understanding obtained from qualitative inquiry. Qualitative researchers pursue understanding of how social experience is formed. Unlike quantitative studies that seek to identify cause and effect relationships between chosen variables, qualitative studies seek to understand processes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

A flexible research design enables the qualitative study to adapt appropriately as the study proceeds, based on the responses of participants and observations of the researcher. Qualitative research methodology is “inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 22). Research questions may be revised during the study to better understand the research

problem. The methods of data collection must change accordingly to adapt to the revised research questions. Data is subsequently analyzed in a manner that provides the researcher with an expanding knowledge base about the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). Exceptions to flexibility occur when constraints are placed on the study by institutional review boards, dissertation committee members, and others to adhere to a specified design plan (Merriam, 2009).

### **THE USE OF QUALITATIVE INQUIRY FOR THIS STUDY**

A qualitative study was selected for this research because, by its very nature, a qualitative study lends itself to garnering the insights, knowledge, and interpretations of the subjects that interact with the environment of the research setting (Merriam, 2009). To accomplish the objectives of this study, the researcher needs to obtain information regarding faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness at their community college. A qualitative approach enables the researcher to acquire this information based on the subjects' first-hand accounts.

Qualitative research is comprised of subcategories known as research designs, or research approaches (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 2009). The type of qualitative research used in this study is the basic, interpretive study, labeled by Merriam (2009), as a *basic qualitative study*. A central characteristic of qualitative studies is that of constructivism, also referred to as constructionism. Underlying the concept of constructivism is the belief that as individuals interact with their social worlds, they construct their reality of the world (Merriam, 2009). Merriam considers constructivism

as the foundation of a basic qualitative study. With constructivism, rather than being discovered, meaning is constructed. According to Merriam, qualitative researchers interested in this type of study want to know “(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). Because this study’s research setting is limited to one community college, it can also be defined as a single bounded case study. To gain an in-depth understanding of faculty and students of one community college, the case study approach relies on interviewing and observing participants and other pertinent individuals of the case site, and analyzing relevant documents.

Another classification of research studies is that of research type. Two main types are described by Merriam (2009): *basic* and *applied*. The two types differ in their purpose. The intent of basic research is the acquisition and advancement of knowledge; its objective is to learn more about a phenomenon of interest. The purpose of applied studies is to use the knowledge gained from research “to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline” (Merriam, 2009, p. 3). As one form of applied research, evaluation research aims to assess the effectiveness and value of a particular program, process, or practice. Another form, known as action research, aims to use results of the study to help address a particular problem (Merriam, 2009).

This study is an applied research study. It focuses on a challenge of higher education in general, and more narrowly, the community college, and even more specifically, one small rural Midwest community college. Community colleges often find that student learning outcomes are insufficient to meet the requirements and

complexities of a rapidly changing world. One proposed solution to this problem is a greater focus on learners. Focusing more on learners' unique characteristics and needs, and designing college policies and practices to address those characteristics and needs, has been identified as a necessary action to increase the quality of learning outcomes for community colleges in general. Results of this study may help to inform future studies and may serve to support policies and practices that may improve or expand student learning at this college.

### **POPULATION AND SAMPLE**

This study was conducted at a small rural Midwest public community college. This college offers two-year Associate's degrees, as well as one-year certificates, in over 75 programs of study. Each fall semester, the college enrolls approximately 1,600 students. In addition to its degree and certificate programs, the college provides community education, as well as workforce development training through its partnership with area businesses and organizations.

The population for this study consisted of faculty and students of this community college. Of the approximate 1,600 students enrolled in the fall 2014 semester, 51% were full-time students and 49% were part-time students; 55% were female, and 45% were male; 70% were 24 years of age and younger, and 30% were 25 years of age and older. Almost 80% of students were enrolled in traditional face-to-face classroom settings only; 15% were enrolled in both online and face-to-face classes, and 5% were enrolled in

online classes only. Almost all students were residents of the state in which the college is located, with the exception of 1%, who reside out-of-state.

The 53 full-time faculty comprise 34%, and 101 part-time faculty comprise 66% of total faculty. The researcher is a full-time faculty member at this community college, and is aware of varying degrees of learner-centered practices at this college. This researcher has established and implemented various practices related to teaching and learning and has developed perceptions of the role and impacts of learner-centeredness on learning outcomes. However, perceptions of other faculty, as well as of students, are not known by this researcher. This site was chosen to enable the researcher to gain insight from faculty and student participants on learner-centeredness, with the objective of developing common or varying themes between faculty and student participants on learner-centeredness and their respective roles in learner-centered practices at this college.

## **SAMPLING PROCEDURES**

The nature of a specific study requires the use of an appropriate sampling method. Two major types of sampling are used to select the sample, which is the unit to be studied (Merriam, 2009). One such type, probability sampling, is used in quantitative research to enable the researcher to generalize results of the study of a sample to the population from which it was obtained. In contrast to quantitative research, the objective of qualitative research is not to generalize results of the study, but to gain insight into the unique characteristics of the context of the study. Because each



qualitative research setting is unique and is set apart from all others, it is inappropriate to generalize results of qualitative research, based on a sample that is not necessarily representative of the population (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Rather than generalizing research findings to another population or context, the objective of qualitative research is to focus on the unique characteristics of the phenomenon being studied.

Qualitative studies enable participants to describe their unique situation in detail. Thus, nonprobability sampling is appropriate for qualitative research, as the subjects' descriptions and responses provide the opportunity for the researcher to acquire a deep understanding of the selected sample (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Qualitative research selects a sample that is purposeful (Patton, 1990; Merriam, 2009), also known as *purposive sampling* (Merriam, 2009). Purposive sampling is a nonprobability method in which the researcher intentionally selects a sample that will provide rich insight and information for the study (Merriam, 2009). In selecting purposeful samples, the researcher can gain insight of the phenomenon being studied (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). This researcher aims to gain in-depth knowledge and insight about the perceptions of faculty and student participants regarding learner-centeredness at their college. Therefore, nonprobability purposeful sampling will be used. From the population, nonprobability purposeful criterion sampling will serve to identify faculty and students within the population that meet specific criteria.

Criterion sampling requires all participants to meet established criteria that have been predetermined by the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The criteria for selecting the sample for this study include:

1. The subjects are full-time faculty and full-time students. Faculty participants will possess a minimum of two years of full-time teaching experience at this community college, and students will have completed a minimum of two semesters of full-time coursework at this college, at the time they are selected for the study.
2. The subjects are selected to represent a cross-section of faculty and students across the academic departments of the college.
3. The subjects are willing and able to participate in the study.

From the subpopulation of faculty and students meeting the criteria, five faculty and five students were selected for the study, to represent a cross-section of the college's six academic departments. The six departments include (1) Industrial Technology; (2) Professional Occupations; (3) Mathematics and Sciences; (4) Nursing, Health and Human Services; (5) Language, Arts and Humanities; and (6) Social Sciences.

The rationale for selecting the first criterion is that obtaining data from experienced faculty and students captures the rich knowledge and insights that may not exist in, or vary from, the knowledge and insights of those with less than two years of full-time community college experience. The second criterion provides a broad representation of the college. The selection of faculty and student subjects from across academic departments is intended to provide multiple perspectives on learner-centeredness, representative of the disciplines included in each respective academic department. This broader range provides input from faculty and student subjects possessing a wider breadth of skills, interests, experience, knowledge, and desired outcomes than that which could be obtained from a more narrowly focused, homogenous group of subjects. The rationale for the third criterion is that the design of

this qualitative study relies on participant responses to detailed questions about their perceptions and experiences, and, therefore, it is imperative that participants are willing and able to provide the time and attention to respond accordingly.

## **INSTRUMENTATION**

The researcher plays a major role in qualitative studies. Experts describe the qualitative researcher as “the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15), and the “key instrument” of research (Creswell, 2013, p.45). The researcher is the data collector, as well as the research designer.

In addition to the researcher, three types of data are often collected for qualitative studies: (1) interviews, (2) direct observation, and (3) written documents (Patton, 2001). In-depth interviews, with open-ended questions, generate “direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge” (Patton, 2001, p. 4). Observations enable the researcher to see, experience, and describe the activities and behaviors of subjects, and the social and organizational culture in which humans interact with each other. Documents can be used to garner descriptive information, verify results of interviews and observations, and to provide further insights about the phenomenon being studied (Merriam, 2009). Utilizing these three types of qualitative data—interviews, direct observations, and written documents—enable the researcher to provide a *thick, rich description* of the phenomenon of interest (Merriam, 2009). These three types of qualitative data were among those used to collect data for this case study.

Several instruments were used in this study, including participant questionnaires, interview schedules, interview questions, observation forms, course syllabi, and other documents. In qualitative research, the researcher reviews documents, and makes observations of participants as they interact in their natural setting. The researcher develops a list of open-ended questions, asks the questions, records the responses, adapts the research plan according to participant replies, and analyzes the results. Both inductive and deductive reasoning are used as the researcher weaves between the data and the underlying themes, identifying and developing common threads and organizing data into major categories (Creswell, 2013).

The use of a qualitative approach facilitated the collection of data through the use of interviews with faculty and student participants, questionnaires to collect demographic information, observations of subjects in the research setting, and a review of documents used by the participants at the college. Additionally, to assist the researcher in acquiring an understanding of the policies, procedures, and practices of the college that impact the study, the researcher reviewed relevant documents used by faculty members to help them carry out the responsibilities of their position (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009).

#### Description and Appropriateness of Instruments

Several data-collecting instruments were used in this study. A brief description of each is provided in this section.

1. Questionnaires: Brief questionnaires were developed by the researcher and administered to consenting participants to efficiently obtain demographic and contact information.
2. Interview Questions: Interview questions were used to guide the study as the researcher pursued the answers to the research questions. The list of interview questions is included in Appendix E of this dissertation.
3. Interview Schedules: A schedule of dates and times for participant interviews was established by the researcher to assist in the timely and proper planning and conducting of participant interviews.
4. Participant Interviews: In-depths interviews of five faculty subjects and five student subjects were conducted on an individual basis according to an interview schedule. The interview was considered appropriate to this population and setting because first-hand accounts are an integral part of this study and interviews are an effective tool to garner the rich description of the participants' accounts.
5. Classroom Observations: The researcher attended classes to observe classroom activities and the interaction between the faculty member and students. Classroom observations were deemed appropriate to the study, as the experience increased the depth of the researcher's insight and understanding about the research site, subjects, and research topic. It also proved useful in comparing the interview responses of subjects with actual classroom activities and behaviors.
6. Document Review: Selected documents, including the course syllabi, as well as college policies and procedures, were analyzed by the researcher to garner further insights into the phenomenon being studied. Each course syllabus, as the contract between the faculty and the students, contained course-related policies and procedures, course requirements, college policies, and the understanding of the responsibilities of faculty members and students. College policies and procedures articulate institutional requirements, expectations, services, and other pertinent information. A review of selected course syllabi and college policies and procedures provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the research site, subjects, and research topic.

Qualitative studies describe the context of the study, the participants participating in the study, and the areas of interest. A qualitative research report is "richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2009, p. 16), communicating the researcher's findings

about the subjects in words and pictures. Vivid summaries and excerpts from documents, interviews with subjects, the researcher's field notes, or a combination of these and other sources of research evidence, form an integral part of the study (Merriam, 2009).

## **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

Various data collection methods were used in this study, including interviews, classroom observations, and a review of course syllabi. Each data collection procedure is described below.

### Questionnaires

At the beginning of each interview, participants completed a brief questionnaire that provided demographic information, including the participant's age, contact information, the length of experience with this community college and identification of the academic program the subject was representing. The participant's personal identification number was entered on this form by the researcher to protect the confidentiality of the participant.

### Interview Questions

Prior to commencing each interview, the researcher read through the interview questions. For all interviews after the initial one, the researcher recalled responses to the questions provided by previous participants. Reading the interview questions in advance of each interview helped guide the interview process.

## Interview Schedules

The researcher established a tentative schedule for conducting interviews of participants. As the interview process progressed, the schedule was revised to fit the availability of the research participants. Interviews were conducted during the months of April, May, and June, 2016.

## Participant Interviews

Interviews were conducted according to the pre-established interview schedule. Researcher-prepared interview questions were used to guide the interview process. To help ensure the comfort and safety of participants, as well as quality in the data collected, participant interviews were conducted in an environment that was non-threatening to the participants. Some interviews were conducted in a classroom on the college campus, while others were conducted at another safe, comfortable, and neutral location.

Prior to the interview, each participant read and signed an informed consent form, agreeing to participate in the study, and each was assigned a personal identification number, which was subsequently used as a pseudonym for the participant, to provide confidentiality of interview responses. With the subject's written permission, the interviews were audio recorded, to enable the researcher to subsequently transcribe the interview, organize responses, and identify themes among participant responses.

Initially, the same faculty interview questions were asked of each faculty participant, and the same student interview questions were asked of each student participant, to provide consistency in the direction of the interview. Follow-up questions were asked, as needed, to garner further insights or to obtain clarification of participant responses. Based on responses to identified interview questions, the researcher asked additional clarifying questions. The duration of the interviews was approximately 60 – 80 minutes, depending on the individual responses to interview questions.

Validity and reliability of interview results were evaluated by the researcher through a combination of comparing the results of all participant interviews, observing faculty and student participants in the research setting, and reading pertinent documents.

#### Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were conducted on a scheduled basis, according to the availability of subjects and the appropriateness of the site to host an observation. The researcher attended five classes during April, 2016, observing faculty members and students in their classroom environment. To minimize distractions and impact on the study, the researcher sat at the rear of the classroom. Field notes of observations were taken regarding the organizational culture of the class, the teaching methods used, the interactions between faculty and students, the level of student engagement in learning activities, and other characteristics. The notes were analyzed on an ongoing basis during the classroom observation, as well as afterward. The analysis of each classroom



observation was compared with the analysis of the interview and a review of the course syllabus.

#### Document Review

The researcher reviewed the course syllabi for ten courses at this community college. The document analysis also served to validate the interview responses of subjects and the observations of the researcher. To ensure authenticity and accuracy of each document used in the research process, the researcher considered who authored the document, its reasons for being written, and the context in which it was written.

The course syllabi for the observed classes were reviewed and notes taken. An analysis of findings was compared with an analysis of interview transcripts and field notes from classroom observations.

#### **TRIANGULATION OF THE STUDY**

The use of the above various research methods, including interviews, classroom observations, and a review of course syllabi provided triangulation of the study.

