

**RETENTION IN A SMALL LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTION:  
THE COMMUTER STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

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## Abstract

Research indicates that students who reside on campus are more likely than commuter students to persist in their studies until graduation. The purpose of this study is to explore factors that may influence retention for commuter students. Data were collected from 20 commuter students at a primarily undergraduate four-year institution, in three stages: administration of a brief questionnaire, individual in-depth interviews, and a focus group. The qualitative data gained was coded and analyzed, and a grounded theory entitled “the commuter student experience” was developed. The theory contains three main categories, various subcategories, and a mediating variable. The results and findings of this study provide validation for existing areas of research on commuter students; however, they also suggest areas for further exploration.

## Acknowledgements

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## Chapter One. Introduction

I am currently both a commuter student and an employee of the University of Lethbridge. Throughout my undergraduate and now my graduate degree, I commuted to and from campus. After graduation, I worked as a Student Recruitment Officer, and after three years made a transition into planning Convocation. My experiences both as a student and an employee provoked various questions: Why are commuter students a high-risk population for attrition? Would the first-year students I helped to recruit complete their degrees successfully? How do the students who complete their degrees differ from those who do not? What can be done to improve student retention?

Students who are enrolled in their first post-secondary class may be experiencing nervousness, anticipation, and a desire to succeed in obtaining a higher-level credential. The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (CSRDE, 2002-2003) reported that only 59% of students originally enrolled in a post-secondary institution proceed to graduation. Regardless of who departs, research on the factors influencing these departure decisions has been ongoing for many years (Astin, 1984; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Tinto 1975, 1988, 1993). What factors influence students to persist in or depart from their post-secondary studies? The answers to this question may help post-secondary institutions to better support students through to completion, resulting in increased retention rates.

The factors that influence students to withdraw can affect, or be more heavily weighted for, different groups of students. Ethnicity (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, Pascarella, & Hagedorn, 1999), age (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Grayson, 1997), finances (Gilbert & Auger, 1988), and program choices (Bers, 1985), among other factors, have

been examined in the quest to understand student retention. One such factor is place of residence: students who live on-campus and students who live off-campus comprise two distinct groups that display variance in regards to retention. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005), in a meta-analysis of 16 student retention studies, found that students who reside on-campus are more likely than commuter students to persist in their studies until graduation. The general purpose of this study is to explore factors that may influence retention for commuter students.

### *Research Problem*

Numerous studies have examined why students withdraw or persist in their studies (Astin 1984; Braxton et al., 2004; Tinto 1975, 1988, 1993). It has consistently been found that commuter students experience lower retention rates than students who reside on-campus (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). However, less is known about the reasons for this discrepancy in retention rates. A better understanding of the factors that affect the retention of university commuter students would be very useful to individual students, post-secondary institutions, and society. The purpose of this study is to discover what commuter students are experiencing within their first year of university and how those experiences affect retention.

### *Benefits of Retention*

Persistence until graduation brings many benefits, and in turn attrition is associated with negative effects. The institution, the individual student, and society are all affected by student retention until degree completion, or conversely by student attrition.

### *Impact on the Institution*

Institutions of higher education are impacted by retention in a variety of ways. Many positive benefits accrue to an institution when students proceed until graduation. As Crockett (2004) noted, institutions with high student retention also benefit from higher alumni donation rates. Crockett also found that student satisfaction equates to success for the institution, specifically in retention; institutions with higher student satisfaction rates also maintain higher rates of student graduation.

Higher retention rates may also indirectly benefit an institution's student recruitment. Students who are satisfied tend to complete their programs, and they may communicate their satisfaction with their experience to prospective recruits. Students who do not persist are more likely to have experienced negative feelings, which they may also freely share with prospective recruits. Thus higher retention rates equate to an increase in the number of students who are likely to communicate their positive experiences to others.

The revenue gained by retaining a student until completion is also a direct benefit to the institution. A study by Okanagan University College in 1996 (cited in Grayson & Grayson, 2003) estimated that, for each student who failed to continue into second year, the lost revenue equated to \$4,230. Ness (2004) provided worksheets for projecting institutional savings through the improvement of retention rates for first-year students. The worksheets, based on Ness's 2004 calculations, show that for public institutions with an enrolment of 2,000 first year students and an historical attrition rate of 30% between first and second year, reducing the attrition rate by 10% would result in a savings of \$1 million. An institution is affected negatively by student attrition through lost finances.

If an institution decides that student retention is not a priority, it may not develop or maintain initiatives that encourage student success. High-risk students may not experience an equal opportunity for completion at institutions that rate retention as a lower priority.

### *Impact on the Individual*

Continuation in and completion of a post-secondary degree affect not only the institution but also individual students. Some students who withdraw may carry a feeling of failure for the duration of their lives or until they complete a credential elsewhere. Students may be not only emotionally distraught but financially burdened as well. According to Bean and Hossler (1990, cited in Grayson & Grayson, 2003), the income of a student who has completed four years of post-secondary education is equal to that of four students who were not retained beyond the first year. Day and Newburger (2002, cited in Porter, 2002) also emphasized the financial benefit to the individual of completion: there is an almost \$1 million difference between the average lifetime earnings of high school graduates and those of individuals with bachelor's degrees. Statistics Canada reported in the 2006 Census that the median earnings for Canadians in the 25-64 year old age group with only a high school degree earned approximately 33% less than those with a university degree.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2005) compiled *The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education*. The report identified four categories of benefits to obtaining higher education: private economic, private social, public economic, and public social. Individual or private benefits include the following:

Private economic benefits: higher salaries and benefits, employment, higher savings levels, improved working conditions, and personal/professional mobility.

Private social benefits: improved health/life expectancy; improved quality of life for offspring; better consumer decision making; increased personal status; more hobbies, leisure activities. (p. 4)

Hansen (n.d.) listed further benefits to the individual from obtaining a university or college education:

...longer life spans, better access to health care, better dietary and health practices, greater economic stability and security, more prestigious employment and greater job satisfaction, less dependency on government assistance, greater use of seat belts, more continuing education, greater Internet access, greater attendance at live performances, greater participation in leisure and artistic activities, more book purchases, higher voting rates, greater knowledge of government, greater community service and leadership, more volunteer work, more self-confidence, and less criminal activity and incarceration.

### *Impact on Society*

Student retention at the post-secondary level also has many impacts on society.

The Institute for Higher Education Policy (2005) identified the following public economic and social benefits:

Public economic benefits: increased tax revenues, greater productivity, increased consumption, increased workforce flexibility, and decreased reliance on government financial support.

Public social benefits: reduced crime rates, increased charitable giving/community service, increased quality of civic life, social cohesion/appreciation of diversity, and improved ability to adapt and use technology. (p. 4)

Overlap does exist between the benefits of post-secondary completion to the individual and to society. Watts (2001) listed the following societal or individual benefits: economic benefits such as higher earnings, and more income taxes paid; reduced welfare dependency; lower crime costs, as higher education correlates with lower incarceration rates; healthier lifestyles specifically relating to smoking and educational level; and social gains such as volunteering, charitable giving and participating in community organizations. Thus institutions, individuals and society are all positively influenced by the retention of students in post-secondary education.

#### *Retention and the University of Lethbridge*

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of commuter students in order to determine how those experiences affect student retention. The sample used in this study is drawn from the student population of the University of Lethbridge. While student retention clearly benefits any post-secondary institution, why might the University of Lethbridge in particular benefit from a better understanding of this issue? To answer the question, one needs to understand the current situation of Alberta's post-secondary institutions.

The education system in Alberta, including post-secondary education, is undergoing numerous changes in a process of analysis and reform. To initiate an examination of post-secondary education, in 1999 Alberta Learning contracted with

Ipsos-Reid Corporation to conduct an accessibility study. Ipsos-Reid (2001) explored the factors influencing students' decisions to attend or not to attend post-secondary institutions, and students' perceptions of the tuition costs and funding provisions at that time. In 2001, Alberta Learning released the Report of the MLA Post-secondary Funding Review Committee. After analyzing funding throughout the province, the report concluded with ten recommendations on issues such as access funding, government processes, and tuition. Subsequently, Alberta's Commission on Learning (2003) produced the report *Every Child Learns, Every Child Succeeds*. This report contained 95 recommendations that sparked debate throughout the province. One of the report's recommendations called for a thorough analysis of Alberta's post-secondary institutions.

In 2004, the Alberta Government introduced the Post-Secondary Learning Act, or Bill 43, which combined the former Universities Act, Technical Institutes Act, Colleges Act, and Banff Centre Act into one unified piece of legislation. The Post-Secondary Learning Act includes this statement: "The Government of Alberta is committed to ensuring that Albertans have the opportunity to enhance their social, cultural and economic well-being through participation in an accessible, responsive and flexible post-secondary system." In light of the Post-Secondary Learning Act, an examination of student accessibility should coincide with an examination of retention, since making institutions accessible without ensuring student success is clearly counterproductive.

The student population of the University of Lethbridge consists mainly of commuters, as limited residence facilities are available. Pascarella and Terenzini's (2005) finding that commuter students and commuter institutions experience lower student retention rates suggests that an exploration of commuter students would be particularly



valuable to the University of Lethbridge. It is anticipated that the results from this study could be used in developing appropriate institutional initiatives to improve retention of commuter students at the University of Lethbridge. Furthermore, the results and understanding of the specific factors pertaining to retention at the University of Lethbridge may be generalized to other institutions with similar demographics.

A review of the literature on retention is provided in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 details the specific methodology used for obtaining and analysing data. The results are reported in Chapter 4, followed by a discussion of the findings and implications of the study in Chapter 5.

## Chapter Two. Literature Review

This chapter includes a review of the literature that is applicable to the current study. Much of the literature on retention and attrition was conducted in the United States. The literature review begins with a comparison of retention rates in the United States and Canada, justifying the use of retention literature based on American schools. It continues with a description of general student retention theories and examination of a theory that deals specifically with commuter student retention.

### *Retention Rates*

In 2003, the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange reported that for 2002-2003, in 415 U.S. colleges and one Canadian university, the dropout rates for students by year in college were 21% in first year, 11% in second year, and 9% in third year. Only 59% of students originally enrolled proceeded to graduation. ACT, formerly known as American College Testing, reported on the basis of its 2005 Institutional Data Questionnaire that among 1,800 U.S. institutions the mean persistence rate (i.e., to graduation) was 46.4%. Between the first and second years, ACT indicated the mean retention rate to be 68.3%. Although data warehouses such as these are unavailable in Canada, studies have shown similar percentages for Canadian institutions. For example, in a study for the Commission of Inquiry on Canadian University Education, Gilbert (1991, cited in Grayson & Grayson, 2003) estimated that after five years a Canadian institution's attrition rate would be 42%. Wong (1994, cited in Grayson, & Grayson, 2003) found that among 13 Canadian universities the first year attrition rate was around 24%, with a variance of 12- 44%. These figures are compared in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of Retention Rates in United States and Canada

Country	Data Source	Retention Rate %	
		Overall	1 <sup>st</sup> and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year
United States	CSRDE (2002-2003)	59	79*
United States	ACT (2005)	46.4	68.3
Canada	Gilbert (1991)	58	--
Canada	Wong (1994)	--	76*

Note. Dashes indicate no data was available.

\*These numbers were reported as attrition rates but were converted to retention rates for comparison.

Numerous studies have been conducted that examine why students withdraw or persist. As mentioned previously, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) in their meta-analysis of 16 such studies found that students who reside on-campus are more likely than commuter students to persist in their studies until graduation. Retention is an important issue for all aspects of post-secondary education, and the retention of commuter students appears to be of particular concern. Clearly we need a better understanding of why commuter students leave.

#### *Retention Theories*

The research and questions surrounding student retention for post-secondary institutions have led to the development of various models and theories to account for student departure (Astin, 1984; Bean, 1980; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1980; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). One of the most prominent explanations of retention was introduced by Tinto in 1975 and revised in 1993. The original article has been cited more than 550 times (Web of Science, 2008).

As the citations indicate, many studies refer to Tinto's (1975) theory on student retention. Recently Braxton et al. (2004) analyzed Tinto's theory, attempting systematically to validate or disprove components of the theory by synthesizing existing studies on retention. Although the findings supported the theory for most populations, unfortunately strong empirical support was lacking for commuter universities, and only partial support was found for residential universities. Braxton et al. devised a new theory to better account for student departure in commuter colleges and universities. They also revised Tinto's theory for student departure in residential colleges and universities.

#### *Commuter Student Retention Theory*

Braxton et al. (2004) found that the distinctions between residential and commuter institutions indicate a need for separate theories to account for student departure within these institutional types. Tinto (1993) noted that students in commuter institutions have less of a community or social environment with which to develop a sense of membership or belonging. Compared to on-campus students, commuter students displayed more conflicting issues between family, work and college. In research conducted in commuter universities and colleges, Braxton et al. found that, of the 13 propositions in Tinto's 1975 theory, only two received strong support, while another two had moderate support. Including the components of Tinto's theory that were supported, Braxton et al. developed a commuter student conceptual model based on empirically supported propositions. Their conceptual model of retention uses four base constructs or conceptual orientations: economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological. Braxton et al. explain: "[A] multitheoretical approach is needed because college student departure is best

characterized as an ill-structured problem.... Ill-structured problems defy a single solution and require a number of possible solutions that may not alleviate the problem” (p. 2).

Braxton et al.’s (2004) conceptual model includes 16 propositions that relate to these orientations, or to the interaction between the orientations and the following basic elements: student entry characteristics, the external environment, the campus environment, and the academic communities. These components comprise the elements of a theory of commuter student departure. The 16 propositions are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Sixteen Propositions: Elements of a Theory of Student Departure in Commuter Institutions

Conceptual Orientation	Proposition
Economic	1. The lower the costs of college attendance incurred by the students, the greater their likelihood of persisting in college.
Organizational	2. The more that a student perceives that the institution is committed to the welfare of its students, the lower the likelihood of the student’s departure. 3. The more a student perceives that the institution exhibits institutional integrity, the lower the likelihood of the student’s departure.
Psychological	4. Motivation to graduate from college exerts a positive influence in student persistence. Motivation to make steady progress toward college completion also positively impacts student retention. 5. The greater a student’s need for control and order in his or her

Conceptual	Proposition
Orientation	<p>daily life, the greater the student's likelihood of departure.</p>
Sociological	<p>6. The stronger a person's belief that he or she can achieve a desired outcome through his or her own efforts, the less likely the student will depart from college.</p> <p>7. The greater a student's awareness of the effects of his or her decisions and actions on other people, the greater the student's likelihood of departure from college.</p> <p>8. The greater the student's need for affiliation, the greater the student's likelihood of departure from college.</p> <p>9. As parents' educational level increases, the likelihood of student departure from a commuter college or university also increases.</p> <p>10. Support from significant others for college attendance decreases the likelihood of student departure from a commuter college or university.</p> <p>11. The probability of student departure from a commuter college or university decreases for students who participate in communities of learning.</p> <p>12. The probability of student departure from a commuter college or university increases for students who engage in anticipatory socialization before entering college.</p>
Additional	<p>13. Student entry characteristics affect the level of initial commitment</p>

Conceptual Orientation	Proposition
	to the institution.
	14. The initial level of institutional commitment to the institution affects the subsequent level of commitment to the institution.
	15. The greater the degree of academic integration perceived by students, the greater their degree of subsequent commitment to the institution.
	16. The greater the degree of subsequent commitment to the institution, the greater the likelihood of student persistence in college.

