A MATTER OF BALANCE:
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DROPPING OUT AND PERSISTING
IN AN ADULT LEARNING CENTRE

by

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B. Ed., Simon Fraser University, 1982

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A Matter of Balance: The Difference Between Dropping Out and Persisting in an Adult Learning Centre

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ABSTRACT

High dropout rates in adult education result in a variety of problems, the greatest of which may be confirmation for the adults themselves that they are not successful learners. This study investigates factors contributing to dropout and persistence at one adult learning centre to provide a fuller theoretical understanding of the problem to the school along with recommendations for improving retention.

Research investigating the problem of adult dropout rates has tended to identify and relate student characteristics to attrition, implying that the prime cause of dropout rests with the student. Unfortunately, little research investigating the relationship between school factors and dropout has occurred. Some researchers have developed models that attempt to explain dropout by showing the relationship between all relevant variables. Two research findings seem particularly relevant: the problem is complex, not explainable by a single set of contributing factors, and, because of this complexity, analysis for the purpose of improving retention is best carried out in a specific context.

This study examines the context in which dropout occurs in a secondary school completion program at an adult learning centre in Surrey, British Columbia. Twenty-five dropouts and 26 persisters responded to a questionnaire about factors contributing to their decision to drop out or persist. Four dropouts and four persisters were subsequently interviewed to assist in clarifying data from the questionnaire and to probe for deeper insights into the forces that result in withdrawal.
The results of this study indicate that differences between dropouts and persisters are so subtle that a matter of degree may be all that tips the balance of contributing factors towards persistence or withdrawal. A central theme in student responses was difficulty in managing the self-paced learning format.

The study concludes that no single set of factors can predict dropout but that multiple factors, of varying intensity, combine in ways, unique to each student, that result in a decision to withdraw or persist. The strength of the factors, once recognized, can be adjusted so that persistence is encouraged. Recommendations are made to assist teachers in influencing these factors so that the balance will be weighted in favour of persistence.
DEDICATION

To the students and staff of Invergarry Learning Centre:

your courage, vision and joy

are an inspiration.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To the many students at Invergarry Learning Centre who trusted me with their very personal stories: thank you.

My thanks and appreciation also go to the members of the Invergarry staff who reviewed my paper, provided helpful suggestions and offered encouragement at the right times.

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The problem of high rates of student attrition in the field of adult education is not new. Hallenbeck (1965) describes it as the “old story” and Londoner (1972) refers to it as a “disappointing fact of life for teachers and administrators”. In one U.S. study, 40 percent of the adult education teachers surveyed reported a student attrition rate of 10 to 24 percent during the first five weeks of class, while another 17 percent reported rates in the 25 to 49 percent range (Mezirow, 1975). At Invergarry Learning Centre in Surrey, British Columbia, the focus of this study, the current dropout rate for adult students whose goal is to complete their high school graduation is 32 percent.

High rates of attrition in adult education is not limited to this continent. It is indeed an international problem (Boshier, 1972). No matter where it occurs, the human and financial costs of the dropout problem are high. In the U.S., estimates are that individuals without high school completion cost that country “over $13 billion annually in welfare programs, lost productivity and prison upkeep” (Wilson, 1984). Administration of school programs is difficult when attendance is unpredictable. Resources are often allocated in relation to attendance patterns. Low attendance means fewer resources, including teacher contracts. Morale among teachers and students is lowered as they confront withdrawals. Of utmost importance, an adult’s involvement in Adult Basic Education (ABE) or high school completion may represent the student’s last gamble on education. To withdraw with a sense of failure may close doors of opportunity and re-open doors of frustration. Both students and society stand to lose.
Understanding why adults drop out of educational activities has been a major concern of researchers and practitioners: "despite a hundred or more studies over several decades, understanding of the dropout phenomenon has progressed very little" (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). The lack of progress is due largely to the contradictory and inconclusive findings of researchers as to the cause of this phenomena. There are many reasons for this. One is that dropout is a very complex problem, attributable to many interacting factors involving students, their situations and the institution they attended. Another reason is the absence of consensus on how dropout should be defined. Many dropouts could just as easily be called "dropins" as many have a history of returning to their program when the conditions are right for them to do so (Thomas, 1990). The primary explanation, however, for the lack of unity in the research findings is that "nearly all research to date has been correlational or descriptive, lacking the coherence and discipline afforded by plausible conceptual frameworks or theories" (Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987, p. 152).

The current research dealing with adult attrition can be divided into two types. The first type, focusing on specific variables that influence dropout, can be subdivided into three categories: dispositional, situational and institutional variables. Dispositional variables are student characteristics such as self-confidence, self-control, endurance and autonomy. While this approach yields valuable information about adult learners, its chief limitation is that it implies that the cause of dropout rests with students without considering the interaction of forces between students, their world and the educational institution. The second category, known as situational variables, considers factors such as dependents, employment, finances, family stability, and transportation. These variables create formidable obstacles to education
and are often accepted as the cause of dropout. These factors alone, however, as this study will demonstrate, are seldom the real cause of dropout. The third category of research examines institutional features, such as student-teacher interactions, classroom climate and course relevancy. The literature in this category is inadequate: there are many institutional practices, such as different teaching strategies, whose relationship to dropout has not been considered by researchers.

The second type of research attempts to explain adult attrition by developing theoretical models that illustrate the relationship between these variables. By examining research from each of these categories, the relevant variables that influence adults in their decision to drop out of school will be described.

**Rationale and Purpose of the Study**

Adults who return to school for a graduation diploma face formidable challenges. Many suffer a lack of self-esteem caused by their failure to graduate at an earlier age. This is usually accompanied by a lack of confidence in their ability to succeed academically. Often, adult learners have dependent children and may have suffered through marital dissolution. A number of adults who return to school have not experienced occupational fulfillment and are motivated to train for a career that is more rewarding, both psychologically and financially. Another challenge faced by most adults returning for a high school diploma is severe financial shortage. Thomas (1990, p. viii) reported that “people in this target population have often experienced chaotic lives. It is only when everything falls in place and the necessary supports are available that there is a reasonable chance of adults
succeeding in their goals. If supports are not in place, the less-motivated and curiosity seekers soon drop out”.

The phenomenon of dropout among adult learners is extremely complex. The multiplicity of factors that interact between students’ worlds and the school environment are unique to each individual, making it difficult to generalize research findings (Garrison, 1987). Situation-specific studies are, therefore, warranted. Ellsworth, et. al. (1990) argue that individual “institutions need to identify their own major obstacles and then to address those identified factors specifically and contextually. In doing so, institutions can move closer to improving retention rates, student success, and the overall atmosphere of the educational institution” (p. 26).

There are two purposes to this study. The first is to examine the literature with respect to adult attrition to gain an understanding of the factors contributing to dropout and the relationship between them. More specifically, what is the relationship between student characteristics and institutional factors? Is there a list of inherent factors that, if present, will cause dropout? Or, do all of the factors interact to result in a net force that leads to a decision to withdraw or persist? The first result of this study will be a proposed theoretical model that outlines the relationship between the multiple factors leading to dropout.

The second purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the context in which current and former students at Invergarry Learning Centre exist so that recommendations, in light of the proposed model, can be made to increase the rate of student retention.
The Context

The City of Surrey, one of the fastest growing communities in Canada, includes the second largest school district in British Columbia. The school district serves approximately 45,000 students in 110 elementary and secondary schools. The district also operates a continuing education department, which offers academic and non-academic courses to the community, primarily in evening classes.

Invergarry Learning Centre, part of the continuing education department, is the only adult school in Surrey offering daytime classes. The school is also open two evenings per week. Students may attend the School Bridge program (English language acquisition), the Literacy program (basic reading and writing), the Adult Basic Education program (English and Math courses at the grades 8 - 10 level) or the Adult Secondary School Completion (ASSC) program (grade 11 and 12 courses that lead to a provincial graduation diploma). While the whole school may enroll approximately 800 students at any time, there are normally about 250 students in the building. The school employs 32 teachers, many of whom work part time.

The focus of this study is the Adult Secondary School Completion (ASSC) program, which may enroll up to 350 students in a term and is served by 5 full time equivalent teachers. Twenty-two grade 11 and 12 courses are offered. Course offerings reflect those needed by most students to meet provincial graduation requirements, such as Social Studies 11, Mathematics 11 and English 12. While course content must meet provincial curriculum guides, many courses are designed to reflect the needs and interests of an adult student population. An example is Women's Writing 12, a course that uses women's issues as a vehicle to develop writing skills while addressing the needs of a segment of the school population. All but two of these courses
are self-paced, meaning that students work independently and progress at their own rate. Four of the courses offer weekly tutorial groups which provide students with an opportunity to interact with peers while discussing course materials. Upon registration, students create, with a teacher, a schedule that suits their situation. Students are required to attend a minimum of two 2-hour sessions per week for each course they take, and to accumulate at least 80 hours of time at school to complete a course. When they are at the school, students generally work on their own, with individual assistance from an instructor when necessary. The 'classroom' is a very large open area, about the size of three regular classrooms, furnished with 18 round tables that seat five or six students each. Students sit where they choose. Interaction with other students, both social and academic, is encouraged. The students have the option of working in the 'quiet room', where there is no conversation. There are also four small classrooms which are used for small group meetings and for informal groups of students.

During the spring term of 1993, there were 340 students registered, 56% of whom were female. The mean age was 30.4 years. The modal age was 20 years and there were six students over the age of fifty. Students enroll in the ASSC program to complete their grade 12, fulfill prerequisites for a post-secondary institution, or upgrade in certain skills in preparation for a job or entrance examination. Some students enroll simply to fulfill a personal desire to obtain their graduation diploma. A number of students in their mid-thirties and older enroll because of layoffs or injuries and are being sponsored by the Workers' Compensation Board to upgrade their education in order to change careers. The largest 'category' of students are people in their twenties, many of whom are single mothers, financially supported by
the Ministry of Social Services. Many other students have recent addictions and are involved in programs helping them to overcome their dependencies.

Adults are attracted to attend Invergarry Learning Centre because it offers high school courses during daytime hours, flexibility in scheduling and an approach to learning that is unlike most high schools. These features are attractive to people who are unemployed, need a variable schedule or do not have encouraging memories from their own school experiences. The teachers at Invergarry believe the school serves a population that is unique for these reasons. Students are pulled in many directions by the demands of parenting without a spouse, or with an abusive one, struggling for basic financial resources, managing a household, and working. Just below the surface are painful memories of abusive family backgrounds, damaging school experiences, substance abuse and the feelings of disempowerment by being trapped at the bottom of the socioeconomic spectrum. According to one of the school counsellors, “Every single one of the students we see in this [counselling] room tell us horrifying stories of crisis and abuse” (Murray, 1994).

Invergarry offers a number of support services. Two counsellors are available for personal counselling and also provide a range of services such as career counselling, job search skills, and workshops on topical issues. During the spring of 1993, for example, the counsellors coordinated a large forum dealing with violence against women. The topic was chosen because it represents a major concern expressed by students through personal counselling. The counsellors also coordinate a peer counselling program and a welfare advocacy program, designed for people who are on social assistance and need help with bureaucracy. The school has a part-time librarian, a computer room which offers free instruction, a daycare for children over 18
months, and a student lounge. Food services, currently limited to pop and snack machines, is being considered for improvement, due to requests by students. Bus transportation is available at the front of the school.

The relationship between teachers and students is generally informal, positive and friendly. Students are welcome to interact with any of the instructors about any concern. Academic advising is available from any of the instructors.

There is a strong belief among the staff that the school be democratically operated and that students be given a voice. General students meetings are held every two weeks for the ABE/ASSC departments. The agenda and minutes are posted and students are invited to participate. Students have taken advantage of this by requesting services such as parenting workshops, or addressing concerns, such as the location of a smoking area. The request for improved food services came from a student meeting, as did a request for a traffic light and crosswalk at the intersection adjacent to the school. The school has a students' council called 'Friends of Invergarry' and student representation on the staff committee. A school newspaper is printed periodically, which serves as a vehicle for publication of student writing.

For most of the courses, the instructional strategy consists of students working independently from a text or package of materials and seeking help from an instructor when necessary. Students are encouraged to work informally with other students, and students are occasionally paired up by teachers when one student has a problem that another student is able to help with. Generally, the responsibility is on the students to seek help, hand in assignments and set their own deadlines. Two courses, Physical Education 12 and Women's Writing 12, have scheduled class times which meet twice per week. Optional tutorial groups are offered weekly in four other subject areas.
This practice is expanding to other courses, reflecting the belief of the staff that more opportunities need to be provided for student-student interaction within the context of course topics. A precedent was established in the Fall of 1993 when, for the first time, weekly tutorial participation in one of the courses (Communications 11) was made compulsory.

Although students are required to attend at least two sessions per week per course, many of them do not attend consistently. A problem identified by instructors is the practice of students doing their work at home and dropping off assignments to be marked, never meeting with the teacher. Students are advised that work handed in this way will not be evaluated. Interaction with the instructor is seen as important for success in most courses. Attendance records are carefully maintained. When students have not attended for four weeks and have not contacted the school, they are considered withdrawn.

The length of time spent by students to complete a course is a problem with the self-paced format. An interval of more than one year from the start to finish of a course is not unusual, whereas courses in the "regular system" would be completed in five months. While the school attempts to be flexible and thereby fit into the lifestyle of adult students, this leniency seems to be exploited by some students, allowing them to take more than reasonable amounts of time to complete courses. This becomes a problem as students tie up resources and teacher attention for excessive periods of time, often unproductively. Further, students who spend extended amounts of time on a course often lose their focus and drop out.

The school is a busy place. Because of the self-paced, individual format, teachers move from student to student around the open area. It is not uncommon for instructors to work with one student while one or two others are waiting to talk to them. It is easy to be unaware for several days that a
particular student has not attended for a week or two. Instructors are provided with lists of students that are assigned to them and attempts are made to contact students who have been absent. Often, by the time a student is called, the instructor is informed that the student will not be returning. Usually, the reasons provided have to do with family responsibilities, financial pressure or changing work schedules.

The dropout situation creates obstacles for delivery of service. For example, when tutorial groups are scheduled, attendance is inconsistent, hampering the effective progress of the group. During the Fall term of 1993, a lawyer volunteered her time to lead the Law 12 weekly tutorial groups. The group proceeded for five months, with an average weekly attendance declining from eight or ten in the first month to one or two in the fifth month, when the group was cancelled. Although students made progress on the course during this time, none of them completed it.

Invergarry's dropout rate of 32 percent creates a "revolving door" situation, where students enroll, pay fees, receive course materials, become oriented to the school and staff, and drop out, creating a space for the next student waiting in line. Considerable amounts of time and effort are spent by instructors carefully assessing students and orienting them to their course(s), only to have many of them disappear in a few weeks. The result is a continual drain of school resources and teacher morale. The effect on the students themselves may be much more damaging.

Method of Investigation

Most studies of the dropout problem are quantitative. For example, characteristics of dropouts are derived from student responses to instruments administered early in the academic term. Later, when dropouts are identified
by their non-attendance, correlational profiles are developed. Other studies collect data about dropouts by surveying teachers and administrators, with surprisingly little emphasis on the perspectives of the learners themselves. Although Thomas (1990) followed up some dropouts using a telephone survey, I am aware of no study within the field of adult education that has conducted in-depth interviews with students who stopped attending.

In order to assess the service that Invergarry Learning Centre provides to its students, it seemed prudent to ask the students themselves to evaluate the school. The method of investigation involved the following three steps:

1. **Telephone survey of dropouts:** The registration records of the ASSC program at Invergarry Learning Centre reveal that, in the spring term of 1993, 92 students (27 percent) discontinued their studies. Contact was attempted with each of these students to ask them about their experiences at the school and their reasons for dropping out. The telephone survey was guided by a questionnaire (Appendix A). This data provided an overall representation of the factors which contribute to dropout decisions for Invergarry students. Further, students were asked if they would be willing to participate in an in-depth interview.