Triangulation refers to the confirmation of the validity of data through the use of several resources, including multiple methods of data collection, multiple sources of data, using more than one investigator, and combining research theories (Denzin, 1978; as cited in Merriam, 2009). Validity, or internal validity of the data, addresses the extent to which the research findings are credible and reflect reality (Merriam, 2009). Triangulation provides trustworthiness in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009). In postmodern research, triangulation is being replaced with *crystallization*, indicating that the world

can be viewed from more than just three perspectives referenced through the use of the term *triangulation* (Richardson, 2000; as cited in Merriam, 2009). Richardson describes crystals as prisms capable of reflecting and refracting, resulting in varying colors and patterns. He uses crystals as an analogy of what the researcher is observing. According to Richardson, what the researcher sees depends on the perspective from which the observation is being made (Richardson, in Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; as cited by Merriam, 2009).

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

As an analytical approach, grounded theory was used. Grounded theory develops from the data collected in a qualitative study (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory not only verifies existing theory; it also creates new theory based on results of new data obtained from research. The grounded theory approach was selected for this study because a lack of knowledge exists at this research site regarding the perceptions of students and faculty on their respective roles in developing and practicing learner-centeredness on their campus, and how these perceptions may support or constrain progress toward learner-centeredness. The basis of grounded theory is the ongoing construction of knowledge about the phenomenon of study, based on the responses of the research participants as the study progresses.

The interviews were recorded and the researcher opted to personally transcribe the interviews because, although self-transcription by the researcher can be lengthy and time-consuming, it enables the researcher to become immersed in the data, which

produces a high level of data familiarity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). Transcribing the interviews enabled the researcher to connect deeply with the research data. The resulting thick, rich descriptions of the interview responses enhance the quality of the data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

A draft of the transcribed notes was available for participants to review if they opted to do so, as it is important that research participants are given the opportunity to review a draft of the transcription of their interview to review how their responses are interpreted and quoted by the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). This review, if elected, enables the subject to confirm or correct the researcher's documentation of the interview so clarifications can be made, errors corrected, and the resulting report describes the experience of the subject. At the start of each interview, the research participant was informed of the opportunity to read the transcription of their interview. None of the research participants opted to review their interview transcript.

Data analysis commenced as interviews were conducted, and the analysis continued during the transcribing of the interviews, as well as after the transcribing had ended. The researcher conducted an initial reading of the interview transcripts, making notations in the margins of the transcribed document when deemed appropriate. Interview notes, audio recordings, field notes, and other documents were stored in a dedicated electronic folder in the researcher's password protected personal computer, and in hard copy form in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office. The audio recordings and all electronic and print documents related to the interview will be

destroyed by the researcher after the research report has been approved for publication.

A template for recording interview responses was developed and used by the researcher to document and organize research findings, to identify common themes, and to assist in writing the results of the study. Similar templates were developed to summarize the results of the researcher's observations and analysis of documents.

### **VALIDATING THE FINDINGS**

The researcher compared and contrasted interview responses provided by the various participants, and compared those interview responses with classroom observations and an analysis of course syllabi to identify consistent, as well as contrasting, findings. Contradictory findings were analyzed to determine if responses were due to varying subject and researcher attitudes, beliefs, and interpretations; or if they were due to misinterpreted interview questions, or to misstatements of responses.

The use of interviews, observations, and a review of documents helped to increase the credibility of the study, particularly internal validity. Internal validity is strengthened using multiple methods and multiple sources of data collection (Merriam, 2009).

### **ASSUMPTIONS**

This study includes the following assumptions:

1. Based on past and present experiences, students and faculty possess perceptions of various learner-centered principles, the value of learner-

centeredness, and the extent to which their community college practices learner-centeredness.

2. Given the opportunity, students and faculty will be interested in sharing and willing to share their perceptions of learner-centeredness with the researcher.
3. Given assurance of the confidentiality of their responses, participants will be willing to honestly share their perceptions regarding learner-centeredness.

### **DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

This study was designed to capture perceptions of community college faculty and students, and, therefore, excluded other types of higher education institutions, such as universities. Additionally, just one community college was selected. Although community colleges adopt a mission much like their counterparts, and many share similar visions, each community college possesses unique institutional characteristics. These differences are manifested in the policies, procedures, and practices of the respective colleges. By utilizing just one community college, the faculty and student perceptions regarding learner-centeredness at other community colleges are excluded from the study. Inclusion of multiple community colleges in this study, as well as inclusion of universities, may change the results of the study.

Only faculty and student subjects with at least two years of experience in a community college were included in the population of potential subjects. As a result of this design, this study excludes first-semester and second-semester full-time students, new faculty with less than two years of community college teaching experience, and all part-time students and faculty. The results of this study with a narrow scope results in

research findings that may differ from a study that includes a broader scope of subjects. However, it may provide insights and information about learner-centeredness at the subject college that can be used to improve the extent and effectiveness of learning outcomes.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Limitations are external factors that constrain the utility of the study. Several inherent limitations exist in this study. A small sample size, the potential for researcher bias, limited training of researcher on research techniques, and the limited time span of the study are all limitations. Each limitation is described below.

### **Sample Size**

Because of time constraints, a small sample size was selected, relative to the entire population of higher education institutions available to study, as well as the entire population of faculty and students of the community college research site. This small sample size limits the sources of information, and, therefore, excludes other available sources. The small sample size, however, does not create a generalizability limitation, as generalizing the results of a qualitative study to other similar settings is not a goal of this type of study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The focus of qualitative studies is on transferability, defined by Bloomberg & Volpe as “the ability to apply these findings in similar contexts or settings” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 103).

## Potential for Researcher Bias

Another significant limitation is the possibility of the existence of researcher bias while making observations about the data collected (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Researchers' assumptions and beliefs impact their qualitative studies. Researchers, through their life experiences, education, and training, form beliefs and assumptions. Developed over time through completing coursework, receiving mentoring and advising, reading journals and articles, reviewing prior research design and results, and participating in professional development activities, these deep-seated beliefs impact the researcher's study (Merriam, 2009). The researcher may be selective in presenting research findings. It is important to both the researcher and the readers of the study that the theory behind these beliefs and assumptions are communicated in the study (Merriam, 2009).

The researcher is a tenured faculty member of the research site; therefore, experience and researcher bias may impact the study. However, the researcher is committed to practicing *epoche*, which is the awareness of biases and assumptions regarding the phenomenon being studied, and the setting aside of such bias and personal viewpoints for the sake of the quality of the study (Merriam, 2009).

## Limited Research Training

Merriam (2009) regards the significant role of the researcher as both an advantage and a disadvantage. She explains that having a direct connection with the research subjects can provide a beneficial line of communication between the

researcher and the subject. However, as Merriam points out, the researcher may lack adequate training in interviewing and observation techniques to properly conduct the study. Further, according to Merriam (2009), guidance on writing the results of research findings is often limited.

#### Limited Time Span of Research

The brief time span in which data for this study was collected results in another limitation. Longitudinal studies were not conducted, nor were comparative studies performed of participants' responses over time. Data were collected based on a single moment in time, during a specific semester of college. Results of the study may vary if data were collected over a longer period of time.

#### **CONCLUSION**

This chapter described the methodology used in this study. It included the purpose of the study, the research design and the type of study, and a description of the population and sample. It also described the sampling procedures, instrumentation used to collect data, and the data collection procedures. It described the process of data analysis, the validation of the research findings, the assumptions used, and the delimitations and limitations of the study.



## CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is (1) to identify community college faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and learner-centered practices at a small rural Midwest American community college, and (2) to assess the alignment of faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and their respective roles in applying learner-centered practices on their campus.

The objective was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness at this community college?
2. To what extent do the perceptions of faculty and students align regarding learner-centeredness and their respective roles in establishing, implementing, and improving learner-centered practices at this community college?
3. How does this alignment impact the effectiveness of learner-centered practices at this community college?

This chapter presents the key findings obtained from five student interviews, five faculty interviews, the researcher's observation of five classes, and a review of ten course syllabi of the subject college. The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows:

- Description of the Participants
- Presentation of the Findings
- Conclusion

## **DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS**

Five full-time faculty and five full-time students participated in this study at this community college, which is organized into the following six academic departments: Health and Human Services; Industrial Technology; Languages, Arts, and Humanities; Math and Science; Professional Occupations; and Social Science. Collectively, the ten research participants represented all six academic departments, with some departments represented by one participant, while other departments are represented by more than one participant. Five of the participants were male and five were female. Student participants had completed a minimum of two full-time semesters at the subject community college prior to this study and ranged in age from their 20s to their 30s. Faculty participants had taught full-time at this college for a minimum of two years prior to this study and ranged in age from their 30s to 50s. To help ensure confidentiality of participant responses, the names and descriptions of specific professions, college courses, departments, faculty members, students, and other college staff referenced by participants or observed by the researcher have not been divulged.

## **PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS**

To obtain data to answer the first research question regarding student and faculty perceptions of learner-centeredness, the researcher asked participants questions

using the student and faculty interview questionnaires included in Appendix E of this report. Follow-up questions were asked, as needed, to clarify responses or to obtain additional insights of participants. An analysis of the responses to the first research question enabled the researcher to answer the second and third research questions regarding the alignment of student and faculty perceptions and the impact of this alignment on learner-centeredness at this community college.

The researcher recognized that learner-centeredness is an overarching topic consisting of several principles, and believed that obtaining participants' perceptions about specific learner-centered principles would provide deep insights into participants' perceptions of the overall concept of learner-centeredness. Therefore, the interview questions were designed to obtain perceptions about several learner-centered principles, including: the role of faculty, the role of students, the responsibility for learning, the sharing of power, and the role of content. These principles, discussed in the literature review section of this study, are discussed and espoused by several researchers, educators, and authors (Doyle, 2011; Fink, 2003; Harris & Cullen, 2010; Weimer, 2013). After asking questions related to these five learner-centered principles, the researcher concluded the interviews by asking participants their overall perceptions of the value of learner-centeredness at their college, and were asked to rate the extent to which they perceived their college currently uses learner-centered practices.

Consistent with recommended research practices of qualitative studies, the researcher simultaneously analyzed data with data collection, following the analysis process described by Merriam (2009). During the initial interview, the researcher

compared the interview responses with the purpose of the study. Data from the second interview was compared with data from the first interview, and data from each subsequent interview was compared to the data from previous interviews, as well as field notes from classroom observations. The researcher used information from previous interviews and observations to inform subsequent interview sessions, as recommended by Merriam (2009).

The researcher transcribed all interview responses and read each response of the ten participant responses. All five student responses were then grouped together by interview question to help the researcher recognize similar words and phrases used by students. Likewise, all five faculty responses were grouped together by interview question and analyzed for similar words and phrases. The researcher then read the student group transcripts and the faculty group transcripts, noting similarities and differences. As the transcripts were read, the researcher used a system of open coding to note key words and responses related to the research study about perceptions of learner-centeredness. These open codes were then analyzed for patterns, and grouped together through the use of descriptive coding to form categories. While analyzing the descriptive codes, the researcher identified common terms and responses within each participant group, and also compared responses for each question between students and faculty, to help answer the second research question regarding the alignment of perceptions between students and faculty. From an analysis of these categories, the following six themes emerged.

Theme 1: Faculty play the important roles of guide and mentor in the learning process.

Theme 2: Student roles in learning include engaging in the learning process, asking for help when needed, and carrying out assigned responsibilities.

Theme 3: Students and faculty perceive that they share the responsibility for learning; however, their perceptions differ on who bears the major responsibility.

Theme 4: Students and faculty participants perceive that faculty hold most of the power in the classroom, leaving students with limited choices in their learning.

Theme 5: All participants perceive that both the study of the course content—the theories, concepts, and principles—and student engagement with the content through various learning activities, are vital to student learning.

Theme 6: All participants perceive their college's focus on learners as important and consider their college moderately to highly learner-centered.

Each of the six themes is described and discussed in detail below:

#### Theme 1

*Faculty play the important roles of guide and mentor in the learning process.*

During the interviews, students and faculty alike conveyed that they perceive one role of faculty to be to guide students. In describing their views of faculty's roles, students expressed that they wanted faculty to make students "feel welcome" in college, and sought a personal experience with faculty while they learned. They used the terms "to help," "to help guide," and "to be a mentor," as they expressed the desire for faculty to help them understand what they are learning. They also expressed that

the role is more than “just to teach,” and that they expect faculty to “help that student develop in academia.”

One student expressed that faculty’s role “is to present what’s being taught and to guide the students in the topic.” Students clearly did not view faculty’s role to be limited to presenting the content, but also to help students as they interact with the content. One student explained:

The role of faculty in the learning process is to help guide and it’s not obviously just to teach. A teacher should be interacting with their students in a way that makes sense to them (and) makes the student feel welcome, more of personal aspects. That’s kind of why I like the community college.

Students viewed the role of faculty to include being a mentor, indicating that they look to faculty to share their professional and life experiences to help students develop a deep understanding of what they are studying. During in-depth interviews, all five student participants expressed that they valued the instructor’s ability to provide accurate, relevant, and real-world knowledge as they facilitated the learning process. They perceived that the real-world experiences shared by faculty help students acquire the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in their studies and in the workforce. One student expressed the importance that instructors not only present textbook content, but also “share their experience in the subject.” Another student described how his instructor’s illustration of a concept by sharing a professional experience helped him learn. He explained:

When I was taking the exam and I got to a question on that concept, I remembered the example my teacher shared with us. I could answer the exam question because I could easily recall his example.

Another student expressed the value of real-world application by sharing:

For me personally in my field, I really want a real-world situation all the time because they (faculty) all have a lot of experience.... I want them to go over the content in the book but when they can, just have a little side note that, 'Hey, this happened to me'. That to me is the most important, not only that they can teach the class, but that they actually have the experience in the world. In our field especially, if you don't have the work experience, I don't know how you could teach it.... It's good to get good grades and pass your classes. You obviously have to do that. But if you get out there and there's no correlation to what's actually going to happen (on the job), it's kind of a waste of time to me.

Students spoke of the importance of faculty as someone who cares about the students and is willing to offer additional help, guidance, and resources and make them feel comfortable as they learn. Two students described their perceptions as follows:

The role (of faculty) is to help guide and help that student develop in academia to develop those skills. I believe that a teacher, if they see a student struggling, should take them under their wing and help try to figure out what the problem is. Not only as an educator, but a caretaker as well in the school setting.

Basically, for the teacher to teach us the stuff we need to know and if we need help on it then we could use a certain amount of time in class to go over (the area of concern) with the class.

Similar to student responses, faculty perceived their relationship with students and their willingness to guide students as an important role. Helping to equip students with knowledge and skills for further studies was important to faculty. In addition to helping students academically, faculty also took seriously their role in guiding students through the challenges of college and life responsibilities. One instructor explained:

First and foremost of course, the role is to make sure that they're (students are) prepared at the end of the (course) for when they transfer with what they need to know. Additionally, I see my role as making sure that the classroom is comfortable. That's a big thing for me, that the environment is safe, whether online or on campus, because I have both, and I find online to be a bit more challenging in developing that, so working on the classroom environment is

important. Making everyone feel comfortable and then, of course, making sure they understand and also trying to address some of the life issues that they run into when they can't focus or they're coming in late all the time because of the issue at home.

