The Effect of Motivation on Student Persistence in Online Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study of How Adult Learners Experience Motivation in a Web-based Distance Learning Environment

Kevin Lucey

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THE EFFECT OF MOTIVATION ON STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HOW ADULT LEARNERS EXPERIENCE MOTIVATION IN A WEB-BASED DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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By

Kevin Lucey

May 2018
THE EFFECT OF MOTIVATION ON STUDENT PERSISTENCE IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HOW ADULT LEARNERS EXPERIENCE MOTIVATION IN A WEB-BASED DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

THE EFFECT OF MOTIVATION ON STUDENT PERSISTENCE
IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF
HOW ADULT LEARNERS EXPERIENCE MOTIVATION IN A
WEB-BASED DISTANCE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

By
Kevin Lucey
May 2018

Dissertation supervised by Dr. David D. Carbonara

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of motivation in the
persistence of adults enrolled in online higher education. Since the 1990’s, online courses
and programs have proliferated across higher education, with adults (ages 25 and over)
currently making up the largest portion of online enrollments. Online courses, however,
suffer from a higher rate of student attrition than their hybrid and face-to-face
counterparts. Although it is difficult to attribute the high rate of attrition in online
education to any one factor, research has identified a lack of motivation as a primary
cause of student dropout. Likewise, studies have shown that when motivation is present,
learners are more likely to persist in their coursework. In order to develop a deeper
understanding of this issue, a phenomenological approach was chosen as the most
appropriate method for this study.
Participants for this study were at least 25 years of age and were enrolled in an online class at a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In adhering to the phenomenological method, open-ended, in-depth interviews were used to investigate how adult learners experience motivation in online higher education. Transcendental phenomenological analysis was then used to determine the essence of this experience. During the first stage of this process, twelve distinct themes emerged from the data, including Relevance and Applicability, Communication, Flexibility, and Instructor Presence. During the next stage, three additional structural themes were identified: Relation to Self, Relationship with Others, and Time. During the final stage of analysis, the essence of this experience was revealed as the participants’ Goal Commitment and their Need for Guidance.

Key findings from this study include the confirmation of motivation as a critical component in the persistence of adult online learners. In addition, a number of factors were identified as key facilitators and barriers to persistence in adults learning online. In developing an in-depth understanding of the link between motivation and persistence in this particular sample of learners, the results of this study may potentially contribute to addressing the overall larger problem of high rates of attrition in online higher education.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife Robin. You were an endless source of positivity and encouragement throughout this entire journey. Thank you for always believing in me. I truly couldn’t have done this without you.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This dissertation would not have been possible if it wasn’t for the support and guidance of a number of people.

First, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my dissertation committee: Dr. David Carbonara, Dr. Debra Scigliano, and Dr. Helga Stokes. I cannot thank each of you enough for your time and dedication to this project. Your guidance, feedback, and encouragement has been invaluable. I would especially like to thank Dr. Carbonara for his patience and guidance early on in this project. Our monthly virtual meetings kept me on track and were instrumental in helping to refine my research.

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I would also like to acknowledge the individuals who agreed to participate in this study. Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedules to share your experiences with me. This dissertation could not have been completed without you.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the support of my family. To my parents, Pete and Kathy, you have always supported me unconditionally and encouraged me to pursue my dreams. If I hadn’t been raised in such a supportive and
loving environment, I doubt that I would have had the courage to pursue this degree.

Thank you. To my wife Robin, you have been my biggest supporter from day one of this project. Thank you for all of the sacrifices that you have made over these past few years. Your contributions to the success of this project cannot be overstated.
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Online distance learning programs first appeared in higher education during the 1980s and subsequently experienced a period of rapid growth and development throughout the 1990s (Hill, 2014e; Holder, 2007; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). With advances in technology that made it easier than ever before to access and navigate the Web, the latter half of the 1990s saw strong gains in online enrollments, while an ever-growing number of institutions joined the ranks of those offering online programs (Herbert, 2006; Herron & Wright, 2006; Simonson et al., 2012). By the start of the 2000-2001 academic year, online course delivery had become the dominant form of distance education in the United States, offered by 90% of all degree granting institutions with distance learning programs (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2003).