2. **Written questionnaire with returning students:** Continuing students returning to their studies at Invergarry in the Fall of 1993 were also asked about their Invergarry experiences. The purpose was to balance the responses provided by the leavers in step one, thereby providing the most complete portrait possible of contributing factors. This assessment took the form of a written questionnaire, administered to the students as a group. The questionnaire used was identical to that used in step one.

3. **In-depth interviews with a sample of dropouts and returning students:** The data from the above two surveys served as a background to
student perceptions about the school and indicated areas for further inquiry. Students who indicated that institutional factors contributed to their dropout decision were sought for interviews. Continuing students who offered criticism of the program or who persevered in spite of obstacles were selected. In-depth interviews were conducted with four dropouts and four continuing students (persisters).

Definition of Terms

**Adult Basic Education (ABE):** There is confusion in the literature about this term because in some jurisdictions it refers to high school level courses from grade 8 to 12, possibly including GED (General Educational Development). Other jurisdictions, such as school districts, use the term to refer to Grade 8, 9, and 10 level courses only. Grade 11 and 12 courses are referred to as Secondary School Completion. For this report, the former, more inclusive definition will be accepted because that is the meaning implied in most of the literature.

**Completers:** Students who stop attending an institution because they have met their educational goal(s) are known as completers.

**Dropout:** For the purpose of this study, dropouts are defined as students who have not attended classes for a period of four consecutive weeks and did not achieve their goals for attending. Students who temporarily stopped attending for health or personal reasons and informed the school of their absence are excluded.

The term ‘dropout’ is somewhat contentious because there is no definition that is universally accepted nor is there an accepted method of calculating dropout rates. If dropouts resume their education at a later date, possibly in a different location, is it accurate to consider them dropouts?
Adult students who determine that their needs are not being met by a particular program and choose to discontinue would be included in the calculation of dropout rates, inflating the statistic. Further, students who have met their personal goals before receiving a certificate of course completion are considered dropouts. Without interviewing all students who discontinue their attendance, accurate calculation of dropout rates is difficult.

**Persisters**: Students who have not yet met their educational goal but still regularly participate in the school's program are referred to as persisters. It is useful to distinguish persisters from completers because some persisters require extensive periods of time and may not actually complete.

**Limitations**

As coordinator and teacher in the ASSC program at Invergarry, I was aware that my position may affect the validity of student responses. Interviewees may not see me as an impartial observer and consequently may feel reluctant to state their honest criticisms of the program. To counteract this, I addressed the issue directly during interviews and stressed that the purpose was to elicit their help in providing feedback that could improve the program. As students responded to me in a forthcoming matter, I do not believe that my role with the program interfered with the interviews.

The purpose of this study is to examine the context of one particular site and to make recommendations specific to that site. Studies that involve a complex interaction of variables between individuals and institutions yield results that are not generalizable (Garrison, 1987). Therefore, the results of this thesis are not intended to be used to make recommendations for dropout problems at other institutions. The theoretical development, however, of a
model describing the "balancing of factors" may have application more generally.

Organization of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into five chapters: Introduction, Review of the Literature, Methodology, Results, and Discussion and Conclusions. Chapter One introduced the problem of attrition rates in adult basic education and summarized the current state of literature on the topic. The complexity of the problem was indicated and the rationale for a specific focus of the study was provided. The chapter included a thorough description of the Adult Secondary School Completion program at Invergarry Learning Centre, the focus of this study. Chapter Two provides a comprehensive review of dispositional, situational and institutional factors identified in the literature as contributing to dropout decisions. Four theoretical models, showing relationships between these factors, are described. Chapter Three provides a rationale for and description of the methodology employed. Chapter Four reports the data provided by dropouts and persisters through the telephone survey, written questionnaire and interviews, and attempts to synthesize these results by constructing composite profiles of a dropout and a persister. The final chapter builds on the literature by proposing a model for understanding the dynamics affecting students' decisions to drop out or persist within the Invergarry context and makes recommendations to the program for increasing the retention rate.
Adults who return to complete an interrupted high school education are taking a risk. Most are insecure about their ability to succeed in school. Uncertain or inadequate financial support as well as dependent children is the norm. Others, because they must continue working, have limited time for their studies, creating a formidable obstacle to course completion and eventual graduation.

With a student population that is already facing such adversity, a dropout rate of up to 50 percent is easily accepted as typical. Although many factors that contribute to dropout are not under the control of the school, educators have a responsibility to do whatever is within their power to ensure student success.

To help educators understand the barriers that discourage participation and ultimately to enhance their ability to address or circumvent these barriers, this chapter provides a comprehensive review of research findings with regard to the variables influencing dropout. The variables fall into three categories: dispositional, situational and institutional. Following that, four theoretical models that purport to explain student dropout and persistence by showing the relationship between these variables will be explored. The four models are Finn's (1989) participation-identification model, Tinto's (1975) integration model, Boshier's (1973) congruence model, and Rubenson's (1978) expectancy-valence theory.
Review of Research Findings

Considerable research into the dropout problem, even if conducted without reference to a theoretical model, has provided volumes of valuable information. The variables identified by this research can be organized using Cross's (1981) categories of dispositional, situational and institutional barriers to participation. Dispositional variables are those related to attitudes and perceptions about one's self as a learner. The dispositional attributes which may influence dropout include both sociodemographic and psychological factors. Sociodemographic variables include age, sex, race, educational attainment, employment status and marital status. Although there are multiple psychological variables, three are reported on here: intelligence, self-concept and goal clarity. Situational variables are those arising from one's situation in life at a given time, and may include lack of child care, time (due to job responsibilities), marital stress, transportation or health. Institutional variables, which are school practices and procedures that tend to exclude or discourage students, include: class location, class size, number, frequency and length of class sessions, and provision of support services. This category also includes teaching-learning variables, involving: personal characteristics and attitudes of the instructor, instructional strategies, course content and relevancy and harmony between program and learner goals. These three categories of variables will be considered in the following sections, with the primary emphasis placed on institutional factors, since they are the ones that can be most readily influenced by educators.

1. Dispositional Variables

As indicated previously, dispositional variables are of two kinds: sociodemographic and psychological.
1. (a) Sociodemographic Variables

The bulk of experimental research on dropout and persistence in ABE has focused at least in part on sociodemographic variables such as age, race, sex, educational attainment, employment status, and marital status. The purpose of these studies is primarily to identify who drops out and who persists by assigning variables found to be associated with each group. This data is commonly collected from questionnaires or through examination of existing student records. In the only comprehensive review of adult education dropout research, Verner and Davis (1964) identified 30 studies that had been conducted over a 35 year span. For the most part, the findings of these studies were contradictory or inconclusive. Although Verner and Davis (1964, p. 172) note some trends, they conclude that “in no case . . . is the research sufficiently acute to clarify the nature and extent of a relationship” between various sociodemographic variables and persistence.

Studies undertaken since 1964 have added to our knowledge but there are still deficiencies. Reasons for this include lack of a theory to guide research, use of small samples yielding results which are not generalizable, and the use of research designs which are not suited to capturing the complexity of factors (Darkenwald, 1981). Two sociodemographic variables which do seem to be associated with persistence are age and years of educational attainment. Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) and Boshier (1973) found that “older” adults and adults with more formal schooling are less likely to drop out than others. A possible explanation is that students with more classroom experience have acquired study, organizational and time management skills which help them be successful students.

Two implications arise from this information. One is that the association of age and years of educational attainment to persistence may
serve to sensitize teachers and administrators to the propensity for younger and less educated adults to be at risk of dropping out of ABE programs (Darkenwald, 1981). A second implication is that those students who have attained less education may benefit by some emphasis on “student survival skills”, such as how to study, manage time, and read in content areas.

For the most part, the usefulness of sociodemographic factors is limited. By concentrating on these factors, researchers have suggested that the reasons for dropout reside with learners and have failed to consider the wide array of alterable variables, external to the learners, that influence their behaviour. These studies have provided little insight into why dropout occurs or how it can be prevented.

1. (b) Psychological Variables

Psychological variables refer to “relatively enduring individual characteristics such as intelligence or personality” (Darkenwald, 1981, p. 4). Consideration, in this review, will be given to intelligence, self-concept and goal clarity.

The literature is surprisingly barren on the relationship between intelligence level and dropout. Darkenwald (1981) indicates a general and “common sense” proposition that ability is closely linked to persistence. Garrison (1983) believes that achievement is related to cognitive ability but denies that the reverse is necessarily true. Jackson-Meyer (1987) cites research to support the view that dropouts are less intelligent.

The significance of self-concept, defined as “how individuals see themselves and how they perceive that significant others see them” (Criner, 1990, p. 125), as a psychological variable related to dropout cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, Martin insists that “the cause of attrition is the
inability of teachers to improve self-esteem in adult students” (cited in Criner, 1990, p. 124). While no empirical studies link self-concept with persistence or dropout in ABE, its integral role and relationship to motivation to learn and learning success is evident in the theories described earlier. Students who have low self-esteem usually perceive themselves as failures, generally and scholastically. People’s self-perceptions, regardless of their accuracy, define their expectations for themselves and limit their capacity to change. Self-concept, a fundamental construct in the theories described later in this chapter, is seen as a major influence in a student’s decision to persist or withdraw.

Even though most ABE students suffer from the pervasive effects of previous failures, lack of confidence and low expectations of success, research and practice have reflected a surprisingly low level of emphasis on examining, explaining, and counteracting the impact of these variables. The limited literature on this topic clearly places responsibility on teachers and program administrators for building students’ academic self-concept. Criner (1990) cites the need to include the topic of self-concept as part of professional development for adult educators. She provides some suggestions for identifying students with low self-concept and describes strategies for classroom use.

‘Goal clarity’ is defined as an assessment of how certain students are of their career aspiration. Although perhaps not a lasting psychological factor as defined, it is an internal quality students brings to the school. Hillery states that the “literature consistently documents the fact that post-secondary students who have not made a commitment to a career plan are significantly more dropout prone than those who have a career commitment” (cited in Garrison, 1985, p. 27). No data in this regard is available for adult students in
ABE or secondary school completion programs. Garrison (1985) was unable to associate students without clear goals to dropout behaviour, but explained this by stating that these students set unrealistic goals for themselves. As discussed in Chapter Five, this finding reinforces the need for effective interviews with students at the time of registration.

2. Situational Variables

A multiplicity of situational factors have been identified as relevant to dropout and persistence behaviours in ABE. Examples of situational variables that can inhibit persistence are work and family responsibilities that cause time/money conflicts, family disharmony, transportation problems, lack of child care, and poor health. Many studies that query dropouts for their reasons for dropping out conclude that these factors are of great significance. There is reason to believe, however, that respondents to such studies give misleading answers. As Boshier (1973, p. 261) notes,

Previous dropout follow-up studies . . . have shown that dropouts are inclined to dwell on one incident, the last of a long series of dissatisfactions, and are defensive in telling the truth . . . A participant’s self-concept can also more easily accommodate a non-course reason for dropout than a course-related reason.

Darkenwald (1981) uses this point to claim that, while situational factors influence the dropout decision, they are not the “cause” of it. These situational factors interact with other factors, such as poor teaching, for example, to promote attrition. Students who are educationally and economically disadvantaged, however, may have less resilience, causing these external factors to play a larger role in their decision to drop out or persist. Situational variables then, while not themselves causing a student to withdraw, work in combination with all other variables to either create an
equilibrium, permitting persistence, or to upset the balance, culminating in a decision to drop out.

Social-interpersonal factors are another type of situational variable. An example is the degree of encouragement from family, peers or an employer. As emphasized by Rubenson (1978), membership or reference groups can be very influential in shaping an adult's attitude toward participating or persisting in an educational activity. Membership groups can discourage an adult's involvement in ABE if those associates tend to devalue educational pursuits. Conversely, over-encouragement, which may be interpreted as pressure, has been shown to have a negative effect, as in the case of a spouse's excessive nagging or an employer making an ultimatum (Eberle & Robinson, 1980).

Situational reasons for dropping out are sometimes cited because they are perceived as more socially acceptable than certain other variables, such as lack of interest in learning or lack of confidence in one's ability to learn (Cross, 1981). Indeed, adults may be reluctant to reveal their real reasons for quitting, or may not be certain themselves exactly why they failed to persist.

According to Darkenwald (1981), situational variables are of limited practical importance because, for the most part, they are beyond the control of teachers and administrators. Illness, job changes and the like are unpredictable events. Notwithstanding Darkenwald's position, these variables pose significant obstacles to participation and persistence that can be overcome to some extent by institutional practices such as provision of daycare and coordination of transportation.
3. Institutional Variables

Institutional variables are those that are viewed as within the control of adult educators. They include organizational characteristics, administrative practices and a variety of other teaching-learning factors. Much of the dropout research emphasizes personal, or dispositional, variables of students. "It appears that the focus of the research on the 'individual attributes' of students without an equivalent focus on the attributes of the program they attend produce conclusions which imply the reasons for dropout rest only with the behaviours of students" (Martin, 1990, p. 163). It is necessary to broaden the focus from what is "wrong" with the student to include what is "wrong" with the institution.

3. (a) Organizational Variables

Organizational variables are factors such as course duration, frequency and length of class meetings, class size and provision of support services. The belief that number of course sessions is directly related to dropout rates is supported by research. Anderson and Darkenwald (1979) found a significant negative association between number of weeks of scheduled classes and persistence. Frequency of meetings (in contrast to total number) has also been shown to affect dropout rates. Less frequent meetings (e.g., once a week or biweekly) are associated with higher persistence rates (Verner & Davis, 1964). Since time is a scarce resource for most adults, it must be included as part of the cost of participation. How the time is scheduled is probably more important than length of class session, as disruption of daily routine by class meetings is costly. The findings regarding the size of classes are mixed, although Boshier (1973) found that persistence was higher in smaller classes (i.e., fewer than nine students).
Support services refers to supports offered through the instructor as well as more formal supports such as counselling and daycare. The instructor is a crucial provider of support, especially in terms of providing instructional resources, building self-confidence and offering encouragement. A lack of academic counselling was found to be a significant factor influencing dropout decisions by Jackson-Meyer (1987). While research has neglected to examine the relationship between support services and dropout/persistence in ABE, in light of the special needs of this clientele, it can be reasoned that services such as personal counselling may contribute to student satisfaction and persistence.

The need for better "intake" procedures has been identified by a number of authors (Cross, 1981; Jackson-Meyer, 1987). As reported, students who do not have a clear occupational goal are more likely to drop out. The intake interview is an opportunity to assess the clarity of the student's goals and, if needed, help the student begin the process of identifying goals. Accurate information must be provided so that students have a realistic expectation of their participation in the program and its outcomes. Assessment of the students is important so that they can be placed appropriately.

3. (b) Teaching-Learning Variables

Teaching-learning variables refer to factors that are most closely associated with the interactions between the instructor and the learner. These factors include personal characteristics of instructors, instructional strategies, perceived relevancy of the course, and classroom climate. The research suggests that these factors are far more important than others in accounting for dropout from adult education (Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979; Boshier, 1973; Verner & Davis, 1964). Ellsworth, et. al. (1991), in their study of institutional barriers at a university, found that dissatisfaction with faculty
and curriculum were the major reasons why students discontinued their studies. These teaching-learning variables are of practical importance because many of them are within the control of adult educators concerned with enhancing student retention.

The personal characteristics of instructors, while obviously a significant factor influencing the climate of the classroom, has not been studied in relation to dropout/persistence. Drawing from some writers in the field (Burnham, 1983; Eberle & Robinson, 1980; Brookfield, 1986; Clark, 1986), however, indicates that instructors will be most likely to encourage persistence if they possess the following characteristics:

(a) are warm, loving, caring, and accepting of learners;
(b) are secure personally so that they don’t need to extract “strokes” from students to maintain their self-esteem;
(c) view themselves as partners with learners rather than dominant in relation to them;
(d) view learning as a process, rather than simply the absorption of prescribed content;
(e) are encouraging;
(f) are sensitive to the learners’ needs and agenda, are flexible and skillful in facilitating those agendas; and,
(g) value the experiences of the learners and believe in their ability to learn.