Another instructor focused on equipping students for their future careers:

I demand that my students come to class and expect students to view college just as if it were a job, on time, prepared. If they can't make it for whatever reason, I require them to call ahead or email ahead just as if it were a job. In the classroom, I try to encourage the students to put forth effort and then that effort will be rewarded because once you understand a little bit you'll feel better about yourself and it just builds, it builds. I also try to be a good example and never be late, always show up. I tell the students, 'You know I'm here, and I want you to be here.' But I will tell them, if someone's not there, 'Your attendance isn't good and it's hurting you. And you know, you've got to decide, do I want to be here or not?'"

When asked to describe his role, one faculty member immediately replied, "A mentor," and then expounded:

Coming from the field that I'm in, there's an (internship) that I had to go through and I know my students are going to have to do that when they leave here. Or in some cases they're...working under a (professional) and learning that material and I'm just kind of supplementing their (content), so my role is probably more towards getting the critical thinking and logical thinking for trouble shooting skills and not the content so to speak, but the life skills and learning skills and number one, the safety, to be totally aware. More of a mentor than an instructor.

Two faculty view their role as a guide for students to learn. One focused on encouraging students, while the other viewed it important to help ensure a correct understanding of what students are studying.

I view it more as I've been down the path and so I'm the guide along the path...and their learning is the journey and I can help guide them and point them toward various things and help them over hurdles where I know there are typical stumbling blocks.... I can be the support and the cheerleader, offering encouragement like "Hey, we're in the difficult part but you can do it!" But,



especially at the college level, it's much more about their learning than my teaching.

My concept on that (the role of faculty) is that I am more of a guide to them than I am that dictator in the front of the room.... I like to...try to get them to think about something more, such as discussion. You know, more of the group work, to give them some different assignments where they're interacting with the other students and I'm coming around to see how they're doing and then popping in to help them when they're having difficulty, or redirecting them if they're going down the wrong track.

## Theme 2

*Student roles in learning include engaging in the learning process, asking for help when needed, and carrying out assigned responsibilities.*

Students and faculty were asked, *what is the role of students in the learning process?* Their responses described several student roles.

One student considered it an important student role to "be there every day and to try and understand what is important and try to pull from the teacher what they think is important for you to know." Two other students focused on their contribution to the class as an important role. The first stated, "It's to listen and add as much information as possible" while another said, "If our teacher asks us a question, basically to chip in and help out. I usually try and help out the teacher...if she asks and a student doesn't know it. I try."

One student participant described the roles of self-motivation and open-mindedness:

Well, the students obviously need to be self-motivated because no one is going to be motivated for them. So I think a big portion is that students actually need to be motivated, that's one of their biggest roles, and students need to have an open mind. If students don't have an open mind then what are they doing here?

So I believe that students need to act like a sponge, you know, and just soak everything in and after a while they start to apply it in the real world when they get out into the open.

Two students considered it an important student role to ask questions when needed.

They (faculty) are there to teach. I feel a lot of times they have their agenda or everything planned out to what they feel is very important to teach, so they're going to teach that, but if you have questions, it's up to you to ask.

The instructor's there to teach you and help you understand but they can't cover everything, so you're expected to learn information, and...if you don't understand it and they don't know that you don't understand it, they can't elaborate on it.

Student engagement in the classroom was mentioned by another student participant, who simply described the student role as "To well, obviously, do your homework and everything, but also to...engage in class." As a follow-up to this response, participants were asked what they perceived engagement to look like on a typical day in the classroom.

One student replied, "Probably taking notes or paying attention to the board," and a second student stated, "Answering lots of questions." Another student described a common practice in his class where the students prepare and present lessons to classmates. With this type of learning activity, he explained, student engagement naturally occurs during both the preparation and presentation of the assignment.

In one of my classes we actually taught the class. We were split into groups and then every week we were assigned a chapter...and we would have to present those chapters. My group, we were really active about it and we would develop a game for the end in case we didn't take up the whole time so we did that. Visual indicators of student engagement were described by another student:

Oh, if someone...has their eyes up front, obviously paying attention to the instructor, you can see just by, you know, nonverbal cues. What people are doing, where their eyes are, if they're taking notes.... So I think, you know, if someone's engaged they have their book open; they're following along...in the book if it's relevant; they're taking notes; they're looking up front, actively listening.

When faculty were asked about the role of students in learning, one replied:

They need to be accountable for their own attitude, which I think will then reflect in their homework and their assignments and how they do. I think they're responsible for showing up, unless there are, you know, difficult circumstances. I think they're responsible for making sure they're in contact with me and I also think that's it's part of their roles...to make sure that if they don't understand something they...feel comfortable either coming to talk to me...or to office hours, or staying after class.

In describing their perceptions of student roles in learning, most faculty participants expressed frustration that many students do not do their part to maximize their learning.

They haven't prepared ahead of time to come and receive the info and they're so busy half the time they're not even really paying attention.... So my thought is that...they have to be active in the class.

This instructor also viewed it important for students to focus more on learning and less on grades.

They need to attend to what's being done or said. They need to try and make sense of what's being said and then ask questions if they're not getting it. They shouldn't just sit there like part of an oil painting or a statue and just let it all flow over the top of them and never question and never think. That's what I really see missing in students is that they're not actively thinking about things and trying to apply it and I think without that connection to what goes on out in the world, it seems to them a waste of time; a hoop to jump through. (They view it as) "I have to come sit here for an hour and 40 minutes twice a week for a semester and then they are going to give me a grade and I'll go to a different class and do the same." You know, they don't think of that knowledge as something that they're going to build on later, but I really expect them to listen

to what's being said, you know, when I try to help them make those connections, and realize that it's a process.

Another faculty member also considered asking for help as an important student role.

It's their (students') responsibility to do the learning and if they're not understanding it to tell me that, and to set up ways to help them learn to develop some assessments to help them...measure whether they're learning. But it's not necessarily my job to guarantee that they learn or that I'm going to, um, be the teacher that spoon feeds them, that, really, the responsibility is on them to learn it.

One faculty participant expressed exasperation regarding student efforts at learning.

Try. That's just, just try. And...it can't be just once. It's like a teeter totter and if you're on the teeter totter and you want it to tip, so (you've got to) climb up that teeter totter a certain way before the balance goes the other way...you're not going to get anything if you don't try. I get these students who are smart, they've got the potential, yet they just don't want to try. Succeed is another thing, you may succeed, you may not. But you won't succeed if you don't try.

Regarding student engagement, one faculty remarked that asking questions was a sign of engagement, and added, "I can tell by the look on their face, you know, whether they're zoned out or whether they're thinking or seeing the light." Three faculty participants mentioned students' active involvement in the class as a sign of engagement. Other faculty participants stated, "They're taking notes, they're talking to the whole class or to me, not whispering to their neighbor" and "First of all, they're cognizant, they're not just staring at the table...They'll ask a question and I'll know they're engaged." A detailed example was provided by one faculty participant, who said:

Answering questions when I ask them, demonstrating that they heard what I said, the fact that they are looking at me or the video or whatever I'm trying to

get them to look at. If I hand something out...I expect them to kind of look at it and inspect it. If a student's stuck on something and I look over and say "Did you need help?" I have one gal that sits up in front that jumps up and runs back to help them. So that means she's paying attention to me and knows right where we're at. She's doing well with what we're learning, and she's also attuned to the people around her and is willing to go back and help.

### Theme 3

*Students and faculty perceive that they share the responsibility for learning; however, their perceptions differ on who bears the major responsibility.*

To gather perceptions about this issue, participants were asked:

*Who bears the major responsibility for learning—faculty, students, or do they share this responsibility equally?*

All participants recognized that students and faculty each bear some of the responsibility for learning. Many participants provided examples or descriptions of situations where learning responsibilities were shared by students and faculty, while contending that the student bears most of this responsibility. One student referred to the expectations that students bring with them to college regarding who is in charge of their learning. He stated:

I think we like to put the emphasis on the teacher, but it truly is the student's responsibility. I think society wants to put the brunt of kids not learning on educators, but it's a two-way street. It really is. From my experience at the college, I noticed that it seems that some of the younger kids just expect that from instructors. The instructor is to give them the easy way out, so to speak.

He then contrasted that general expectation with his approach to learning.

That's not how I was raised. I try to apply myself as best I can and really try to understand the material to succeed.

Other students perceived that students' learning is impacted by their cooperation and willingness to learn. They shared that even the best efforts of faculty to create an environment conducive to learning prove fruitless if students don't do their part. Each explained:

It's kind of a shared responsibility in my opinion, but the majority of it is on how willing the student is to learn. So it doesn't matter how well the teacher prepares, if the student isn't listening, the student isn't going to learn anything. So the majority of the learning is on the student.

I think it's both really. But a student has to obviously be involved and if you're not then you're pretty much wasting the teacher's time, like if you're not focusing in class or goofing off or whatever, and the teacher's willing to help students more if they're involved. And if they're not, it's just wasting their time in class, really.

Well, they both have (responsibilities for student learning), but the student is the one that chooses to learn it or not to learn it, essentially.

Most faculty perceived the responsibility for learning to be evenly split between students and faculty, stating:

Traditionally, of course, I think it's (the major responsibility for learning) on the teacher because they are the ones getting paid. (But) they can't force the student to learn, so I think it has to be half and half. They (the students) are just as much responsible as the teacher. Otherwise there is not going to be a product in the end.

I think it takes some preparation before you go into class to talk yourself up to that point that, you know, this is MY goal, I need this, so I need to make the most out of it for me, and not look at ways to kind of brush the responsibility off on the instructor or anybody else. They have to be responsible for their own learning, and they can't just say, "Oh I don't like the way that teacher instructs. It's not my learning style." They have to be willing to meet half way and find how that instructor's teaching style will work with their learning style.

I guess I'd say that it's kind of split in the middle...because we both have a job to do and we're working as a team, whether people view it that way or not. If you

have a team and somebody's not pulling their own weight, it doesn't work...So it takes both.

At the beginning of the semester, the class, I'd say it is both, tied, it's an even thing...you are sending out signals and you're waiting for a response. So you get students in the beginning, you try to send signals out, (such as) "Hey, we'll try to work this out." Hopefully it stays 50/50. That would be your hope, you know, you do this, they do this, you do this, they do this. That would be good, that would be the balance. What I put in, you put in...and the best way I can help a student is to know what they need help on, and that's not always easy to recognize.

Another faculty member more succinctly described this shared responsibility,

stating:

The major responsibility, well I'd say it's probably split 50/50 and I try to encourage that. I try to let the students know that up ahead it's their responsibility to get as much information as they can. I reiterate that several times throughout the semester.

Only one faculty participant charged the student with the major responsibility for learning.

I think students are the central part of the learning process. It's their learning and their education. It's what they want out of it. I do see that as the big difference between high school and college. They have a lot more personal responsibility for learning in college but I'm not sure that new students coming in have figured that out, or they're struggling to make that transition. I would say the student, for the actual learning, bears the responsibility; partly because it's an effort in communication and any communication requires transmission and reception. I tell them this in class, that I can transmit all I want, but if the receiver is not tuned on and tuned in, the transmission's just hot air. So they on the receiving end have to be receive and willing to receive and wanting to receive. That's the only way the learning really is going to happen.

This faculty participant then acknowledged a share of responsibility for student learning:

But that's not to say that I don't bear significant responsibility in helping them figure out what they need to know and what parts they already know, what

parts they don't know, what they need to focus on, and trying to help them figure out what it is.

#### Theme 4

*Students and faculty participants perceive that faculty hold most of the power in the classroom, leaving students with limited choices in their learning.*

Students were asked their perceptions of the sharing of power, and asked to describe ways in which the instructor has power and in what ways students have power. They were also asked about the extent to which students have choices in their college classes. Power and choices are defined below to help understand their significance in the context of this study.

One source defines *power* as *the ability or right to control people or things* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), and defines *choice* as *the opportunity or power to choose between two or more possibilities; the opportunity or power to make a decision* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Another source defines *power* as *the ability or official capacity to exercise control; authority*, and defines *choice* as *the act of choosing; selection, and the power, right, or liberty to choose; option* (Houghton Mifflin, 2004, 2002). In answering interview questions, most participants used the words power and choices interchangeably. For example, one student stated, "We have the power to attend class" while another stated, "We choose whether or not to go to class." Therefore, the terms *power* and *choice* are used interchangeably in this discussion.

All participants provided examples of shared power between faculty and students. However, faculty participants provided more examples, and with much



greater detail and depth of answers, than students. The researcher attributes this to the extensive experiences of seasoned faculty as compared to students earning their associate's degree, and the increased knowledge and awareness of faculty regarding the design, management, and control of classroom learning as compared to students.

The student and faculty perceptions regarding student choices and the balance of power are compiled in Tables 4 and 5 below. Where participants repeated examples provided by other participants, the frequency of that response is noted next to the example in parentheses. For example, the designation (2) indicates that two participants provided the same example. The tables are not meant to provide a row-by-row comparison of items in each column, and the researcher does not intend that the quantity of examples in each list are to be compared to determine which column reports greater or fewer examples. Rather, the tables are intended to provide a concise list of the perceptions of each participant group.

The researcher recognizes a difference in the nature of the examples of choices and power between the two groups regarding the magnitude of power indicated. The researcher noted that most participants' examples of faculty power relate to the design, implementation, and management of policies established by faculty, whereas most examples of student choices and power relate to student responses to those established faculty policies. Table 4 provides a list of student and faculty participants regarding their perceptions of the power of students.

Table 3: *Balance of Power: Student and Faculty Perceptions of Student Power*

Students perceive that students have choices and the power to . . .	Faculty perceive that students have choices and the power to . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• earn their grade (2)</li> <li>• choose which questions to answer when given a choice</li> <li>• help others by asking questions and elaborating on discussions</li> <li>• to come to class or not (2)</li> <li>• evaluate the course and the instruction and provide feedback on effectiveness of courses</li> <li>• choose a writing assignment topic (2)</li> <li>• make the work their own, to customize it</li> <li>• enhance the assignments, put more into them</li> <li>• request revised due dates</li> <li>• form study groups</li> <li>• get tutored when needed</li> <li>• choose extra credit assignments</li> <li>• choose the approach to solving a problem</li> <li>• seek help during instructor’s office hours</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• work alone or in groups</li> <li>• select topics for writing assignments, projects, presentations</li> <li>• request revised due dates for homework, quizzes, and exams (3)</li> <li>• attend class and participate in class</li> <li>• request a library day to gather resources</li> <li>• challenge what was said in class</li> <li>• choose the method of presentation of reports or projects</li> <li>• influence the pace of the semester (2)</li> <li>• learn or not to learn</li> <li>• discuss issues</li> <li>• engage in learning activities (2)</li> <li>• choose to complete or not complete assignments</li> <li>• choose in-class or take-home exams</li> </ul>

Table 4 lists the student and faculty perceptions of the power of faculty.