Note. From "Toward Understanding and Reducing College Student Departure," by J. M. Braxton, A. S. Hirschy, and S. A. McClendon, 2004, in *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Research Report Series* (Vol. 30, No. 3), pp. 36-42. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Braxton et al. (2004) incorporated propositions 13, 14, and 15 from Tinto's (1975) original theory. Their synthesis of existing studies on retention indicated that student entry characteristics strongly affect the level of initial commitment to the institution. Braxton et al. also found strong support for the proposition that the initial level of institutional commitment affects the subsequent level of institutional commitment. Only modest support was found for the proposition that the greater the degree of academic integration perceived by the student, the higher the student's subsequent commitment. The final four additional propositions proposed by Braxton et al. (2004), summarized in Table 2, are illustrated in Figure 1.

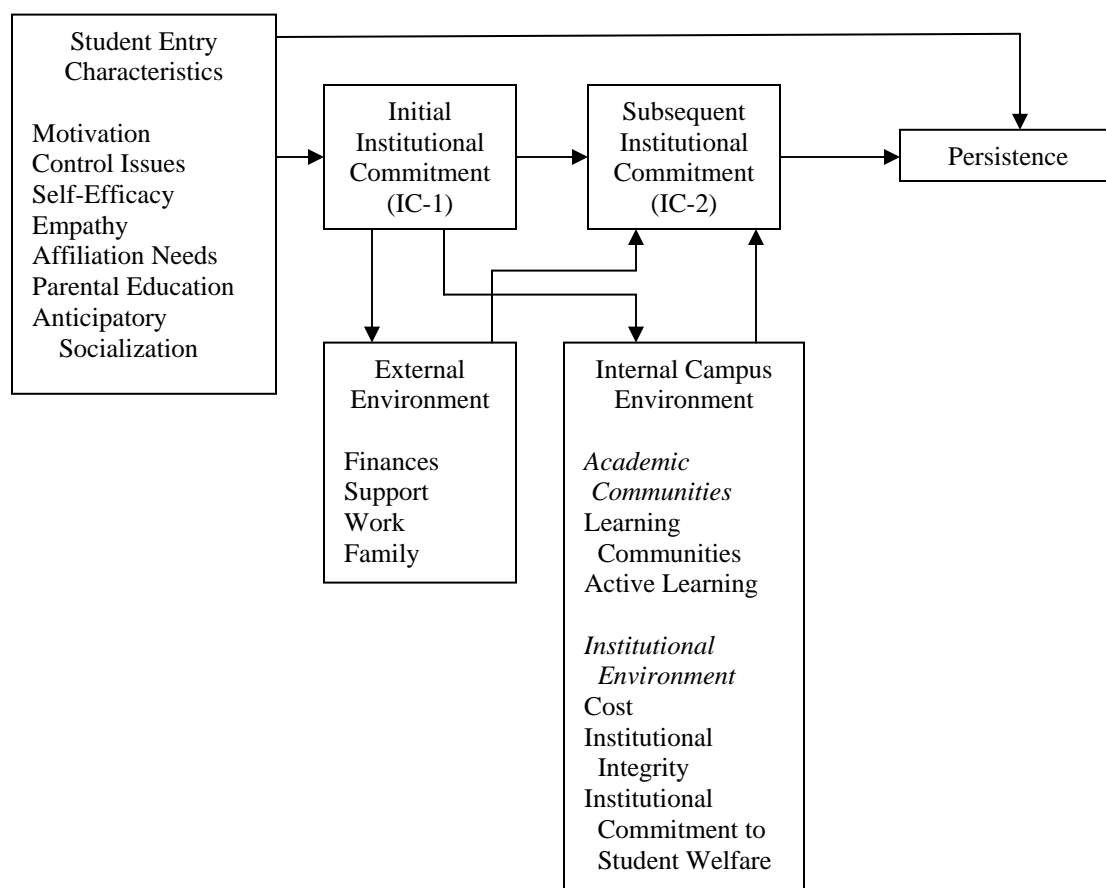


Figure 1. Theory of student departure in commuter colleges and universities.

Note. From *Toward understanding and Reducing College Student Departure* (p. 43), by J. M. Braxton, A. S. Hirschy and S. A. McClendon, 2004. Copyright 2004 by Wiley Periodicals, Inc. Reprinted with permission.

Braxton et al.'s (2004) general recommendations indicate that retention research should continue on the constructs derived from economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological orientations. Future studies on retention should also include detailed institutional descriptions, as it is not always apparent if the institution studied was attended mainly by residential or commuter students. Multiple replications of the theory or conceptual model are needed. Walpole (2005), in a review of Braxton et al. (2004), concluded that while a few areas lacked clarity, "This monograph makes a significant



contribution by incorporating a contextual aspect in the revised theories and by providing new theoretical and programmatic perspectives” (p. 454).

When Braxton et al. (2004) define retention as an ill-structured problem that defies a single solution, they admit that many different influences can affect students’ departure decisions. Braxton et al. chose a valid method to establish the elements of a theory based on previously conducted research. However, as the commuter student theory is relatively new, they and other researchers may have missed areas in previous research related to retention. The elements of the theory that Braxton et al. proposed could be examined proposition by proposition; however, one would have to assume that the propositions are all correct and that none have been missed.

As noted, Tinto (1993) argued that the students in commuter institutions have less of a community or social environment within which to develop a sense of membership or feeling of belonging. Commuter students also display more conflicting issues between family, work and college. Differences among commuter students could exist due to factors such as previous experience levels, age, and so on. The propositions listed by Braxton et al. may have a greater influence on commuter students who are just starting out in life, compared to those who may already have an established family of their own. The elements of the theory proposed by Braxton et al. (2004) seem to have sufficient heuristic value; however, there is also a need for empirical validation and possible theoretical revisions.

It is clear that a deeper understanding of the student experience is necessary to understand the factors related to attrition. An examination of the commuter student experience in particular would be valuable because so little is known about the

experiences of commuter students, and because we do know that students who live in residence are more likely to persist. Using qualitative research methodology, this study attempts to examine the question: what do commuter students experience during their first year of university, and how do those experiences affect retention? A qualitative methodology is appropriate for this study because it allows for the institutional characteristics to be highlighted and does not force the theory onto the situation. Instead the methodology can reveal what theory best accounts for the situation. Chapter 3 includes a description of the methodology used in the investigation, as well as an explanation of the reasons for using this approach.

### Chapter Three. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the retention experiences of first-year commuter students at the University of Lethbridge, a small liberal arts institution located in southern Alberta, Canada. The literature on retention clearly indicates that students who reside on-campus are more likely to persist than commuter students (Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005). Retention of students, particularly commuter students, is an issue for most if not all post-secondary institutions.

This chapter includes a detailed explanation of grounded theory, the primary methodology chosen for this study, and of the specific procedures and methods used. The researcher employed a grounded theory methodology in order to develop a theory about the retention experiences of first-year commuter students at the University of Lethbridge. The study involved three steps of data collection: administration of a brief questionnaire, individual in-depth interviews, and a focus group.

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 commuter students attending the university. To facilitate the interview process, participants completed a short questionnaire (Appendix A) before the interview. Content analysis was performed on the two open-ended questions in the questionnaire, concerning why the students decided to pursue post-secondary education and why they specifically chose the University of Lethbridge. The other questions served mainly to provide background information that helped to guide the interviews. After the interviews, the researcher used the constant comparison method of grounded theory to interpret the results.

Once an initial theory began to emerge, the researcher conducted a focus group in which all interview participants were invited to participate. During the focus group, the

students were shown a flowchart of the developing theory and then given an opportunity to verify, revise and/or add components to assist in clarifying the developing theory.

The grounded theory methodology was chosen because it would enable the researcher to develop a theory to explain the retention experiences of commuter students within a specific setting. Grounded theory allows researchers to develop a theory in response to a question. Testing the validity of Braxton et al.'s (2004) theory that specifically deals with commuter student retention would only support or contest the elements of that theory. Grounded theory, however, allows for the development of a theory that might describe the experiences of students attending a small liberal arts, four-year commuter-student university.

### *Grounded Theory*

Glaser and Strauss (1967) introduced grounded theory and developed its methodology in response to an overabundance of studies focusing on theoretical verification. Their purpose was to enable social scientists to generate theory relevant to their research, “the discovery of theory from data” (p. 1).

In 1990, Strauss and Corbin authored a follow-up book in an attempt to further assist researchers in the methods of grounded theory. In 1992, Glaser wrote *Emergence vs Forcing*, arguing that Strauss and Corbin provided too much structure to the methodology, which resulted in a forcing of the data, rather than trusting in the emergence of a theory. Grounded theory does not test or validate a hypothesis; it discovers a theory that accounts for the research situation as it is (Dick, 2000).

The constant comparative method and the use of theoretical sampling in grounded theory ensure that the data gathered are collected and analyzed simultaneously.

Theoretical sampling further displays the flexibility within grounded theory, as the emergent theory directs the sample selection.

### *Constant Comparative Method*

Constant comparison is the main component of grounded theory. It involves four stages: comparing incidents applicable to each category, integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the theory, and then writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Comparing incidents, the first stage of the method, is where the data coding begins. The basic defining rule of this stage is, “while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 106). During coding of the data, the grounded theory process allows for the development of conflicting ideas to be recorded in memos. The second rule of this stage is to “stop coding and record a memo on your ideas” (p. 107). In stage two, category integration, incidents are no longer compared with incidents. A switch occurs at this point, where incidents are compared to the properties of the categories formed from the initial comparisons. While stage two broadens the scope of the data, stage three, delimiting the theory, attempts to reduce extraneous information so that what remains are the vital categories that will define the theory.

After the first three stages are completed, stage four involves compilation of the substantive theory. A substantive theory “is grounded in research on one particular substantive area... It might be taken to apply only to that specific area” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 79). Formal theories can also be developed from substantive theories, although additional analyses are required.

### *Theoretical Sampling*

Theoretical sampling involves simultaneously collecting, coding, and analyzing the data. A sample population cannot truly be pre-defined within grounded theory, since the emerging theory controls the data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). An initial sample is chosen based on the problem or area being investigated. Theoretical relevance is important when a researcher is dealing with sample groups, as groups are chosen only to further the development of categories. Theoretical saturation has occurred when no additional data are being found, and only then may data collection cease.

In this study, logistics related to room availability made it necessary for the researcher to book a pre-determined number of participants and block of interview times. Since block scheduling was necessary, the researcher set the completion of 20 interviews as an examination point at which to assess whether data saturation was reached. Within two weeks, 17 interviews were completed; however, the remaining four interviews took another six weeks to complete, for a total of 21 interviews completed. Two of the 21 participants interviewed did reside on campus in their first year but were living off campus in their second year; however, their interview data was used as supplementary. Overall, 19 eligible participants were interviewed before the researcher was confident that data saturation had been reached.

This study used as its sample pool the student population of the University of Lethbridge, a small four-year liberal arts institution. In Fall 2006, enrolment at the University's main campus consisted of 6,844 undergraduates and 255 graduate students (University of Lethbridge Facts Book, 2006-2007). The main campus is situated in Lethbridge, a comparatively small city of 81,692 residents (City of Lethbridge Census,

2007). The University of Lethbridge provides only 312 first-year on-campus beds (University of Lethbridge, 2007). The University's Facts Book (2006-2007) indicates that, in Fall 2006, 1,011 newly graduated high school students were admitted and were eligible for those beds. Thus 69% of first-year students in Fall 2006 needed to reside off-campus, an ideal situation for a study of commuter students' experiences.

### *Sample Delimitation*

The sample chosen for the study was first delimited. To be included, students had to be living off-campus and to have started their first year of studies in Fall 2006. Second, the students had to be entering the University of Lethbridge directly out of high school. The sample was restricted to new high school graduates in order to reduce the chances that student age might be a factor in how students experience commuting to university. For example, age could have been a confounding variable, as students might have already attended another post-secondary institution or had prior experiences that affected their perceptions of the University as commuter students. Despite these attempts at delimitation, a few participants slipped through the eligibility criteria and did not enter the University of Lethbridge directly out of high school. Their interviews were still used within the constant comparison method; however, it was noted within the results that these participants had not enrolled directly out of high school. Tracking this variable was necessary to ensure that any differences found in the coding of their interviews were not due to their being older and possibly more experienced than the other participants.

Within the sample, two groups of students were identified. The first included students who had a permanent address in Calgary and who had graduated from Calgary high schools. The second group included students who had a permanent address in

Lethbridge. To determine eligibility, it was confirmed that they still lived at home while attending the University of Lethbridge. This Lethbridge group needed also to have graduated from one of the city's high schools.

The Lethbridge and Calgary groups were chosen because of an expected theoretical difference in the commuter student experience due to their living away from home or staying at home. Tinto (1993) argued that students in commuter institutions have less of a community or social environment within which to develop a sense of membership or feeling of belonging. The Lethbridge group would have had the opportunity to maintain more social ties, since more of their high school friends or acquaintances would have attended the University of Lethbridge. The Lethbridge group, who already had friends in the city and in the institution, may not have needed to get as socially involved in the institution. Since the Calgary group would not have had as many, or any, high school friends attending, they might have become more involved in meeting new friends while attending university. On the other hand, it could be expected that the Calgary group would have less of a social support network and more social problems since they were living in a new city. Braxton et al. (2004) found that support from significant others is important and decreases the likelihood of departure. The Lethbridge group, who were still living at home, could be expected to have more direct and available support, whereas the Calgary group, who were not still living with their families, would be less able to access the same support level. As indicated above, differences in the experiences of these two groups could be expected. Finally, it was ensured that the two groups in the sample had equal gender representation to account for any differences in the commuter student experience due to gender.



### *Sample Selection*

Two lists of eligible participants were provided by the University of Lethbridge. The lists were separated into gender, resulting in four lists: Lethbridge Group Female, Lethbridge Group Male, Calgary Group Female, and Calgary Group Male. The names were sorted in ascending alphabetical order. To ensure random selection, every tenth name represented a possible participant. In addition, sample sizes were kept consistent for each of the groups where possible.

Initially, potential participants were contacted by telephone. The purpose of the study was explained to them, their eligibility was confirmed, and finally they were asked for their consent to participate in the study. If a student expressed no interest, the next student on the list was contacted. When these initial strategies resulted in an insufficient number of participants, the selection process was modified to include contact by email. The initial phone call was still made; however, if the researcher failed to reach the potential participant and was forced to leave a message, a follow-up email was then sent. The follow-up email that was sent contained the identical phone call script but provided the participants with a different medium for contact. The students who were contacted then had two options, telephone or email, for contacting the researcher and agreeing to participate. To obtain 21 participants, 66 contacts were made; 12 of the 21 participants were obtained by using the combined phone call and email method.