The personal characteristics of instructors is a primary determinant of the teacher-student relationship. Even though some students come to the school with unproductive behaviours, likely the product of a dysfunctional background, the primary responsibility for building supportive, encouraging relationships rests with the teacher. Wilson (1980) observed that students
who seem to be the least appealing (potential dropouts) are the ones in the greatest need of acceptance and encouragement. Martin (1990) found, however, that they received less teacher attention because persisters, having more self-confidence and a better understanding of how the classroom functions, successfully obtained the majority of the teacher’s time. Murphy (1972) noted that clear lines of communication between the teacher and student are predictive of goal completion. Boshier’s (1973) results indicated that discrepancies between the students’ expected and perceived relationship with the teacher were significantly related to dropout.

The relationship between instructional strategies and dropout/persistence in ABE has also been largely ignored by researchers. Taylor (1983), however, saw its importance when he stated, “Retention is an indication of quality teaching” (p. 129). Mezirow, et. al. (1975) were critical of the traditional classroom strategies heavily relied upon in ABE:

The mode of instruction in many ABE classrooms is that of the elementary school of the 1920’s before all those progressive educators began their tinkering. Drill, recitation, group blackboard and routinization are familiar hallmarks. (p. 18)

This study is dated and, unfortunately, more current literature could not be located. There is obviously a need to investigate current instructional strategies and their influence on dropout/persistence. Within the ABE classroom, it is not uncommon for students to engage in learning activities independently, and to be attended by the teacher individually. Students, while following the same curriculum, proceed at their own pace.

Individualized instruction requires that students work at their own pace, and that they also develop individual programs of study. Eberle and Robinson (1980) describe a system where learners identify what they want to learn and then, with their tutors, locate the necessary materials. As
difficulties or skill deficiencies arise, the tutors are available to assist.
Participation and persistence, with this approach, improved dramatically.

Martin (1990), in his use of a modified version of Tinto’s integration model to discriminate between completers, persisters and dropouts, concluded that the learning environment for dropouts and perhaps for some persisters was not conducive to their learning needs:

> Apparently, the program failed to mediate the weak academic skills and long-term goal commitments of dropouts with its organizational structure and operational arrangements. Students at risk of dropping out appear to require a more concerted programmatic effort to increase their academic and social integration, clarify targeted goals, and increase commitment to the program. (p. 172)

Martin suggests the use of cooperative learning groups for at-risk students to simultaneously increase their academic and social integration. He also supports Garrison’s call for counselling services to help students work through the ambivalence of pursuing an academic goal as a means of obtaining a more distant occupational goal.

Thomas (1990, p. 91), in her study of non-participation and dropout among literacy students in British Columbia, asserts that “caring instructors and instructional strategies” are the two classroom factors that matter most. Instructional strategies should be flexible and varied, accommodating student learning styles. Thomas also stresses the importance of evaluation: “Students need to know where they are going and how they are doing. Benchmarks and tracking procedures should be provided to assist learners in reaching realistic, attainable goals” (p. 92).

Course relevance, or the extent to which a course is perceived to be congruent with student needs and objectives, is probably the major determinant of persistence (Darkenwald, 1981). Students are more likely to
persist when they have clear or concrete goals, when their goals or expectations are capable of being satisfied by a particular educational experience, and when they perceive the learning experience to be instrumental in helping them satisfy their needs or objectives.

To test the relationship between course relevancy and dropout/persistence in ABE, Garrison (1985) hypothesized that dropouts would report that their courses were less relevant than persisters. His results failed to support this hypothesis. His explanation is that students with lower scholastic ability, lower self-confidence, and greater socioeconomic change may set unrealistic goals for themselves and have unrealistic expectations of the program resulting in an incongruence leading to dropout. Garrison's conclusions support the position stated earlier that effective interviews upon registration help to ensure that students' goals, abilities and time constraints are realistically matched with the program.

This issue of relevancy raises important questions, because "typically, the content of instruction in ABE has been decided by everyone but the learners" (Clark, 1986). For secondary school completion, courses must follow provincial curriculum guides. There is latitude, however, in most curriculum to respond to individual differences and interests. The extent of learner involvement in selecting learning goals and materials depends, to a large extent, on the instructors' professional self-concept. Instructors who, consistent with the characteristics of teachers noted above, see themselves as participants with the learner and not providers of skills and knowledge, should be able to effectively facilitate learning activities that are truly individualized and personally relevant.

Classroom climate has been shown to have an impact on student outcomes in elementary and secondary schools (Coleman, 1983). The concept
of climate has been metaphorically defined as the personality of a classroom. Literally, the climate is created by the characteristics and interactions of students and teacher, with the teacher’s influence being primary. Irish (cited in Darkenwald, 1981) reported that the classroom social environment is the most potent predictor of dropout.

Darkenwald & Gavin (1987), while studying the relationship between expectations of the classroom social environment and actual experiences of students, found that dropouts anticipated being in a classroom in which they did not expect or presumably desire a climate characterized by friendly social relations and mutual support among students. This finding, that dropouts do not desire a ‘friendly environment’ was confirmed by Martin (1990). The obvious question is why dropouts are less affiliative thanpersisters. Boshier’s (1973) congruence model may offer an explanation. He found that dropouts perceived other students as different from themselves in undesirable ways. Thus, one would expect dropouts to be dissatisfied with the classroom social environment and to engage in few, if any, affiliative behaviours with other students. The question that arises out of these findings is what type of social environment would induce potential dropouts to become persisters.

An extensive search of the literature offers only one response to this question. Wilson’s (1980) typology of dropouts describes a person who does not naturally invite supportive responses from peers or teachers. Yet, Wilson suggests this is just what they need:

If the non-persister is to be retained, more understanding and support will be needed. Past failures and present anxieties require greater efforts and consideration from the teacher. Learning periods may need to be shortened and the number of success experiences increased in order to retain these persons. Peer relationships may be encouraged and fostered to increase bonds to the program. Above all, non-persisters will need instructors who are mature and willing to absorb some of the
jolts and jars encountered when working with persons who may tend to be self-centered and insensitive. (p. 184)

As has been stated, social integration is a powerful predictor of persistence. But what type of classroom social environment is expected by adult students? Darkenwald (1987) modified the Classroom Environment Scale to create the Adult Classroom Environment Scale (ACES). It is the only scale developed to measure the social environment of adult classrooms in general (Langenbach & Aagaard, 1990). The ACES assesses student perceptions on seven factors (Darkenwald, 1987):

(a) student affiliation, defined as student interaction and cohesion;
(b) teacher support, defined as sensitivity and encouragement;
(c) task orientation, defined as focus and accomplishments;
(d) personal goal attainment, defined as relevance and flexibility;
(e) organization and clarity;
(f) student influence, defined as collaborative planning and teacher non-authoritarianism; and
(g) involvement, defined as student attentiveness, participation and satisfaction.

Darkenwald concluded that students prefer a classroom social environment that is similar to the one described by each of the seven dimensions measured by the ACES. This finding was largely confirmed by Langenbach and Aagaard (1990) in their analysis of the ACES. Interestingly, student affiliation was the strongest of the seven dimensions in their factor analysis.

While social integration within the school setting is important, the degree of integration varies with individuals. The social life of many adult learners is filled with family and socioeconomic responsibilities and
commitments. The ABE student is unlikely to have the same need or time to develop meaningful social relationships at school as would younger college and university students. This would suggest that the major institutional concern for these students is likely to be academic integration as compared to social integration. "Social integration within the school setting is not likely to significantly reduce dropout for those adult learners with families and concomitant responsibilities. It is the impact and required integration of school into the total social milieu of the adult learner that will ultimately determine persistence or dropout" (Garrison, 1985).

Theoretical Models

Several researchers express an urgent need for a sound theory that explains and predicts adult persistence and dropout in education (Garrison, 1987; Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987). Until Boshier proposed his "congruence model" in 1973, participation research was characterized by social surveys showing the relationship of participation to discrete social variables, such as age, family responsibilities and self-confidence. These surveys attempted to explain a complex, multi-faceted behaviour with a single variable (Boshier, 1973).

Many theories of adult participation in education have been developed in the past 30 years, yet the understanding and prediction of adult behaviour has not progressed significantly: "It would appear that at the heart of the problem is a basic disregard for the inherent complexity of human behaviour" (Garrison, 1987, p. 212). Researchers, believes Garrison, are too accepting of theoretical models that profess to explain all adult participation behaviour with only a few psychological variables. Instead,
a large number of variables may combine in unique ways to cause dropout. Not only may the critical combination of variables be unique to each individual but they are certain to change over time. This necessitates a much broader perspective of the adult learner. (Garrison, 1983, p. 138)

Attempts to incorporate the variables that influence dropout and show how they are related have been made by some researchers. The following section describes four theoretical models: Finn’s participation-identification model, Tinto’s integration model, Boshier’s congruence model and Rubenson’s expectancy-valence model.

1. Finn’s Participation-Identification Model

A recently developed model, which does look at a broader context of factors contributing to dropout, is Finn’s (1989) ‘participation-identification’ model. In his consideration of school-aged children, Finn argues that dropping out is a developmental process, beginning in the early years of elementary school. Finn believes that if students identify with their educational institutions, participation will follow. Central to this theory is student self-esteem. Identification with the school requires that students believe that the school’s goals can become their own goals, and therefore they are capable of achieving them. Self-esteem develops over time, partly through evaluations by others (family, peers and teachers), that are perceived by the student. If students’ accumulated perceptions about themselves and school are that they are not successful, then identification and participation are unlikely. Dropout becomes a strong possibility.

Adults who dropped out of high school are likely, therefore, to lack confidence in their learning ability (Valentine and Darkenwald, 1990). Low academic self-esteem is the most frequently cited barrier for not participating,
and, predictably, as the following theories confirm, it is often a factor in an adult’s decision to drop out.

Although Finn’s model was developed to explain adolescent dropout, his conception of dropout as a developmental process is relevant to adult education. Finn states that dropout is simply the final act in a series of events that began early in the student’s educational career. There is no reason to believe that the result of this development does not still exist in the adults who return to complete their high school education. Further, his concept of participation following identification with the school suggests that, if the same process is operative with adults, schools need to understand and respond to the unique needs of the learners in their context.

2. Tinto’s Integration Model

A second model, referred to as the ‘integration model’, extends Finn’s identification concept into the adult realm. It explains dropout by focusing upon the necessity for students to become integrated, socially and academically, with their educational institution (Tinto, 1975). The model argues that a positive relationship exists between institutional characteristics and dropout. Since dropout results from a multidimensional process involving the interaction between the individual and the institution, the model suggests that the characteristics of the institution—its resources, facilities, structural arrangements, and composition of its members—place limits upon the development and integration of individuals within the institution and therefore lead to the development of academic and social climates with which the individual must contend. Given the individual characteristics, experiences, and commitments that students bring with them to the institution, the model argues that the extent of the individual’s
integration into the academic and social systems of the program directly relate to continuance in that program.

Tinto's model was developed to explain participation among residential college students who satisfy admission standards and seek to complete a four year degree. Martin (1990) adapted Tinto's model for adult secondary and pre-vocational programs and found that the model effectively facilitated the identification of variables that predict completion as opposed to dropping out or persistence. His data suggests that completers deepen their commitment to the academic environment over the course of their involvement with the program (i.e., become academically integrated). Conspicuously absent in Martin's findings is confirmation that social integration is necessary for successful completion. Although social integration has been found by a number of studies (eg., Darkenwald & Gavin, 1987; Garrison, 1985; Wilson, 1980) to be important in differentiating dropouts from persisters, none of the variables assessing social integration were able to distinguish completers from dropouts. Martin explains this by suggesting that successful students may have pursued short-term goals that did not encourage the development of a long-term institutional affiliation.

3. Boshier's Congruence Model

Boshier's (1973) congruence model, a well known conceptualization of dropout behaviour in adults, also uses student self-esteem as a foundational construct. According to this theorist, both participation and dropout stem from the interaction of internal psychological and external environmental variables. The adult participant is viewed as a unified system concerned with maintaining inner harmony, and harmony with the environment. The concept of congruence refers to this state of harmony or accord. Incongruence
or discrepancies may develop within the individual (intra-self), or between the individual and the environment (self-other). Incongruencies also occur between the individual and a teacher or between the individual and the institutional environment. While congruence produces satisfaction, incongruence causes anxiety and acts to deter participation. When students experience a large discrepancy between their expectations of themselves and their interpretation of the institutional environment, dropout is likely to occur. Students, according to the model, who do not participate experience incongruence to such a degree that they simply do not enroll, whereas students who find their expectations sufficiently consistent with or congruent to the institution, persist and eventually achieve their goals.

Boshier's testing confirmed that students with high incongruence scores are significantly more likely to drop out than are other people. Underlying Boshier's theory is the view that self-esteem is a critical factor in educational participation. Those who evaluate themselves negatively are less likely to experience congruence with an educational environment. However, Boshier's theoretical stance is that the reasons for participation and dropout do not reside exclusively within the learner. This in turn suggests that there are ways the educational environment can be altered so as to have a positive impact upon dropout and persistence.

Although Boshier is critical of previous studies that explain dropout on the basis of one or two factors, Garrison (1987) levels an identical criticism against Boshier for basing much of his model on one psychosocial construct, that of self-esteem. By so doing, Boshier eliminates potential environmental factors that may contribute to dropout. The generalizability of the model has also been questioned because it is based on a study using a sample of university continuing education students. Garrison (1985, 1987) argues for
using a broader psychosocial perspective in dropout studies and for limiting generalizations to situation-specific populations.

4. Rubenson's Expectancy-Valence Theory

A final model, also stressing the importance of academic self-esteem, is the expectancy-valence theory, developed by Rubenson and Hoghielm in 1978. The theory assumes that a person's choice of activities results from both the value attached to the result of the action and the expectations of being able to carry out the proposed action. Darkenwald's (1980) depiction of Rubenson's model is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Expectancy-Valence Theory

The theory states that learners will persist if they perceive that a specific course or learning activity will satisfy an important need (positive valence) and if they expect to be able to complete or cope with the course in question (positive expectancy). If expectancy and valence are both highly positive, one would predict persistence. If both are low, or one has a value of zero, dropout would be predicted. Rubenson stresses the influence of membership groups in shaping the attitudes of learners. When reference groups or family
members view participation in an educational activity as having a negative value or consequence, then the valence for the potential learner may become negative, and persistence will be unlikely.

The major emphasis in this model is how individual learners perceive themselves, their environments, and what they expect to gain by participating in a learning endeavor. As Cross (1981) points out, a strength of the model is that Rubenson places much less emphasis on so-called external barriers to participation than other research investigations do. The assumption that merely removing external barriers will result in an increase in the rate of participation in education has not been supported by research findings. Instead, the model places emphasis on how the student perceives the situation, which may or may not be the ‘real’ situation, but it is this perception which determines the level of motivation.

The idea of a resultant force which predicts dropout or persistence seems particularly relevant to adult learners. This resultant force, however, may be the product of several factors not considered by the model. For example, a student who has high valence and high expectancy may interrupt her studies indefinitely because of employment or family responsibilities. Or, persistence may be enhanced by the provision of factors such as financial resources, daycare or supportive teachers. These and other factors may work together to produce a resultant force that effectively predicts or explains dropout.