Table 4: *Balance of Power: Student and Faculty Perceptions of Faculty Power*

Students perceive that faculty have choices and the power to . . .	Faculty perceive that faculty have choices and the power to . . .
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• establish and enforce course policies in the syllabus</li> <li>• adapt teaching based on student suggestions</li> <li>• guide the topic and discussion</li> <li>• control the class</li> <li>• choose the content to cover</li> <li>• choose the assignments</li> <li>• assign grades (2)</li> <li>• plan the class</li> <li>• make most decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• design, implement, and enforce course policies</li> <li>• design and select the assignments and establish assignment due dates</li> <li>• choose what students need to do to demonstrate what they are learning</li> <li>• do whatever they want</li> <li>• determine who can talk in class</li> <li>• design and present the course content (2)</li> <li>• control and veto decisions (3)</li> <li>• judge, assess, and grade (2)</li> <li>• provide students with feedback on effectiveness of assessments and the course(2)</li> <li>• establish routines</li> <li>• exercise classroom power and authority</li> <li>• kick students out of class</li> <li>• choose to be a conduit of information</li> </ul>

The initial response from each student participant indicated that the ultimate power resides in the faculty. Although students described examples of student power in classes, the majority of their responses indicated that faculty's power is much more significant than that of students. The following responses elaborate on some student perceptions from Table 3 above:

We had so many assignments and we could have so many projects due the next day between the two classes and we would ask (the instructor) if we could change the syllabus because it would be so much (work).

I think in the (program name) they (the instructors) have a lot of power, I think, compared to any other classes. I guess through (students' course evaluation) you say what you liked and disliked. So, I feel like we have some power there. It's good because...they've (instructors) made changes in their teaching.

Two students perceived a more substantial power in students, stating:

The professor has the power to I guess guide the topic, guide the discussion, but the student can also have that power if he has a question. The professor has the power to choose the assignments...and the student has the power to enhance it. You can give more input to the assignment if needed. Some of the professors have said, "I can teach all I want, but if you don't show up, it doesn't do you any good. So it's your choice of whether to show up or not." The power of grades is both of them because the student has to do the work to get the grade and the professor has the power to give the grades.

Well, the instructor has power because they give you your grade, but the student has the power because they determine what their grade is. Really, it's up to the student.... It's the student's power to earn the grade.

Faculty perceived an imbalance of power, noting that most decisions regarding college courses are made by faculty, with little input from students. Some faculty perceived their power as substantial and necessary in controlling and leading the classroom. They explained:

Well, I think it needs, with me, to stay a majority, but I don't think it has to be 100%. I think it needs to be kind of when you are controlling the stock in business so you don't get less than 51% because you don't want the student to be running the classroom.

The faculty holds the power in determining what gets covered and how it gets covered. The student can't really do anything if you decide that it doesn't really matter—what their learning style is or how they're doing.... So the teacher really has the ultimate power if they desire to.

The learning is probably 75% my (power), 25% theirs. I like a good discussion and it's not that I wouldn't give them more control it's just that they don't take it. In terms of the power to learn, they possess more power than I do. In terms of power and authority, to run the classroom, I do.

Others added that they'd prefer to not have to hold so much power. One expressed, "I don't want to be the dictator, but I definitely need to be the leader."

Another echoed:

I don't like being the head of the class. I do it and I hold it seriously. I am the boss. I tell them it's a democratic dictatorship.... I just want to be a conduit of information and I want to present it and I want you to learn it. And part of it is that I have to grade, I have to judge, I have to assess, but I don't like being in charge.

One faculty participant emphasized the value of student opinions, saying, "I very seriously take their feedback" while another stated, "They have their say and I try to be flexible. They get a sense that they had some say in it. I try to respect my students, I really do." Others described the power of student feedback in shaping the direction of the class.

They certainly have some power to say, was this assignment helpful? What do I need to add to it to make it better? Let's take stock in what's working and what's not. They have the power to come in and say, "Hey, we'd like to do this or that." I still want, when I close the door to my classroom, for them to stop talking and...to know that (I'm) the one that's starting the class. (I'm) the one that's kind of dictating what (we're) going to cover, but they should know that how it's

covered really depends on them because I will tell them...if you guys are doing really great on something I don't want to beat it into the ground. I want to go to the next thing. And if you're struggling with it, I want to be able to revisit this.

Other faculty viewed student choices as a form of power, stating:

I would say I give a lot of choices. They are always allowed to choose their topics. With the exception of one or two assignments, they choose if they want to work alone or in groups. Then we work together on some choices, like extending deadlines or if we need a resource day where we can interact more.

These are the assignments and they need to do them. They have the choice to do it or not do it; that's their choice with the corresponding grade.

## Theme 5

*All participants perceive that both the study of the course content—the theories, concepts, and principles—and student engagement with the content through various learning activities, are vital to student learning.*

Participants were asked the following question regarding content:

*What is the role of content—the concepts, theory, and principles, in your courses?*

Responses to this interview question indicate that student and faculty participants perceive the role of content similarly—that content serves two purposes. First, they perceived that an understanding of the course content is essential in providing students with the foundational concepts and principles of an academic subject, preparing students for further studies, and equipping them for the requirements of the workforce. Second, they consider it necessary for students to

engage in the course content through various learning activities to acquire a deep understanding of content and to develop critical thinking and problem solving skills.

Student participants considered the content foundational in their current courses and crucial to success in further studies in their specific program and in related subjects. One student emphasized the importance of content, saying, "Having a good understanding of (subject) processes is the big thing." Two students discussed building new content on previous content, and described how this repeated exposure can lead to a deeper understanding of what is being studied.

Everything we've learned, and every class, certainly builds on the last, and within my program they try to match up, (what we learn). Let's say we have four or five classes. Three of them are talking about the same thing but you're kind of coming from a different (angle)...so they (the faculty) try to connect it all that way so it stays relevant throughout the whole semester.

The purpose (of content) is to teach us more. In (introductory course), we learned the basics, but then in (more advanced course) we took it further, so really in my most recent classes it was elaborating on things we had previously learned and it was kind of actually more helpful because you may not have understood it...and now you do.

Students also perceived content mastery as foundational in preparing them for employment. The three responses below emphasize perceptions of the importance of acquiring requisite skills and aligning the study of content with workforce expectations.

Content (is provided) so we know how to do it. When we go out for a job we will need to apply the skills. For instance, when we're (work activity described) and have to figure out the (process), we need to learn the skills first and figure out how to (apply them).

(The role of content) is to give a background of what you're studying, so you understand the concepts that you are going to be doing in your first job or to be able to, like in a writing course, know why you write in such a way.

The concepts, theory, and principles should definitely align with what the career expectations are, what the workforce is looking for today. If it's critical thinking, then obviously it (the content) should lean more on critical thinking.

Although student participants indicated that the study of content was a significant component of their classes, they explained that the pairing of content—the principles, theory, and concepts of a course—with students' engagement with the content through various learning activities, is what helps increase student understanding. They emphasized the importance of not just hearing about the content, but engaging with the content through practice. Students expressed the need and desire to experience the content by directly applying content to a variety of learning activities to make the content real, relevant, and easier to understand.

They acknowledged the existence and the value of both in their classes. One said, "I'd say probably around half of the class period is learning what's in the book and the other half is teaching you how to do it." Another student reported that in class, "probably 75% is content, and the rest is putting together pieces from previous classes, so that's where critical thinking comes in." A third student noted the benefit of his instructor in guiding students to develop critical thinking skills:

We spend quite a bit of time working on critical thinking because we do have to think critically as a (profession name). They'll (instructors) give us a subject and ask questions about it as they're teaching it and then they'll ask questions that make us think further into it so that would be helping us critically think. If (the instructor) feels that something isn't real-world creditworthy, I'd rather go over concepts that I'll be using in the real world versus something that you may see, or that might not even apply. So, I feel that more emphasis should be placed on more deeply learning those important areas.

One student described the value of a keen understanding of what he is studying.

In the long-term, the deeper understanding is what's in my career, (it's) going to matter.... You want to get through the program and pass your classes, but in the end, it's the deeper understanding of what's going on that's important.

Faculty perceptions of the role of content strongly aligned with student perceptions. Faculty participants described content as the necessary first step in learning, and essential to further learning. One commented about content, "That's what drives what we're here for." Another explained:

In (course level 1) you've got to cover the basics or they can't do (course level 2). It's a little more time consuming...but if the student can't complete what they're (working on), they're not going to move on. If you're not on the first floor, you're not going to get to the second floor.

Yet another faculty participant stated, "I use (critical theories) as building blocks for what we are actually working on in class. The role of them in actual class is to use as a basis for other assignments." One faculty member poetically described content in terms of a flowing body of water.

It's the river we're rowing down. I mean that's what it is. In (subject), you start here and you hope to take this concept and build it to do the next concept, and you take what you know to teach them what they don't know. So you're like going down a river, and you're just...the content is...you follow the river. And so for every class we teach, like (an introductory subject), you start with basics of (an introductory subject) and you end up with some fundamentals of (a more advanced subject).

Three faculty participants viewed the understanding of the foundations of content, as well as the ability to develop skills needed to use content in the workforce when students engage and interact with the content, as vital in preparing students for employment opportunities and responsibilities.

You try to get them (students) focused more on employability skills. I think that's critically important. The content is the content...from feedback from my past



grads a lot of this stuff doesn't make sense to them until they're out in the field, so it's just kind of more of background information...to actually get some work skills into these people, the students.

Well, I think it's twofold. First, there's the content that we have to deliver in the course outline. In addition...we're preparing these students for employment. So in addition to just the sterile content that may be in the textbook, I interject a lot of personal stories with as a (professional title), you know, what I've done on the job.

It (content) is critically important because students need to be able to learn it, master it.... It's what employers are going to expect them to know. It's what they need to know when they get out into the world, to really learn anything to either use for themselves or for an employer. If they don't know the content, what's the point?

Faculty deemed student engagement with content to be critical to understanding the content. One expressed, "The engagement in the learning is more important to me than the subject matter sometimes, you know, provided there's enough time." Another faculty participant described how his students work to solve problems during a portion of the class period, explaining that as they engage with various problems during the class period, he can help guide them to find the correct solutions and they can learn to take responsibility for their own learning.

You give them something to work on and...you find those who've got the right idea, and you (help) them recognize conceptually what the mistake is and tell them "You need to think of it this way," and that leads to the right process. I tell them, "you've got to own it, you've got to own your study habits, you've got to own your outlook, you can't wait for me to give it to you. I offer it to you and you've got to, basically, buy it. You've got to own it."

He explained that in his classes, the focus on content varies according to the skill level and "the chemistry of (students in) each course." He enthusiastically described the role of content in a high-performing class.

I would say it depends first of all, on the students. Now that class that you (the researcher) sat in on, (Course Title)... It was just a remarkable bunch. So, there's a far less amount (of content only coverage), I mean you cover the material and they ask what's going on and why are we doing this and how's this working? And then they take it.... I always call it the magic.... They worked together; we meshed; we clicked...and afterwards I said, "Wow, it was like magic."

Two faculty participants described their views of the importance of faculty in knowing when to transition from teaching content to helping students learn by providing opportunities for them to apply the content.

I...have (students) work with the content to develop critical thinking skills. I have them do a presentation...and they get to choose the topic.... They have to find the pros and cons and they have to incorporate at least three terms and definitions...and apply them properly. I'm trying to get them, with critical thinking, to see both sides of it...making a deep connection between the material they're learning and a different topic, a different class, their life. Is that teaching content or is that teaching skills? I don't know how to separate those.

If there's some skill that they need in order to make sense of the content, and you skip that part, you might as well not have taught them anything because they're just not going to pick it up.... Sometimes you have to take a step back and teach the skill of how to make sense of that content and how to use it.

## Theme 6

All participants perceive that their college is moderately to highly learner-centered and consider their college's focus on learners as important.

To obtain student and faculty participants regarding their overall perceptions of learner-centeredness, they were asked the following questions:

*To what extent is the use of learner-centeredness practices at your college important to you? Why?*

*On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being minimally learner-centered and 10 being very learner-centered, to what extent do you view your college as being learner-centered? Please provide examples.*

Student and faculty responses to interview questions were similar regarding learner-centered aspects of their college. Their perceptions are presented below.

When asked about the importance of learner-centeredness practices at their college, all students quickly responded that it was very important to them, with some indicating that it's central to the success of the students and the purpose of the college's existence. One expressed, "When everybody from each part of the college is willing to help the student, I think that's very important," while another stated, "I feel it's very important because if the student isn't learning then it does go back on the college and wondering why they're not doing well." Others responded very similarly.

Well its obviously very important because that's why we're here, you know, we're here to learn and you know if the college isn't focused on having the learners learn than what are we doing?

I've always enjoyed the classes where you know we have to present things or we have to break into groups or in my program go into the lab and be very hands on. That's important to me because it can be boring if someone's just reading a PowerPoint (slideshow presentation). I don't learn well that way. So I think it's very important to me.

I'd say that it's very important to me. Honestly, like I said, I'm very hands on. I learn by actually doing it and interacting with a problem rather than just reading about it, just sitting there reading a textbook. I actually really read my textbooks.

Participants were asked to rate the extent of the college's learner-centered practices. The researcher made it clear to participants that they were being asked to rate the college, as a whole, on learner-centeredness, not only the classroom. Most students perceived the college to be highly learner-centered, with one considering it to be moderately so.

One student struggled to numerically quantify his rating of the college's extent of learner-centeredness, but as he explained his viewpoint, it was evident that he perceived his college to practice the highest level of learner-centeredness. He explained:

When the student walks through the door to the college, I feel the focus is totally on them. They're the ones who are here to learn so I feel that because of that, the focus should or always is on the student.... I'm trying to think of a time where I haven't seen the focus on the student, where it isn't about the student. I really haven't experienced teachers as being there for themselves. I guess that's just the perception that I have, like when I walk through the door I feel like, "Hey I'm here to learn!" So, the college's teaching is funneling into me. That's kind of how I see it, you know, I'm the sponge and this (the college) is the ocean and I'm soaking it all in.

Other students quantified the level of learner-centeredness. One focused on the college's limited options available to students due to its small size, saying:

I would say it's probably a 6, only because there might be only two choices of times for certain classes because it's a smaller school.... There might be a class that you can't take in the summer or at night. You know, there might be just one option so I think that's one of the issues. Obviously, it has to be that way being a smaller school.