Table 3 displays the participation rate of the different groups. There were 10 participants in the Lethbridge group and 11 in the Calgary group. The participation rate varied considerably between groups. The number of contacts it took to obtain the

participants for the Lethbridge group resulted in a 63% participation rate, whereas the Calgary group had a significantly lower participation rate of 22%.

Table 3. Participation Rate by Group

Group	Contacts Made	Participants	Participation Rate
Lethbridge	16	10	63%
Calgary	50	11	22%
Overall	66	21	32%

Table 4 displays the participation rate for each group by gender.

Table 4. Participation Rate by Gender

Group	Female			Male		
	Contacts Made	Participants	Participation Rate	Contacts Made	Participants	Participation Rate
Lethbridge	8	5	63%	8	5 <sup>a</sup>	63%
Calgary	14	6 <sup>b</sup>	43%	36	5 <sup>b,c</sup>	14%
Overall	22	11	50%	44	10	23%

<sup>a</sup>A Calgary Male participant was moved into this group, resulting in six interviews completed. The individual's family moved to Lethbridge with him, so he is currently living in Lethbridge with his family.

<sup>b</sup>Each group contained one ineligible participant who had lived or was living on campus; however, there was some intriguing data, so their interviews were used as supplementary.

<sup>c</sup>One participant within this group no longer attended the University of Lethbridge; therefore this interview was conducted via phone.

The low Calgary participation rate is most prominent for the Calgary males, who had a 14% participation rate overall. The reasons for this low participation are discussed in Chapter 5. Table 4 also notes the two group anomalies. First, a participant who

originally was in the Calgary male group was moved into the Lethbridge male group, due to the discovery that his family had moved to Lethbridge with him and he currently was living at home. The second anomaly was that, in both the Calgary male and Calgary female groups, one participant who would have been deemed ineligible had slipped through the verification process. Both individuals had lived on campus and were currently living off campus. Their interviews were still conducted, and since they included some intriguing data, the data were used as supplementary. The selection process worked, as one participant was no longer attending the University of Lethbridge. Although various potential participants were no longer at the University of Lethbridge, this student was the only one willing to participate in the study.

#### *Data Collection*

Before being interviewed, all participants were required to answer a short one-page questionnaire (Appendix A) consisting of 13 questions. The questionnaire was intended to start the participants thinking about their first year at the University and also to provide the interviewer with information to discuss within the interview. When students consented to participate, they were given the option of completing the questionnaire on paper prior to the meeting or completing the same questionnaire electronically. Two completed the questionnaire immediately before the meeting; the remaining 17 emailed it before the interview or brought along a completed copy.

The individual interviews, which represented the main source of data, were conducted in private meeting rooms located at the University. The location was chosen for reasons related to students' comfort and ease of access. At each interview the researcher provided a generic introduction and reiterated the purpose of the study. The

questionnaire was then reviewed with participants, who were given a chance to clarify their responses and asked if they had any questions. A sample interview script (Appendix B) was followed in each interview. The script included four basic questions and further probes to be used, depending on the participants' responses. Throughout the interviews additional probes were developed and asked, because of the developing theory.

Following analysis of the interview data, a focus group was held. Its purpose was to give participants an opportunity to confirm the researcher's initial interpretations of their individual interviews and to offer any further information if desired.

#### *Use of Constant Comparative Method*

Using the constant comparative method, the researcher engaged in the following steps. After each interview, the interviewer recorded any relevant notes about the participant and/or any new ideas or insights that came to mind during the interview. After coding the interview, the researcher subsequently examined each interview using the codes from the prior interviews. Before coding each interview, the researcher read any notes from that interview, read the questionnaire that the participant had completed, and then replayed the interview while coding its transcription. This procedure helped the researcher to remember more about that particular interview. When a new code was discovered, the researcher reexamined past interviews for that code and then included the new code in the subsequent comparisons.

The constant comparison process occurred continuously and simultaneously. Throughout coding, the researcher also recorded memos, noting ideas about categories or properties. The codes that were found were then related to categories and properties, which were then developed into a substantive theory.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge approved the methods used for this study. Consent to participate was initially obtained from students through a telephoned request to participate (see Appendix C for a script of the telephoned participation request). Before interviewing commenced, participants were asked to sign a Participant Consent Form (Appendix D). In case follow-up verification of answers might be required, the primary researcher needed to associate an individual's name with each interview. Consequently, each transcript was assigned a case number. A master file containing each participant's name, contact number and case number was stored in a password-protected file on the principal researcher's computer. No one else was allowed to associate an individual participant with his or her answers. These precautions were explained on the Participant Consent Form.

Following the individual interviews, participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a focus group. The possibility of this further involvement was also indicated on the Participant Consent Form. Participants were not required to re-sign the consent form regarding participation in the focus group; however, they were reminded that the Participant Consent Form still applied.

All information was kept confidential. Besides the principal researcher, only the committee supervisor, Dr. Kris Magnusson, had access to the information. The transcriber, who was required to sign a confidentiality agreement, had access only to the interview tapes. All tapes and transcriptions of the interviews will be destroyed after five years from the interview dates. All paper transcriptions will be shredded and tapes will be erased. These procedures were outlined on the Participant Consent Form.

### *Data Analysis*

The data set was drawn from in-depth interviews with individual participants, supplemented by an initial questionnaire (Appendix A). The interviews were performed at the beginning of each student's second year at the University. Interviews were booked from mid-September to the beginning of November. Scheduling interviews in the participants' second year enabled identification of students who were no longer with the University and allowed participants time for reflection on their first-year experience.

The questionnaire was used primarily to facilitate the interviews and to gather an understanding of participant demographics; however, participants' responses to some open-ended questions on the questionnaire were also examined using simple content analysis. The constant comparative method of grounded theory was used to interpret the results of the interview and to develop a substantive theory.

The main source for data collection involved interviews with individual students. The interview questions were open-ended in their wording, to encourage participants to be open in sharing their experiences as commuter students. The researcher piloted questions with two individuals who were former students, to ensure clarity and also to allow the researcher to gain confidence in interview techniques. These individual practice interviews were not included as data sources. The actual participant interviews' ranged in length from 13 to 32 minutes. They were tape recorded, then transcribed to allow for verification of the information.

To validate the interview results, a focus group was organized in which interview participants could confirm the initial interpretations made based on their individual interviews and for them to offer any further information if necessary. The focus group

was held within the second semester of participants' second year. This timing was beneficial as it allowed for time between the initial interviews and the focus group, so that the participants could either develop further commuter experiences or have additional time to reflect on their initial interview responses and the opportunity to add any additional comments. All participants were invited to join the focus group, and three participants agreed to participate: two were in the Lethbridge male group and one was in the Lethbridge female group. After verifying that the participants were still registered at the institution, the researcher found that 2 of the 19 participants (11%) did not return after their first year. Three additional participants were not registered for Fall 2008, so it could be assumed that 3 of the 17 remaining participants (18 %) would not return after their second year. The participants in the study experienced a 26% attrition rate, or a 74% retention rate between years one and two. These attrition or retention percentages are representative of the rates reported in the literature review. The Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (2003), found a 21% dropout rate for first year, Wong (1994, as cited in Grayson, & Grayson, 2003) found a first year attrition rate to be 24%, and ACT (2005) had a higher rate, reporting 32% attrition between first and second years.

The analysis of the data began with the constant comparison method, as described above. In this stage, the researcher analyzed and coded what the participants were saying, then compared the final coding from each participant with that from other participants' statements in order to identify themes within the data. Interviews occurred continually until data saturation, that is, until no new information was brought forth.

### *Theoretical Sensitivity*

An important aspect of grounded theory is that the researcher “can conceptualize and formulate a theory as it emerges from the data” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 46). This ability is referred to as theoretical sensitivity. Two characteristics define theoretical sensitivity: an individual’s personal experiences and biases, and ability to have and make theoretical ideas about the question being asked (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The first characteristic of theoretical sensitivity is that researchers need to be aware of their own personal experiences and biases. However, unlike other forms of research where biases and personal experiences are seen as clouding the data, in grounded theory these are not always negative components. A researcher may develop “crucial insights not only during his research... but from his own personal experiences prior to or outside it” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 252). The researcher was and still is a commuter student at the University of Lethbridge, having completed her undergraduate degree at the same institution, directly out of high school, and lived at home with her family. Upon completion of her degree, the researcher was employed by the University of Lethbridge to recruit potential students. The researcher has personal experiences and a strong positive bias toward her experiences at the University of Lethbridge. Using memos and journals, the researcher monitored the effects of her personal experiences and biases upon the research process.

The second characteristic of theoretical sensitivity, the ability to create theory, is not easily developed. Glaser (1992) stresses that theoretical training is the best way to develop this ability to be theoretically sensitive. Since grounded theory is discovering the theory emergent within the data, some believe it would be ideal for a researcher using this



methodology to have no preconceived ideas about the research area in question. The researcher would, therefore, not be predisposed toward certain ideas that could bias the research findings. In actuality it would be difficult to have no knowledge of research in the area. The researcher had, for example, reviewed some literature in advance and specifically read a theory on student departure from commuter colleges and universities (Braxton et al., 2004). By memoing and journaling, the researcher monitored the effects of her personal experiences and biases upon the creation of a substantive theory from the data obtained in this study.

The results gained through analysis of the data and the substantive theory that the results generated are presented in Chapter 4.

## Chapter Four. Results

This study explored the question, what are commuter students experiencing in their first year and how do those experiences affect retention? Data were collected primarily through in-depth interviews; supplementary data were gained through a questionnaire and focus group.

Before being interviewed, participants completed a 13-item questionnaire (Appendix A). The researcher then conducted the interviews and recorded any memos or notes regarding the interviews. These memos and notes resulted in the addition of further questions to the interviewing script. For example, it came to the researcher's attention that some individuals actually had shorter commute times to the University compared to their commute times to high school. Consequently, the remaining participants were asked about the length of their commute in high school. After all the interviews were completed, the tapes recording the interviews were transcribed. Following transcription, the coding process began. The initial interview was coded, and then the data from the next participant's interview was coded using the first codes. If a new code emerged, all previous interviews were re-examined to determine if that code was present for those participants as well.

The researcher was confident that data saturation was reached and no new general codes were emerging after 14 interviews. At that time a focus group was arranged at which the researcher presented the initial findings. After the focus group, the researcher coded the remaining 5 interviews and then examined the data for differences between the a priori groups. Six months elapsed between commencing the initial coding and concluding with the final grounded theory that is presented here. After the focus group,

the researcher took a substantial amount of time to reflect on and re-examine the categories and issues that were presented.

This chapter includes an analysis of the participant demographics, obtained through examination of the questionnaire results, followed by a profile of the commuter student that has emerged from the analysis of the individual questions. The substantive theory entitled “the commuter student experience” is then introduced. The a priori groups are then examined to determine if group membership yielded any substantive differences in the commuter experience. To conclude the analysis of results within this chapter, the research process is examined to illustrate how certain areas of concern within the process were handled in an attempt to avoid contamination of the results.

#### *Participant Demographics*

The 13-item questionnaire (Appendix A) was intended to start the participants thinking about their first year at the University and to provide the interviewer with information to discuss within the interview. It also allowed for the development of a participant profile of the University of Lethbridge commuter student. A simple coding scheme was used to explore the answers to the open-ended questions. Two a priori groupings of students are presented: students who had a permanent address in Calgary and who had graduated from Calgary high schools; and students who had a permanent address in Lethbridge and had graduated from a Lethbridge high school. These groups were further divided into gender categories resulting in four grouped divisions: Lethbridge Male, Lethbridge Female, Calgary Male, and Calgary Female.

### *Age and Gender*

Table 5 reports participants' responses to question 1, concerning gender, and question 2, concerning year of birth. Of the 21 participants interviewed, 19 met eligibility requirements and it is their data that is reported here. The 19 participants consisted of 11 in the Lethbridge group, and 8 in the Calgary group. The mean age was 19.5 for all participants; the Lethbridge group had a mean age of 19.4 years, and the Calgary group had a mean age of 19.6 years.

Table 5. Gender and Mean Age of Participants -- Overall and by Group

Group	# of Participants	Average Age
Lethbridge Females	5	19.2
Lethbridge Males	6	19.5
Lethbridge Total	11	19.4
Calgary Females	5	20.2
Calgary Males	3	19
Calgary Total	8	19.6
Overall Total	19	19.5

### *Work and Sources of Funding*

Questions 3a and 3b dealt with the participants' work situation. Question 3a asked the average number of hours that participants worked during their first year. Question 3b asked the number of hours they anticipated working during their second year. Table 6 reports the results. In the first year, 11 (58%) of the participants worked an average of 10.1 hrs a week. Two (14%) more of the participants, in the second year, anticipated having to work. The anticipated average hours of work per week also increased in the

second year by 8.4 hours. In years one and two, more students in the Lethbridge group reported having to work; however, the students in the Calgary group who worked reported working longer hours.

Table 6. Number of Participants Working and Mean Hours of Work – Overall and by Group

Group	1st Year - Employed	1st Year - Reported Hours per Week of Employment	2nd Year - Planning to Work	2nd Year - Hours of Employment Anticipated
Lethbridge Females (n=5)	4 (80%)	10.5	5 (100%)	15.1
Lethbridge Males (n=6)	4 (67%)	6.6	4 (67%)	8.5
Lethbridge Total (n=11)	8 (73%)	8.6	9 (82%)	11.8
Calgary Females (n=5)	2 (40%)	5.4	3 (60%)	10.2
Calgary Males (n=3 <sup>a</sup> )	1 (33%)	18.0	1 (50%)	40.0
Calgary Total (n=8 <sup>a</sup> )	3 (38%)	11.7	4 (57%)	25.1
Overall Total (n=19 <sup>a</sup> )	11 (58%)	10.1	13 (72%)	18.5

<sup>a</sup>One participant did not return for the second year.

Question 4a asked what sources of funding participants were using for their first year; question 4b asked what sources they were hoping to use in their second year. Table 7 displays participants' responses, broken down by group and location.

Table 7. Sources of Funding Used by Number of Participants – Overall and by Group

Years	Lethbridge Females		Lethbridge Males		Lethbridge Total		Calgary Females		Calgary Males		Calgary Total		Overall Total	
	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Family	0	0	2	0	0	2	2	2	2	2	4	4	6	5
Loans	0	0	2	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	3	2
Scholarships	4	2	2	0	6	2	1	1	1	0	2	1	8	3
Savings	1	1	3	3	4	4	1	1	1	0	2	1	6	5
Registered <sup>b</sup>	1	2	0	0	1	2	2	2	0	0	2	2	3	4
Work	0	2	0	1	0	3	1	1	0	0	1	1	1	4

<sup>a</sup>One participant did not return for the second year.

<sup>b</sup>Registered Education Savings Plan and Registered Retirement Savings Plan.

Overall 8 participants received some type of scholarships. Six used savings, and 3 used Registered Education Savings Plans (RESPs) and/or Registered Retirement Savings Plans (RRSPs). Three reported using loans, and six were funded by their families. One participant mentioned having to work. The results for the second year show that fewer students anticipate getting or applying to use scholarships, that savings are being depleted, and that more students anticipate having to work to fund their education. For sources of funding in their first year, the Lethbridge group mentioned scholarships most often, whereas the Calgary group mentioned family most often. For anticipated sources of funding in the second year, the mention of assistance from family stayed the same for the Calgary group and increased for the Lethbridge group.