Each of the four models described look at dropout behaviour somewhat differently, and in different contexts, but also exhibit many common features. All theories share the belief that participation can be understood by examining the interaction between students and their environment. The theories are all built on the premise that self-esteem is a critical influence in students’ perception of their environment, leading to decisions to persist or
withdraw. The idea of dissonance or incongruence is evident in each of the theories. Finn's concept of identification and Tinto's integration resemble Boshier's congruence, while for Rubenson the concepts of expectancy and valence assume congruence between participation and anticipated outcomes.

The relevance of these models to explain adult learner behaviour at Invergarry Learning Centre will be considered in Chapter Five.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter began with a review of dispositional, situational and institutional factors that are associated with a student's decision to persist or withdraw from school. Although considerable research has occurred, there are still many areas that warrant investigation. In particular, the influence of institutional factors, such as student-teacher relationships, instructional strategies and curriculum design on the dropout decision demands scrutiny. The majority of research has focused on dispositional and situational factors that are correlated with dropout behavior. While such findings are of interest, they fail to offer substantial help to administrators and instructors who are attempting to increase retention. Further, by emphasizing the factors that reside within the student, this line of research has the potential effect of holding the student alone responsible for dropping out, without consideration of the institutional factors that may also influence dropout. The chapter then considered four models developed to propose relationships between the various factors and dropout. Understanding the variables associated with dropout in ABE and striving to modify programs to encourage persistence not only increases the likelihood of enabling individuals to realize their full potential as learners, it is also a very powerful and public
acknowledgment of the inherent worth, ability and potential of adults who, for a variety of reasons, have not yet achieved high school graduation.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the research method and provides a rationale for the research design. It also describes the development of instruments, selection of respondents and analysis of data.

Much of the research into the problem of persistence and dropout in Adult Basic Education uses quantitative methods. One method used to gain information is to assess all students with a variety of instruments, identify the dropouts after they have left, and then draw conclusions about them. Information is also gained by questioning administrators and instructional staff. I have located only one study (Thomas, 1990), within the field of adult education, that followed up on dropouts to ask for their perspectives on the factors leading to their decision.

In a study that had anomalous findings, Garrison (1987, p. 221) writes, "Unfortunately, follow-up interviews of the dropouts which might have revealed their subsequent activities were not conducted". Due to the heterogeneous nature of the ABE population, caution must be exercised in generalizing the results of a study to other contexts. Garrison (1987) stresses that applications must be made within specific situations with data that is grounded in the context. He further emphasizes that the dropout problem is extremely complex and that "it is highly unlikely that one or two variables can be found that will adequately explain and predict dropout behavior" (Garrison, 1988, p. 209). These factors lead me to believe that a qualitative method of data collection, incorporating some in-depth follow-up of dropouts, should be included as part of this situation-specific study of attrition rates.
In the study of any problem, the design of the research method is dictated by the nature of the question and the type of information sought. The purpose of this investigation is twofold:

(a) to extract from the literature on adult attrition a theoretical understanding of the factors influencing dropout and their relationship to each other, and

(b) to identify and explain the factors, especially institutional, that lead to dropout decisions by adult students enrolled in ABE courses at Invergarry Learning Centre so that recommendations to improve retention can be made.

The data generated by these dual purposes will be used to build on existing theories to develop a model explaining the dropout situation, specific to Invergarry Learning Centre.

While the literature offers information on this question, a situation-specific assessment is necessary to provide the instructional staff at Invergarry with an enhanced understanding of the context within which the students find themselves. A qualitative approach, because it “offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance” (Merriam, 1988, p. 32) to the phenomenon, is an appropriate choice of method. Descriptive research is undertaken when description and explanation (rather than prediction based on cause and effect) are sought, when it is not possible or feasible to manipulate the potential causes of behavior, and when variables are not easily identified or are too embedded in the phenomenon to be extracted for study (Merriam, 1988). These conditions describe the situation at Invergarry Learning Centre.
Research Design

The first phase of the study uses quantitative methods and then, using information obtained from this phase, shifts to a qualitative approach. I chose to utilize a quantitative approach to begin the study in order to create an overall picture, specific to the school, of the situation in which Invergarry students are immersed. Use of a quantitative method allowed me to collect data quickly and efficiently. In addition, I anticipated the emergence of patterns which would later be used to develop the questions for a series of interviews. This quantitative phase had two parts. First, I attempted to contact by telephone all of the students who dropped out of the ASSC program at Invergarry Learning Centre during the spring term, 1993. For the second part of the quantitative phase, I utilized the same questionnaire with a group of persisters. The second part was to provide a balance to the information provided by dropouts. I reasoned that if dropouts indicated dissatisfactions with some aspect of the program, the views of persisters on the same aspect would be needed before recommendations could be made.

The list of dropouts was obtained by examining the registration records. Students who were not in attendance for a period of four consecutive weeks and did not achieve their goals for attending were counted as dropouts. The dropout rate was determined by counting the number of students registered in the Fall and Spring terms of the 1992/93 academic year who stopped attending. Expressed as a ratio of the total number of students registered for each of those terms, the dropout rate for the Fall term was 36% and the Spring term was 27%. The mean of these rates is 32%. The actual dropout rate may be lower than this because it is not known if these students resumed their education at another institution, are planning to return to Invergarry, or actually fulfilled their goals even though their course was not completed.
1. Survey and Questionnaire

The questionnaire (see Appendix A) has 15 questions, divided into two parts. Part A asks about institutional factors and consists of eight questions. The first seven questions ask respondents to indicate their support for statements by selecting from closed-ended responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Topics asked about are: working with other students, the degree of relevance and interest in the courses taken, working in a self-paced environment and about the instructors. The eighth question is an open-ended question asking for additional comments that would improve the program at the school. These questions reflect the institutional factors described in the literature as relevant to dropping out.

Part B of the questionnaire, consisting of six multiple-choice questions, asks about future goals, academic self-concept, and situational factors such as family support, family commitments and adequacy of finances. A final, open-ended question asks if there are other factors that act as barriers to the student’s attendance at school. These questions are designed to verify the dispositional and situational factors described in the literature review.

The telephone survey of dropouts was conducted during September and October, 1993. After introducing myself, I explained the purpose of the study as well as the voluntary and anonymous nature of the students’ participation. Of the 92 students who dropped out of Invergarry Learning Centre in the spring term, 1993, 25 students participated in the telephone survey.

The second phase of the study used the same set of questions, in the form of a written questionnaire, with persisting students at the school. Respondents selected to complete the questionnaire were students who attended Invergarry for three months or more. Three months is an arbitrary time period but deemed sufficient to designate one as a persister. Each of the
persisters chosen had been a student in the Spring of 1993 and had returned to Invergarry in the Fall of 1993. After asking for their voluntary participation, groups of eight to ten students were gathered in a classroom at the school on three separate occasions. Before the questionnaire was given, the study was introduced, consent forms completed, and instructions provided. Some students responded by quickly circling their responses; others welcomed the opportunity to express their opinions and spent up to 30 minutes providing detailed responses to the questions. A total of 26persisters completed written questionnaires.

The data from the quantitative portion of the study were totalled and converted to percent to facilitate comparison between persisters and dropouts. Differences between the two groups were sought to identify variables that may lead to dropout. When significant differences, trends or unexpected findings from this data emerged, I used these to develop questions for the third and final phase of the study, the interviews.

2. The Interviews

A list of the questions asked in the interview, along with a rationale for each question, is provided in Appendix B. The open-ended interview questions were developed with reference to previous research findings and information from questionnaires. They explored the following areas:

1. educational background and the situation that led to an early withdrawal from high school;
2. current situation of student (e.g.,) number of dependents, employment, transportation, encouragement);
3. future goals;
4. experiences as an Invergarry student;
5. advantages and disadvantages of self-pacing;
6. learning with other students versus learning independently;
7. relevance and interest of courses;
8. instructors;
9. personal integration within the school.

All students were asked at the end of the interview if they had any comments to add that would improve the program offered at Invergarry. An interview guide was used in each interview in order to obtain information about similar kinds of experiences from each respondent. Following the suggestions of Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1990), respondents were encouraged to elaborate on responses which seemed incomplete or which may have revealed a fresh perspective. I believe this was necessary in order to ensure that the greatest number of possible answers emerged. I did not, however, explore new avenues raised by a respondent with subsequent respondents unless the individual led the interview in that direction.

I conducted the interviews in December, 1993 and January, 1994 with four persisters and four dropouts. In selecting dropouts for interviews, I considered their responses to the telephone questionnaires. Dropouts who were critical of Invergarry practices or provided reasons for dropping out such as "loss of motivation", a comment which seemed worthy of further inquiry, were chosen. Cross (1981) reports that dropouts may offer situational reasons to explain their withdrawal which may actually mask the real reason because it is more socially acceptable or less painful than saying that they could not, for example, function in the learning environment of the school. Interviews, in these cases, serve as the most appropriate means to seek explanations at a deeper level. Therefore, students who cited reasons such as "changing job schedule" for dropping out became candidates for interviews.Persisters were also selected for their comments on the written questionnaire. Although
these were completed anonymously, students often voluntarily signed their name to the paper, allowing me to pursue them for more information. Students who persisted in spite of situational and/or dispositional factors that would predict dropout, or who responded in ways that represented thoughtful criticism of the program, were sought for interviews.

When arranging the interviews, I gave students the options of meeting in their home, at a mutually agreeable location (such as a restaurant), or at the school. In all cases, students elected to meet with me at the school. One student responded, "We're talking about the school. It should happen at the school." Each interview was held in a small classroom, with only the student and myself present. After introducing the study, completing the consent forms, and emphasizing the voluntary and anonymous nature of the interview, a tape recorder was turned on. Interviews lasted from 30 to 45 minutes in length. Six of the eight interviews took place outside of school hours. In all cases, there was a relaxed tone, free of interruptions and pressure.

As a staff member of the department under study, I anticipated that some students may be hesitant in being forthright and critical about the school with me. I addressed this by stressing that criticisms are necessary for improvement, that no feelings would be hurt, and that their participation was anonymous. In all interviews, students showed no signs of withholding information or hesitating to express themselves fully.

Within 48 hours of completing each interview, I transcribed the conversation from audio tape. Coding was relatively straightforward as the questions were asked in a fairly structured sequence. An annotated list of codes was developed with the initial interview and referred to throughout the remainder of the coding process. The first interview was recoded to
ensure reliability of my own coding. Coding was almost identical so I continued the coding process with the remaining interviews. As responses were coded, the computer enabled me to copy them from the interview and paste them into the appropriate category. When all the coding was complete, each category contained numerous quotes on the respective topic. These categories were then studied to discover themes. The themes are reported in Chapter Four along with the quantitative data.

As stated, much previous correlational research has yielded sociodemographic characteristics that are associated with dropouts. The findings of these studies are contradictory and limited in usefulness. Further, they usually fail to take into account the wide array of other alterable variables external to the learners that influence their behaviors (Clark, 1986). As a means of unifying the broad array of data, and providing results that are authentic to the Invergarry site, I constructed composite profiles of a persister and a dropout. I chose to use composite profiles to illustrate the context of Invergarry students instead of describing the cases of actual students because I reasoned that, with a composite, a broader array of factors that influence a student’s outcome could be described. After carefully analyzing the interview transcripts and questionnaire data, I noted themes in response to the nine interview questions (listed above). These became the basis of each profile. Specific details in the profiles reflect actual stories told by respondents.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides a rationale for the research design employed. Identification of subjects and development of instruments is described. The conditions under which the data was collected is detailed as is the analysis of the data.
CHAPTER FOUR
RESULTS

This chapter reports in an integrated fashion the data from the telephone survey with dropouts, the written questionnaire completed by persisters and the interviews with both groups. Survey questions, clustered together when they deal with related concepts, are presented with the quantitative data. This is supplemented by qualitative data obtained from interviews. The chapter concludes with a composite sketch of a persister and a dropout, based on the information obtained from students during the study.

Contact was attempted with all of the 92 former students who discontinued their studies at Invergarry during the Spring term, 1993. Table 1 summarizes the disposition of students contacted.

Table 1: Responses to Telephone Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education continued:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returned to Invergarry or</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entered another educational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decided to Drop Out:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After attending at least</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one month</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After attending less than</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No contact made:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone number not in</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>service</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not reached after 3 tries</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moved away</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>92</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

47
While I was unable to determine the disposition of 46 students (50 percent), Table 1 indicates that 16 students were not true dropouts but had continued their education at Invergarry or elsewhere. Such changes were made because of moving to another community or changing occupational goals, where grade 12 was not required. Five students registered for a course and never reappeared or attended less than one week. These students were not questioned because of their limited Invergarry experience. Twenty-five students (27 percent) did choose to discontinue their studies. This group comprises the students whose responses to the survey make up the first phase of the study. All 25 of these students participated in the telephone interview.

Table 2 lists the reasons given for dropping out by this group of 25 students. This data indicates that 24 percent of the contacted students who dropped out identified the learning format offered at Invergarry as not suitable to them. The primary criticism was that the self-paced format did not provide the structure they needed to complete work within a reasonable period of time. Although months would pass, the objective of completing the course remained distant. It seems that for many students, self-pacing means slow-pacing. One student stated that, "pressure needed to be there to complete my goals" (SD#1).1 Some students with this criticism transferred to institutions that operate on a more traditional teacher-directed model.

A second criticism was that students often had to wait too long for teacher assistance. Although all instructors teach a number of subjects, there are one or two subjects where only one teacher is qualified to help. If this is

---

1The first letter in the bracket, an “S”, indicates the quote was obtained from a survey or written questionnaire. An “I” would indicate an interview response as the source of the quote. The second letter, a “D”, designates the speaker as a dropout. Alternatively, a “P” would indicate a persister. The number after the letter is a code allowing me to identify the source.
Mathematics, where development is sequential, students found they sometimes had to wait, leading to frustration.

**Table 2: Reasons Given for Dropping Out**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutional Factors:</th>
<th>#</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not enough structure and/or teacher attention</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Situational Factors:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Financial pressure</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>12</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family problems (e.g., marital stress, ill children)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work schedule conflicted with school schedule, making attendance difficult</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coping with demands of family, job and school too great to continue</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changed occupational goals; grade 12 no longer necessary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ill health</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Dispositional Factors:**

| Loss of motivation | 3  | 9  |

**Other Factors:**

| Goals for attending accomplished eg., review English, raise self-esteem | 3  | 9  |

| Total | 33* | 100% |

*The total equals more than 25 as some students cited more than one reason.

The data in Table 2 reflect the findings in the literature which states that adult students have complicated, stressful lives, making it difficult to
maintain a high priority for education when meeting basic needs is of immediate concern. For three students whose work hours changed and thus conflicted with school hours, there seems to be an admission of motivational decline. The students were aware that their school hours are flexible and adjustable to accommodate their new schedule. Two students made changes in their occupational goals, such that a grade 12 diploma was no longer necessary. They may have determined that the investment of energy needed to graduate was no longer worthwhile.

The three students who stopped attending because their goals had been accomplished are noteworthy. Although they are recorded as dropouts because they did not complete their course(s), they are actually completers. One student, a graduate of high school in Poland, was preparing to write an examination in physiotherapy and wanted help to improve his English writing skills. His goal never was to complete a course or graduate but, statistically, he appears as a dropout. Another sought to improve her self-confidence in writing and self-esteem as a learner in general. She spoke very positively of the school and moved on to pursue her goals at a community college, having fulfilled her purpose for attending Invergarry. A third student, an employee at Revenue Canada, wanted to review accounting principles. Although she also did not complete the Accounting 12 course, she left the school satisfied that her goals were fulfilled.

Demographic statistics assembled on all of the students contacted for this study yielded the results reported in Table 3. Some unexpected results were found. Contrary to the findings of other researchers, (Anderson and Darkenwald, 1979; Boshier, 1973) there are no significant differences between the two groups with respect to age or highest grade completed. The second statistic, highest grade completed, is elevated, however, due to a number of
students who completed grade 12 in other countries and are studying at
Invergarry to improve their English or fulfill prerequisites for other
institutions. There is also little difference between the groups in terms of the
number of courses required for graduation. The only significant difference
between the groups is the number of courses completed prior to the
questionnaire. Dropouts, apparently, decide to discontinue their studies
relatively early in their program.