Another student first extended his rating of learner-centeredness based on his classroom experience to an overall rating of the college.

As a whole I give it an 8 to 9. The majority of classes are very interactive, lots of class discussions, lot of hands on. If it's a (subject) class, you learn in the class and apply it, you're hands on with it. It's not just sitting there listening to (instructor) lecture. You'd fall asleep, especially if it's an early morning class, but (instructor) had it so you'd discuss different things. In programs that are hands on, (instructor's) projects and groups are quite hands on.

This same student went on to expand his rating of learner-centeredness to tutoring services, describing his experience as a tutor:

From the courses I've had, the classes I've had, (the college is) learner-centered also towards both the tutor and the students that you're helping because when

I'm sitting there helping them, I'm also learning something new. As you're picking up some of how they do things; it's not normal, but it's actually better.... You're teaching them how to do something and they say, "Well what about this?" and you say, "Oh, that would actually work, but it's better." So sometimes the students teach the teacher (the tutor).

Two students, in ranking the college as being highly learner-centered, described the college's library, financial aid, enrollment, and student support services as examples.

I would say a 10. For instance, if I have any questions with financial aid they're always willing to help me. In the library if I needed help transmitting something, (librarian) would always help me.

Probably about an 8. I was at the financial aid office quite often. Depending on which one I talked to, sometimes I had to ask quite a bit of questions because I want to fully understand. They're able to understand the questions.

This student continued:

I came to school here and I've gone through an orientation three times for the (degree) program. (College leader) comes to all of our orientations and talks to us. From the learning center, people come and talk at our orientations, too, so I feel like they do a pretty good job on that aspect.

Faculty responses strongly aligned with student responses, as faculty indicated that they considered learner-centeredness very important to them. One faculty simply rated the importance as "moderate to significant," while another elaborated:

I probably have been aware of it and working with it but never really called it learner-centered practices. But it's very important. It's why we're here. It's the only reason we're here, to help the students, so if we're not on the same page...that needs to be important, that they're learning and that they are not just passing through and having a negative experience. It's very important. Providing quality education, as well as protecting one's job, were noted as

reasons that learner-centeredness is important to one faculty member, described as:

I think that's very important. That's kind of critical to our success.... I kind of like being in charge of a program...because it actually gives me some control over my

job, my career, and whether I have a job or not. By doing all the recruiting, making sure we have students, and that we're doing a good job so that the students are successful and we get more students...(but) if we don't provide a good product to our employers, they're not going to hire them. Then I don't have any students...; then I don't have a job.

Another faculty participant perceived learner-centered practices as good business.

We wouldn't exist without our students needing us. We are a business. I know some people don't like to think of it that way, but I can't think of any other way to put it. Our business is education and if we're not educating people the way they need so that they can go out and be successful, then we're failing and I'd never want to work somewhere where I felt like a failure. So, if something's not working right, you adjust it but you are always tapping in to that customer to find out what their needs are and whether we're meeting them. It's a big deal.

One instructor cited several examples of learner-centeredness used by faculty to support his high ranking of learner-centeredness.

About a 7 or an 8 I would think. I guess my perception is just from hearing instructors talk about their classes and about their students and they always seem to be running it through their heads how effective they are based on that group of students they are working with. They are always seeming to try to shift things to meet that class need at the time...then you hear them talking the next semester talking about the same thing and now they have to shift it back a little because it's a different group of students. And...they always seem to be looking for somebody else's feedback in case they have a solution that they tried and it worked. To me, if we weren't centered on the students and their success, I don't think we'd be going through that.

Without hesitating, this instructor continued to quickly name several instances where learner-centeredness is practiced college-wide.

And then there's all the focus on retention and...that when our students take 3<sup>rd</sup> party tests that they are scoring well, and that we are supposed to change something in our courses based on whether or not they are doing well. The assessment of the instructors. The fact that we do go out and ask students in the class what do you like and what would you improve? We have that student outcomes assessment committee...looking at the numbers, running statistics, to

make sure that we're scoring well. I think we're always looking at how we rate against other colleges as far as graduation.... We're looking for a really successful graduate that's going to come back and try to inspire people, to not (just) always do their best, but to also...help the next one.

Two other faculty also provided college-wide examples of learner-centered practices.

We offer online courses because we know that some people can't necessarily sit in on our class and we try to vary our times so that somebody who couldn't be there one time can pick it up another semester. We're taking into account that some people are in the military, trying to work around the fact that people have families and are working. We're trying to...make that contact with them so this is doable for them. We're trying to...get people in those classes and give them what they need.

From a faculty's perspective, I'd say 8. There are some people who are not as centered on it. Regarding other college functions, such as student support services, orientation, enrollment, financial aid. I think we're doing pretty good...an 8 to a 9, I'd say.

One faculty participant, focusing on the classroom, initially rated the college's learner-centeredness as a 3, observing that students are not given many options in class, and describing an online instructor's course as "very structured and very rigid." This instructor also noted that a colleague's syllabus is "15 pages long, and it's very structured and rigid and laid out" and that some courses are "not student centered so much as they are faculty centered."

He went on to rank learner-centeredness on a college-wide basis, saying:

As far as the college, as a whole, as far as the learning centeredness towards the student, it's an 8 or a 9.

Another faculty participant described both campus-wide and classroom practices of learner-centeredness to support the ranking of a “6 or a 7.”

I’d say about a 6 or a 7. I think we do have the student services workshops and help with note-taking and test-taking and test anxiety. We now have mandatory orientation and part of that is what you can expect in college and it does incorporate things there. And I do, just in talking to faculty and colleagues, know a lot of them are looking at how do we engage students.... How do we enhance learning, talking with students about that. And I think that even the evaluation process we have for faculty members does build a little bit of a feedback for what do students like, dislike, suggestions for improvement, giving them a voice. We have some faculty members who I think are just all about themselves and are not necessarily focused on student learning and what’s best for students, but I think the majority (of faculty) are (learner-centered).

#### **CONFIRMATION OF INTERVIEW DATA BASED ON CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS**

The researcher observed five classes during April, 2016, to assess whether interview response from participants aligned with classroom practices. Not all categories of responses of interview participants could be assessed during the classroom observations, due to the nature of the interview questions and responses and to the limited time period in which the observations occurred. However, no contradictions between interview responses and classroom practices were observed.

In all observed classes, the content was presented by the instructor, in the beginning of class, and was later applied through learning activities. One instructor used a slideshow presentation to accompany the discussion of content, but interjected several real-life examples to illustrate the application of content. Another instructor used course-related software to teach the content and the students followed along and also used the software throughout the class. Two instructors used whiteboards or



chalkboards and did not use technology during the class. One instructor wrote extensive examples on the board and also used online resources. All instructors provided several examples of application of the content as students engaged in the content. One instructor coined some catchy phrases for students to use in remembering the proper principles needed in solving the problem. On average, the discussion of content comprised approximately 60% of the class period, and application of content comprised the other 40%, with some classes splitting content and application equally.

The instructor was the leader in the classroom, guiding the study of the content, as well as its application. A mutually respectful and professional relationship between faculty and students was observed during classroom visits. Respect, fun, conversation exchanges, attentiveness, and a positive classroom environment were noted. Instructors asked questions of students and students responded, sometimes after a few moments of silence. In many classes, the instructor and students joked as they discussed topics, which lightened the environment. Students were respectful of the instructor during the class. For hands-on activities, the instructor circulated throughout the room in one instance to help students, and in another class, remained at the front of the class and demonstrated a solutions approach on the board.

The researcher relied on the instructor's classroom practices, as well as observations of student engagement activities, to assess the responsibility for learning. The instructor assumed a large part of the responsibility for learning by providing the structure of the class, by leading the discussion, and by providing learning activities in

the form of worksheets, computer problems, small group discussions, or question and answer periods.

Varying levels of student engagement in learning activities were observed. Some students appeared to be highly engaged, some moderately engaged, some appearing to not be engaged, and others absent from class. The researcher discovered that student engagement was challenging to assess during the observation, because students engage in different ways. Some were vocal, asking questions and offering insights. Others appeared to engage in less noticeable ways, such as focusing on the speaker, reading along in the textbook, and taking notes. Even note-taking was challenging to observe, as the researcher observed students writing, but did not know if what they were writing related to what was being studied in class.

The researcher sat in the back of the classroom during the observations and could observe some students using cell phones in three of the five observed classes. The researcher did not observe whether the cell phone use pertained to the course so engagement through the use of cell phones could not be assessed. Various forms of student engagement indicated that students did bear some responsibility for learning. However, the extent of this responsibility could not be observed in single classroom visit.

The researcher observed effective classroom management practices in the courses observed. The instructor possessed more power than the students. In two instances, the instructor referred to the course syllabus to answer student questions.

The instructor led the discussions regarding content, as well as the hands-on learning activities. Students followed the lead of the instructor.

### **CONFIRMATION OF INTERVIEW DATA BASED ON A REVIEW OF COURSE SYLLABI**

To assess alignment between student and faculty interview responses and the policies in the course syllabus, the researcher reviewed ten course syllabi. Due to the varying nature of personal responses of research participants to interview questions and the content written in the syllabus, inherent limitations existed. However, no contradictions were noted between interview responses and the policies and other content in the syllabi. Findings are summarized below.

Topics covered in the course are identified in each of the course syllabi. Some are more detailed than others. Some syllabi or accompanying course schedules identified various learning activities, such as presentations, written reports, homework, and group work, while others described these activities in detail. In addition to content, other skills including critical thinking and problem solving skills, as well as the ability to interact with the world and solve math problems, were included as objectives in the syllabi.

The role of faculty was not expressly stated in the course syllabi. Neither content expert nor facilitator of learning was described. However, the inclusion of the topics to be covered throughout the semester indicated a focus on content.

The course syllabi outlined several expectations and responsibilities of students in completing assignments, submitting assignments and assessments on a timely basis,

attending and participating in class, notifying the instructor in the event of absenteeism, avoiding plagiarism, and other policies. None of the course syllabi stated that the student bears the major responsibility for learning. The required resources for the course, such as printed textbooks, publisher's online resources, and software, varied depending on the class. The types of resources included in the syllabi provided students with some indication of the resources they were expected to engage in.

The syllabi indicated significant power in the faculty. Syllabi included policies on attendance, participation, test-taking, homework due dates, plagiarism, cell phone usage, and other course and college-wide policies. The syllabus was structured to reflect a contract between the student and instructor, although the syllabus did not indicate that students contributed to the development of this contract. Little or no choices were described in the syllabi, indicating that students do not have extensive choices in the courses.

The sample syllabi reviewed reflect the more traditional approach to teaching and learning, with faculty possessing most of the power over the course and students responding to that power as they complete assigned work. This aligns with the findings presented in Theme 4, which finds that students and faculty alike perceive that most of the power in college courses is held by faculty. With an increased awareness of learner-centered principles, faculty may want to consider using the course syllabus to document and communicate course policies and expectations that more closely reflect the characteristics of a learner-centered environment, including the roles of faculty and students, the responsibility for learning, the importance of studying content and

engaging with that content, and the benefits of sharing power between faculty and students.

## **ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The objective of this study was to answer three research questions regarding student and faculty perceptions of learner-centeredness at their small rural Midwest community college. The research provided insights into these perceptions and the extent of alignment between student and faculty responses, and the impact of this alignment on current and future learner-centered practices.

### Research Questions 1 and 2

The first research question sought insights into student and faculty perceptions of learner-centeredness at their community college, while the second research question sought to determine the extent to which the perceptions of students and faculty participants aligned regarding learner-centeredness at their college. As student and faculty participant responses were transcribed and the data were analyzed, the researcher discovered that the alignment of perceptions between students and faculty were evident in the data analysis.

The first research question was designed to obtain perceptions regarding student and faculty perceptions of learner-centeredness at this community college. To help answer this question, rather than asking participants during interviews, “What is your perception of learner-centeredness at your community college?” the researcher decided to ask about perceptions of several principles embraced by learner-centered

theory. The objective of asking about perceptions of specific learner-centered principles was to provide more structure and guidance to participants to assist them in formulating their responses, as compared to asking their perceptions about the general topic of learner-centeredness. The researcher believed that more specific questions would result in more specific, applicable, and rich interview responses than would be obtained by simply asking participants their perceptions on the general topic of learner-centeredness.

When asked about five specific learner-centered principles, student and faculty responses indicated strong support of the learner-centered view regarding the role of faculty, the role of students, the responsibility for learning, the sharing of power, and the role of content. Additionally, they support and value learner-centeredness in general and consider it important to them. They perceive that their college is already practicing learner-centeredness in many ways and they possess a positive outlook on the effects of learner-centeredness.

All ten participants perceive the role of faculty to be that of a guide and mentor. The experiences of faculty shared with students is highly regarded by students in helping them understand how content applies in the real world. Students consider faculty to be the crucial link between textbook and real-world knowledge. Students also depend on faculty to provide guidance as they navigate the curriculum and develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills as they prepare for further studies and employment opportunities.

The role of students is perceived by all ten participants to include doing their part to engage in the learning process, informing their instructors when they were struggling and asking for help as needed, and completing their assigned work. Contributing to class discussions and engaging with the content and in classroom learning was also perceived to be a role of students.

After participants provided their perceptions of the role of faculty and the role of students, they provided their perceptions regarding which of the two bore the major responsibility for learning. They were asked if students and faculty shared the responsibility for learning, or if one bore more responsibility than the other. Without exception, every participant perceived that students and faculty share the responsibility for learning. However, when asked who bears the major responsibility, differences in perceptions were observed. Of the six participants who perceived that students bear the major responsibility for learning, five were students and only one was a faculty participant. The other four faculty considered it a responsibility to be equally shared by students and faculty.

The sharing of power is perceived by all ten participants to be imbalanced, with faculty perceived as possessing most of the power and students possessing limited power and choices. Some of the differences in perceptions about sharing power and offering choices was perceived as related to the instructor's responsibility for establishing and maintaining control in the classroom. This responsibility for instructors to maintain control was perceived as an expectation by college leaders toward faculty; thus, faculty were reluctant to relinquish control to students. At the same time, students

perceived that they were somewhat stifled in their opportunities to make choices and to possess power in their own learning.

When asked their perceptions of the role of content, all ten participants responded similarly. They consider the study of the concepts, theory, and principles to be important in providing the foundation about a subject. However, all ten expressed that in addition to studying content, it is important that students engage with the content as they participate in a variety of learning activities. They view this engagement as necessary for students to deepen their understanding of course content and to enhance their learning.

In answering the second research question regarding the extent of alignment of perceptions, the data indicate a very strong, direct and positive alignment of perceptions between student and faculty participants. The only perception that did not align as strongly was in relation to the responsibility for learning. As described above, while all perceptions strongly and positively aligned regarding the view that students and faculty share some of the responsibility for learning, the perceptions varied about whether students or faculty bear the major portion of this responsibility, with six perceiving that students bear the major responsibility, and the other four perceiving that the responsibility is equally shared.