#### *Parents' Level of Education*

Question 5 asked about the highest level of education attained by participants' parents. Table 8 displays the results, counting each parent as one for each participant.

Clearly most participants came from well-educated homes. Of the parents, 24 had a Bachelor's degree or higher, 9 had at least a college diploma, and only 4 had a high school diploma or less.

Table 8. Parents' Highest Educational Obtainment – Overall and by Group

	Lethbridge Females	Lethbridge Males	Lethbridge Total	Calgary Females	Calgary Males	Calgary Total <sup>a</sup>	Overall Total
No High School	0	2	2	0	1	1	3
High School	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
College	3	2	5	2	2	4	9
Bachelors	3	6	9	7	3	10	19
Graduate	2	2	4	0	0	0	4
Doctorate	0	0	0	1	0	1	1

<sup>a</sup>One participant did not return for the second year.

### *Program and Program Load*

Question 6a asked what program of studies participants were enrolled in for year one. As Table 9 displays, 5 participants reported pursuing a combined Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Education degree, 1 a Bachelor of Science and Bachelor of Education degree, 6 a Bachelor of Management degree, 2 a Bachelor of Arts degree, 2 a Bachelor of Science degree, and 1 each a Bachelor of Arts and Science, Bachelor of Fine Arts and Bachelor of Music program. The Calgary group had 4 of the 8 participants (50%) enrolled in a teacher education program, whereas, the Lethbridge group had only 2 of the 11, or 18% enrolled in a teacher education program.

Table 9. Program of Studies in First Year – Overall and by Group

	Lethbridge Females	Lethbridge Males	Lethbridge Total	Calgary Females	Calgary Males	Calgary Total <sup>a</sup>	Overall Total
BA	0	1	1	1 <sup>c</sup>	1	2	3
BSc	0	2 <sup>c</sup>	2	0	0	0	2
BASc	1 <sup>b</sup>	0	1	0	2	2	3
BMgt	1	2	3	1	1	2	5
BEEd	2	0	2	3 <sup>d</sup>	1	4	6
BFA	1	0	1	0	1	1	2
BMus	0	1	1	0	1	1	2

<sup>a</sup>One participant did not return for the second year.

<sup>b</sup>This individual changed to a BA for their second year.

<sup>c</sup>These individuals changed majors not programs for their second year.

<sup>d</sup>This individual was forced to change programs for their second year due to poor academic performance.

Question 6b asked participants in what program of studies they anticipated being enrolled for year two. Five participants reported anticipating program changes. The participant pursuing a Bachelor of Arts and Science major was changing to a Bachelor of Arts program. Two participants in the Bachelor of Arts program changed their majors. One general major Bachelor of Arts participant was changing to a major in psychology, and the other student from English to drama. Of the remaining two anticipated program changes in the second year, one was due to attrition, as a participant had left the University of Lethbridge to pursue education at a college. The other participant pursuing a Bachelor of Education degree changed to open studies; the participant had failed and could continue only as an open studies student.

Question 7 asked participants the number of classes they had taken in year one, and the number they planned to take in year two. As illustrated in Table 10, participants



took 4.8 courses in their first semester, 4.1 courses in their second semester, and 0.7 courses in the summer semester. The mean was 4 courses for the first semester in their second year, and they expected to take 3.8 courses during the second semester of their second year. The Calgary group took more courses to start with, but after that they consistently took fewer courses than the Lethbridge group; however, the Lethbridge group enrolled in more summer courses than the Calgary group.

Table 10. Mean Participant Course Load – Overall and by Group

Group	Fall 2006	Spring 2007	Summer 2007	Fall 2007	Spring 2008
Lethbridge Females	4.4	4.6	1.8	4.4	4.6
Lethbridge Males	4.8	4.6	0.2	4.3	4.6
Lethbridge Total	4.6	4.6	1.0	4.4	4.6
Calgary Females	4.6	4.4	.6	4.4	3.4
Calgary Males	5.3	2.6	0	2.7	2.7
Calgary Total	5.0	3.5	0.3	3.6	3.1
Overall Total	4.8	4.1	0.7	4.0	3.8

*Note: Five courses are considered a normal full-time course load.*

#### *Accommodation*

Three questions related to participant's living arrangements. Question 8 asked in how many places, since September 2006, participants had resided while attending the University of Lethbridge. Table 11 displays the results. In the first year, students resided in a mean of 1.4 locations. The Lethbridge group had no changes of residence to contend with, while the Calgary group all dealt with at least one change of residence, with one student having reported moving three times.

Table 11. Mean Number of Places of Residence – Overall and by Group

Group	Mean Number of Places of Residence	Range
Lethbridge Females	1	1-1
Lethbridge Males	1	1-1
Lethbridge Total	1	-
Calgary Females	1.8	1-3
Calgary Males	1.7	1-2
Calgary Total	1.8	-
Overall Total	1.4	-

Questions 9a and 9b asked with whom participants lived during their first year and second years. The options were “with family,” “with roommates,” “alone,” “with significant other,” or “other.” Since none of the participants selected “significant other” or “other,” those options have been excluded from the results reported in Table 12. In addition, since all of the 11 Lethbridge participants indicated that they resided with family, their data has been excluded from Table 12.

Table 12. Types of Accommodation for First and Second Year Calgary Students

Group	1 <sup>st</sup> Year		2 <sup>nd</sup> Year	
	Alone	With Roommates	Alone	With Roommates
Calgary Females	1	4	1	4
Calgary Males <sup>a</sup>	0	3	0	2
Calgary Total <sup>a</sup>	1	7	1	6

<sup>a</sup>One participant did not return for the second year.

Of the participants in the Calgary group, 7 reported living with roommates in the first year. That number decreased to 6 in the second year due to the attrition of one student, and only one student lived alone for both years.

Question 10 was open ended and asked participants to describe their living arrangements in the first and second year. While responses varied, the majority of participants reiterated the information concerning with whom they were living: family, roommates, or alone. However, they did report the location of the accommodation, as summarized in Table 13.

Table 13. Location of Accommodation for First and Second Year – Overall and by Group

Years	Lethbridge		Lethbridge		Lethbridge		Calgary		Calgary		Calgary		Overall	
	Females		Males		Total		Females		Males		Total <sup>a</sup>		Total	
	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Westside	2	2	3	3	5	5	5 <sup>b</sup>	4	3	2	8	6	13	11
Other	3	3	3	3	6	6	1 <sup>b</sup>	1	0	0	1	1	7	7

<sup>a</sup>One participant did not return for the second year.

<sup>b</sup>One participant resided in both the Southside and then Northside in year one.

A river divides the west side of Lethbridge from the rest of the city. Since the University of Lethbridge is located on the west side, students living in west Lethbridge have the shortest commute time to the University. In this study the Lethbridge group, since they all lived at home, had no control over where they reside. The Calgary group reported living in west Lethbridge for their first year, but in the second year, fewer reported residing in the west side.

### *Transportation and Commute Time*

Questions 11a and 11b asked how individuals traveled to and from campus in their first and second year respectively, including the time frames associated with that travel. Table 14 displays the mean commute time for participants in both years.

Table 14. Mean Commute Time – Overall and by Group

Group	Mean 1 <sup>st</sup> Year Commute Time (in minutes)	Mean 2 <sup>nd</sup> Year Commute Time (in minutes)
Lethbridge Females	29.5	27.5
Lethbridge Males	17.9	15.9
Lethbridge Total	23.7	21.7
Calgary Females	26	23.5
Calgary Males	18.2	11.3
Calgary Total	22.1	17.4
Overall Total	22.9	19.6

The commute time for participants decreased between the first and second year. The mean commute time was 22.9 minutes in year one and 19.6 minutes in year two. Two factors mentioned in the interviews could have resulted in the decrease. First, construction that was underway at the University in their first year was completed in the second year. Second, changes made to the City of Lethbridge bus routes between the two years may have reduced commute time for some participants. In addition, some participants who had walked to University in their first year now had vehicles, reducing their commute time. The types of transportation that participants mentioned using are displayed in Table 15.

Table 15. Type of Transportation for First and Second Year – Overall and by Group

Years	Lethbridge Females		Lethbridge Males		Lethbridge Total		Calgary Females		Calgary Males		Calgary Total <sup>a</sup>		Overall Total	
	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Bus	4	4	1	1	5	5	3	1	1	0	4	1	9	6
Car	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	3	2
Pool														
Drove	2	2	3	5	5	7	2	3	2	2	4	5	9	12
Manual <sup>b</sup>	1	1	1	0	2	1	4	2	2	1	6	3	8	4

*Note: Participants could report more than one type of transportation.*

<sup>a</sup>One participant did not return for the second year.

<sup>b</sup>Includes references to walking, biking and skateboarding.

There was a reported decrease in bus use from year one to year two for the Calgary group; a decrease in manual forms of transportation, such as walking; and an increase in driving to campus. Participants commented on the stress of commuting during the first year, noting such issues as the need to rely on bus schedules and not being able to get home quickly if necessary.

#### *Reasons for Choosing Post-Secondary Education and University of Lethbridge*

Question 12 asked why participants had decided to pursue post-secondary education, and question 13 asked specifically why they had chosen the University of Lethbridge. These two questions were examined using a basic coding method, and the frequency of category responses was tallied. Table 16 displays participants' reported reasons for choosing to pursue post-secondary education.

Table 16. Reasons for Pursuing Post-Secondary Education – Overall and by Group

	Lethbridge Females	Lethbridge Males	Lethbridge Total	Calgary Females	Calgary Males	Calgary Total	Overall Total
Improve Career Opportunities	2	4	6	3	1	4	10
Job Requirements	1	2	3	1	1	2	5
Further Education	0	2	2	2	1	3	5
Family/Friend Influences	2	2	4	0	0	0	4
The Thing to Do	1	1	2	1	1	2	4
Better Paying Job	0	0	0	1	0	1	1
Personal Betterment	0	0	0	0	1	1	1

*Note: Participants often mentioned more than one reason for pursuing post-secondary.*

Participants gave a range of reasons for deciding to pursue post-secondary education. The most frequently mentioned reason in all groups was that post-secondary education had the potential to improve participants' career opportunities. The Calgary and Lethbridge groups differed in the next most frequently mentioned reason. The Lethbridge group mentioned the influences of family and friends next in frequency; however, but the Calgary group did not mention this factor at all. The Calgary group mentioned simply wanting to further their education as the second most important reason for pursuing post-secondary education.

Question 13 asked why the participant specifically chose the University of Lethbridge. The responses are displayed in Table 17.

Table 17. Reasons for Choosing the University of Lethbridge – Overall and by Group

	Lethbridge	Lethbridge	Lethbridge	Calgary	Calgary	Calgary	Overall
	Females	Males	Total	Females	Males	Total	Total
Location	5	5	10	2	2	4	14
Program	3	1	4	4	0	4	8
Reputation							
Cost Benefit	2	4	6	0	1	1	7
Family/Friend	1	1	2	1	0	1	3
Influences							
Size	0	0	0	1	2	3	3
Admission	0	1	1	0	0	0	1
Average							

*Note: Participants often mentioned more than one reason for pursuing post-secondary.*

As was the case in question 12, participants gave a range of reasons for specifically choosing the University of Lethbridge. Location topped the list of mentions for all groups. The second most common reason given was program availability for the Calgary group, while cost benefit was more important for the Lethbridge group.

#### *Profile of the Commuter Student*

Based on the questionnaire responses, a composite profile of the commuter student was established. The profile provides an overall picture of who the commuter students are and what types of experiences they are having. The profile describes the students who participated; however, because the sample was random, the profile could be used to represent the population of commuter students in general.

The characteristics that define all participants resulted in the following profile for first-year commuter students. At just over 19 years of age, the first-year commuter

students who entered university directly out of high school work 10 hours per week. Scholarships are a common source of funding for these students' in their first year. The students are pursuing post-secondary education primarily because they want to improve their career opportunities. They specifically chose the University of Lethbridge because of its location. Their families are well educated, as their parents are either diploma or degree holders. These students most likely want to pursue a teacher education program, and they have been taking just under five courses a semester. They use either public transit (bus) or personal vehicles as their main source of transportation to campus, and they have a 23-minute commute time.

For their second year, these commuter students still have to work, and the amount of time they anticipate working increases to 18 hours a week. These students do not anticipate receiving as much funding assistance from scholarships, and they will be taking a lighter course load in their second year. They will be more likely to use a car in their second year, and their commute time will decrease.

In examining the first and second year commuter characteristics, the basic profile changes slightly for students in the Calgary and Lethbridge groups. The Lethbridge commuter students, in addition to the characteristics outlined above, are more likely to work in their first year. They draw on more scholarships and savings during their first year and do not expect to use family assistance for funding until their second year. The Lethbridge students reported utilizing summer courses more often than the Calgary students. Since they live at home with family, they have no control over how close they live to the University, and they do not have to worry about changing residence or roommates. Bus use does not decrease, but driving to campus for their second year



increases for the Lethbridge commuters in an attempt to reduce their commute time.

These students, like the generic commuter students described above, want to pursue post-secondary education mainly to improve their career opportunities; however, family and friend influences are their second main reason for attending university. These students, like the others, specifically chose the University of Lethbridge because of location; however, their second most frequently mentioned reason is specifically the cost benefit.

In addition to the key characteristics of generic commuter students, the Calgary commuter students have a few different characteristics. Fewer Calgary students may work, but those who do have to work longer hours. Family is a consistent source of funding for the first and second years. These Calgary commuter students live with roommates and change residences on average 1.5 times per academic year. They are more likely to live close to campus in their first-year and to decrease their bus use in their second year. The main reason they give for pursuing post-secondary education is still to improve career opportunities; however, the importance of furthering their education is their second most frequently mentioned reason. When explaining why they specifically chose the University of Lethbridge, these students still mention location, but their second most important reason is program availability and this is represented by half of them enrolling in the institutions' very reputable teacher education program.

### *The Commuter Student Experience*

After examination and coding the interviews, and then verification through the focus group, the grounded theory from the participants' experience was developed. The theory entitled "the commuter student experience" is illustrated in Figure 2.

The substantive theory developed from the data in this study is summarized into three main categories, their subcategories, and one mediating variable. The three main categories are labeled “context,” “control,” and “connections.” These three main categories all contain subcategories that emerged from the data. Prior to analysis of the subcategories that exist in each area and the mediating variable, the relationship between the core categories needs to be addressed. The two core categories -- control and connections -- are intertwined with context. This intertwining is illustrated in Figure 2, which shows all the core categories simultaneously influencing each other.