Table 3: Demographic Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Persisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>30.2 years</td>
<td>30.0 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest grade completed before attending Invergarry</td>
<td>10.4 years</td>
<td>10.5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of courses needed to graduate</td>
<td>4.7 courses</td>
<td>5.4 courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of courses completed at Invergarry prior to questionnaire</td>
<td>0.4 courses</td>
<td>2.0 courses</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All results reported are mean values.

The data obtained directly from the students is organized into three
categories: institutional, dispositional and situational. Results within each
category are clustered into themes.
Learning Together or Alone

School is by definition a social environment. Learning and personal development is enhanced when students work together. Group interaction in the ABE classroom serves many objectives. A small, supportive group, for example, can offer an informal setting for oral expression, team building, critical thinking, decision making and the development of self-respect, trust, responsibility, confidence, feelings of accomplishment, initiative and poise. While the program operates with the majority of students working on an individual basis, the following two questions were designed to assess their attitudes and dispositions toward learning with others.

Table 4: Working With Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 1. The students at Invergarry are generally friendly.</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisters</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 7. Working with other students helps me to understand the course material.</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisters</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There was unanimous agreement among both groups surveyed that Invergarry students are generally friendly. The interviews, with one exception, also supported this view. The exception was a comment that some
students seemed to form a closed, tight group to which others were not invited.

There was, however, considerable variation in response to the question about working with others. A large proportion of the dropouts (32 percent) responded that the question did not apply, indicating that they chose to work alone even when opportunities for group interaction were available. If the 20 percent of dropouts who did not agree with the statement are added, we have 52 percent of dropouts not benefitting from the opportunity for interaction with other learners. This differs significantly from the persisters, 80 percent of whom agree that working with other students is helpful to their learning.

Another point of view, however, was expressed by a persister on the written questionnaire. The results in Table 4 indicate that 20 percent of persisters do not derive benefit from working with others. The following comment may represent that group:

I personally do not socialize. I tend to come to school to do my work. I find that being too overly social tends to distract from my studies. My goals and my own need to show myself that I can follow through has been my impetus to continue, especially when I felt that it was taking so long to finish. I found Invergarry staff to be encouraging and caring. (SP#2)

This student demonstrates that it is possible and legitimate to work independently and not be lonely. The school is organized to give students this choice and this student obviously appreciates that freedom. During the interviews, two persisters echoed this view, saying that they avoided the school on days when potluck lunches were organized because it distracted them from their main focus.

Notwithstanding the above, 100 percent of the interview participants spoke positively of the value of learning with peers. This is not to say that
they supported social conversation but that they recognized value in forming groups to talk about their courses.

I know I had problems with some questions and I'd ask for help and a teacher would help me and then they'd leave and I wouldn't really understand it. But I kind of got it and then I'd ask another student and they'd be able to explain it how I would understand it. They would get it and say, "Well, this is what they were trying to tell you." That's helpful that they could say it on my level. (ID#6)

I would like to respond to the stories and novels in English 12 by talking about them with other students. I know that [names instructor] has a Wednesday morning group. I would go if I could. But I would also have to be careful that all this talk about the stories, etc. would not prevent me from getting my work done. I think an English 12 group would be helpful to me. (IP#2)

When asked to make suggestions to improve the program, a majority (62 percent) of survey respondents suggested that group instruction to supplement the self-paced aspect of the course would be of benefit to them.

2. Self-Pacing and Individual Instruction

Tables 5 and 6 report on two questions that sought comments on two features of the Invergarry program that simultaneously are the biggest attractions and most contentious: self-pacing and individual instruction. Many students attend Invergarry because of these features and, as Table 2 indicated, many students also withdraw because of them.

Eighty-four per cent of the persisters found the self-paced format suitable, compared to only 52 percent of the dropouts. Further, 17 percent of dropouts strongly disagreed that the self-paced format was manageable, compared to 0 percent of the persisters. For the 9 percent of dropouts who responded "Not Applicable", one said that she went to school in Hong Kong and could not compare self-pacing to a regular classroom as the question asks. Two
other respondents said that it depended on the course. If the course maintained interest, the self-pacing was more successful. Without interest, a structured format would be a minimum requirement to expect persistence. Many of the dropouts made comments in response to question #4:

I’m used to deadlines, so I’m going to Night School for that reason. (SD#1)

It was hard to maintain a focus. Pressure needed to be there for me to complete my goals. (SD#9)

Structure as well as group interaction are needed to help you move along. (SD#11)

... needed a teacher to push you. (SD#14)

It was too easy to procrastinate. (SD#24)

... preferred lecture format. (SD#22)

The interviews yielded numerous opinions on the subject of self-pacing. In three of the four interviews with dropouts, self-pacing was a direct contributor to the decision to withdraw. The following exchange is indicative of these discussions:

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Table 5: Self-Pacing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 4. Compared to a regular high school classroom, I found that the 'self-pacing' of courses at Invergarry was easy to manage.</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>NA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisters</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ID#7: I think that if I had to take it at a certain time [the final exam], I probably would’ve done it, but it [the school] was very lax about that.

Interviewer:
Too lax, would you say?

ID#7: Yeah, for me.

Interviewer:
What would you say then about our program here?

ID#7: I think it’s really good but I think some people need more structure in their learning. I think they need a little more of a push. I know you do that, it’s all very open, working at your own pace, but I think some people need that, a little more structure. If they have an assignment due, people can go on one assignment for six months. I think some people need that. A lot of people want to do things but they just don’t do them. They just don’t have it inside themselves to do it. And maybe if they have a little push then they can get it done.

While all students recognized value in the self-paced model, most recommended modifications that would apply some pressure and limitations to them.Persisters saw the need for this as much as dropouts, the difference being that persisters were more successful at applying pressure to themselves. Modifications that were suggested included having the students keep a record of their own progress and reviewing these with their teacher at certain intervals. Not only would this make students more accountable for their time spent but would also “increase the dialogue between the teacher and the student about what they are doing and cause both sides to problem-solve about why they are going slow, perhaps, and then come up with some solutions.” (ID#5) An improvement like this, said one dropout, would likely have made the difference between completing and interrupting his studies. Another suggestion was the provision of a recommended schedule, allowing
the students to pace themselves at a certain rate in order to finish the course within a desired time period.

While there is certainly room for improvement in the self-paced model, many students pointed to its strengths:

... the teachers here make me feel comfortable. If I don't understand I can ask again and again until I do understand it and I'm so relieved that I finally do understand it and it wasn't so hard after all. So now I don't feel uncomfortable asking questions. More so because it's unstructured. If it was structured I'd have a harder time, with many other students waiting to go ahead. But now I'm doing all of the questions, all of the book, and I think I probably have a deeper understanding than the others [in a structured program]. (IP#4)

For me, in my situation, the greatest strength of Invergarry is the fact that you can go at your own pace. For me, that's what it is because if I was in a structured program, I'd probably be bored to death. I'd want to go faster. (IP#3)

When a student's progress is self-paced, it is likely that he or she will work alone. The next question was intended to determine to what extent students were satisfied with independent learning.

Table 6: Independent Learning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 5. With the independent courses at Invergarry, I found that learning was a lonely experience.</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisters</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6 indicates that 72 percent of dropouts and 76 percent ofPersisters did not find independent learning a lonely experience. There is a very active social element within the school and even though students may not work...
with others on the same course, there is abundant conversation and interaction between students. Further, students have the option of working alone or finding someone else on the same course to work with. For some students, not knowing others in the same course was a barrier, leading to the suggestion that, when oriented to the course, they be introduced to another student in that course. Although the majority of students did not find Invergarry a lonely place, but instead a very friendly place, many students recommended tutorial groups to help them with their courses. The following exchange provides some rationale for this recommendation:

Int: Let me just summarize. You’re saying it’s important to have a group of friends, people you’re comfortable with. In your case it would’ve been more helpful if they were in similar courses to you. Can you think of any ways that we could change how the school operates to encourage that to happen?

ID#5: Like, maybe, course-peer work groups, like people who were having trouble in Algebra 11, not necessarily to have an instructor present at this group but say, would get together and all sit around for half an hour and talk about what’s going on with their specific course and maybe that would help. For example, people who are just getting started in the course would get help from people who are farther along in it. Just half an hour everyday, all the Algebra 11 students come in here and chew the fat about things, maybe there’s a common problem that an instructor could help with. That would’ve helped me.

While the social component of school is invaluable, the tendency toward socializing can be a distraction. Students have complained that, “the noise level was too high. I couldn’t concentrate.” (SD#22) Another student objected that she had to spend money on daycare so she could come to school

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2Int: Interviewer
and, once there, was unable to get work done. She did not want to offend anyone by saying, “Please leave me alone,” so consequently, felt unable to use her time productively. (IP#2) One of the persisters was quite direct about how he felt the school should deal with the problem of students who oversocialize:

You get some groups of people together at tables that are a social group. Treat ‘em a little bit like kids and separate them. They need that. A lot of times, that’s all they do all day long. They don’t get anything done. It’s just buzzin’ all the time. (IP#3)

And later in the same interview:

That’s right. Treat them like children. Get on their case a bit. [Mimicking a teacher:] “This has been going on too long. You guys sit here three days a week and socialize and maybe get an hour of work a day done, if that, of quality work. So, what are you working at now? Here’s my expectations for next week, you should be this far along. If you’re not, well, there’s a problem. What have you accomplished in the past week?” And if they can’t show you anything, maybe this is not the right environment for them. (IP#3)

Self-pacing, according to the students, should continue to be an option because it provides them the opportunity to be autonomous with regard to their learning, something that has likely never been offered to them before. Autonomy allows them to adjust their pace to accommodate the need for deeper understanding of the subject material or to meet the demands of their situation. Students are also asking, however, that teachers help them manage this autonomy. Several suggestions were made to help students maintain a steady pace.

Relevance and Interest

Course relevance, or the extent to which a course is congruent with student needs and objectives, was referred to in Chapter Two as one of the
major determinants of persistence. Students are more likely to persist when they have clear or concrete goals, when their goals or expectations are capable of being satisfied by a particular educational experience, and when they perceive the learning experience to be instrumental in helping them satisfy their needs or objectives (Darkenwald, 1981). The following two questions, summarized in Table 7, sought to understand the students' assessment of the relevance and interest level of their courses.

Table 7: Relevance and Interest of Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 2. My course(s) are useful and relevant to my future goals.</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisters</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 3. In general, I would say my courses at Invergarry were interesting.</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisters</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An overwhelming number of students (84 - 87 percent) found their courses relevant to future goals, with little variation between dropouts and persisters. This high degree of relevance seems surprising. Further, an astounding 93 percent of persisters and 76 percent of dropouts found their courses interesting. As the following exchange indicates, the interviews were an opportunity to find some explanation for such a high degree of satisfaction with the courses.

IP#4: Before, schoolwork was work, and I didn’t understand it and I saw it as boring. But now that I’m older and it’s information, I’m valuing it, it opens doors. People ask me a question and I can do it now. How long something is,
or, even about Chemistry, I know the elements now, which before I didn’t know.

Int: So even dry boring school subjects like chemistry and biology and algebra can be interesting?

IP#4: Yeah, tissues and photosynthesis, it’s opening doors, it’s so neat. I want to tell other people about it.

There were many other comments from interviews on this topic. Courses were considered high in interest and relevance for the following reasons:

- Students, working at their own pace, could delve deeper into content areas that interested them.
- When students are rewarded with high marks on tests or assignments, their interest is encouraged, increasing their motivation to continue.
- Courses are viewed as relevant because they are recognized as prerequisites for a subsequent program at a post-secondary institution, leading to a chosen career.
- When it is perceived that the course is relevant to a chosen career, the interest is higher.

A closer examination of Table 7 reveals important degrees of difference between dropouts and persisters. Although the aggregate totals are similar, significantly more persisters (31 percent) strongly agreed that their courses were relevant and interesting than did the dropouts (12 percent). This is not surprising when considered in light of the previous finding, that persistence in a self-paced format is more likely when interest is high.

The significant correlation between goal clarity, relevance and persistence was described in Chapter Two. It is interesting to note that a
student may find the course relevant but the instructional methods unsuccessful, therefore unable to meet his/her objective, leading to withdrawal. Students were also asked about their educational and career goals. These will be reported in a later section of this chapter.

Instructors

Instructors are the key people who are able to facilitate academic and social integration into the school. Not only must they know their subject material and be able to communicate with confidence, enthusiasm and effectiveness, instructors should also be seen by adult learners as interested in more than the student's subject performance. Question 6, summarized in Table 8, was intended to determine student perceptions about Invergarry instructors.

Table 8: About Instructors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 6. My instructor(s) do whatever possible to help me be successful.</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dropouts</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persisters</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The instructors at Invergarry obviously are appreciated by their students for their efforts to help them. An overwhelming number of persisters and dropouts affirmed their work. Many respondents made specific comments about their teachers such as:

[Teacher A] was always willing to help, even staying late [at night] until I got it. (SD#18)
[Teacher B] was very good. He always spent time to help me understand. (SD#21)

[Teacher C] is an excellent teacher. She gave me totally honest responses by always telling me directly what I needed to know. It would be a pleasure to work with her again." (SD#27)

Teachers here are definitely concerned with more than the academic needs of the students. . . . I think most of the students here don't mind approaching a teacher and telling them about it [personal problems]" (IP#3)

The teachers try really hard to help us. . . . The teachers are all friendly to me and seem to like me. They know what they are doing and I have no complaints about them at all. The teachers here seem to get more enjoyment from their work. It's more of a team here as opposed to a regular high school. I think the teachers here are here because they want to be here. They enjoy it. In a regular high school, it's just a job. (IP#2)

While the majority of respondents were positive, some criticisms were made. Table 8 indicates that 13 percent of dropouts and 12 percent of persisters believe their instructors could do more to help them. One student stated that assignments should be marked and returned more quickly. Another said that her instructor was sometimes unable to answer her questions and did not offer any subsequent follow-up. Other criticisms reflected frustration in having to wait for a teacher's assistance, the desire for tutorial groups and help from the teachers to maintain a reasonable pace for the students.

Once again, while the aggregate results offer similar evaluations of Invergarry instructors, a closer look reveals a distinction between persisters and dropouts. More persisters (46 percent) strongly agree that instructors do whatever possible to help than do dropouts (30 percent). There seems to be a message from dropouts that more could have been done for them. The interviews were an opportunity to confirm this. If any more could be done by
teachers, it would be to provide more structure to help manage the self-paced format. Although a number of students (24 percent of persisters and dropouts) reported frustration with having to wait for help from a teacher, they stressed that they recognized it was not the fault of the teacher.

Not having enough teachers for the number of students was the most difficult part for me. (SP#8)

I found it kind of frustrating if I had problems. The [Mathematics] book is pretty straightforward, it does help explain things, but I'd get stuck a few times and I'd wait for help. It's not the teachers' fault, there's so many students but I'd wait and wait, sometimes for 20 minutes to half an hour and I'd get pretty frustrated. I try to go on but I can't because I don't understand what I'm doing and I'd end up leaving. (ID#8)

Whether the problem was the fault of the teachers or not, having to wait for help is a serious concern for both dropouts and persisters. This point also dominated in the responses to the open-ended question reported in Table 9.

In studying Table 9, the reader is reminded that these are responses to an open-ended question, with no prompts provided, and that the dropouts responded to the question over the telephone, while the persisters wrote their responses on the questionnaire. Also, student recommendations were made elsewhere in the questionnaire, in response to a related question. Therefore, the responses in Table 9 and the percentage attributions do not reflect the overall responses provided by the students.