Student and faculty participants' responses to the interview questions regarding their perceptions of the importance of learner-centeredness and the extent to which learner-centered policies are present on their campus very strongly aligned. Students and faculty alike considered learner-centeredness key to student success and central to



the purpose of the college's existence. Student and faculty participants also perceived that their community college already employs many learner-centered practices.

### Research Question 3

Regarding the impact of the alignment of faculty and student perceptions on learner-centered practices at this community college, the research data indicates that the strong, positive, direct alignment may positively impact learner-centered practices. The common perception of students and faculty that their college currently uses many learner-centered practices, as well as the shared perceptions of the importance of learner-centeredness serves to build a strong foundation for further adoption of learner-centered policies and support of efforts to move further on this continuum.

This positive alignment of perceptions between students and faculty indicates that this community college has already overcome some major obstacles faced by many higher education institutions; namely, convincing stakeholders of the value and importance of adopting and using learner-centered principles. These two stakeholder groups value learner-centered principles, recognize the benefits of current learner-centered practices, and view learner-centeredness as essential to carrying out the college's mission of providing learning opportunities to the community it serves.

As stated in the Chapter 4 the discussion of this study, both student and faculty participants expressed that focusing on the learner was the reason the college exists. Because students and faculty agree that learner-centeredness is important to the college and to students, less efforts will be needed to convince them that learner-

centered practices help students learn. In turn, resources can be aimed at increasing awareness of the benefits of learner-centeredness and at implementing additional learner-centered practices.

When students learn more, they increase their opportunities to be successful. Skilled, prepared students who can critically think and problem solve will be valued in the workforce and in the communities in which they live and work. When students benefit from increased learning, the college also benefits.

When the community college provides increased opportunities for students to learn, it demonstrates its commitment to excellence. This is important for several reasons. Many stakeholders hold the college accountable for effectively managing its resources to produce quality outputs. When students are more successful, the college may benefit financially if funding is tied to performance. Additionally, community and business partners may be more willing to support the college when its students are successful. A positive reputation for producing high-quality learning may also attract additional students to this community college.

## **CHAPTER SUMMARY**

This chapter presented the six themes that emerged from this study obtained during the process of analyzing qualitative data obtained primarily through personal interviews with participants. The three research questions were then answered. The key research findings that emerged from these themes, as well as conclusions and recommendations, will be presented in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### **INTRODUCTION**

The key themes identified from the data were presented in Chapter 4. Six key research findings emerged from the themes and from the answers to the research questions of this study. This chapter presents the research findings and places them in the existing literature on learner-centeredness. The conclusions drawn from this study, a discussion of the implications for action, and recommendations for further research is also provided.

### **SUMMARY OF THE STUDY**

As introduced in Chapter 1 of this study, the value and effectiveness of student learning outcomes in American higher education has declined throughout the past three decades. The world has noted that American graduates and workers are often ill-equipped to meet the demands of a changing world, while other countries continue to surpass American graduates in achievement levels. Obsolete college practices have been blamed, in part, for declining learning outcomes. One suggestion to improve learning is to adopt learner-centered principles, which focus more on learners and their

needs, and less on faculty and the institution. The researcher was interested in how students and faculty at one community college perceived learner-centeredness.

The purpose of this study is to (1) identify community college faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and learner-centered practices at a small rural Midwest American community college, and (2) to assess the alignment of faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness and their respective roles in applying learner-centered practices on their campus.

The researcher used a qualitative approach, primarily through the use of interviews with five student and five faculty participants, to gather data for this study. Additionally, five classes were observed and ten course syllabi were reviewed by the researcher to augment and corroborate interview responses. The objective of obtaining the qualitative data was to answer the following research questions:

1. What are faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness at this community college?
2. To what extent do the perceptions of faculty and students align regarding learner-centeredness and their respective roles in establishing, implementing, and improving learner-centered practices at this community college?
3. How does this alignment impact the effectiveness of learner-centered practices at this community college?

Data were transcribed, read, and coded by the researcher to identify themes.

From an analysis of themes, six key research findings emerged. They include:

- Finding 1 The role of faculty in serving as a guide and mentor to students is considered important to student learning.

Finding 2 The role of students to engage in the learning process, to ask for help when needed, and to complete assigned work is perceived as important to student learning.

Finding 3 Students and faculty perceive that they share the responsibility for learning, but while the majority of participants perceive that most of the responsibility rests on the student, some perceive that students and faculty share equally the responsibility for learning.

Finding 4 Students want more power and choices over their learning, while faculty perceive it important to limit the sharing of power and choices with students.

Finding 5 Students and faculty want the learning experience to include more than just the study of content. They consider it essential for students to also engage with the content through various learning activities to help students learn.

Finding 6 Learner-centeredness is important to students and faculty, and they perceive their college to be practicing learner-centeredness in many ways.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The six research findings identified above answer the first research question, which sought to obtain student and faculty perceptions of learner-centeredness at their community college. The study was designed to first gather perceptions about five specific learner-centered principles, and then to obtain overall perceptions of learner-centeredness. The five specific learner-centered principles were the role of faculty, the role of students, the responsibility for learning, the sharing of power, and the role of content. Participants were then asked about their overall perceptions of learner-centeredness. Their feedback led to the following conclusions:

## Conclusion 1

The first conclusion drawn from an analysis of the data is that students and faculty view the role of faculty in the same manner. They all perceive that the role of faculty is to be a guide and mentor to help students learn. Students value the faculty-student relationships at this community college and they look to faculty to guide their learning. When faculty share their experiences with students to demonstrate a concept, students see the concept as real. As described in Chapter 4 of this study, one student appreciated that his instructor shared a professional experience to illustrate a course concept because he could better understand the concept and was later able to visualize that example during an exam, which helped him correctly answer the exam question. Another student emphasized the importance of the ability of faculty to share with students “a real-world situation all the time because they all have a lot of experience.” Such responses indicated that faculty’s shared experiences help students more deeply understand the concept, appreciate its relevance, and retain the knowledge. These student perceptions align with learner-centered theory, which informs that effective facilitators still need to thoroughly understand the topic or content of what they are facilitating, but the manner in which they use their expertise differs; namely, they use this expertise to help guide students in their efforts to understand the content (Doyle, 2011).

Faculty perceptions of their role in learning also align with Doyle (2011), as well as with student perceptions. Faculty value the opportunity to help students learn and take seriously their role as a guide and mentor for students. While they valued the

opportunity to help students learn, they did not consider this help as limited to academia. They also repeatedly spoke of their desire to help equip students for the challenges of employment and of life responsibilities.

One faculty member mentioned her high priority of ensuring that the learning environment was safe and that students were comfortable. She also strived to create an environment where students could discuss “life issues” that may be interfering with their ability to learn. This is consistent with research that asserts that a positive environment supports learning (McCombs and Whisler, 1997).

None of the participants perceived the role of faculty to be strictly a content expert. This is consistent with the literature, which informs that in a highly technological world, where students can quickly and readily obtain information, they do not view faculty to be strictly the provider of the course content. Rather, students value the deep insights, lived experiences, real-world examples, and wisdom that faculty can provide (Doyle, 2011).

Students and faculty also perceive faculty’s encouragement to be important to student learning. One student explained that the motivation to understand content is strengthened when instructors offer encouraging support. This student quoted a common phrase, “I can see that lightbulb turning on now” used by one of her instructors to acknowledge students’ understanding, and noted that this simple form of faculty recognition helped confirm her understanding and motivated her to continue learning. Another views part of her role to be a supporter of student learning as she tells students that she believes in their abilities and that they’ll get through the difficult

portion of the course. Yet another faculty participant considers it important to continuously remind students to keep an open mind and persist in their learning. He shared, "I encourage the students...to put forth effort and then that effort will be rewarded because once you understand a little bit you'll feel better about yourself and it just builds, it builds." He also coaxes students to do their part in learning and to not give up. He shared, "I try telling them, when you're here, especially the first year or two, just keep your eyes open and wait. And if all of a sudden something comes up and you say 'I get it!' that's what you want to do."

Students expect faculty to guide them when they grapple with learning. Repeatedly, students remarked that they look to faculty to assist struggling students, to correct their misconceptions, redirect their study approach, and to provide clarity of understanding. Faculty want to help guide students and used phrases such as "help them over hurdles" and "help them make connections." One finds it beneficial to set aside time in class for students to work on some of their homework, explaining, "I can watch them go through a process and I can see where they're getting stuck" and then can help them "work out the bugs." The examples shared by participants regarding the relationships of faculty and students clearly indicated that these relationships are highly valued. In sharing experiences, offering guidance and support, and encouraging students, faculty enhance learning for students.



## Conclusion 2

The second research conclusion is that student and faculty research participants perceived the role of students as engaging in the learning process, asking for help when needed, and carrying out assigned responsibilities. Students were quick to describe their perceptions of the role of students. One student deemed the role of students in learning to include being engaged, taking from class all that is considered important and asking questions. Another student also mentioned engagement, and described how he needs to be involved in the classroom, asking questions to stay engaged. Another perceived that students should contribute to class discussions, keep an open mind, and do the learning. Yet another student reported that she isn't the first one to speak up in class discussions, but she'll add to a discussion that has been started. Being prepared for the regular student taught lessons that he and his classmates presented each week was considered to be an important student role for one student. He shared that because he invested substantial time into preparing to present the lesson, he experienced significant learning. While describing student roles, some student participants expressed frustration that not all their classmates fulfill their role and responsibilities. One student recounted an experience where a classmate missed several classes, and then several class sessions later, wasted class time by asking questions that were already discussed by the entire class in his absence. This response emphasizes the important role of attending and participating in class and completing assignments. The student describing the situation said she felt the other student was wasting her time, as well as her instructor's and classmates' time.

One faculty participant said student roles include “being accountable” and “showing up” to class, while another viewed their role as being “active participants” and tending to what’s being done or said. The role of students is also viewed by faculty as paying attention, being prepared, and trying to make sense out of what’s been studied, as well as asking questions if help is needed. Two other faculty participants responded that students need to contact the instructor with questions as they arise. One stated, “To make sure that if they don’t understand something they are in contact with me.”

The above perceptions align with the literature on learner-centeredness. Learner-centered instructors recognize that students need to work at their own learning, while faculty serve to facilitate their learning (Weimer, 2013). As stated in the literature and discussed in Chapter 2 of this study, learning is not something that is done to students, but rather learning is accomplished by students themselves (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010). Learner-centeredness theory recognizes the important roles students play in their own learning. These perceptions align with research. In the literature review, McClenney (2004) reports that research shows that engaged students learn more, and if they are connected to classmates, faculty and other college personnel, and also to the content they are studying, they are more likely to persist in college. The importance of student engagement, particularly in classroom activities, is supported by the research of Tinto (2011), who reports that highly engaged students enjoy higher levels of student success.

As discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2 of this study, author and college professor Terry Doyle references years of research findings regarding how

humans learn as he succinctly, yet powerfully, contends, “It is the one who does the work who does the learning (2008, p. 7). Author and educator Weimer echoes this view, declaring, “The hard and messy work of learning can be done only by students” (2013, p. 10). No one else can do it for them.

### Conclusion 3

The third conclusion of this study is that students and faculty share the perception that they each play a role and bear some responsibility for learning, but some perceive the primary responsibility differently. While all students perceive that the primary responsibility for learning rests on students, only one of five faculty members perceived the same. One student opined that it’s a shared responsibility, “but the majority of it is on how willing the student is to learn so it doesn’t matter how well the teacher prepares, if the student isn’t listening, the student isn’t going to learn anything.” One faculty participant simply stated, “For the actual learning the student really bears the actual responsibility.”

The other four faculty perceive that this responsibility is equally shared by faculty and students. An example of this viewpoint was expressed by one faculty participant, who stated, “Well, I’d say it’s probably split 50/50. And I try to encourage that. I try to let the students know that up ahead it’s their responsibility to get as much information as they can.”

The responsibility for learning is an important tenet of learner-centeredness. It holds students accountable and views students as primarily responsible for their own

learning (Doyle, 2011; Weimer, 2013). The perceptions of four faculty that they share the responsibility for learning equally with students does not entirely align with the literature. This perception may impact the faculty's design and implementation of the course, including the selection and design of assignments. It may also affect student learning. If faculty do not perceive and communicate to students that students bear the major responsibility for their own learning, students may take less initiative, be less motivated to learn, and therefore less engaged in learning activities. Reduced levels of student engagement may hinder students' learning.

One student explained that when coming to college, some students bring with them preconceived ideas that faculty should perform the work of learning. In contrast, however, this student viewed this responsibility as "a two-way street."

In analyzing the responses, the researcher noted that none of the student or faculty participants perceived the major responsibility for learning to be on the instructor. This perception aligns with the literature; learner-centered principles challenge the thinking that faculty are responsible for making learning happen. Rather than functioning as passive participants, learner-centered principles posit that learners need to work at learning in order to learn and, therefore, charge students with the major responsibility for their learning (Doyle, 2011; Weimer, 2013).

Participant responses aligned significantly, but not totally, with the literature. Faculty viewed the responsibilities as a team effort, explaining, "We both have a job to do and we're working as a team, whether people view it that way or not. If you have a team and somebody's not pulling their own weight, it doesn't work.... It takes both." The

perception that both students and faculty bear some responsibility for learning may increase the likelihood that each will strive to carry out their responsibilities, while the perceptions of the four faculty participants that they share an equal responsibility with students for student learning could result in faculty taking on more responsibility and students taking on less responsibility than the literature recommends. This could hinder student learning because if they don't accept the major responsibility for their learning, they may be less motivated, less engaged, and therefore, less likely to learn and retain knowledge.

#### Conclusion 4

This conclusion is that students want more power and choices over their learning, while faculty perceive it important to limit the sharing of power and choices with students. Although student and faculty perceptions regarding who has more power and choices are strongly and directly aligned, their practice of limiting student power and choices does not align with learner-centered principles. As discussed in the literature review chapter of this study, power is an important principle of learner-centeredness. In order for students to take on the responsibility for their own learning, they must be empowered to do so (Weimer, 2013). Empowered students are more motivated to take control of their learning, enjoy increased opportunities to learn, and find learning activities more relevant (Harris & Cullen, 2010). Additionally, when students have more power over how they learn, their ability to retain what they learned is enhanced (Doyle, 2011). Doyle reports that when students are empowered, the

learning belongs to the students, and faculty “share a responsibility for the learning, but it is not about us; it is, in fact, all about the students” (2011, p. 78). Despite the benefits reported in the literature about empowering students, students’ power and choices are perceived to be limited at this community college.