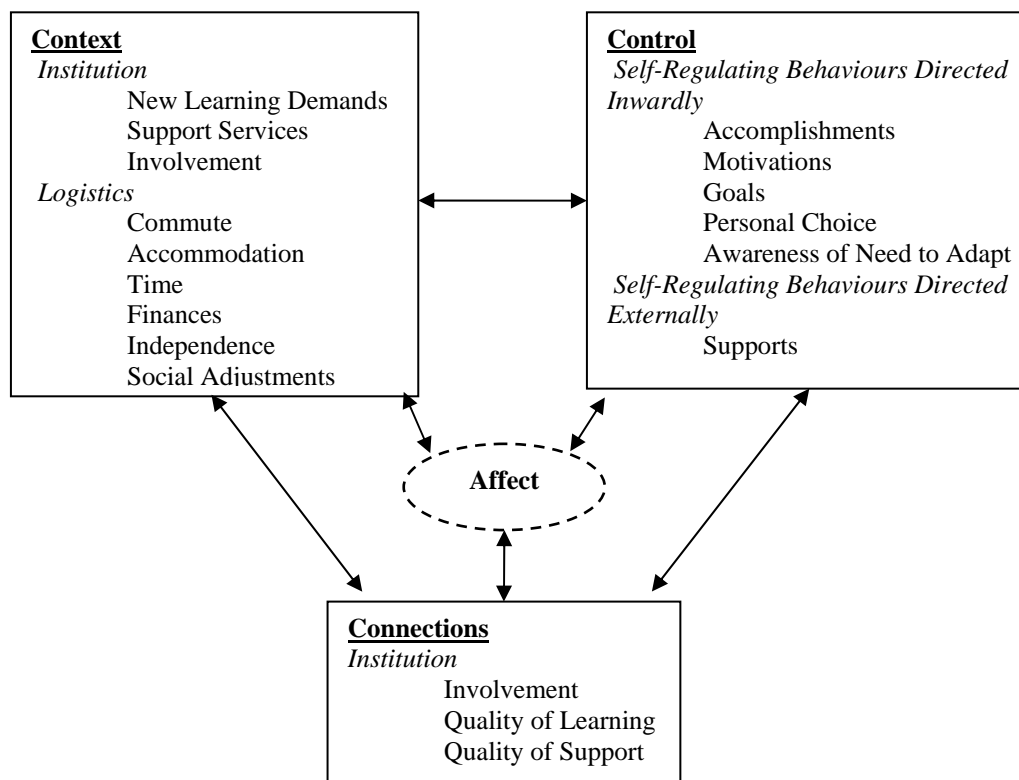


Figure 2. The commuter student experience.

Context refers to the environment, new experiences, and conditions that individual students must adapt to and manage within their first year. Control refers to students' ability to manage the stress and adapt to it by using self-regulating behaviours.

The more students believe they are in control of their context, the more connected they will feel toward the institution. Connections refer to students' sense of belonging to the institution, in this case the University of Lethbridge. The more connected they are to the institution, the better their context and the more in control of their situation they will be. Affect is a mediating variable that is also an important component of the theory as it influences the participants' experiences in all three of the main categories.

Using exemplars from the participants to illustrate the types of responses given, a more detailed analysis of each core category and its subsequent themes follows. An examination of the role of affect is presented following the analysis of the three core categories. The exemplars used identify only the group membership of the a priori participant groups: Lethbridge Female, Lethbridge Male, Calgary Female, and Calgary Male. The theory is then examined for any significant differences among the four groups.

### *Context*

Context refers to the environment, new experiences, and conditions that individual students must adapt to and manage within their first year. In other words, context is the milieu in which students operate. All participants are exposed to context, but the conditions that are a part of context vary for each participant. For example, one participant may report ease in finding suitable accommodation, while another may have had to move numerous times throughout the year. The subcategories of context are entitled "institution" and "logistics."

*Experiences with the institution.* One important aspect of the commuter students' context pertained to their experiences with the actual institution. This subcategory illustrates how participants had to adapt to and/or adjust to certain characteristics of the

institution. This category was further divided into “new learning demands,” “support services,” and “involvement.” As indicated above, each student may experience components of context differently. The following exemplars have positive, negative, or neutral connotations.

A cluster of participant contextual experiences was related to learning. In particular, participants found that they needed to adapt to a different way of learning; this led to the theme of “new learning demands”. The exemplars illustrate the need for participants to adapt to new learning demands, adjusting to a different way of learning than was required in high school:

- “It is lot better than high school just because it was more of an open atmosphere for intellectual discussion as opposed to memorization of stuff.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “It’s different, but I like it better, I think, because there are not assignments every day. You can pace yourself and decide what you do and don’t need to do.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “The course load was nicer – they left you alone and you could do your own thing. A lot more independent learning – more my style so that really helped.” (Calgary Male)

Participants also reported experiences with the institution that were related to support services. The exemplars illustrate the participants’ experiences with the support services at the institution.

- “I went to an office to walk me through to see what classes I should take. I forget what it was.” (Lethbridge Female)

- “I think the only ones [services accessed] are related to my loans, scholarships.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “I like the health centre. I saw a dietitian.” (Calgary Female)
- “No one helped me register for my courses so I didn’t know what to do.” (Calgary Male)

In experiences with the institution related to involvement, the participants were detailing their extra-curricular experiences. Involvement refers to how the participants are engaging with the institution through non-academic means:

- “I really didn’t participate in anything except for drama plays.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “[You] usually wait until your class is done and then you leave the campus.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “I was in rugby.” (Calgary Male)

*Logistics.* The other subcategory of context has been labeled “logistics”.

Participants within their first year all had new experiences associated with the details of attending a post-secondary institution. The new experiences and effects associated with having to commute, accommodation issues, managing time, dealing with finances, having new-found independence and experiencing new social adjustments are the areas under logistics that commuter students mentioned having to deal with in their first year.

Participants’ comments regarding their commute to the institution showed a real discrepancy in the conscious and unconscious effects that commuting was having on their experience, as seen in the following exemplars. Regardless of their perceptions about the

effects that commuting was having on them, participants still had to deal with and manage their commute to and from campus.

- “I don’t think it affected it that much but then again I have never known anything else, having never lived on campus, so I don’t know how convenient that was.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “No, it was never an issue. Even if I didn’t feel like walking I would just hop on the next bus. If it was nice out we would just walk – there was no problem to that. No, even in Calgary we would walk everywhere, so walking here is a lot quicker. A 45 minute walk is nothing... My high school was 2 minutes up the road for me, but I used to walk two hours just to get to a friend’s house.” (Calgary Male)
- “No, I was really close so I can’t blame that on me not going to class. I think it didn’t really affect me.” (Calgary Male)
- “You had to kind of plan ahead and your driving time too and road construction, and all that stuff.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “It wasn’t really that much of an issue. Sometimes, for example, when I needed to stay on campus a little bit longer and then take the next bus home, if I stayed after a certain hour the buses stopped rotating. So that was a little inconvenient, but for the most part it was okay.... Sometimes academically we have group projects and it would be, like, let’s meet on Saturday in the library or something, and last year there were no buses in rotation on the weekend that were regular buses. That was a little inconvenient that way, and socially if you want to meet a friend, let’s get together on Friday to do

something to go and see a movie or something but my bus, my method of transportation, isn't there." (Lethbridge, Calgary Male)

Another logistical issue that students had to deal with was accommodation. The Lethbridge group expressed their concerns about accommodation; however, since they were all living at home, they had no concerns related to finding different accommodations. The following exemplars illustrate the general types of feelings that participants expressed regarding their accommodation:

- "It was easier [living at home] because I did not have to worry about working a lot to pay rent or being able to have food and actually to live." (Lethbridge Female)
- "[resided three places, evicted first year] We found a new place right away so it wasn't bad. The house is fine. It's close, although my room is very small but it's okay." (Calgary Female)
- "I definitely enjoyed the fact that I had my own place to go back to and be alone." (Calgary Female)
- "Well, there are pros and cons to the situation [living with roommates]... The house is wonderful. The only thing that is hard is if I need to study or I have to get to work quickly it can be a little bit more difficult." (Calgary Female)

A third logistical issue concerns time management. The following exemplars illustrate students' feelings about how they manage their time. Scheduling classes and work, balancing family life, and even commuting are some examples of the new time issues participants mentioned having to deal with:

- “Now I have to find time to hang out with friends... I am always so busy. There was hardly any time to do homework or time to see friends.”  
(Lethbridge Female)
- “I was too busy trying to keep up with the homework.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “Not knowing my work schedule, it is hard to plan 2-3 weeks ahead to make an appointment... It was a pain to come back to school if you forgot something.” (Calgary Female)
- “I went back [visiting Calgary] maybe once a month, but there was a big long stretch where I didn’t go back for a few months... When I was away from home I really wish I had been able to go home just to see my family and stuff.” (Calgary Female)
- “You don’t see your parents, you talk to them over the phone and that is different.” (Calgary Male)

Finance is another logistical concern. Participants described the challenges or new experience of having to pay for their schooling or coming to the realization that there are costs associated with their education:

- “I don’t know if I could have [taken summer courses] because of the financing.” (Calgary Male)
- “It was a whole lot cheaper [living at home]! It’s awesome to have your parents cook your meals, and you don’t have to pay for anything.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “Last year I wasn’t working and ran out of money, and I needed to find the money.” (Calgary Male)



Independence is another logistical area. Participants mentioned having to make choices of their own, without parents or teachers constantly watching over them, in the following exemplars:

- “It’s hard not to procrastinate. There is nobody telling you [that] you have to do anything.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “It’s great for me because I have the inflated sense of independence and I could just go to and from at will, sort of thing.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “I went to the independent high school and this is more structured. I do like the structure.” (Calgary Female)
- “It was exciting. I felt really independent. I am getting to school by myself, I am coming home, I am at my classes, no one is encouraging me to study except myself.” (Calgary Female)

Within their first year, participants had social adjustments to make as they experienced an entirely new set of friends, or interacted with old friends from high school in a new environment. The final logistical area, social adjustment, was reported in varying degrees; some participants reported feelings of isolation and others did not.

- “I haven’t met many new people.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “I didn’t have, like, any friends last year.” (Calgary Female)
- “It’s just fun. I just met a lot of new people.” (Calgary Female)
- “Actually better than high school. [I have] more friends now than I did back in Calgary.” (Calgary Male)
- “Last year I kind of faded into the background and didn’t want to speak.” (Lethbridge Female)

- “For me I am actually more of a stick-to-yourself person.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “I definitely find myself a little bit more by myself than usual.” (Lethbridge Male)

### *Control*

The second major theme in the commuter student experience is control. Control refers to the techniques or strategies that participants use to manage the components of their new experiences within context. When participants believed that they had more control, they reported having better experiences of their context. In turn, a better experience of their context resulted in a greater sense of control; for example, participants whose self-regulating behaviours made them aware of a need to adapt then reported their new experiences related to time management in a more positive light.

*Self-regulating behaviours.* The control and adaptation process occurred through participants’ engaging in self-regulating behaviours, which were either internally or externally directed. These behaviours and/or actions encouraged the commuter students to take control over their context and to acquire a better connection with the institution. Internal self-regulating behaviours included actions where participants justified their struggles and gained a sense of belonging through the following areas: celebrating their accomplishments, establishing internal motivations, affirming their goals, experiencing personal choice, and being aware of their need to adapt. Externally directed self-regulating behaviours include actions where participants gain control over their changing situation by utilizing external support networks.

Celebrating accomplishments is one area of self-regulating behaviours.

Participants expressed their feelings regarding their performance at the institution. The

following exemplars illustrate that the participants who did well felt a sense of accomplishment, which would result in decreased feelings of failure and overall stress:

- “...did pretty good in classes.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “I think I did everything to the best of my ability.” (Lethbridge, Calgary Male)
- “Really well actually, I did really well in all my courses.” (Calgary Female)

Another area of self-regulating behaviours is motivation. Participants reported their internal belief and perception that they needed and would benefit from attending the institution:

- “I would keep on thinking, I want to do this, I have to be here.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “I have a better mind set about things this year .....Rather than being motivated by fear I am trying to turn it around and being motivated to actually reach for something other than just getting away from Canadian Tire.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “I have to put my mind to it.....I am here at the University of Lethbridge and I am going to stay here for the next 4 years.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “...getting an education is great.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “To further your education is the most important thing you can do for yourself.” (Calgary Female)
- “Not only does it further you in life, but you get to meet new people who will be your friends for the rest of your life.” (Calgary Male)

Goals were also important to participants, many of whom reaffirmed their original goals after their first year. Students may be motivated and see benefits to attending

university; however, their goals also need to mesh with the deliverables that the institution can provide.

- “[First-year experience] reaffirmed my ambition to be a theatre major.”  
(Lethbridge Female)
- “Yeah, I think if anything I am more excited [to be in university].” (Calgary Female)
- “No, it [first-year experience] hasn’t changed it [goal]. It just concreted it more.” (Calgary Male)

Participants reported that they wanted to be at the institution, that it is their choice. Personal choice, an internal self-regulating behavior, also assists in establishing more control for the participants:

- “I really enjoy them [classes] especially now since I am doing more what I want.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “I like -- I think it is better here because I want to be here now, and I don’t feel pushed to be here.” (Calgary Female)
- “I like school now. Like I want to come to school.” (Calgary Female)
- “I am also in something I want to be in.” (Calgary Male)

The last area of internal self-regulating behaviours is awareness of the need to adapt. Participants who are aware that, to make their experience better, they need to change certain behaviours will be more in control. Whether or not participants actually followed through on their desire to change, they expressed their awareness of needing to adapt to better fit into their new environment:

- “This year I want to do more on campus.” (Lethbridge Female)

- “I have to get higher, my GPA higher.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “I am coming to school earlier.” (Calgary Female)
- “I am trying to attend more classes...check out your professors before you go to class.” (Calgary Male)

Support is the final area of self-regulating behaviours, and it is the only externally directed one. Support refers to the people from whom participants seek assistance during their time of adjustment to a new context. Those participants who have individuals they can turn to for assistance felt more in control of their situation.

- “My family is very supportive.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “My parents, if I ever am unhappy or something like that, they are the first ones I call.” (Calgary Female)
- “Pretty much myself and my friends.” (Calgary Male)

### *Connections*

Context includes all of the new experiences that coincide with attending university for the first time. Control is what helps the students deal with the new experiences. The third category of the commuter student experience is connections. Connections refer to the participants’ developing a sense of belonging to the institution. Feeling a sense of connection with the institution also increases commuter students’ control over their context. However, a lack of connection with the institution decreases students’ confidence in the context and their control.

Connections with the institution are established through three main areas: involvement, quality of learning, and quality of support. However, commuter students may place more or less importance on each category than residential students. Many of

the commuter students did not become as involved socially with the institution, so they tended to place more importance on the quality of learning and the quality of support that the institution offers. Commuter students did not place as much emphasis on the institution having opportunities for them to get involved in intramurals and student government, as many saw completing their education as their primary goal. The main emphasis for commuter students then was the quality of learning and support.