That both groups placed similarly high emphasis on the need for more teachers is noteworthy. Closely related to this, and also high in emphasis, is the desire for more structure. Students recognize that it is possible to spend too much time on courses and, through this study, have repeatedly asked for help with self-pacing. The request for workshops in study skills and time management seems appropriate. Although the students have
overwhelmingly acknowledged the efforts of instructors to treat them respectfully as individuals, some suggest that teachers would benefit by further training in understanding student self-esteem. All students who offered no suggestions for improvement stated that they were satisfied with the program as it was.

Table 9: Suggestions to Improve the ASSC Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suggestions</th>
<th>Percent of Persisters</th>
<th>Percent of Dropouts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide more instructors to reduce waiting</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more structure i.e., pressure to meet goals set mutually with teachers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offer tutorial groups in more courses</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open the school more than two evenings per week</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manage the classroom environment to reduce noise and socializing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teach study skills/time management</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide teacher workshops on student self-esteem</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more videos to support courses</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide computer support for Accounting 12</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand daycare to include children under 18 months</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No suggestions for improvement</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The survey had two groups of questions. The first set, just reported, referred to institutional practices at Invergarry Learning Centre. The second set probed the students for information about themselves and the situations in which they find themselves.

Dispositional Variables

Dispositional factors include goal clarity and self-esteem. Intelligence, considered an important dispositional factor related to dropout, was not a part of the data collection of this study. However, self-esteem, referring to academic self-esteem, reflects the students' perception of their intelligence.

The literature on dropouts in adult education clearly states that students with career goals are more likely to persist (Garrison, 1985). To investigate this finding with Invergarry students, the two questions in Table 10 were asked.

The data summarized in Table 10 shows little distinction between dropouts and persisters with regard to their reasons for attending school. However, post-high school diploma plans are significantly different. None of the persisters planned to get a job immediately upon graduation, whereas 24 percent of the dropouts did. Many more persisters plan to go on with their education at another institution to qualify for a chosen career. Clearly, persisters have goals that are longer term. These findings were strikingly confirmed by the interviews. Of the four dropouts interviewed, only one had a career goal. And that one person better fits the definition of a persister: she terminated her course at Invergarry and registered at another institution which offered a more traditional, teacher-centered approach to Mathematics, her self-described weakness. She needed Mathematics as a prerequisite to
becoming a teacher. The four persisters interviewed had clearly defined career goals.

### Table 10: Future Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 9. Which of the following is your most important reason for attending school?</th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Persisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Get my high school diploma.</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Improve marks in some courses.</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Take courses required to attend college, university, BCIT, etc.</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q.10. What career plans do you have when you finish at Invergarry?</th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Persisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Get further training at another institution.</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Get a job as</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Not sure.</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This difference between dropouts and persister raises an obvious question: what accounts for the difference in goal clarity between the two groups of students? An assessment of academic self-esteem was the purpose of the next question, which is summarized in Table 11.

An examination of Table 11 reveals that more dropouts (33 percent) claim that it is easy to pass school courses than persisters (23 percent). On the other hand, 50 percent of the persisters state that they can pass most courses
with reasonable work, compared to 29 percent of the dropouts. When these numbers are aggregated, 73 percent of persisters compared to 62 percent of

Table 11: Academic Self-Esteem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 11. Which of the following best describe you as a learner?</th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Persisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Passing courses at school is easy for me.</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. With reasonable work, I can pass most courses.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. I really struggle to pass each course.</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. I’m not confident that I’ll pass the courses I need to.</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Other</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

dropouts believe in their ability to succeed with their courses. Finally, twice as many dropouts “really struggle to pass each course” as do persisters. In attempting to understand the large number of dropouts who state that they can pass courses easily, it is tempting to consider this in light of previous findings that assert that dropouts may not attribute their withdrawal to factors that would reflect on their ability. Overall, these results provide tentative support for the notion that dropouts do not have as much belief in their ability to succeed academically as do persisters. It does not refer to actual ability but to student perceptions of their ability. This ‘academic self-esteem’ is likely the result of many years of feedback from significant people in the lives of the students. Referring to the previous finding, that persisters have longer-term goals, it seems reasonable that those with less belief in their ability to succeed will choose occupations which require less educational preparation.
The interviews, once again, yielded insights on the relationship between a student's academic self-esteem and success in school. All interviews began with the question, "Please tell me about your background in school, and the events which led to your decision to leave school before graduating". Of the fourpersisters, three of them had family situations which were much more discouraging of success in school than encouraging. The fourth was a high school graduate, working at Invergarry to meet entrance requirements for BCIT. And yet all four manifested a belief in themselves and their ability. The following comments from two of the persisters are indicative of this confidence:

And here I am and I'm realizing that I am a slow learner but once I get it I'm pretty smart! I'm not a genius but I'm not stupid like I thought for so many years... I can give myself a pat on the back with every chapter test and feel proud that I'm progressing. I don't have a lot of support from my family because they all say that I should've done that when I was a teenager. (IP#4)

I wanted to be a writer. I wrote some poems in Grade 7 and I thought they were really good but no one else seemed to think so. I told my Mom and she laughed that I would never be a writer, she told me that some day I would grow up and get married and have kids and I was never encouraged to think much about a career... My mom was right. I did get married and have kids. But I do have career goals now. I think I could write a book. I know I could. (IP#2)

These two students had endured a childhood of experiences and repeated messages that conveyed a lack of belief in their ability. Somehow, they discovered that they did have academic potential, which seemed to fuel their motivation to continue learning and prove others wrong. Their success seems assured. Both students have been Invergarry students for 18 months and have successfully completed several courses. The second student, one week after my interview with her, left an abusive situation with her husband.
and took her two children to an emergency shelter. She continues to attend school.

One of the four dropouts is a high school graduate who re-enrolled at another institution to receive more intensive help with Mathematics. Two of the other three dropouts interviewed did not demonstrate confidence in their ability to succeed academically. The following comments illustrate the levels of confidence among dropouts.

The first day of school I remember quite well. I was given a piece of paper and I was told that you’re supposed to fill in whatever you can do, and don’t worry about it, just do it. I took the piece of paper and I put it in my desk. And the teacher said, “Are you finished?”

I said, “Yeah.”

She took the paper and looked at it and said, “There is nothing on it.”

I said, “Yeah.”

She said, “Why didn’t you put anything on it?”

I said, “I can’t do it. Too stupid.” (ID#6)

This theme of feeling stupid, which the student attributes to her mother’s repeated messages, carried on into adulthood and only now, at the age of 28, is the student beginning to come to terms with.

Another former student described a test-anxiety which prevented her from writing the final exam for the course, in spite of having completed all of the course work for Biology 12, a particularly comprehensive course.

With me I think it was fear of taking the exam. I was studying and I would quiz myself and I didn’t know anything. It’s like the information was there but I couldn’t get it out. I know a lot about what I learned. Somebody will mention something and I know it and I’ll tell them about it and I’ll remember it. Especially the things that interested me, I retain that information much better. And then when I’d be quizzing myself I couldn’t get the words out. I’d know what it was but I couldn’t explain it properly. (ID#7)
To summarize this section on dispositional factors, well-defined and realistic career goals are more characteristic of persisters. Dropouts seem to believe that "getting my Grade 12" is a sufficient goal in itself, and that some unspecified job will appear when they have that. There is a possible link between career goals and students' beliefs in their ability to succeed academically and vocationally. The qualitative data indicates that nurturing family backgrounds, leading to healthy self-esteem, are similarly lacking for persisters and dropouts.Persisters, however, have had greater success at casting off the discouraging childhood messages and realizing their own potential.

**Situational Variables**

As reported, adult learners lead hectic, often chaotic, lives. Many events occur which make attendance at school and pursuit of non-immediate goals difficult or impossible. The results of the next two questions, summarized in Table 12, consider non-school responsibilities as a factor in a student's decision to withdraw or persist.

Seventy-four percent of dropouts report that their family roles conflict with their student roles, compared to 50 percent of persisters. Further, persisters receive slightly more support from significant people in their lives than do dropouts. Along with the financial pressures reported in Table 13, these are significant situational factors which contribute to a student’s decision to withdraw or persist.
Table 12: Situational Factors

Q. 12. Which of the following best describe your role as a student and your responsibilities to your family?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Persisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. My responsibilities to my family make it very difficult to be a student.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. My responsibilities to my family make it a little difficult to be a student</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. My responsibilities to my family do not make it difficult to be a student</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Q. 13. Which of the following best describe the amount of support and encouragement you receive from the people who are most important to you?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Persisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. My family/friends are very supportive of me being a student.</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. My family/friends are somewhat supportive.</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. My family/friends are neither supportive nor unsupportive.</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. My family/friends are opposed to me being a student.</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13 reveals that almost twice as many dropouts (50 percent compared to 27 percent) face "major concerns" with finances as do persisters. This finding clearly illustrates a liability that potential dropouts face while pursuing an education. A large number of Invergarry students are single parents, receiving social assistance. The cost for daycare, housing, groceries, transportation, utilities and other living expenses are overwhelming.
Without adequate financial support, persistence with educational goals is unlikely.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Q. 14. While I am a student, adequate financial income is a:</th>
<th>Dropouts</th>
<th>Persisters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Major concern</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Somewhat of a concern</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Not a concern</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Other</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Composite Profiles of a Persister and Dropout**

The results reported represent human experiences. Therefore, they are complex, sometimes contradictory and resistant to statistical distillation. In order to better reflect the dynamic forces involved and to personalize the results described in this chapter, composite descriptions of a dropout and persister were constructed. The profiles illustrate the subtle differences between the two groups and foreshadow aspects of the model described in Chapter Five. The composites, based entirely on data collected from Invergarry students during the study, describe a typical persister, Patricia, and a dropout, Derek.

**Patricia, the Proud Persister**

Patricia grew up as the eldest daughter in a family of three children in a suburb of Winnipeg. As a result of working at two jobs, her mother was tired
and impatient with Patricia when she came home. In grade four, Patricia recalls writing a poem that she was very proud of. When she came home, showed it to her mother, and announced that she would like to be a writer some day, her mother replied, “Forget that idea. You’ll have kids, and be stuck at home forever”.

Patricia did not find a home at school either. In her primary years, she remembers losing the courage to ask questions because teachers would respond with, “What’s wrong with you when everyone else gets it? Must I always explain things twice?” Patricia moved her seat to the back of the room where she could sit and daydream all day about things like being an actress. She never imagined herself as a doctor or in some other professional career. She did not believe she could reach that high.

In high school, Patricia’s peer group became the crowd that got into drugs, skipping out and sex. Her parents divorced when she was in grade 9 and her marks in school were dismal. She wanted to finish high school though, so she put herself into a private girls’ school, thinking that if she got away from guys she would have a chance to improve her grades. Her parents did not support the idea but she thought it was her only hope. Her time at the private school was short. Patricia found she could not function in the strict Catholic system. The teachers embarrassed her in front of her classmates and made her feel more stupid then ever. She went back to the public school system and eventually finished grade 11. She became seriously involved in drugs and alcohol during this period, and, in order to escape an abusive boyfriend, moved to Vancouver and sought help from a drug and alcohol program. During the next six years, while working in several different offices and becoming pregnant, Patricia confirmed what she already knew: she needed her grade 12 in order to satisfy her occupational goal of becoming a
writer. After getting married and adjusting to life with a new baby, Patricia registered at Invergarry Learning Centre.

Her marriage dissolved after two years and now, as a single parent, is forced to rely on social assistance for financial support. Because Patricia completed grade eleven, she only needed to complete four grade twelve course to qualify for an adult graduation diploma. She found the school accepting of her and willing to give her all the time she needed to master concepts which had eluded her in the past. Although for years she had been led to believe that she was stupid, she is now disproving that message. Deep inside she always knew the truth. When asked why she kept pushing at completing her grade 12 over so many obstacles, she replied, “I had to prove to them all that I could do it”.

At Invergarry, Patricia thrives on the self-paced format. She recognizes that she spends more time on a course this way, but justifies that by stating that she is able to understand the course material in greater depth. Unlike her previous school experiences, she is not afraid to ask one of the instructors for help and has never been made to feel stupid. She works hard at home and when she is at school. In fact, she is very careful about where she sits because she knows that she cannot afford the time to socialize. She does value being with others, however. She can usually be found in one of the small classrooms, sitting with a friend who is working on the same course. They help each other and provide encouragement.

At the age of 28, Patricia finds her courses opening a new world to her. She delights in Literature 12 because she is discovering ideas and writing styles that she never knew existed. As a future writer herself, Patricia finds this course invaluable. She has also taken Law 12, Biology 12, and English 12.
Patricia has taken full advantage of the services offered by the school. She has completed two non-credit courses: Introduction to Computers and Public Speaking. She also spent several sessions with the school counsellors, where she received help adjusting to single parenthood.

By the time Patricia graduates, she will have studied at Invergarry for two years. Many adults respond that this is too large a period of time to devote to their education. Patricia's growing sense of self-worth, supported by the positive reinforcement of success at school, helped her to maintain her focus during this period. Further, Patricia knows where she is going when she completes her Grade 12. She is on the wait list for a diploma program in creative writing at a local community college. After that, she hopes to write for a newspaper while she works on publishing her first book.

Aside from completing her courses, Patricia's biggest challenge at the present time is managing to provide for her son, who is now four years old. Finances are a constant pressure, and her ex-husband, who is unemployed due to a back injury, provides no support. Her two biggest fears are surviving in the "real world of a community college" and finding for her son, who starts kindergarten next year, a classroom setting that is more positive than those of her childhood.

Derek, the Discouraged Drywaller

Derek's elementary school years were not memorable. No teacher or event stands out as being significant. He has many memories of his family, however. His father left home when he was five. A series of male adults passed through his family for the next few years. His mother eventually remarried and Derek remembers being given, although he was not ready for it, a box of condoms by his stepfather for his thirteenth birthday. By the time
he reached grade 9, school was almost exclusively a place for socializing. The
effect of his half-hearted efforts in elementary school caught up to him as he
struggled with high school English and Math. Marks plummeted as
homework went undone and days of school were missed. Phone calls home
from school administrators had little effect. Derek passed grade 9 with the
help of teachers who did not want to see him repeat their classes. In Grade 10,
after being suspended from school for truancy, Derek got a job as a drywall
assistant. This worked out well and when his employer offered him full time
work, the pull of the income easily outweighed the senseless struggle at
school. Eight years and three cars later, Derek was ready to move on from the
construction trade and decided it was time to complete his Grade 12.

Still working part-time as a drywaller, Derek was initially attracted to
Invergarry Learning Centre because of its flexible schedule. Derek enrolled in
Mathematics 10 and Communications 11.

Invergarry did feel like a different sort of school. The teachers, all on a
first name basis, were friendly and approachable. They seemed to care more
about him personally than they did for his marks on tests and assignments.
Derek appreciated the freedom, autonomy and respect because he liked to be
treated as an adult. The self-paced nature of the courses allowed time to really
understand concepts. Students at the school seemed friendly but Derek chose
to work alone. He knew that his interests were different from the average
person and he did not expect to find anyone he could relate to.

Although his intentions were good, progress in his courses soon began to
slow down. Mathematics 10 was a potent reminder of his history of weakness
in that subject so Communications 11 received most of his attention. Afraid
the result of his efforts might not be considered good enough for a grade 11
course, Derek asked for an inordinate amount of help from the teachers.
They were encouraging when giving feedback, but it was clear that Derek had a lot of work to do before completing this course. It became easy not to get any schoolwork done at home as there were too many distractions there. Besides, he told his employer he was available to work when needed and this always took priority. The teachers seemed very busy and he often had to wait for help. Derek was surprised when he realized that he had not completed an assignment for three weeks and then he began to think, “I’ve got eight courses to do. I’m never going to get through all of this!”