During interviews, students and faculty communicated their perceptions regarding how power and control are shared between students and faculty. Students expressed that while they want choices and power, very little power and very few critical choices are offered to them. Students explained that they enjoy only limited power, control and choices in their learning. One commented, “I like having choices. Who doesn’t, right?” but observed, “I don’t think there’s many choices.” Another student described the impact of choices, saying, “It just makes me feel like I can work through it, like, hey if I have that choice, then I’m you know, then I can make it what I want, make it my own.”

Faculty expressed a willingness to offer limited choices to students, yet they want to retain most of the control over learning. Faculty reported that they offered student choices over when to take an exam, who to work with on small group projects, or what topic to choose for a writing assignment. Faculty’s hesitation to share power is reflected in the literature, which reports that faculty most often limit the sharing of power and choices because they perceive it necessary to maintain control over the learning environment (Weimer, 2013). Sharing power, they fear, may lead to chaos in the classroom. The paradox of this situation, however, is that while faculty feel the need to hold on to power, students need to possess power in order to learn. Limited student

power often results in limited student learning. When students feel that they are not in control of their own learning, they lack motivation to learn. In order to “own it” as one faculty participant coined, students need the power to do what it takes to claim ownership of their learning. When students are given control and choices, they are more motivated and empowered to learn (Weimer, 2013).

At the same time that faculty express the need to maintain control over the learning environment, they recognize that the ultimate power in choosing to learn resides in the student. One faculty participant remarked that the only way learning is going to occur is if the student wants to learn and is willing to do so. As stated in the literature, students need to be empowered if they are going to engage with content and take on the responsibility for their own learning (Doyle, 2011; Fink, 2003; Harris & Cullen, 2010; Weimer, 2013). While faculty at this community college perceive the need to hold on to power, students perceive the need to gain more power. By giving students more choices and power, faculty may increase student motivation, which could lead to increased learning.

#### Conclusion 5

Research conclusion five is that students and faculty want the learning experience to extend beyond the mere study of content. They consider it essential for students to engage with the content as they work through various learning activities and life situations to help them most effectively learn.

The traditional approach to studying course content differs vastly from the learner-centered philosophy on content. Therefore, the researcher sought participant perceptions of the role of content in college courses to determine if they more closely reflected the traditional or the learner-centered view of the role of content. As discussed in the literature review, the traditional and most common approaches used in teaching are lecturing and leading discussions (Fink, 2003). With these approaches, faculty focus on transmitting facts and strive to transfer their knowledge of the relevant principles and theories of a specific subject to students. Learner-centered principles challenge this traditional approach, asserting “covering content does not develop the knowledge base or learning skills that students need to take with them from a higher education experience” (Weimer, 2013, p. 120). Learner-centered faculty use content to establish a knowledge base, and then teach students specific skills to apply the content to achieve deep and significant learning (Weimer, 2013).

Regarding the quantity of content to study, the literature acknowledges that, in the present Information Age, knowledge expands rapidly and continuously, resulting in far more content to study than time constraints permit; thus, the focus of education should not remain on content only (McCombs & Vakili, 2005; Weimer, 2013). Consistent with the literature, participants recognized that studying all the available content of a course is not possible in a college semester. Even if time would permit, both students and faculty found little value in studying content only. They believe that engaging with content through a variety of learning activities that require critical thinking and problem solving provides more depth of understanding than the study of content alone. These



perceptions align with the literature on learner-centeredness regarding the role of content. The literature reports that students do not learn significantly when faculty merely attempt to impart their knowledge to students through lectures and discussions. Rather, to develop mastery, students need to acquire skills and practice using them (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010).

Students expressed that as they use skills to apply content, they engage in learning, and they are able to construct new knowledge by applying what they are learning to previously learned knowledge. As they practice applying content, students develop and hone important skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision making, which prepares students for the responsibilities of the workforce and of life responsibilities. One student described the approach of some of her instructors, saying that they first discuss the subject “and then they’ll ask questions that make us think further into it so that would be helping us critically think.” Another student explained that when students seek employment, they’ll need skills, so not only covering the content, but practicing and developing skills is very important. Another shared with passion, “I really believe that when a teacher starts talking about real world experiences and is able to apply what is being learned in a book or in a classroom to what they actually have gone through or witnessed or experienced, or had a colleague who has done the same, I think it really adds another dimension to the learner’s aspect.” One student described the impact on learning of applying content to the preparation of ongoing student presentations. “So every class... somebody got up to do a 5-minute presentation on a topic.... You learned it so well because you had to get up and teach it.

These practices of skill building are supported by the literature which states that educators should help learner develop problem-solving, critical thinking, technology, and global awareness skills so students can search for and discover relevant information based on the specific details of the particular issue or challenge they face (Bellanca & Brandt, 2010). Similarly, the literature informs that students develop a deep understanding of what they are studying by learning specific skills to help them apply the foundational knowledge acquired in the study of content as they engage in various learning activities (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Faculty viewpoints align with learner-centered principles as well. One faculty participant explained her view of the value of content application as she said, “I don’t think (it’s) really effective to just sit there and talk and talk and talk.... I know we need to kind of shift it out more to (students) and let them ask their questions and bring topics up and try to work that in to the lecture... but then always give them something hands on, if I can, so they can put it into practice.” This was echoed in the following response, “Give them a visual, give them an audio, give them examples that connect to the real world and then have them after they’ve gone through all that, do something themselves on a computer, on a piece of paper—whatever it is—talk to another person, and show that it meant something to them.”

The practice of applying content is supported by brain-based research, which finds that intelligence is a function of experience, and that active participation with content through various experiences is necessary for individuals to learn. Brain researchers contend, “Curriculum content cannot be inserted into students’ heads but

must be assembled by each student through his/her sensory system (Kovalik & Olsen, 2005, p. 1.6). Using learned skills to apply content to varied learning experiences aligns with constructivist theory, also discussed in the literature, which asserts that students do not receive knowledge, but rather, they construct their own knowledge as they link new experiences with previous knowledge (Stage, Muller, Kinzie, and Simmons, 1998, as cited in Weimer, 2013). Despite these findings, many faculty spend most of the class time providing foundational knowledge of a subject, leaving little or no time to teach students how to use content (Fink, 2003).

#### Conclusion 6

The sixth research conclusion is that learner-centeredness is important to students and faculty, and they perceive that their college currently practices many learner-centered principles. Both students and faculty value the learner-centered practices already employed at their community college. They deem the focus on students to be the central purpose of their college. One student shared, "It's very important to me," and then emphasized his appreciation that his learning was active, rather than passive, by adding, "I'm very hands on. I learn by actually doing it and interacting with a problem rather than just reading about it, just sitting there reading a textbook." Another student remarked, "Well, it's obviously very important, because that's why we're here, you know; we're here to learn." A faculty participant remarked, "It's why we're here. The only reason we're here is to help the students." Another explained, "We wouldn't exist without those students needing us."

They acknowledge that if student learning is the goal, then a focus on the learner should be the approach used by their college. Student and faculty perceptions show a willingness, and perhaps readiness, for students and faculty to move even closer to being a learner-centered campus. This is good news for this community college. If perceptions varied regarding the importance of learner-centeredness, the college may find it more challenging to learn more about learner-centered principles and to adopt policies and practices that focus on learners and doing what's best for them. The alignment of student and faculty perceptions of learner-centeredness may prove beneficial in helping this college become more learner-centered.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION**

A review of the literature in Chapter 2 of this study indicates that learner-centered practices help students learn. The findings of this study indicate that student and faculty perceptions of learner-centeredness strongly align with each other, and these perceptions, in turn, align with the findings of previous research reported in the literature review. This positive alignment indicates that the college may benefit from efforts to move along the learner-centeredness continuum. Based on the conclusions of this study, the researcher offers several recommendations for policy and practice at this community college, which may also be considered by other higher education institutions.

Although this study's participants embrace learner-centeredness, the adoption of learner-centered practices at this community college is likely to be met with

resistance. The researcher's suggestions are aimed at reducing this resistance and at helping to provide guidance on learner-centered policy implementation.

One reason for resistance is the lack of understanding of the benefits of learner-centered practices. As discussed in the Chapter 2 literature review of this study, learner-centered principles have been advised for several decades by various authors, researchers and education leaders, yet it continues to be a seldom understood or used approach to learning.

Even after learning about the value of learner-centeredness, some may continue to resist its implementation (Doyle, 2011). In large part, this resistance is due to common and long-held beliefs and practices of focusing on faculty and the institution, rather than on learners. Faculty, students, support staff and administrators alike are often accustomed to educational policies and practices established by the institution and its faculty and pushed onto students.

For many higher education practitioners, shifting to a focus on learners turns current practices upside down. Learner-centeredness adopts the constructivist approach to learning, where students build knowledge based on applying new information and experiences to prior learning (Glaserfeld, 1995, Weimer, 2013). The familiar stimulus-response activity of traditional classrooms no longer applies (Glaserfeld, 1995). A shift towards a more learner-centered environment is viewed as uncomfortable and different, thus many tend to resist (Doyle, 2011).

The researcher believes that training various stakeholders at this community college on the benefits of learner-centeredness may help reduce resistance to adopting

learner-centered practices. Developing and implementing an effective system of learner-centeredness may prove challenging, even when resistance has been reduced. Even those who are willing to try to make the switch to learner-centeredness may find that they don't know how to do so. Therefore, the researcher also suggests implementation strategies to help improve the likelihood of the adoption of additional successful learner-centered practices at this community college. The suggested strategies are presented below.

#### Form a Learner-Centered Core Team

One recommendation is to form a multi-functional core team of learner-centered advocates at this community college consisting of faculty, staff, students, administrators, and community partners. Core team members would be provided awareness training through using guest speakers and trainers, as well as through the use of various resources such as videos, books, research, and similar publications. This training could help faculty understand the significance of learner-centeredness to their students and their college.

After this training, the core team members would brainstorm to identify ways in which learner-centered policy and practices already exist at this college. Next they would perform a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT), address each element of the analysis, and identify actions and resources needed to foster a college environment that is increasingly learner-centered. As part of this analysis, members of the core team could also meet with colleagues from community colleges of

similar characteristics to share best practices for learner-centeredness and to bring knowledge and ideas back to this community college to share with various stakeholders.

#### Train Colleagues and Selected Stakeholders for Small-Scale Implementation

Core team members could be trained through *Train the Trainer* events. This core group could then provide training to a selected group of colleagues, students, and other stakeholders on the value of learner-centeredness, as well as guidance and tips on adopting learner-centeredness on a broader scale throughout the campus.

Small changes could be suggested, and training provided for these changes. Faculty could be trained on how to incorporate learner-centered practices into their traditional pedagogy. Incremental implementation of learner-centered practices into the classroom by a small group of faculty members could provide insights and awareness for other faculty as they move toward further integration of learner-centeredness in their classrooms. Support staff, administrators, and others would also receive training pertinent to their roles and responsibilities.

#### Implement Small-Scale Learner-Centered Practices in the Classroom

After training has been provided, small-scale changes could be made, such as changes in the classroom led by interested faculty members. Documentation of the process of implementing learner-centered practices, including both challenges and accomplishments, would be maintained. Observable outputs, such as levels of student engagement, quality of classroom discussions, and evidence of learning, would be documented and tracked. Results would be shared with core team members.

### Gain the Support of College Leaders

The researcher believes that, although learner-centered practices can be implemented small scale by individual faculty, departments, or other groups, it is most effectively implemented on a campus-wide basis. To help ensure effectiveness of a campus-wide approach to learner-centeredness, the support of college leaders is vital. Therefore, she recommends that, prior to commencing efforts to increase learner-centered practices at this college, the core team meets with the college president, trustees, and other college leaders to present an overview of learner-centered principles. This could be accomplished, in part, by assigning core team members to meet one-on-one with these leaders, as well as by presenting at board of trustee meetings and staff meetings throughout the campus. Also important would be to aim to gain the buy-in and support of the faculty union members.

The college administrators would be asked to provide for the fiscal, human, equipment, technology, information system, assessment, support systems, and other resources needed to support a learner-centered environment. This approach is important because research indicates that a campus-wide support system, complete with resources, is necessary to sustain an effective and thriving learner-centered environment (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Tinto, 2003).

### Provide Awareness and Implementation Training to All Staff

The researcher suggests that after the core team has been trained and college leaders support the learner-centered environment, training should be provided to all



faculty, students, support staff, administrators, trustees, and other stakeholders. The training would present the benefits and requirements of learner-centeredness as well as conversations about the shared responsibility throughout the campus for effective learner-centered practices.

As part of this training, students would be made aware of their roles in learning and that they are responsible for their own learning. The researcher recommends that student training be provided on a regular basis including at new student orientation, during student academic advising and registration, when receiving support services such as financial aid and tutoring, in the classroom, and throughout the campus. Faculty, staff, and administrators would receive training during staff meetings and staff development activities. Faculty would be made aware of the importance of sharing power with students and offering them choices, designing learning activities to provide for student engagement, communicating to students the role of faculty and students and the students' responsibility for their own learning, and for communicating this to students in the course syllabus.

#### Develop and Implement a Campus-Wide Learner-Centered Environment

Once college faculty, staff, students, administrators, trustees, and other stakeholders have been trained on learner-centeredness, college leaders have agreed to support a campus-wide approach to learner-centeredness, and small-scale implementation has occurred, the plan for campus-wide learner-centeredness can be developed and implemented. This would be accomplished by using results of the core

team training, small-scale implementation experiences, conversations with colleagues, meetings with the various stakeholders of this community college, and the assignment of responsibilities and due dates to individuals in the organization.

The current Student Support Services team could work with the core learner-centeredness team to help spearhead implementation efforts and to manage and lead learner-centered practices. These learner-centered champions, consisting of individuals from various functions of the college, could direct the initial campus-wide learner-centeredness implementation efforts, and would communicate closely with various stakeholders of the college, including the board of trustees, college president, other college administrators, faculty, staff and students. This multi-functional approach to learner centeredness would enable the committee to obtain input and feedback and to provide the leadership needed to carry out effective campus-wide learner-centered policy and practices.

#### Assess the Effectiveness of the College's Learner-Centered Practices

The researcher recommends that on a regular basis, the learner-centered policies and practices of this college would be assessed for effectiveness and revised as needed, to improve the outcomes of these practices. Key performance indicators, such as, student course evaluation ratings, student and faculty feedback on learner-centered practices in the classroom, and feedback from other college stakeholders, such as support staff and administrators, would be used to assess the effectiveness of learner-centered practices of this college.

To help inform decisions, data would be summarized, reported, and analyzed regarding associated challenges, costs, and benefits of learner-centered policy. Results of this analysis would be used to revise existing learner-centered policy and practices based on evidence provided.