*Involvement.* The participants expressed a relationship and sense of belonging to the institution:

- “I know more people here, and I know my way around so it is less stressful.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “The social times are kind of nice being in an environment where you know people and you feel like you belong there.” (Lethbridge Female)

*Quality of learning.* The participants’ opinions on the quality of learning that the institution offers helped them feel further connected to the institution:

- “Now I know the U of L has a really good education program and I kind of appreciate being here.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “The professors that I have had so far there have been a couple that haven’t been so great. The majority of them have were so good and so helpful with everything. Class sizes is huge I find, it was really hard the first year to feel like you could go ask for help just because who cares, and this year with having small classes and even last year when I had small classes it really helped with my understanding at university.” (Lethbridge Female)

- “It’s the best place to come for teaching and you can advance in that career that’s why I came here.” (Calgary Female)

*Quality of support.* The participants’ opinions on the quality of support that the institution offers helped them feel further connected to the institution; however, participants’ comments showed that not all felt connected to the institution:

- “[I saw] the program advisors in the Student Union and they did not help and they gave me all the wrong information.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “I wish the UPass [mandatory bus pass] would have went through.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “I had some issues trying to register the first time around.” (Calgary Female)
- “It’s good [contact with professors]. I email unless it is hard to write and then I go in... I haven’t really had huge problems... Yes, they are helpful... Yes I went to the advising office a few times, they were really helpful.” (Calgary Female)
- “I love the fitness centre and the climbing wall.” (Calgary Female)

*Mediating Variable: Affect*

It became apparent that a mediating variable was involved in each of the reciprocal interactions among context, control, and connections. Participants clearly experienced a variety of emotional responses to the situations to which they were exposed. These emotional responses -- the “affect” -- may have been positive, neutral, or negative in their impact. Participants’ responses indicated that their emotional responses were important; therefore, the category of affect arose within the theory development as a mediating variable. While this component is not a core category, it assists in developing

an understanding of the commuter student experience. Following is a discussion of the relationship of affect to the three main categories, along with illustration through exemplars of participants' most common emotional responses.

Affect originates from context, and it has a reciprocal relationship with all three categories of context, control, and connections. All participants reported some type of emotional response to the situations and experiences they were facing. These emotional responses, in turn, would have influenced their perceptions of their situation. For example, participants who reported frustration about their new learning demands may have seen their first-year experience as a failure. In contrast, participants who employed more self-regulating behaviours to increase their control tended to have more positive reactions to the affect. The more negative the impact from the affect that participants experienced from their context, the more control they would require. For example, participants who experienced feelings of frustration with the new learning demands would need to engage in more goal affirmation to remind themselves of the reasons why they are attending the institution. Regarding the final category of connections, the more connected participants felt with the institution, the more positive impact the affect would have; conversely, the more negative the impact from the affect they experienced from the context, the less connected they would feel with the institution.

Affect, which is related to all three categories, covers a wide range of emotions that can have positive, negative, or neutral consequences. The following exemplars illustrate several positive impacts resulting from affect, including students' feelings of excitement, gratitude, and relief:



- “[comparing university to high school] It is so much better” (Lethbridge Female)
- “It was exciting. I felt really independent.” (Calgary Female)
- “Really, well, actually, I did really well in all my courses... I was happy with that and my parents were happy with that.” (Calgary Female)

Participants focused the most on the negative impact of affect. The negative reactions seemed to have come from individual participants’ lack of control, fear of the unknown, and unrealistic expectations. Participants expressed feelings such as frustration, anxiety, shock, surprise, and regret in the following exemplars:

- “I learned a lot in my first year. It was not at all what I expected it would be.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “Yeah, I would have studied right. I really wished I would have know that how brutal and bad it was going to be, could take what I know now, the 20-20 vision.” (Lethbridge Male)
- “It’s a big change. High school doesn’t prepare you for university at all. It is kind of a shock.” (Calgary Female)

The negative consequences that participants experienced from affect were caused by various stressors, both academic and non-academic. The non-academic stressors involved situations or issues not related to the institution, whereas the academic stressors related specifically to participants’ first-year institutional experience. The following exemplars refer to non-academic stressors:

- “I got in touch with the security guy after having a problem with another student.” (Lethbridge Female)

- “My dad came down when my grandpa passed away.” (Calgary Female)
- “The wind got to me. I didn’t think it would. We had a crappy winter too, got unlucky.” (Calgary Male)

In the following exemplars students comment on academic stressors:

- “It was a little nerve wracking. You always have to worry about would I be late for class, or would I do good in classes. It was a little bit hard... I was really worried about getting my major done. A few times in my first year I wanted to just drop out because it was so hard and there was so much stuff going on and I was overwhelmed. Now you just have to worry about school.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “I would like to go into Education, but the GPA for English majors is so hard, so I switched. The first semester was a little bit difficult. I failed a class and I dropped another.” (Calgary Female)
- “To put it politely, I got destroyed. I didn’t fail any classes, and obviously my GPA is good enough to come back, but it’s the stuff – it doesn’t make any sense. My favorite class was chem. and bio, and I got destroyed in them, and everything else was just ho hum and I did well in it.” (Lethbridge Male)

Participants also reported predominant feelings of doubt or fear of failure. During their first year, all experienced these to varying degrees, and some even thought of leaving. The participants’ responses are illustrated in the following exemplars:

- “A few times in my first year I wanted to just drop out because it was so hard and there was so much stuff going on and I was overwhelmed.” (Lethbridge Female)

- “Always! I would love to leave. I think moving away from home would be super.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “Certainly I entertained that (leaving), especially without soccer.” (Calgary Female)
- “Yes, it was probably in the middle of one semester, and it was like I hate this, this is not fun. I enjoy challenges, but this is not a challenge. It is just brutal non-stop. You are screwed. And I honestly thought about it even a few days ago, why am I doing this?” (Lethbridge Male)

### *Summary*

In summary, the commuter student experience theory contains three main categories and a mediating variable. The three main categories of the grounded theory include the new experiences that the commuter students must deal with within their first year (context), the ways in which they manage their changing environment (control), and their sense of belonging to the institution (connection). These components are all interconnected processes of the commuter student retention experience and are mediated by the affect variable.

After the theory was established, the two interviews from the ineligible participants were examined. These participants were deemed to be ineligible because they had lived on campus during their first year and thus were not “commuter” students; however, at the time of sampling (e.g., their second year), they were living off campus. Their interviews did support portions of the commuter student theory, specifically in the social categories of context. One participant reported that the “first year was a lot of fun” and that he or she was “forced to meet people.” A second participant reinforced that

comment on the social atmosphere, mentioning that he or she “met a lot of new people” and had “more social experiences.” That same participant, who is residing off-campus now, commented on feeling “more isolated” and having “less free time now.” The data from these two participants, who initially resided on campus, supports the finding that, compared to residence students, commuter students have a more stressful first year because they face more challenges within their context.

### *Group Differences*

In examining the data, the overall substantive theory was first established; then the data were re-examined for any apparent differences between the four a priori groups: Lethbridge Female, Lethbridge Male, Calgary Female, and Calgary Male. The differences are important to highlight since they may influence what types of retention initiatives may best meet the needs of each group of commuter students.

The Lethbridge and Calgary groups were chosen because of an expected theoretical difference in the commuter student experience due to their living away from home or staying at home. The findings indicated that the overall substantive theory of the commuter student experience is applicable to all four a priori groups. However, some group differences were apparent in the analysis of the main categories of context and control. There were no evident differences between the gender groups; therefore, when discussing the variances within the substantive theory, the author will combine the male and female groupings in the Lethbridge and Calgary groups.

Due to the differences in the profile of the Lethbridge and Calgary first-year commuter students, differences would also be expected in the types of experiences participants had to deal with. The context category encompasses all the new experiences

that a first-year commuter student must manage. Within the context category, one of the obvious differences between the Lethbridge and Calgary groups is in logistics. Logistics is further divided into commute, accommodation, time, finances, independence, and social adjustments. The Lethbridge group all lived at home, so there was no need to deal with accommodation issues such as finding a place to reside, dealing with roommates, and learning how to cook and clean. The following exemplars illustrate the issues that the Calgary group had to experience regarding the accommodations component of logistics:

- “I had to do all the cooking and cleaning, and no one could help you out when you were busy, there was no one to do that this year.” (Calgary Male)
- “I resided three places, evicted first year.” (Calgary Female)
- “I probably would have lived in residence actually to be honest. I would not have had to deal with anything.” (Calgary Female)

Time is another logistical area in which there were specific differences for the Calgary group. Having moved away from home, they specifically mentioned the problem of finding time to maintain their family life. The following exemplars mention the need to manage the time to travel back to Calgary to see family and friends:

- “My first year I went back home every second weekend.” (Calgary Male)
- “I went back maybe once a month.” (Calgary Female)

Concerning finance, another logistical component, differences were apparent between the Calgary and Lethbridge groups. While all groups had financial issues to deal with, the Lethbridge group did have an advantage in this area since they lived at home. A Lethbridge student notes the difference in this regard:

- “It was easier because I did not have to worry about working a lot to pay rent.” (Lethbridge Female)

The social experience was another main component where differences were apparent between the Lethbridge and Calgary groupings. Both areas that illustrate the differences were within context. The social adjustment area of logistics and the involvement area of institution contained the apparent differences for the Calgary and Lethbridge groups. The following exemplars illustrate that the Lethbridge participants continued to interact socially with their friends from high school. However, the Calgary group were forced to make new relationships, as they did not have pre-existing relationships to rely on:

- “It’s too much like high school because I lived here in high school and I know a lot of people that go here already so I kinda just interact with them.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “It hasn’t been a lot of change I guess got a lot closer to the people from high school, I am closer to them.” (Lethbridge Female)
- “I didn’t have like any friends last year.” (Calgary Female)
- “It’s just fun. I just met a lot of new people...It’s been awesome.” (Calgary Female)

The other social component in which there were differences between the groups was the involvement area of institution. The Calgary group had far more involvement than the Lethbridge group in on-campus activities within their first-year. Six Calgary participants were on the rugby team, the soccer team, ice hockey intramurals, volleyball intramurals, and two were involved in religious group clubs on campus. In contrast, the

Lethbridge participants indicated no involvement in sports teams or in intramurals. Of the three Lethbridge participants who mentioned any type of on-campus activity, one student was in an on-campus club, another attended frosh week events, and the final student attended some drama performances.

The Calgary and Lethbridge groups also differed in independence, which is in the logistics subcategory. Because the Calgary participants were living away from home, their non-direct family involvement had them experiencing and having to adjust more to increased feelings of independence. Overall, the Calgary group had more context issues, or more new experiences to deal with, resulting in increased feelings of anxiety and frustration. One commented:

- “No one helped me register for my courses so I didn’t know what to do it was kind of frustrating.” (Calgary Male)

The only group difference outside the context category was evident within control. The support network for all participants consisted primarily of high school friends and family. The Calgary group, however, did not have the direct access or face-to-face contact (verbal and non-verbal) with their support network that the Lethbridge group experienced.

Participants in each group experienced all the categories of the substantive theory to various degrees. Understanding distinct variations within the categories for the groups will help institutions to select more appropriate retention initiatives. The remainder of this chapter examines the variables within the research process that may have influenced the results of this study.

### *Research Process*

Prior to and throughout the research process, the researcher was alert to any possible confounding variables that may have influenced the results of the study. The relationship between the participants and interviewer and a few discrepancies within the sample selection process were the variables of particular concern.

Data were collected primarily through the in-depth interviews. Besides the questionnaire, supplementary data were also obtained through a focus group. Both forms of data collection, the interview and focus group, rely on participants' comfort level with the interviewer. Participants generally articulate more freely when there is a non-threatening relationship with the researcher. The research process was designed to facilitate an open relationship. First, at the beginning of each interview, the researcher went over the questionnaire with the participants to encourage and validate their responses. After each interview, the researcher made note of any resistance. A few of the students were more responsive than others, but after transcription of the interviews the researcher felt all participants had freely shared their stories.

Two discrepancies occurred during the research process, raising concern over the process possibly influencing the data. First, an error in the sample selection process resulted in two participants being interviewed who did not come to university directly out of high school. Second, two students who were ineligible due to their living arrangements were interviewed.

As noted in the results section, the data from the two participants who did not come directly from high school were analyzed by initially coding them with their appropriate group and adding an "x." This procedure allowed the researcher to interpret



the results in their entirety and then to look back to see if the “x” participants were not fitting into the theory. However, no apparent difference was found between their answers and those of the other participants. The second discrepancy resulted in two participants being ineligible due to their living arrangements. Both had resided on campus in their first year, but were living off campus in their second year. The interviews were still conducted, since the discrepancy became apparent at the start of the interview; the interviewer did not want the participants to feel unneeded when they had already gone out of their way in agreeing to participate. The data from their interviews were not used in the initial interpretations, but the interviews were examined after the substantive theory was developed to look for any supplemental information. This information was reported in the examination of the commuter student experience.

### *Conclusion*

The results of this study help to explain the commuter student retention experience in a small liberal arts institution. The grounded theory of the commuter student experience indicates some general conclusions. Understanding the new experiences that the commuter students must deal with during their first year (context), understanding how these students manage their changing environment (control), and helping the students feel a sense of belonging to the institution (connection) are all components and interconnected processes of the commuter student retention experience. Affect, the mediating variable, is also an important component of the theory as it influences the participants’ experiences in all three of the main categories. These results and their implications for retention research and initiatives are discussed in Chapter 5.

## Chapter Five. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to discover what commuter students are experiencing within their first year of university and how those experiences affect retention. Based on analysis of the data generated in this study, a grounded theory entitled “the commuter student experience” was established, containing three main categories and one mediating variable. The theory contributes to the understanding of the commuter student experience, suggesting possible directions for future research and applicable intervention strategies.

This chapter examines how the grounded theory contributes to and integrates with the existing literature on retention and commuter students. The implications of the theory may help institutions to address the needs of commuter students more effectively. The limitations of the study are explored and suggestions made for future research.

### *Contributions to the Literature*

The literature on retention and commuter students may be examined in light of the commuter student experience grounded theory developed through this study. Certain questions should be asked. What are the current student retention rates and how do they compare to retention rates reported by others? How does this new grounded theory compare to the theory presented by Braxton et al. (2004), to account for student departure from commuter colleges and universities? Does the existing theory provide validation or disproof? Has it identified any previously undiscovered areas of information?

### *Rates of Retention and Attrition*

Chapter 2 reviewed the literature on retention rates. In summary, the Consortium for Student Retention Data Exchange (2003) found a 21% dropout rate for first-year

students, Wong (1994, as cited in Grayson, & Grayson, 2003) found a first-year attrition rate of 24%, and ACT (2005) reported a still higher rate of 32% attrition between first and second years. The participants in this study experienced a 26% attrition rate, or a 74% retention rate between years one and two. Two individuals did not return after the first year; three more had not yet registered and could therefore be assumed not to have returned. That would mean that, of 19 participants, 5 (26%) left after completing one year. Thus the attrition or retention percentages experienced by the participants within this study are representative of the rates reported in the literature. Furthermore, the University of Lethbridge's reported retention rate for the same period was 70% for non-residence students, quite similar to the 74% found in this study. The University noted that this retention rate included part-time students. Consequently, the percentage would be somewhat lower if only full-time students were included in the analysis (M. Moser, Manager Institutional Analysis, personal communication, February 10, 2008). The results of the study are applicable to the specific population that was studied; however, since the attrition/retention rates are similar to those reported by others, these students seem to be representative of a larger group as well.