This era of expansion for online education continued throughout the first decade of the 21st century as the number of students enrolled in at least one online class grew to over 3 million students by the fall of 2005 and then nearly doubled to reach over 6 million students by the end of the decade (Allen & Seaman, 2014). With a year-to-year average growth rate of approximately 18%, the gains in enrollment for online students far outpaced that of traditional learners whose numbers grew at an average rate of only 2% during the same period (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Despite a slowdown in overall enrollment growth across higher education that began in 2010, the most recent data available indicates that the number of students
enrolled in at least one online class continues to grow at a modest rate and now hovers around 6 million students, or just over 28% of all students enrolled in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2016). As online enrollments continue to grow, institutional adoption has been facilitated by growing acceptance amongst postsecondary administrators along with increased demand from students (Allen & Seaman, 2015, 2016; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Simonson et al., 2012). As a result, nearly every (95%) institution of higher education in the United States with enrollments of 5,000 students or greater now offers some form of online distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

During this period of growth for online learning, another major change for higher education occurred as an influx of adult learners (ages 25 and over) brought about a marked shift in postsecondary student demographics (Holder, 2007; Hussar & Bailey, 2011; Kasworm, 2003; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2012b; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Seeking to advance in their careers and update their skills for the 21st century workplace, adults flocked to higher education in increasing numbers, rapidly becoming one of the fastest growing segments of the postsecondary student population (DiConsiglio, 2010; Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2015; Snyder & Dillow, 2012; The Economist, 2014; Weise & Christensen, 2014; Wlodkowski, 2008). A downturn in the U.S. economy in 2007 only accelerated this trend as gains in enrollments between 2007-2009 were largely driven by students in the 25 and over age group (Barrow & Davis, 2012). Although a recent recovery to the economy has contributed to a decline in the number of adults in higher education, students ages 25 and over currently account for approximately 40% of enrollments and are projected to grow an additional 14% through 2021 (Faddoul,
Adults entering into higher education, however, have needs that are often considerably different than those of a typical undergraduate student who is enrolled full time, lives on campus, and is between the ages of 18-22 (Bean & Metzner, 1985; DiConsiglio, 2010; McGivney, 2004). By contrast, adult students are more likely to be enrolled part time, live off campus, and must balance their studies with outside commitments to their family, job, and other social obligations (Fairchild, 2003; Kasworm, 2003; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015). This combination of factors has increasingly led adults to opt for the convenience and flexibility of studying online, where they now make up approximately 80% of online enrollments (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2014; DiConsiglio, 2010; Holder, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009).

Despite the increased popularity and advantages of learning online, studies have shown that online courses suffer from dropout rates that are typically 10-20% higher than those of their hybrid or face-to-face counterparts (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Bart, 2012; Carr, 2000; Johnson, 2003; Tyler-Smith, 2006). This problem has been studied extensively and is recognized throughout the literature as an area of significant concern for both the students who enroll in online courses and for the institutions that offer them (Berge & Huang, 2004; Boyles, 2000; Clay, Rowland, & Packard, 2008; Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001; Hart, 2012; Herbert, 2006; Heyman, 2010; Holder, 2007; McGivney, 2009; O’Brien & Renner, 2002; Park, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 2006; Truluck, 2007; Tyler-Smith, 2006). While attrition can negatively affect an institution in terms of its finances, growth, and
perceived quality, students who drop out put themselves at risk of delayed academic progress, reduced measures of social and emotional well-being, and both short and long-term financial penalties (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Allen & Seaman, 2015; Angelino et al., 2007; Boton & Gregory, 2015; Carnevale, Cheah, & Hanson, 2015; Hout, 2012; Kena et al., 2015; Moody, 2004). With adults now comprising a majority of online enrollments, this cohort of learners stands to be disproportionately impacted by these adverse effects associated with a high online dropout rate.