#### Celebrate Accomplishments

The researcher advises that, as objectives of learner-centered policy and practices are achieved, the various stakeholders of this community college should take time to celebrate accomplishments. Like all worthwhile endeavors, widespread adoption of learner-centered policy will be necessary to effect meaningful change. It will take a team of individuals to work together to maximize the effectiveness of learner-centeredness. When individuals commit to supporting an initiative such as learner-centeredness, they invest substantial time and energy into carrying out their responsibilities. The researcher believes it is important to recognize the accomplishments made and to celebrate those who contributed to its success. Celebrating could take the form of a company dinner or picnic, or other similar recognition. Press releases to the public describing the accomplishments and expressing appreciation to those involved would also be appropriate.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

In addition to recommendations for college policy, the researcher recommends further studies to continue the study of learner-centeredness.

The scope of this research could be expanded to reflect a wider range of perceptions. This could be accomplished by increasing sample size, and/or by expanding the study to include other groups of individuals, such as administrators, college support staff, board trustees, and employers. The results of a study with an expanded scope could be compared to the results of this study to evaluate the extent of alignment in research findings.

Based on the limitations of this study, a quantitative study could be conducted to gather perceptions from a broad range and large quantity of research subjects regarding learner-centeredness. Stratified sampling could be used to gather data based on established criterion that could provide insights regarding varying or similar perceptions among students, faculty, administrators, and others at this community college. The study could also be expanded to other populations in higher education, such as other community colleges or universities, and the results of the studies of these populations could be compared to obtain further insights into learner-centered perceptions.

## **CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study was to obtain insights about the perceptions of students and faculty of learner-centeredness at their community college and to assess the alignment of these perceptions, as well as consider the impacts of the extent of alignment on the college's learner-centered practices. As the literature reports, the quality of learning outcomes for United States college graduates has been plummeting for several years, with no effective substantial reform in place. As students from other

countries surpass American students in the acquisition of deep learning and requisite skills demanded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the nation's global power, economic well-being, citizen opportunities, political power, and national security continue to decline.

Understanding the urgent need for improvement of the American higher education system and recognizing the benefits of learner-centeredness may motivate this and other higher education institutions to consider further studies on learner-centeredness. Increased knowledge of learner-centeredness and increased efforts and resources devoted to adopting additional learner-centered policies and practices aimed at increasing the quality of student learning outcomes could prove critical in restoring America to its once coveted global leader position.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

## FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

### Institutional Review Board for Human Subjects in Research

Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, 220 Ferris Drive, PHR 308 · Big Rapids, MI 49307

Date: March 30, 2016

To: Dr. Sandy Balkema and Ms. Lois Darga

From: Dr. Gregory Wellman, IRB Chair

Re: IRB Application #160303 (*Shifting Focus, Improving outcomes: A Qualitative Study of Student and Faculty Perceptions of Learner-Centeredness at a Small Rural Midwest Community College*)

The Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application for using human subjects in the study, "*Shifting Focus, Improving outcomes: A Qualitative Study of Student and Faculty Perceptions of Learner-Centeredness at a Small Rural Midwest Community College*" (#160303) and determined that it meets Federal Regulations Exempt-category 1C/1D. This approval has an expiration date of three years from the date of this letter. **As such, you may collect data according to the procedures outlined in your application until March 30, 2019.** Should additional time be needed to conduct your approved study, a request for extension must be submitted to the IRB a month prior to its expiration.

Your protocol has been assigned project number (#160303), which you should refer to in future correspondence involving this same research procedure. Approval mandates that you follow all University policy and procedures, in addition to applicable governmental regulations. Approval applies only to the activities described in the protocol submission; should revisions need to be made, all materials must be approved by the IRB prior to initiation. In addition, the IRB must be made aware of any serious and unexpected and/or unanticipated adverse events as well as complaints and non-compliance issues.

Understand that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the study and participant rights, with the assurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant receive a copy of the signed consent document and investigators maintain consent records for a minimum of three years.

As mandated by Title 45 Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46 (45 CFR 46) the IRB requires submission of annual reviews during the life of the research project and a Final Report Form upon study completion. Thank you for your compliance with these guidelines and best wishes for a successful research endeavor. Please let us know if the IRB can be of any future assistance.

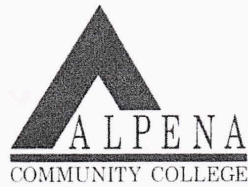
Regards,



Ferris State University Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs

Version 1.2015

APPENDIX B: COMMUNITY COLLEGE APPROVAL LETTER



Office of the President

665 Johnson Street  
Alpena, MI 49707-1495  
(989) 358-7246  
FAX (989) 358-7553  
Website: [www.alpenacc.edu](http://www.alpenacc.edu)

February 22, 2016

Lois M. Darga  
Accounting Instructor  
Alpena Community College  
665 Johnson Street  
Alpena, MI 49707

Project Title: *Shifting Focus, Improving Outcomes: A Qualitative Study of Student and Faculty Perceptions of Learner-Centeredness and Their Respective Roles in Learner-Centeredness at a Small Rural Midwest American Community College*

Dear Lois:

The purpose of this letter is to notify you of my approval, as President of Alpena Community College, of your proposed research of faculty and student perceptions of learner-centeredness, using data that you will collect from Alpena Community College faculty and student research participants. This approval is contingent on the approval of your research project by the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Please allow this letter to also serve as authorization to use Alpena Community College resources, including the college email and telephone data bases and communication systems; ACC Datatel and other sources of faculty, student, and college information related to your study, and use of ACC facilities to gather your data. I understand that some or all of these ACC resources will be used to identify prospective research participants, recruit actual participants, conduct interviews, observe classroom activities, review course related and college documents, and to conduct other research related activities.

This approval is valid for one year from the date of approval by the Ferris State University Institutional Review Board only for the research activities and subjects described in the research proposal.

Sincerely,

Don MacMaster, Ed.D.  
President  
Alpena Community College  
Phone: (989) 358-7246  
Email: [macmastd@alpenacc.edu](mailto:macmastd@alpenacc.edu)



## APPENDIX C: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN STUDY

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a student in the Doctorate in Community College Leadership program at Ferris State University and am working on a dissertation study examining student and faculty perceptions of learner-centeredness and their respective roles in learner-centered practices at xxxxxxxxxxxx Community College. Learner-centered practices focus on the learner, with learners more involved and more responsible for their own learning.

As part of the process of gathering data for this project, I am conducting interviews with students and faculty who have a minimum of two years of experience with xxxxxxxxxxxx Community College. I will also read selected course-related documents, such as course syllabi, and will be visiting classrooms to observe classroom activities.

I am contacting you to see if you would be willing to answer a series of questions about your experiences in classes at xxxxxxxxxxxx Community College, and your perceptions on learner-centeredness. Your participation in this study is voluntary which is explained along with other details in the informed consent form. To ensure confidentiality of responses to interview questions, I will use pseudonyms for all participants.

If you have any questions, please give me a call at xxx-xxx-xxxx or send an email to xxxxxxxx@xxxx.xxx.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Thank you,

Lois Darga

APPENDIX D: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

## Informed Consent Form

**Project Title: Shifting Focus, Improving Outcomes: A Qualitative Study of Student and Faculty Perceptions of Learner-Centeredness and their Respective Roles in Learner-Centeredness at a Small Rural Midwestern American Community College**

**Principal Investigator:** Lois M. Darga

Email: XXXXXX@XXXXXX.XXX Phone: XXX-XX-XXXX

**Faculty Advisor (if PI is a student):** Sandra J. Balkema, Ph.D.

Email: XXXXXXXXXX Phone: Campus: XXX-XXX-XXXX; Home: XXX-XX-XXXX

### Study Purpose, Description, Procedures, and Confidentiality

You are invited to participate in a research study about your perceptions on learner-centeredness. The purpose of this study is to gain insights from current students and faculty of a specific community college about their perceptions of learner-centeredness and their respective roles in fostering learner-centered practices. The researcher is also interested in how these perceptions and their alignment may impact an institution's policies, practices, and procedures regarding learner-centeredness.

You will be interviewed regarding your perceptions about learner-centeredness. You will also be given a brief questionnaire to complete. Responses will be audio-recorded and later transcribed. Individual responses will be heard exclusively by the researcher and a transcriptionist. No mention of names will be made in the audio recording. Rather, the participants will be identified by a Personal Identification Number (PIN) and a corresponding pseudonym, assigned by the researcher. The researcher will hold all responses as confidential. The PIN record sheet will be kept in a locked location, accessible only to the researcher, and the original data sheets will be shredded.

### Participation

For student participants:

By participating in this study, you confirm the following:

- You are 18 years of age or older, and
- You are a student at \_\_\_\_\_ College who completed at least two semesters of full-time studies at this college, and
- You are not currently a student of the principal investigator named above

If you are under the age of 18, you will stop and NOT consent to participate in this study.

For faculty participants:

By participating in this study, you confirm the following:

- You are a full-time faculty member who has taught at xxxxxxxxxx college on a full-time basis for a minimum of two years

For all participants:

- You consent to participate in a research study conducted by Lois M. Darga, a doctoral student at Ferris State University.
- Participating in this study is completely voluntary.
- Participating or not participating in this study will not impact your relationship with xxxxxxxxxxxxxx Community College in any way.
- If you agree to be part of this study, you will be asked a series of interview questions by the principal investigator related to learner-centeredness and will be asked to complete a brief questionnaire. You may be asked follow-up questions after the initial interview if the principal investigator deems it beneficial to clarify or augment your responses.
- By signing this form, you consent to the use of an audio recorder to record your responses. Your responses to interview question will be audio recorded to help ensure complete and accurate documentation of your responses. Subsequent to the interview, the audio recording of your responses will be transcribed to a word processed document by the principal investigator or a transcriptionist, at which time your responses will be de-identified and assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality of your responses.
- By participating in this study, you consent to the use of the data you provide by the researcher in the analysis and reporting of findings. The data analysis and report of findings will be written in a manner that maintains confidentiality of your responses.
- The word processed responses will be stored in a password protected file on the principal investigator's personal computer for a period of three years after the end of this study and will then be deleted. A backup copy of the transcribed interview will be stored on a portable storage device. The backup copy and the audio recording will be locked in the principal investigator's file cabinet for a period of three years after the end date of this study and will then be destroyed.
- You may choose to not answer some or all of the interview questions or those on the questionnaire.
- You may withdraw from the study at any time until the completion of the dissertation. If you decide to withdraw your participation in the study, your responses will not be used in the study. If you do not withdraw from this study, your responses will be included in the results of this study.
- The researcher may choose to stop your participation at any time.

**Potential Risks/Discomforts**

There are no known risks associated with this study greater than that encountered in daily life. If you require special accommodations to participate in this study, please inform the researcher so accommodations can be arranged.

**Anticipated Benefits**

This study is not designed to benefit you personally. However, an increased awareness of learner-centered principles and practices gained from this study could indirectly benefit student and faculty participants, as well as the community college, by identifying learner-centered practices that could be implemented to increase opportunities for improved student learning outcomes.

**Confidentiality**

Signing this form is required in order for you to take part in the study and gives the researcher your permission to obtain, use and share information about you for this study. The results of this study could be published in a report or an article, but would not include any information that would identify you. There are some reasons why people other than the researcher may need to see the information you provided as part of the study. This includes organizations responsible for making sure the research is conducted safely and properly, including Ferris State University.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions you may email the researcher at [xxxxx@xxxx.xxx](mailto:xxxxx@xxxx.xxx) or call xxx-xxx-xxxx.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a subject in this study, please contact: Ferris State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Human Participants, 220 Ferris Drive, PHR 308, Big Rapids, MI 49307, (231) 591-2553, [IRB@ferris.edu](mailto:IRB@ferris.edu).

Signatures

**Research Subject:** I understand the information printed on this form. I understand that if I have more questions or concerns about the study or my participation as a research subject, I may contact the people listed above in the "Contact Information" section. I understand that I may make a copy of this form. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to re-consent prior to my continued participation.

**Signature of Subject:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date of**

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Printed Name:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Information: email -** \_\_\_\_\_ **phone -**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Principal Investigator (or Designee):** I have given this research subject (or his/her legally authorized representative, if applicable) information about this study that I believe is accurate and complete. The subject has indicated that he or she understands the nature of the study and the risks and benefits of participating.

**Printed**

**Name:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Title:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date of Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRES AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



### Questionnaire for Student Participants

Student Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Birth \_\_\_\_\_

Your Program of Study At This College \_\_\_\_\_

# of semesters in which you were a full-time student at this college \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Personal Identification Number (PIN) assigned by researcher \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Questions for Student Participants

The following questions were asked of student participants during the face-to-face interview:

### The Role of Content

1. What is the role of content—the concepts, theory, principles, etc., in your courses?
2. On average, considering all of your classes, what proportion of your class time are you involved in learning course content—the subject material—versus working to enhance critical thinking, problem-solving, and similar life skills?

### The Role of the Teacher

3. What do you believe is the role of faculty in the learning process?

### The Responsibility for Learning

4. What do you believe is the role of students in the learning process?
5. In your opinion, who bears the major responsibility for student learning, the student or the teacher? Why?

### Balance of Power

6. Think of the balance of power in your class between your instructor and you. In what ways does your instructor have power? In what ways do you have power?
7. To what extent do you have choices in what you do in your college classes?

### Perceptions of Learner-Centeredness

8. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being minimally learner-centered and 10 being very learner-centered, to what extent do you view your college as being learner-centered? Please provide examples.
9. To what extent is the use of learner-centeredness practices at your college important to you? Why?

### Questionnaire for Faculty Participants

Faculty Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Department \_\_\_\_\_

# of full-time semesters of teaching experience at this college \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

Personal Identification Number assigned by researcher \_\_\_\_\_

## Interview Questions for Faculty Participants

The following questions will be asked of faculty participants during the face-to-face interview:

### The Role of Content

1. What is the role of content—the concepts, theory, principles, etc. in your courses?
2. On average, considering all of your classes, what proportion of your time as a faculty member do you focus on teaching content—the subject material—versus teaching critical thinking, problem-solving, and similar life skills?

### The Role of the Faculty

3. What is the role of faculty in the learning process?

### The Responsibility for Learning

4. What do you believe is the role of students in the learning process?
5. In your opinion, who bears the major responsibility for student learning, the student, or the teacher? Why?

### Balance of Power

6. Think of the balance of power in your class between you and your students. In what ways do you have power? In what ways do your students have power? Please provide examples.
7. To what extent do you offer choices to students in your classroom? What are some examples of these choices?

### Perceptions of Learner-Centeredness

8. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being minimally learner-centered and 10 being very learner-centered, to what extent do you view your college as being learner-centered? Please provide examples.
9. To what extent is the use of learner-centeredness practices at your college important to you? Why?