Derek thought about going to a community college after grade 12, entering a social work program, and perhaps becoming a youth worker or probation officer. He reasoned that working for the government is secure and has reasonable benefits. He could not see how Mathematics would help him in those pursuits. He enjoyed reading and writing but the specific novels and topics offered in the Communications course did not appeal to his interests. He did not ask his instructor about alternatives because he anticipated no room for flexibility. Although these two courses were among the eight he needed to graduate, his interest in them was diminishing.

Derek knew he was drifting towards an inevitable result. There was always the need for more money and his boss seemed to call him more than expected. If he quit school now, when would he get back to his studies so he could fulfill his dream of working with young people? Did he have the ability to pass these courses and did he have the determination and discipline to push him through? These are hard questions to answer. The temptation was to drift along and let circumstance take over, never really making a decision. A few weeks later, one of Derek’s teachers called him to inquire about his absence. Derek’s roommate told her that he had quit because he needed extra money.
Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the investigation of dropout rates among adult students at Invergarry Learning Centre. The results were organized into institutional, dispositional and situational categories. The chapter concluded with composite profiles of a persister and a dropout, based on the findings presented.

In contrast to the findings of researchers (Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979; Boshier, 1973), there is a surprising lack of difference between persisters and dropouts in terms of age, number of years in school and number of courses required for completion of goals. As the composites show, students from both groups experience backgrounds that are not encouraging of education or the development of a healthy self-esteem.

From an institutional point of view, self-pacing is a major issue that influences dropout decisions. While students value and need the flexibility it affords, most students confess weakness when it comes to managing one's own time and activities. Students are requesting that teachers help them in this endeavor by providing structure in the form of tutorial groups, individual goal setting and accountability for their time. A second major concern students are expressing is the need to wait for busy teachers who are not as available as preferred. In spite of this, students offered extremely positive and appreciative comments about the service provided by Invergarry instructors.

When dispositional factors are considered, some differences between the two groups are apparent. Persisters at Invergarry have somewhat stronger beliefs in their own ability to succeed academically. Persisters also have much more clearly defined career goals.
The situational factors facing dropouts seem to be more burdensome than on persisters. Dropouts have more anxiety about finances, less support from significant people in their lives and more pressure in terms of family roles and responsibilities.

The composite descriptions illustrate two major findings of this study. One is that no single factor accounts for the decision to withdraw or persist. Instead, the decision is a result of the accumulation of many factors, both positive and negative, that result in a net force that determines whether persistence is possible.

The second finding is the nature of the differences between the two groups. Contrary to some research findings, differences are diminutive. Their significance becomes apparent only after all factors are added together, resulting in a net pressure that leads a student to a decision to withdraw or persist.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this final chapter, the findings of the study are combined with aspects of the research reviewed in Chapter Two to offer a theoretical understanding of dropout behaviour. This is followed by recommendations to the staff of Invergarry Learning Centre to increase retention rates at that institution.

Theoretical Considerations

As we saw in Chapter Two, much of the previous research has attempted to explain dropout by identifying variables associated with the student or the institution. This approach offers a limited view of the problem as it looks for a solution along a single dimension. Chapter Two also considered four models, each of which purports to explain why students drop out by showing how withdrawal is related to different factors. Finn (1989) believes that if the student identifies with the goals of the school, participation and persistence will follow. The concept of identification is related to integration, as described by Tinto (1975). Tinto believes that if a student becomes socially and academically integrated into the institution, persistence is likely. Boshier’s (1973) congruence construct is similar. He states that if there are no major discrepancies (incongruencies) between students and their perception of the school, teachers and peers, persistence will occur. Finally, Rubenson (1978) considers the various elements in a student’s perceived situation, and predicts a degree of student motivation that will ensure completion of goals. Each of these models attempts to incorporate the factors that are relevant in the lives of students and show how they combine to result in persistence or dropout. Each theory relies heavily on academic self-esteem, or the student’s
expectation of success in the institution. The results of this study support the view of these theorists that dropout cannot be explained by discrete variables but that a student’s decision to withdraw or persist is a result of a unique combination of many positive and negative interacting forces.

These forces can be conceptualized in a general way as shown in Figure 2, which illustrates the institutional, situational and dispositional factors that students identified as relevant to the Invergarry context. In other contexts, additional factors may be relevant. The factors are listed in groups only to provide a general orientation to the model. When an individual student is considered, the factors are located separately on the balance below the circles. If the factor is a negative force, such as lack of child care, this would be located on the left, or negative side of the balance. Positive factors, such as a supportive and encouraging family, would exert positive pressure and be located on the right hand side of the balance. The stronger the pressure exerted by a factor, the closer to the end of the balance will be its location. When all of the factors have been located, the net effect is either positive or negative. This net result, of all the various factors combined, would predict persistence or dropout. This is shown graphically, as we will see when the composite profiles developed in Chapter Four are analyzed, by the weighting of the balance to the right (positive) or left (negative) side.

The arrows in Figure 2 reflect the interactions between factors. For example, if an employer requires that the student work a variable shift, and the school does not have the flexibility in scheduling to accommodate this, there is a conflict between a situational and institutional factor. In this predicament, the pressure would be negative and the student is more likely to withdraw. On the other hand, if the school has flexible scheduling, the negative force of the shiftwork is offset by the flexibility offered by the school.
The usefulness of the model is that it is adaptable to reflect the uniqueness of each student's situation. It shows which factors are most significant and allows for movement of factors along the balance, as conditions change. Further, the model illustrates the assertion that dropout is not caused by a single variable or set of variables. The degree of weighting on one side or the other also indicates the strength of the position. For example, a student whose factors are heavily weighted to the positive side is likely to continue to persist when adversity occurs because of the resilience conferred by the positive weighting. Conversely, a student who has an over-abundance
of negative factors would not likely persist without a number of changes. A student whose positive and negative factors are so even that the balance is horizontal is in a precarious position. A seemingly minor event, such as frustration with a particular assignment, may tip the balance to the side of withdrawal. The “persistence threshold” on the model refers to this horizontal position. When the factors exert sufficient force on the balance to cause a tilt to the negative side, the threshold is crossed and the possibility of withdrawal is increased.

As mentioned, the factors in Figure 2 are those identified by the study as being relevant to the Invergarry context. Self-paced learning and teacher availability emerged from the study as the most contentious institutional factors influencing dropout decisions. The classroom environment, relevance and interest of courses, and teacher-student relationships are other factors, under the control of the school, identified as important to students.

The six situational factors included in Figure 2 also reflect the lives of the Invergarry student population, as reported in the surveys and interviews. The dispositional factors, self-esteem, goal clarity and intelligence level, were described in the literature review as being of significant influence to students when they decide to persist or dropout. This was confirmed by the data collected, although no data was collected on student intelligence levels.

Differences between dropouts and persisters are subtle, according to the results of this study. A profile of a typical dropout could have been that of a persister and vice versa. While dropouts or persisters are potentially subject to the same pressures but to varying intensities, differences, in many cases, are only a matter of degree. Chapter Four reported that overall responses to many questions were similar, with differences between dropouts and persisters occurring in degrees. For example, as Table 8 points out, 87 percent
of dropouts and 86 percent of persisters agree or strongly agree that Invergarry teachers do whatever possible to help them be successful. The difference between the two groups is more noticeable, however, when the figures are not aggregated. Thirty percent of dropouts strongly agree with the statement compared to 46 percent of persisters. Although both groups are overwhelmingly positive in responding to the statement about teachers, there is clearly a difference between them. Similar patterns are found in student responses regarding working with peers (Tables 4 and 6), relevance and interest of courses (Table 7), situational factors (Table 12), and financial pressures (Table 13). Table 3 (demographic profiles) offers further support for this point by its strikingly similar characteristics between the two groups. These 'degrees of difference' are considered significant because, when looked at with all of the other positive and negative forces pressing on students, minor differences could accumulate to shift the balance of factors toward persistence or withdrawal.

The relationships between factors as illustrated in Figure 2 suggest that there are no inherent factors that predict dropout or persistence, although some factors, such as self-esteem, seem to have a stronger influence than others. The four models described in Chapter Two contend that a healthy self-esteem is an essential characteristic for persistence to occur. If this were true, then a person with low self-esteem could not be educated. While such a person has a formidable handicap, it can be overcome if it is counter-balanced with enough positive forces. The following examples, based on the composite profiles developed in Chapter Four, serve to illustrate these points.

As we saw, Patricia exhibits a belief in her ability to be successful, in spite of a very negative and discouraging background, both at home and at school. It is important to her to prove to herself and her family that she can succeed.
Further, she is determined to be a good provider for her son and is concerned that without some sort of career, her retirement income will be dismal. She has occupational goals which are clear and realistic. Patricia's self-esteem and clear goals are positive forces exerting a significant influence. In Figure 3, they are placed near the end of the balance, where their strength has the greatest force. Weaker forces are placed near the centre.

Figure 3: Patricia's Positive Situation

Patricia works well in the Invergarry environment so the institutional factors become positives. She is able to make self-pacing work for her, finds her courses high in relevance and interest because they relate to her goals, and enjoys excellent rapport with the instructional staff. Because she is focused on
her goals, socializing is a low priority for her but she does have students with whom she works positively on her courses.

Patricia’s personal situation presents factors which are negative forces. Finances are secure because she is supported by social assistance. She does not receive support from her ex-husband. The dependency on social assistance, however, is a powerfully negative factor for two reasons: the financial support is at minimal levels, and the stigma attached to being ‘on welfare’ is a potent threat to her self-esteem. She has a good child care arrangement, which is also paid for by social services, but when her son is sick, she must stay home with him. Her family is in Ontario and cannot help her in such situations. In terms of support and encouragement, she receives that only from her teachers, as her parents doubt her ability and her ex-husband is indifferent. As a single mother, Patricia carries all the responsibilities of running a home, living with the loneliness and knowledge that her marriage failed and dealing with the stress of joint custody of her child. Transportation is occasionally a difficulty as she has an older, unreliable vehicle. When necessary, her landlord is able to repair minor problems and keep her mobile.

The balance in Figure 3 is weighted toward the positive side, well beyond the persistence threshold. This position indicates a ‘reserve’, or resilience, allowing a student to deal with crises. When events occur that threaten to upset the balance for Patricia, she seems to have inner resources with which to deal with them, confirming that her positive factors outweigh the negative ones. For example, a recent low mark on a Mathematics test meant not that she was “stupid”, as she earlier would have believed, but that she needed more review with a particular concept she was having difficulty with. Her instructor assisted her and, importantly, Patricia knew that, with help, she could master it. Her strong self-esteem provided the resilience to absorb a
negative event which, for another student, may have been crucial. A major upset occurred when Patricia learned that she was number 150 on the wait list to begin her program at a local college. The program only accepts 30 people per year. The next day, Patricia had collected all of the college calendars available so that she could begin applying at other institutions. Her belief in herself, based on success as an adult, her clear goals, and considerable investment already in the program allowed her to accept this news and maintain her balance.

It is important to note that the location of factors on the balance are not static. They move over time as conditions change. For example, after her negative educational background, Patricia came to Invergarry unsure of herself and her ability to be successful. As most students do, she was taking a very large risk. At that point, her self-esteem was a negative force, although because she was tentative about it, its position would have been near the centre. Gradually, as her Invergarry experiences provided repeated confirmations about her tentative beliefs in herself, self-esteem, along with other factors that worked out well for her, moved to the positive end of the balance. Unfortunately, the same adjustment did not occur in Derek’s case.

Derek experienced a similarly unsupportive background. He was earning good money as a drywaller but no longer enjoyed the work and believed that grade 12 was necessary to “get a decent job”. Derek’s memories of his difficulty in high school had not faded during his eight year absence. At Invergarry, he was afraid to submit work for fear that it would not be acceptable. Derek’s lack of self-esteem was compounded by his vague ideas of a career. Being unsure of his goal, he lacked strong motivation to persist. When Derek began work on his courses, he responded well to the idea of self-paced learning. He quickly learned, however, that if he didn’t meet a
deadline, there was no consequence. It became very easy to substitute his study time for other things, when there was no one to be accountable to. Due to Derek's low self-confidence, he depended greatly on teachers to help him with each step. He seemed unwilling to write more than a paragraph without confirmation from a teacher that his work was satisfactory. His instructors, however, believed that responding to his every request would only reinforce his dependency. Frustration grew for Derek as he found he was waiting too much. Derek began to wonder if the teachers did not want to help him. Because he saw himself as different from other students, he was not willing to risk working with a peer, and receive further negative evaluation. He did

Figure 4: Derek’s Negative Situation
enjoy his Communications 11 course but would have preferred the opportunity for a more individualized selection of curricular activities that reflected his interests. Derek, it seems, had a number of institutional and dispositional factors that became negative forces.

Because Derek continued part time in his job, he was able to afford an apartment and car. He had no money saved, however, so maintaining his previous life style on less income was difficult. Although he had no family responsibilities to fulfill, he also had no family to offer support or encouragement. His primary relationship, a girlfriend who worked as an office clerk, was a positive factor as she supported his decision to get his grade 12. Not having graduated herself, however, she was unable to offer specific help or encouragement with assignments.

When Derek took the risk of returning to school, he was reminded of his past failures, faltering belief in himself, and uncertainty about what a rewarding career choice for him would be. These are very negative forces, attacking the core of who he is, and requiring considerable positive forces to balance them. As it turned out, the situational and institutional factors that worked against him became the explanation for his dropout, but they were not the cause. Had he received more encouragement for his efforts at school, and counselling with regard to career goals and time management, he may have begun to develop enough belief in himself to persevere, as Patricia did. The negative self-esteem could have shifted to the positive side of the balance. If his over-dependency had been openly talked about, so that he was included in the solution, not the object of it, his perceived relationship with his instructors might not have eroded. Derek’s risk turned out to be a negative experience for him so he retreated to the safety of the world he knew.
Derek responded, as his reason for dropping out, that he needed more money. A closer examination confirms Darkenwald’s (1981) assertion that situational factors are not the ‘cause’ of dropout but rather, a factor that when combined with others, result in enough negative pressure to promote dropout.

To summarize, this study has added to the theoretical understandings of dropout provided by previous research in the following ways. Dropout is caused by a complex interaction of many variables, influenced by the learner’s dispositional factors, situation and the context of the school. There is no single factor, or set of factors, in whose absence, dropout can be predicted. The degree of intensity of the various factors, whether positive or negative, is uniquely related to the attributes brought by students and their perceptions of the context. The intensity of the factors determine their power to influence a decision and if the accumulation of positives outweigh the negatives, persistence can be expected. The factors are not static, however, and perceptive intervention by attentive teachers can result in a shift of some factors to increase the likelihood that the overall force on the balance is positive. This is a departure from the implications of much previous research which suggests that dropouts possess stable, enduring characteristics which predict withdrawal. This approach places the major responsibility for dropout on the students. While the students must carry a share of the responsibility for dropping out, educational institutions must also aggressively consider their role in the dropout situation by continuously assessing and adjusting the congruency of their services to the context of the students.
In the next section, I offer a number of specific recommendations to the school designed to encourage the shifting of various factors to the side of persistence.

Implications for Invergarry Learning Centre

The findings above help us to understand a part of a teacher’s role in working with Invergarry students. Teachers can play a very active part in influencing the movement of factors to the positive side of the balance. To increase retention rates, teachers must reach out to students before they arrive at the point of giving up. Considering the unique population the school serves, it is vital that teachers continually assess the students’ perceptions of their success and respond to their needs.

The following recommendations reflect the themes that were apparent in my surveys and discussions with the students as well as the findings of other researchers into the problem of adult dropout. In order to improve opportunities for students to fulfill their goals at Invergarry, it is recommended that the staff:

1. provide more structure within the self-paced format;
2. provide comprehensive orientation and monitoring for new students;
3. teach study skills and time management;
4. increase course relevancy and interest;
5. contact non-attending students;
6. find ways to build student self-esteem;
7. promote social integration.