*The Theory of Braxton, Hirschy and McClendon (2004)*

The other main component of the literature review focused on the theory of Braxton et al. (2004), which accounts for student departure from commuter colleges and universities. Once the grounded theory, "the commuter student experience," was developed, the two theories were compared in an attempt to validate, disprove or identify missing areas between them.

In summary, Braxton et al.'s (2004) conceptual model of retention uses four base constructs or conceptual orientations: economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological. The model also includes 16 propositions that relate to these orientations, or to the interaction between the orientations and the following basic elements: student entry characteristics, the external environment, the campus environment, and the academic communities. Using the grounded theory resulting from this study, support was found for certain conceptual orientations and propositions of Braxton et al.'s theory.

Again, it should be noted that Braxton et al.'s (2004) theory is generic and centers on the entire commuter student population, whereas the current study specifically studied commuter students who come directly out of high school. The differentiation for this study was chosen because, as Tinto (1993) argued, the students in commuter institutions have less of a community or social environment within which to develop a sense of membership or feeling of belonging. Commuter students also display more conflicting issues between family, work and college. Differences among commuter students could then exist due to factors such as previous experience levels and age. The propositions that Braxton et al. listed may have a greater influence on commuter students who are just starting out in life, compared to those who may already have an established family of their own. To best account for this variable, the theory developed in this study was for commuter students entering university directly out of high school. Overall, eight propositions were supported (1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 10, 11, 15), four could be seen as having vague support (8, 13, 14, 16), and the remaining four were unsupported (5, 7, 9, 12) by the findings in this study.

The only proposition within the economic conceptual orientation of Braxton et al.'s (2004) theory states, "The lower the costs of college attendance incurred by the students, the greater their likelihood of persisting in college." This proposition is supported by the findings in this study. When a student has to deal with fewer financial issues, there is less stress or pressure, and that in turn creates a better context.

Braxton et al.'s (2004) conceptual category of organization contains two propositions, both supported by the findings in this study. The propositions state that student departure is lowered for institutions that are "committed to the welfare of ... students" and that "exhibit institutional integrity." Both propositions relate to the current theory's connection category. These propositions illustrate that the more connected students feel with the institution through their quality of learning and the quality of support, the more likely they are to persist.

Within the psychological conceptual orientation of Braxton et al.'s (2004) theory, support was found only for proposition 4 ("Motivation to graduate from college exerts a positive influence in student persistence") and proposition 6 ("The stronger a person's belief that he or she can achieve a desired outcome through his or her own efforts, the less likely the student will depart from college"). These propositions both relate to the control category and its applicable sub-categories of motivation and awareness of the need to adapt.

Braxton et al.'s (2004) remaining propositions, 5 and 7, are uncorroborated and proposition 8 has vague support within the psychological conceptual orientation. Proposition 5 indicates that "the greater a student's need for control and order in his or her daily life, the greater the student's likelihood of departure." However, it was found in

this study that students need control and can achieve it through their self-regulating behaviours; the more control they have, the more likely they are to persist and to gain control through self-regulating behaviours. There was no endorsement in this study for proposition 7, that “the greater a student’s awareness of the effects of his or her decisions and actions on other people, the greater the student’s likelihood of departure from college.” However, this may be due to the current study’s restricted sample. Students who are older than those in this study may be more mature, and they may have an increased awareness of their effect on others. There was some support for proposition 8: “The greater the student’s need for affiliation, the greater the student’s likelihood of departure from college.” The Lethbridge group of commuter students in this study did not place as much emphasis as the Calgary group on their need for affiliation or involvement through connections; however, the Calgary group had more involvement in activities and thus possibly more need for affiliation. Overall, proposition 8 would be supported only for certain groups of people, those who do not already have a pre-existing community within the university.

There are four propositions within the sociological conceptual orientations of Braxton et al.’s (2004) theory. In this study, no support was found for propositions 9 and 12, and validation was found for proposition 10 and 11. Parents’ education level and anticipatory socialization were linked in the theory to likelihood of departure. This study found no direct links in these areas. However, based on the findings of this study, one could make a few speculations. Anticipatory socialization refers to the processes through which students gather information on what to expect from an institution. For commuter students, a better context could be created by having accurate anticipatory socialization;

that is, institutions could realistically inform commuter students about the challenges that they may face. Braxton et al. found that commuter students who had anticipatory socialization were more likely to depart an institution. This may be explained by the fact that anticipatory socialization is gathered mostly from media sources, family and friends, who may portray an institution of higher education as providing experiences that are more typical for residential students. This creates a gap between what students think they will experience and what they actually experience. In addition, parents with higher education levels may prepare their children better concerning what type of context to expect. However, as indicated by Braxton et al., most parents with higher education experienced their education in a residence setting, so their experiences are not comparable to those of their commuting son or daughter, and the student is then more likely to depart the institution.

Proposition 10 (Braxton et al., 2004) states, “Support from significant others for college attendance decreases the likelihood of student departure.” This proposition is confirmed by the results of this study through the control category. Those participants who have individuals they can turn to for assistance and support will feel more in control of their situation. This study also confirms proposition 11 regarding communities of learning. In communities of learning, with block scheduling, a group of students takes a set of courses together. If commuter students participated in communities of learning, they would have more chances for social interaction and would experience a better context through their social adjustment.

The additional propositions 13 through 16 all relate to how the various elements of Braxton et al.’s (2004) theory interact. Proposition 13 states, “Student entry

characteristics affect the level of initial commitment to the institution.” The entry characteristics are listed as motivation, control issues, self-efficacy, empathy, affiliation needs, parental education, and anticipatory socialization. These could relate in a general way to context, because the better the students’ context, the more connected they are to the institution. Propositions 14 and 16 speak about students’ initial and subsequent commitment to the institution. While the current study did not address this point, it would seem likely that the more students participate in the self-regulating activity of goal affirmation, the more control they have and the more connected they will be to the institution. Proposition 15 states, “The greater the degree of academic integration perceived by students, the greater their degree of subsequent commitment to the institution.” This final proposition is supported in this study by the connections category and quality of learning. Students will feel more connected if they believe that the institution has a high quality of learning.

From the propositions, Braxton et al. (2004) defined how the overall theory operates (see Figure 1). External and internal campus environments, institutional integrity, and institutional support are outlined in the theory. In a comparison of Braxton et al.’s theory to the theory of the commuter student experience presented here, some similarities are apparent. The internal and external campus environments described by Braxton et al. correspond with this study’s context category, where the internal environment is the subcategory institution and the external environment corresponds with the subcategory logistics. The student entry characteristics described in Braxton et al.’s theory contain items that can be found under this study’s control category. Braxton et al. recommended that retention research should continue on the constructs derived from



economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological orientations; that future studies on retention should also include detailed institutional descriptions; and that multiple replications of the theory or conceptual model are needed. Overall, the results of this study did support certain components of Braxton et al.'s theory. Suggestions for future research also arose from the grounded theory developed in this study.

Certain areas introduced by the grounded theory developed in this study were not covered in the theory of Braxton et al. (2004). Overall, the importance of control, the barriers of commuting, the group differences, and the role of affect are not adequately represented in Braxton et al.'s theory.

Future researchers and those interested in introducing retention initiatives may also benefit from information on the apparent differences that were found between the a priori groups in this study. Regarding group membership, the Lethbridge and Calgary groups were chosen because of an expected theoretical difference in the commuter student experience due to their living away from home or staying at home. Tinto (1993) argued that students in commuter institutions have less of a community or social environment within which to develop a sense of membership or feeling of belonging. The Lethbridge group had the opportunity to maintain more social ties, since many of their high school friends and acquaintances also attended the University of Lethbridge. The Lethbridge group, who already had friends in the city and in the institution, did not need to get as socially involved in the institution. Since the Calgary group did not have as many high school friends attending the University of Lethbridge, they became more involved in meeting new friends on campus. In addition, it was expected that the Calgary group would have less of a social support network and more social problems since they

were living in a new city. The Lethbridge group, who were still living at home, had more direct and available support, whereas the Calgary group, who were not still living with their families, were less able to access the same support level. As indicated above, differences were found in the experiences of these two groups, and future studies should be mindful of these.

### *Implications*

The grounded theory generated in this study has certain implications. As stated earlier, student retention benefits the institution, community, and the students themselves. What initiatives can an institution focus on that will benefit the institution and in turn positively affect students by increasing their chances of completion? By focusing on retention, an institution increases students' chance of success and thus benefits the community by producing more graduates.

Because the highest dropout rates occur between years one and two, this study focused on commuter students' first-year experiences. The study has implications for institutional initiatives during commuter students' first year; many of the initiatives could be continued beyond the first year to benefit the larger group of commuter students. When committing to an initiative, an institution needs to be clear about what population of students it is targeting. For example, accommodation concerns would be an issue for all commuter students, but not for the Lethbridge group, who live at home. An institution cannot simply implement initiatives without measuring their outcomes and having a clear target population. If a new student social club is formed and the main participants are residence students who already participate in social activities, an institution's retention rates will not be affected as might be hoped. However, if a new student commuter club is

formed and the issues it addresses are targeted to its members' specific needs, an institution might then be more effective in increasing retention rates among this population.

The initiatives suggested below all derive from the categories of context, control, and connections. Each initiative will then influence the other categories and in turn influence the mediating variable of affect. The initiatives focus on the institution and all come down to the need to be proactive. Initiatives should be directed first toward students before they arrive on campus; they should then be continued and refocused for students who are now on campus. Students start interacting with an institution prior to arriving on campus, through activities such as applying for admission and scholarships, registering for classes, locating accommodation, and planning commuting strategies. These activities and more influence students' context, control and connections with the institution. The effectiveness of initiatives can be measured through improved retention rates and student affect. Students will experience fewer negative impacts from affect in an institution that effectively addresses context, control, and connection issues for its commuter students.

### *Context*

An institution could begin its initiatives to improve the commuter student experience through the context category. In general, an institution has to prepare its students and give them tools to handle all their new first-year experiences effectively. Students need to know what to expect from the institution and how to handle the new logistics they will face.

The institution's context has students dealing with new learning demands, support services, and involvement. Students need to know where to go for help and to be able to

access the help when they need it, and this all starts before they are actually on campus. An institution needs to communicate clearly with new students about the tasks they must accomplish prior to the first day of classes. This can be done through mail, but also through an institutions web services, email and phone calls. Many parents are assisting their children at this stage, since they still live at home, and so the family may prefer communication by mail. However, utilizing different modes of communication can ensure that the necessary information is not overlooked. Knowing what they need to do will provide more control to the students and also help to establish a better connection with the institution. Personal contact with students before they arrive on campus would be most effective, and assistance should include all context areas. For example, in contacting a student the institution would ensure that course registration is complete, housing has been found, bus passes or parking passes have been purchased, and forms such as scholarship applications have been received. For students needing help, the appropriate contact information would be provided. This could be accomplished through an institution's recruitment and/or retention office.

Once students are on campus, a new student orientation could be an effective strategy in letting students know what to expect in a class, from the institution, and so on, but since the first few days are also overwhelming, the institution may need to constantly check in on students as well. Mandatory University 101 courses, where new students have their entire first semester or first year to learn and ask about support services, would be more effective in getting the information to these students than a New Student Orientation that only lasts a few days. In a smaller institution, a one-on-one email or

individual meeting with a retention office saying, “Hi, we are here and is there anything we can answer for you?” could also be an affective strategy.

Within logistics, students are dealing with commuting, accommodation, time, finances, independence, and social adjustments. Many of the initiatives mentioned above can also address these logistic needs; however, some additional initiatives could also be effective. For commuting, the mandatory bus pass seemed to be a solution for some, but could bus routes and parking lots be better managed for commuter students? As for accommodation, an off-campus housing site that helps to match students with similar programs and in similar years could be very beneficial to students. A commuter institution needs to make accessibility and ease of finding off-campus housing a priority for these students. Time management of work and school is an issue for students, so making services accessible electronically and after hours will help ease the anxiety and concern of commuter students who are not always on campus to access them. Many participants mentioned communicating with their professors through email, so the services on campus need to be electronically accessible for commuter students. Finances are another main concern. Just informing students where they can go for financial assistance and perhaps having scholarships for which students do not necessarily have to apply would help. What if an institution implemented automatic scholarships for commuter students or at least gave bus passes to all commuter students? Independence and social adjustment are encouraged when students are given the information they need to make the right decisions. Social adjustment might be expedited by the establishment of learning communities in which students have block scheduling, which would provide them more opportunities to get to know their fellow students.

These initiatives commonly involve the use of technology. Students today are technologically savvy. An institution's use of its web services can be vital in reaching commuter students. It is important for students to have online access to apply, register for courses, obtain financial aid and scholarships, make payments, verify course selections through a degree audit program, make appointments with course advisors, post questions or comments to classmates, or email questions to their professors. Portal programs exist that can combine into one online location students' access to the library, email, registration activity, finances, and so on. Such tools can effectively target commuter students in unique ways. For example, an institution can display information that is applicable to a commuter student who is in first year and enrolled in a management program. A designated news page could contain a permanent link to all the New Student Orientation material. There could be first year management forums news, reminders about purchasing parking passes, or links to bus routes and off-campus housing sites. This service could also display set questions at certain times throughout the year. For example, just before midterm exams, a question regarding study habits might be posted and then a sign-up page for study skills workshops might appear. Prior to registration, a question about course selection might appear with information on how to book an advising appointment. The answers to such questions could also trigger follow-up contact from a retention office. Technology can open up innumerable opportunities to improve the context for commuter students.

### *Control*

An institution wanting to begin initiatives to improve commuter student retention by addressing the control category could implement certain strategies. First, giving

students the information they need can increase their feelings of control over their context and lessen their need for control. For example, students who wanted more control over their situation tended to drive to campus in their second year, as they did not want to depend on walking or bus schedules.

Initiatives focused in the control category could celebrate students' accomplishments and in turn motivate them as well. An institution could send a letter to all first-year students who have completed their first semester, congratulating them on their completion. If regulations allow, this letter could also be sent to their parents, since they are the ones students most often turn to for support. Along the same lines of celebrating the students' accomplishments, an institution could hold a year-one graduation celebration, helping students to feel that they have been a part of a successful transition into the institution. Some institutions also hold mock graduation ceremonies as part of the first days of class. This initiative is intended to make students feel connected to their ultimate goal of successful completion.

Also, if students need to change their behaviours, do they know how they can do so effectively? Students need to have accessible information on improving study skills, exam preparation, time management, note taking, transitions, career readiness, and so on, and they need to be able to access it at the appropriate time. An effective new student orientation, or University 101, could address these issues as well.

### *Connections*

An institution wanting to improve retention could undertake initiatives that focus on the connections category. Involvement, quality of learning, and quality of support need to be constantly emphasized to the student by the institution. Although not all

commuter students place as much emphasis on involvement, if they are to become connected to the institution through involvement, there would need to be more available activities for commuter students. Some additional ideas for involvement include providing a common area for commuter students where they can go and meet other commuter students, having an intramural team for commuter students, and mandatory enrollment in University 101 for all students.

To focus on the quality of learning within commuter students' first year, an institution could implement other initiatives. For example, the university could ensure that commuter students have accessible professors and smaller class sizes, so they are not intimidated. The professors who are most popular with students could be assigned to teach first-year classes to ensure that students are engaged and learning.