1. Provide More Structure Within the Self-Paced Format

Self-pacing allows students to have flexibility and autonomy with regard to their studies. Self-pacing, however, does not lead to success for all learners.
Lack of structure and teacher attention are the major factors reported by students that led them to a withdrawal decision. These factors are also the greatest complaints of persisters (Table 9). One could argue that a traditional classroom organization makes more efficient use of a teacher’s time, reducing the demand for more teacher attention. This arrangement also would provide the structure that many students are asking for. But would this work with the unique population that the school serves?

Due to the complexity in the lives of Invergarry students, many do not attend consistently. What would happen to them in a teacher-paced course if they missed two classes in a row? These are not teenagers who can stay after school to get extra help from the teacher. Because of the demands on adults, many do not even have the luxury of working on their courses at home. Adult students who fall behind would have little or no hope of catching up. Their only option would be to drop out, forfeit their fees, and try again in six months when the course is re-offered. For a student trying to meet an entrance deadline at another institution, this would be devastating. The need for flexibility in programming for adults is confirmed by the research of Jackson-Meyer (1987). It must be remembered that the role of student is secondary for most adults. If barriers interfere excessively with their primary role, dropout is likely.

Many students do not complete secondary school because of difficulties with the traditional school organization. Indeed, British Columbia’s Minister of Education concurs: “We do a less than fully adequate job for the 30 to 40 per cent of students who go directly to the workplace after graduation. The situation is even worse for the 20 to 25 per cent of students who drop out” (Minister of Education Art Charbonneau; cited in Balcom, 1994). Would students who were afraid to ask for help in front of others as a teenager have
the courage to risk a public humiliation as adults? What would happen to students who need several repetitions of a concept and cannot keep up to the pace of the average learner? Invergarry students, as the description in Chapter One portrays, are not typical learners and should not be treated as if they were.

1. (a) Encourage Tutorial Participation

The flexibility, autonomy and safety of the self-paced format can be maintained while providing more structure. This can be accomplished in several ways. First, offering more tutorial groups would provide multiple benefits. Students working together in a group develop productive and gratifying relationships with one another in the context of a course. Instead of a relationship based primarily on social events, students learn about themselves and each other through meaningful discussion of course material. For example, a debate on the merits of the Young Offenders Act in a Communications 11 class is a valuable learning experience on its own, but when two people prepare for and participate in a debate together, it also offers the opportunity for social and academic integration into the school. Finn (1989), Tinto (1975) and Boshier (1972), in their models explaining dropout and persistence, argue that social and academic integration encourages persistence. Martin (1990), in his adaptation of Tinto’s integration model to ABE students, found that graduates of adult programs deepen their commitment to the academic environment over the course of their involvement with it. Student relationships initiated in a tutorial group continue outside of the group. Situations where both parties benefit occurs when students help each other on assignments. Many students commented that the best teachers are other students. A by-product of this bonding may
also be a sense of accountability to one another for attendance and achievement.

Another benefit of tutorial groups is that pacing can be provided within a self-paced format. The instructor is able to assess the students and establish a rate of progress that is matched to the students, not to the school calendar. Students would retain the option of working faster or slower than this pace. Those who need help in addition to that provided by the tutorial group would still have instructors available to them on an individual basis. Students participating in such a group would be able to see themselves progressing through the course, avoiding the sense that they are all alone and "never going to get through all this".

Inconsistent attendance does create frustrating problems for teachers and tutorial group members. These can be diminished, however, in the following ways. First, when students register and are oriented to the course, the tutorial schedule should be made known so that their attendance schedule can incorporate tutorial times. Second, tutorial sessions should consist of activities that are engaging, appropriate to the needs and interest of the group, and relevant to success in the course. Students' commitment to the group will increase when these conditions are met. Finally, tutorial participation will increase when it is a requirement of the course and partial credit is awarded for active participation.

1. (b) Address Rates of Progress Directly

Another way to assist with the shortcomings of self-pacing is to hold regular evaluation sessions between instructors and students. Discussion could revolve around questions such as: What are you learning in the course? Is the course meeting your goals? Is your rate of progress satisfactory?
Are there ways I can help you be more successful? For students who need more structure, informal contracts can be made with the teacher to help the student meet their goals and maintain a certain pace. On subsequent meetings with the student, these goals would be reviewed and adjusted as necessary. A system of record keeping should be established to ensure that all students are involved in this process regularly.

1. (c) Foster a Productive Working Climate

A final recommendation concerning self-pacing also concerns the classroom climate. A number of students commented that it is difficult to get work done at school. While conversation around course content and students helping others is encouraged, socializing in the open area results in unproductive use of time for those engaging in it and serves as a major distraction to others. The consequence is inefficient use of time, leading to lack of progress, and a sense of defeat. The blame is placed on the self-paced learning format. When teachers ignore excessive socializing, with the rationale that these are adults, they are giving tacit approval to non-productive use of time. Students should be reminded that there are places provided for socializing and, out of consideration for others, the open area is not one of them. Students who continue to socialize might be asked to work in a room where social interaction is reduced. Interviews with students who have difficulty making productive use of time may uncover difficulties, such as low self confidence, which socializing allows them to avoid. Working to identify and solve underlying problems may contribute to positive student-teacher relationships and help students to develop productive work habits. Finally, informal contracts may be necessary to help these students reach their goals.
2. Provide Comprehensive Orientation and Monitoring for New Students

There is a need for a comprehensive orientation process for learners at the beginning of their involvement in ABE programs (Jackson-Meyer, 1987). Before a student registers, the program and course(s) should be explained, with an outline of the advantages and disadvantages of self-pacing. The purpose is to ensure that there is a match between the goals, expectations and learning style of the student and the features of the program.

Further, a system should be developed to monitor new students. The first weeks at the school are the most influential in forming the students' perception of their likelihood of success. Efforts need to be made to ensure that new students know who to ask for help, understand the expectations of their course, and are feeling comfortable within the program. Matching new students with more experienced students may help to orient them to the school and, by offering a peer contact, help them to feel that they fit in.

In order for instructors to utilize the model described earlier in this chapter, it is recommended that students participate in the placement of institutional, dispositional and situational factors on the balance. After attending the school for a period of two to four weeks, new students could be asked to read a description of the model and then determine the appropriate location on the balance, for their situation, of the various factors. This would provide both the student and the teacher with a clear understanding of the student's context, leading to a mutually developed strategy to encourage the movement of negative factors to the positive side of the balance. Further, such a discussion would serve to establish, early in the student's term at the school, a process and source of help for identifying and rectifying problems that may be encountered.
Goal clarity has been shown to be a significant factor in predicting persistence (Garrison, 1985). It is not uncommon for ABE students to have goals that are unrealistic or lacking. Students who, during the intake interview are unsure of their goals, should be referred for counselling. Follow-up with these and other students after enrollment would help to continually clarify their goals.

3. Teach Study Skills and Time Management

Many students, whether or not they have completed high school, have poorly developed study skills. Instead of developing a strategy for dealing with large amounts of course material, it is not uncommon for students to plod through a chapter, giving equal emphasis to every part. Summarizing, surveying, note-taking, organizing and reviewing are under-utilized study skills. Students reported a fear of writing tests which could be alleviated by practical strategies. Separate workshops can be provided or tutorial instructors can assist in the development and modelling of these skills within the context of their course. These can be reviewed and practiced periodically, providing a valuable life skill that transfers to any course.

4. Increase Course Relevancy and Interest

An important factor in retaining students is offering courses which they perceive as relevant and interesting (Darkenwald, 1981). Relevance in this case may simply mean providing courses which are prerequisites for post-secondary educational institutions. However, students take courses for many other reasons, such as to improve self-confidence in certain academic areas, to improve English skills for success in post-secondary programs, to be a good role model for their children, and simply to have the personal satisfaction of
achieving their high school diploma. For these students, relevance may mean the acquisition of practical skills within the context of material that is intellectually engaging. This can present a challenge when courses are offered in a self-paced format. Providing students with self-contained courses that may simply require replication of content on tests or assignments can hardly be described as engaging and may even stretch beyond the definition of education.

Courses can be made interesting in a variety of ways. One is to use themes which are chosen especially for their interest to adults. Relevance and interest can also be fostered if students have a voice in what they will study. Although courses are required to meet provincial curriculum guidelines, there is considerable latitude to adapt courses to accommodate current student interests. Collaborative discussions with students about their objectives for the course and how these can be achieved may result in a higher degree of relevance and interest.

Maintenance of student interest in a course is also influenced by the quality of instruction. Taylor (1983), asserts that, "Retention is an indication of quality teaching" (p. 129). The quality of instruction and curriculum are institutional factors having a definite impact on student retention.

5. **Contact Non-Attending Students**

More efforts by teachers to contact students whose attendance has been inconsistent or lacking reinforces the teacher-student relationship and has been associated with greater retention (Jackson-Meyer, 1987). Students indicated that a call from an instructor after a period of absence may have influenced them to return to school. It may also result in the identification of a problem being experienced by the student for which the instructor is able to
provide assistance or a referral. One dropout, who completed an entire course but did not have the confidence to write the final exam, may have done so if this problem had been uncovered and support offered.

6. Find Ways to Build Student Self-Esteem

While a conclusion of this study is that there is no single factor or group of factors that predict dropout, academic self-esteem clearly is a factor with powerful influence over a learner's behaviour (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Any of the recommendations made above that result in student success would have, as a by-product, the enhancement of self-esteem. It is beyond the scope of this paper to research the psychological development of self-esteem. From an educational point of view, self-esteem is enhanced by good teaching: acknowledge and build on strengths, recognize growth, set goals in manageable amounts to ensure success, provide continuous encouragement. Building rapport with individual students and creating a supportive classroom climate which encourages positive peer interactions are important. Remaining supportive and encouraging will help learners to develop confidence, and "the tutor's loyalty to and confidence in the student can go a long way toward helping him or her through periods of discouragement" (Eberle & Robinson, 1980, p. 32). People never outgrow the need for encouragement. Self-esteem is a self-estimation which comes in large part from success. A teacher's primary role is to find ways to enable a student to succeed at learning.

7. Promote Social Integration

The models developed by Tinto (1975), Boshier (1972) and Finn (1989) stress the positive relationship between social integration within the school
and persistence. The interview data also reveals that a sense of social belonging is important to Invergarry students. Social integration can be encouraged through some of the recommendations already made, such as the use of tutorial groups. Cooperative learning strategies should be utilized where appropriate, not only for its benefits as an instructional strategy, but also to promote bonding between students. Bonding between students would also be encouraged by course requirements for cooperative activities, such as peer editing.

**For Further Research**

Research often leads to more questions than answers. This thesis is no exception. Topics arising from this study that would be suitable for further research include student self-esteem and self-pacing.

Self-esteem emerges as a common theme influencing student behavior throughout this study. By the time a student is an adult, self-esteem is a well-established psychological construct. To what extent does self-esteem influence a student’s decision to withdraw or persist? To what extent is self-esteem able to be enhanced? What are specific strategies that instructors could use to support and develop a positive self-esteem?

Secondly, self-pacing as a learning format has significant advantages but is also fraught with major drawbacks. While recommendations have been made in this study to provide more structure within the self-paced format, a broader examination of self-pacing is warranted. Within and outside of the field of adult education, what have researchers found about self-pacing that would be relevant to adults? How do other adult learning centres deal with the slow progress that seems to be associated with self-pacing?
Concluding Remarks

This study has examined the context of adult dropout through the eyes of current and former students at Invergarry Learning Centre. The findings confirm many of the results of previous researchers as well as provide new insights. There is no single set of factors that can be attributed to dropout but a series of factors that combine and interact uniquely with the individual involved to result in a balance of factors that encourage a decision to drop out or persist. Thomas (1990, p. viii), quoted in Chapter One, stated, “It is only when everything falls in place and the necessary supports are available that there is a reasonable chance of adults succeeding in their goals.” This statement can now be revised to state that “everything” does not have to be in place. Instead, if there are enough positive factors to outweigh the negative factors, persistence is likely.

Since the intensity of the factors interacts with the institutional environment, schools have a critical role to play in how these factors settle out. Recommendations are made in this chapter to reach out to new students so that positive early experiences will reduce fear and increase the likelihood of success. Other recommendations are to ensure that students who, once established at the school, experience the conditions that are most likely to lead to persistence and fulfillment of goals.
APPENDIX A

Invergarry Learning Centre - Assessment of ASSC Program

Please help us improve the service provided by the Adult Secondary School Completion program by offering your candid responses. Your identity will remain completely anonymous.

A: ABOUT INVERGARRY

<p>| | | | |</p>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The students at Invergarry are generally friendly.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>My course(s) are useful and relevant to my future goals.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>In general, I would say my courses at Invergarry were interesting.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Compared to a regular high school classroom, I found that the ‘self-pacing’ of courses at Invergarry was easy to manage.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>With the independent courses at Invergarry, I found that learning was a lonely experience.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>My instructor(s) do whatever possible to help me be successful.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Working with other students helps me to understand the course material.</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

8. Please use the space below to write any comments you have that would help us improve the service provided by the ASSC program at Invergarry. Use the other side if necessary.

<p>| |</p>
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</tbody>
</table>

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B. ABOUT YOU  Please circle the appropriate letter or number.

9. Which of the following is your most important reason for attending school?
   a. Get my high school diploma.
   b. Improve marks in some courses.
   c. Take courses required to attend college, university, BCIT, etc.
   d. Other

10. What career plans do you have when you finish at Invergarry?
    a. Get further training at another institution.
    b. Get a job as a_____________________.
    c. Not sure.
    d. Other

11. Which of the following best describe you as a learner?
    a. Passing courses at school is easy for me.
    b. With reasonable work, I can pass most courses.
    c. I really struggle to pass each course.
    d. I’m not confident that I’ll pass the courses I need to.
    e. Other:

12. Which of the following best describe your role as a student and your responsibilities to your family?
    a. My responsibilities to my family make it very difficult to be a student.
    b. My responsibilities to my family make it a little difficult to be a student.
    c. My responsibilities to my family do not make it difficult to be a student.
    d. Other:

13. Which of the following best describe the amount of support and encouragement you receive from the people who are most important to you?
    a. My family/friends are very supportive of me being a student.
    b. My family/friends are somewhat supportive of me being a student.
    c. My family/friends are neither supportive nor unsupportive of me being a student.
    d. My family/friends are opposed to me being a student.
    e. Other:

14. While I am a student, adequate financial income is a:
    a. Major concern
    b. Somewhat of a concern
    c. Not a concern
    d. Other:

15. Are there other factors which make it difficult for you to be a student at Invergarry? Please explain in the space below. Use the other side if necessary.

Thank you for your responses.
Your input will be valuable to us in our effort to improve the program.
## APPENDIX B: Interview Topics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview topics</th>
<th>Rationale for question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Background: family experiences related to school, academic experiences in school, positive and negative school memories, reasons for originally leaving school;</td>
<td>1. Probes Finn's (1989) identification-participation construct. Provides information on academic self-concept</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Current situation: family, dependents, employment, number of years out of school;</td>
<td>2. What are the student's situational variables?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Motivation for returning to school;</td>
<td>3. What is the strength of the valence/expectancy, according to Rubenson's model?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Goal clarity: what are the student's future plans with regard to education and employment?</td>
<td>4. Research indicates that dropouts do not have clear or realistic goals.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 5. Experience of school while at Invergarry:  
  - course relevancy  
  - self-paced learning format, value of tutorial groups  
  - quality of instruction  
  - relationships with instructors  
  - relationships/interactions with peers  
  - made use of support services? | 5.a. What is the student's assessment of the various aspects of the teaching-learning situation and other institutional variables at Invergarry?  
  b. To what extent has social and academic integration occurred? |
| 6. Decision to drop out.  
  - what are the reasons? | |

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Murray, Mary. (1994). Personal communication.