Quality of support is also vital for the institution. If they perceive that the quality of support is high, students have a better connection and also a better context. An institution cannot departmentalize each area. Quality student-focused support needs to be a global focus of an institution's student services. For example, students may not understand that advising offices are separate entities, so they need to be joined into one unit. All support services also need to have evening hours, accessible appointments that can be scheduled online, and online tools to assist with things such as registration, finances, career planning and degree progress. Students need to know they are valued, and again this may be accomplished through a retention office that contacts each first-year student individually at least once throughout the year. Or perhaps each first-year student could have a mandatory pre-scheduled advising appointment, where an advisor or retention officer would talk with them individually to ensure that they have accomplished



all the things that they need to do. Institutions that are committed to student services will find ways to accommodate this need for one-on-one attention.

### *Limitations*

The methodology employed and the exploratory nature of the study carry certain limitations. First, the implications of this study really apply only to commuter students at the University of Lethbridge. However, since the retention rates in this study are similar to those reported in the literature, the results could be applicable beyond this institution. A confirmatory study should be conducted to determine if the theory of the commuter student experience is also applicable to commuter students in other institutions. The decision to focus this study on commuter students coming directly out of high school and to provide a clear definition of the institution as a small liberal arts university may assist future researchers in better utilizing the findings in applicable areas.

Second, while the decision to limit the population being studied carries certain benefits, it also has limitations. There are commuter students who are part-time versus full-time; there are more mature commuter students who may be balancing a family or have had years of work experience prior to enrolling; there are commuter students who do not live in the same city as the institution and could face at least a one-hour commute each way. Since these commuter students were not included in the study, there is no evidence that the theory generated here may pertain to them.

Third, due to time limits on the study, no follow-up was performed to see if these students actually continued beyond year two. Looking at the retention rates overall, we would expect a few more of them to drop out before graduation, but not as many as are lost between years one and two.

Fourth, in this study there was a drastically lower participation rate for the Calgary males. The Calgary males had a 14% participation rate overall, as compared to the Calgary females' participation rate of 43%, and the Lethbridge males' and females' participation rate of 63%. The focus group included no participants from the Calgary groups. This extreme difference may have resulted from a few factors. First, the researcher faced a secondary hurdle of having to initially contact all Calgary participants' families in Calgary to obtain their child's Lethbridge phone number prior to contacting them directly. Often messages were left at the family's number in Calgary but they did not call the researcher back. Second, the reason that the students gave for not participating was generally that they were too busy. In the study, the students in the Calgary group were employed less often, but if they were employed they worked longer hours than their Lethbridge counterparts. They also were more involved in on-campus activities, and many commuted back to Calgary. There were more demands on their time than for the Lethbridge group.

#### *Suggestions for Future Research*

Validation is the main area to which future studies may contribute. The grounded theory generated here can be considered applicable only to the specific population being studied at this particular institution. Studies on the same type of commuter students in similar institutions, and even on a different definition of commuter students within different types of institutions, may help to validate these results. Future research will also help to determine whether the theory can be generalized to other populations of commuter students. For instance, the following questions could be examined:

- Does the theory of the commuter student experience have validity within similar institutions, or do differences exist for two-year colleges, or for larger institutions?
- Are there differences in the commuter student experience for more mature students, students who had prior experience with an academic institution, or students from racial or ethnic minorities?

In examining and verifying the theory, future studies could consider each core category to ensure that all necessary information is included. An analysis of the relationship between the categories could also be conducted. The following questions could help to verify the categories and their relationships:

- Within a student's context, what subcategories carry the most perceived negative impact? How does proximity to the start or end of the first semester and/or first year influence the prioritization of the subcategories in a student's context?
- How are students who are aware of their need to adapt successfully engaging in these altering activities? What self-regulating activities most improve students' perception of their control?
- Do the priorities change for different types of commuter students as to the importance of connecting to the institution through involvement, quality of learning, and/or quality of support?
- Does improving a student's context, control, connections, or affect subsequently improve the other categories?

It would be useful to compare commuter students with residential students in terms of the findings of this study. One could speculate, from the limited number of interviews with residential students, that the numerous organized social activities for the residence students results in better affect for them.

A final area for study could involve secondary analysis based on models of stress. Since a main area of affect for students was stress, such as anxiety, worry of failure, and regret, the stressors and models of stress could be further explored to see how these findings relate to the literature on stress.

### *Conclusion*

The purpose of this study was to explore the commuter student experience and to determine how it relates to retention. The theory generated from this study provides a detailed understanding of the commuter student experience. In summary, the commuter student experience theory contains three main categories and a mediating variable. The three main categories of the grounded theory include the new experiences that the commuter students must deal with within their first year (context), the ways in which the students manage their changing environment (control), and the students' feeling of belonging to the institution (connection). These components are all interconnected processes of the commuter student retention experience and are mediated by the variable of affect.

The results and findings of this study provide validation for existing areas of research on commuter students; however, they also suggest areas for further exploration. The theory suggests that institutions can implement certain initiatives related to commuter students' context, control and connections, in an effort to improve retention

rates for this high-risk group of students. Validation of this theory is needed to confirm its generalizability to other commuter student populations.

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## Appendix A. Questionnaire

**The Commuter Student Experience**

*Please complete the following form prior to commencing the interview.*

1. What is your gender?     Male     Female
  
2. What year were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. a. During your first year, what were the average hours of paid employment that you worked a week? \_\_\_\_\_  
  
b. During your second year, what do you anticipate your average hours of paid employment a week will be? \_\_\_\_
  
4. a. During your first year, how were you financing your education?  
  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
b. During your second year, how do you plan to finance your education?  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
5. What is the highest educational level obtained by each of your parents?  
  
Mother (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_ Father (if applicable): \_\_\_\_\_
  
6. a. During your first year, what program or programs were you enrolled in?  
  
\_\_\_\_\_
  
b. During your second year, what program or programs will you be enrolled in?  
  
\_\_\_\_\_  
7. How many full-time classes did you take or are you planning to take in the following semesters?  
  
Fall 2006: \_\_\_\_    Spring 2007: \_\_\_\_    Summer 2007: \_\_\_\_    Fall 2007: \_\_\_\_  
  
Spring 2008: \_\_\_\_

8. How many places have you resided, while attending the U of L, since September 1, 2006? \_\_\_\_\_

9. a. During your first year, were you living:  Alone  
 With roommates  With family  With significant other  
 Other (please define) \_\_\_\_\_

- b. During your second year, will you be living:  Alone  
 With roommates  With family  With significant other  
 Other: (please define) \_\_\_\_\_

10. a. Please describe your living arrangements for your first year.

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b. Please describe your living arrangements for your second year.

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11. a. Please explain how you got to and from the University of Lethbridge during your first year (include time frames associated with the travel)?

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b. Please explain how you plan to get to and from the University of Lethbridge during your second year (include time frames associated with the travel)?

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12. Initially, why did you decide to pursue post-secondary education?

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13. Why did you choose the University of Lethbridge?

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## Appendix B. Interview Script

*Thanks for agreeing to participate in my study. I really appreciate your giving your time, as it helps make everyone's experience better.*

*Again, my name is Jodie and I am a student in the Master's program here at the U of L. As I said in the phone call and in the consent form, I am interested in the experience of commuter students. I wanted to start out by verifying some of the information from the questionnaire you filled out. After that I just have some general questions to try to learn more about your particular experiences as a student.*

*(Read through some of the answers, and ask clarification if needed.  
Ask where they work and what is their schedule like at work – flexible hours, etc?)*

*Now that you are (or are not) about to start year two, when you think back:*

1. What was the first year like for you?

How did the courses go for you?

What kinds of grades have you been getting?

How are you finding the experience as compared to high school?

What about the interaction between the professors and yourself?

University is a time of changes. What has your social experience been like?

Have you, or what kinds of on- or off-campus activities have you participated in?

Did you know anyone in Lethbridge before you came down from Calgary?

OR Did you know anyone at the U of L before you attended?

Are any of your friends from high school attending U of L, and if they do, do you still hang out together?

How often do you get back to Calgary?

*Okay, we have just spent "x" minutes talking about your first year as a student and you have stated a few things like "x." Now, what can you add about:*

2. How did your living situation affect your experience as a first-year university student?

*In some studies people said that how they got to campus had an influence on their experience. I see you “walked/drove” (answer from questionnaire) most of the time.*

Was getting to campus even an issue, and if so how was it an issue?

Did your means of getting to campus affect any decisions you made academically or socially?

*We spoke about being a commuter student and your experiences. In your questionnaire you told me that you initially decided to go to post-secondary because “x.”*

3. How has your first-year experience affected what you told me about why you decided to pursue post-secondary education?

Have the reasons why you chose U of L changed at all?

How have your goals changed as a result of your first-year experience?

To you, what are the benefits or importance of university?

Have you ever entertained the idea of leaving, and if so why, and what are your thoughts about that now?

What type of support do you have – parents financial, siblings, etc. (emotional, financial). Who do you turn to for help?

Have you used any student services on campus (e.g., Advising)?

*Throughout our time so far, we talked about the general experience, the commuter experience and your thoughts on post-secondary.*

4. Being a commuter student often poses challenges to a successful experience. I am wondering if you found that to be the case, and if so what challenges were there that we have not discussed?

Now that your first year is complete, when you look back was there anything you would have done differently in your first year? Is there anything you plan to do in your second year that you have not done in your first year?

Is there anything the U of L is doing or should do to make your experience academically and or socially better?

*Is there anything else that you would like to add?*

*I may also be organizing a focus group to further discuss some of the ideas brought up in the interviews. If I need to organize a group, would you be willing to participate?*

*I would like to thank you again for your time. You do have a copy of the consent form with my number on it if any questions should arise.*



### Appendix C. Telephone Participation Request Template

Hi, is “x” there please?

Hi, my name is Jodie Black and I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge. As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master of Education degree.

You are being asked to participate in my study entitled: *Retention in a Small Liberal Arts Institution: The Commuter Student Experience*. You are being asked to participate in this study because your name has been randomly selected as a University of Lethbridge second-year student who lives off campus, and whose permanent address at time of application was in either Calgary or Lethbridge.

Before I ask if you would like to participate, I am required to provide you with some detailed information, which will take about 2 minutes. Is this a good time, or can I call you back later?

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a 30-60 minute individual interview, and a short questionnaire. The interview will be tape recorded, then transcribed to allow for verification of the information. If you are interested and/or willing, you may be asked to participate in a focus group to discuss the themes discovered within the individual interviews.

It is not anticipated that participation in this study will pose any risks to you. It may cause some inconvenience to you, through the time required to participate in the interview.

Participation in this research has the potential to improve the university experience for commuter students at the University of Lethbridge.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any need to justify your decision. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used, and all notes/tapes collected from your interview will be destroyed immediately.

All information will be kept confidential. The only others who will have contact to the information will be the committee supervisor, Dr. Kris Magnusson, and the transcriber. The transcriber, who will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement, will only have access to the interview tapes. Once the study is complete, the data will be securely stored in the possession of myself, the primary researcher. Data from this study will be disposed of after five years. All paper transcriptions will be shredded and tapes will be deleted.

If you are willing to participate I would first like to verify your eligibility and then try and book a meeting time that will work within your schedule. Would you be willing to participate in this study?

*If they say “Yes, I am willing to participate”:*

1. Verification

- Calgary Group:
  - i. You do not live on campus, correct?
  - ii. You have not attended any other institution besides the U of L, so you entered university directly out of high school?
  - iii. You lived in Calgary and graduated from a Calgary high school before attending the U of L?
- Lethbridge Group:
  - i. You are currently living at home with your family?
  - ii. You have not attended any other institution besides the U of L, so you entered university directly out of high school?
  - iii. You lived in Lethbridge and graduated from a Lethbridge high school before attending the U of L?

2. Book a meeting time

- I am conducting interviews within “x” time frames. Which openings would work within your schedule?
- Would it be possible to email you the questionnaire immediately so you may complete it beforehand? If not, you will need about 10 minutes at the beginning of the interview to complete it.
- So you are booked in at “x” and the interview will be at the U of L Career Resource Centre, B610. You can check in at the front desk.
- Thank you for your time and I will see you on the “x.”

*If they say that they are unwilling to participate, or if they are deemed ineligible to participate:*

I would like to thank you for your time.

## Appendix D. Participant Consent Form



## PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Retention in a Small Liberal Arts Institution:  
The Commuter Student Experience**

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You are being invited to participate in a study entitled **Retention in a Small Liberal Arts Institution: The Commuter Student Experience** that is being conducted by me, Jodie Black. I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at the University of Lethbridge, and you may contact me by phone if you have further questions, at 403-380-6412.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master of Education degree. The study is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Kris Magnusson. You may contact my supervisor by phone at 403-329-2202.

The purpose of this research project is to understand what new high school commuter students at the University of Lethbridge are experiencing and how those experiences affect student retention. It is anticipated that the results from this study could contribute to the development of appropriate institutional initiatives aimed at improving retention of commuter students at the University of Lethbridge. Other institutions with similar demographics may also learn from and utilize these findings.

Research of this type is important because it has consistently been found that students who live off-campus are more likely to drop out of university than students who reside on-campus. Therefore, a better understanding of the factors that affect the retention of university commuter students would be very useful.

You are being asked to participate in this study because your name has been randomly selected as a University of Lethbridge second-year student who lives off campus, and whose permanent address at time of application was in either Calgary or Lethbridge.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a 30-60 minute individual interview, and a short questionnaire. The interview will be tape recorded, then transcribed to allow for verification of the information. If you are interested and/or willing, you may be asked to participate in a focus group to discuss the themes discovered within the individual interviews.

It is not anticipated that participation in this study will pose any risks to you. It may cause some inconvenience to you, through the time required to participate in the interview. In the unlikely event that the interview process raises issues or concerns for you, a referral will be made to professional counselling services.

Participation in this research has the potential to improve the university experience for commuter students at the University of Lethbridge.

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any need to justify your decision. If you do withdraw from the study, your data will not be used, and all notes/tapes collected from your interview will be destroyed immediately.

Due to the possible need for follow-up verification of answers, the primary researcher will need to associate an individual's name with each interview. Consequently, each transcript will be assigned a case number. A master file containing the participants' names, contact numbers and case numbers will be stored in a password-protected file on the principal researcher's computer. However, no one else will be allowed to associate an individual with his or her answers.

All information will be kept confidential. The only others who will have access to the information will be the committee supervisor, Dr. Kris Magnusson, and the transcriber. The transcriber, who will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement, will only have access to the interview tapes. Once the study is complete, the data will be securely stored in the possession of the primary researcher. Data from this study will be disposed of after five years. All paper transcriptions will be shredded and tapes will be deleted.

The results of this study will be shared with others through a public thesis defense and, if requested, the results of this study may be presented to the administration and/or student services groups at the University of Lethbridge.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher [and, if applicable, the supervisor] at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study or raise any concerns you might have by contacting the Chair of the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee at the University of Lethbridge (403-329-2425).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

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*Name of Participant*

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*Signature*

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*Date*

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***