Although it is difficult to attribute the high rate of attrition in online education to any one factor, research has identified a lack of motivation as a primary cause of student dropout (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Boton & Gregory, 2015; Glore, 2011; McGivney, 2009; Wang, Foucar-Szocki, Griffin, O’Connor, & Sceiford, 2003). Likewise, studies have shown that when motivation is present, learners are more likely to persist in their coursework (Bunn, 2004; Hart, 2012; Irizarry, 2002; Keller, 2008). This positive relationship between motivation and persistence has been shown to exist across a variety of learning contexts and student populations (Fjortoft, 1995; Huett, Kalinowski, Moller, & Huett, 2008; Morris, Finnegan, & Wu, 2005; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Osborn, 2001; Scribner, 2007; Visser, 1998; Visser, Plomp, Amirault, & Kuiper, 2002; Zvacek, 1991). Looking specifically at adults learning online, motivation has been linked to persistence in both graduate and undergraduate programs as well as in a variety of workplace-based settings (Bird & Morgan, 2003; Castles, 2004; Frankola, 2001; Holder, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Jamison, 2003; Jones, 2013; Jun, 2005; Kemp, 2002; Margueratt, 2007; Menager-Beeley, 2003; Müller, 2008; Ojokheta, 2011; Packham, Jones, Miller, & Thomas, 2004; Park, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Parker, 2005;
Tyler-Smith, 2006). For instance, Chyung and her colleagues (Chyung, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Chyung, Winiecki, & Fenner, 1998, 1999) found that by increasing the motivational appeal of the courses in an online Master’s degree program, they were able to reduce the program’s dropout rate by 22%, while Kim (2005) concluded that “a lack of motivation [was] the major reason for learner attrition” in a sample of adults enrolled in self-directed e-learning courses (p. 132).

Statement of the Problem

Given this body of research highlighting the role of motivation in reducing student attrition, it has become critical to develop a better understanding of how adult students perceive motivation in the context of online learning. Student perceptions have been identified by Johnson (2012) as “a logical place to discover student motivation” (p. 32), while several other scholars have cited learner perceptions as integral to achieving a greater understanding of motivation in online and distance learning (Chang, 2005; Glore, 2010; Hurd, 2006; Scribner, 2007). Investigating learner perceptions of motivation, however, can be a difficult task as previous research has highlighted the challenges of studying a construct that is not able to be directly observed, is largely influenced by personal variables, and tends to change over time (Ahl, 2006; Gabrielle, 2003; Glore, 2011; Huett, Moller, Bray, Young, and Huett, 2006; Keller, 1983; Keller, 1987c; Kim, 2005; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Schartz, 2014; Song & Keller, 1999).

As a result of these complicating factors, research has shown that while adults can be motivated by a great variety of course and learner-related elements, there is no clear agreement on any single set of factors or specific instructional approaches for motivating adults in the online learning environment (Chyung, 2007; Glore, 2011; Ivankova & Stick,
2007; Kim, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009; Komarraju & Karau, 2008; Styer, 2007). In addition, in spite of the research that has been done on this topic, a review of the literature has revealed that scholars consider motivation in the context of online education to be an area that is understudied and in need of further research (Artino, 2008; Bekele, 2010; Gabrielle, 2003; Hodges, 2008; Huett et al., 2008; Jones & Issroff, 2005; Kim, 2004, 2005, 2006; Miltiadou & Savenye, 2003; Schartz, 2014; Song, 2000; Sperry, 2009). When taken all together, these factors demonstrate the need to investigate motivation in adult online learners in order to determine if the link identified in the literature between motivation and persistence is indeed valid. Also, given the varied nature of the motivation construct, this study was designed to investigate and gain a deeper understanding of the specific factors cited by adults as influential in their decision to persist in their studies.

**Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of motivation in the persistence of adults enrolled in online higher education. In addition, this study was designed to probe deeper into the factors cited by students as contributing to their motivation in an attempt to identify any commonalities and/or uncover new insights into this phenomenon. By investigating this problem qualitatively, this study has addressed dual needs identified in the literature for more qualitative research on motivation in adult learners as well as for more studies on motivation in the context of online education (Bannier, 2010; Kim, 2005). In developing an in-depth understanding of the link between motivation and persistence and possibly drawing consensus around a set of motivational factors for this population of students that makes up the vast majority of enrollments in
online higher education, the results of this study may potentially contribute to addressing the overall larger problem of high rates of attrition in online higher education.

**Significance of the Study**

By investigating the role of motivation in the persistence of adult online learners, the results of this study have the potential to benefit a number of stakeholders across higher education. For instance, a deeper understanding of the factors cited by adults as contributing to their motivation will aid faculty and instructional designers in identifying and incorporating these elements into the classes that they teach and build. The need for such knowledge is highlighted by scholars who note that motivation is an often overlooked element of online course design (Keller, 2006; Kim, 2009; Kruse, 2008 as cited in Johnson, 2012; Song, 2000). In addition, by using qualitative methods to study motivation in adult online learners, this study fills a need in the literature and has the potential to uncover new factors specific to adult students that have not been previously identified (Bannier, 2010). By potentially contributing new knowledge to the larger body of research on motivation, this study will also benefit any scholars who are interested in this topic. Likewise, new insights into what motivates adult online learners may also give a competitive edge to various companies in the educational technology sector who are in the business of developing online learning tools and applications.

The results of this study will also be important to those stakeholders who must contend with the overarching problem of high dropout rates in online education. For instance, attrition poses a major problem for institutions both in terms of financial costs (Cuseo, 2010; Raisman, 2013) and also in regards to the perceived quality and effectiveness of their online programs (Angelino et al., 2007; Boton, 2015; Moody, 2004;
Rovai, 2003). Highlighting the need for a solution to this problem, Allen and Seaman (2015) report that “two-thirds of all academic leaders continue to consider retention of online students a critical issue for the future of online education” (p. 25).

Most importantly, the results of this study may potentially benefit adult learners who are by far the largest segment of the online student population (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2014). The consequences of attrition can be particularly harmful to this group of students who put themselves at risk of financial penalties, delayed academic progress, and even feelings of failure and disillusionment by simply dropping out of a course (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Hout, 2012; R. J. McGivney, 2009; V. McGivney, 2004). For adults who drop out and never complete their program of studies, the consequences of attrition can be far more severe and include lower lifetime earnings and decreased measures of physical and social well-being (Carnevale et al., 2015; Hout, 2012; Kena et al., 2015). With motivation being identified as a key factor impacting student persistence in online education, the literature has identified a significant area for research, the findings of which could potentially contribute to lower dropout rates, thus benefitting students and institutions of higher education alike.

**Research Questions**

By investigating how adults experience motivation in the context of online higher education, this study will seek to answer the following questions:

1. What effect does motivation have on the persistence of adult online learners?
2. What factors are perceived by adults as being influential in their decision to persist in (or drop out of) their online studies?
Definition of Terms

*Academic motivation.* A term used when examining the role of motivation in the context of student learning and achievement.

*Adult learner.* For the purposes of this study, an adult learner is defined as “any student, undergraduate or graduate, 25 years of age or older” (The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2012b, p. 1).

*Asynchronous online class.* A class delivered entirely online with no scheduled meetings and where all coursework is completed according to a predetermined schedule.

*Attrition.* “[R]efers to a decrease in the number of learners or students engaged in some course of study. This course of study might be a degree plan, or it might simply be a standalone online course. Attrition takes place when a learner leaves the course of study, for any reason” (Martinez, 2003, p. 2-3).

*Hybrid/blended online class.* A class that utilizes a combination of both online and traditional face-to-face instruction.

*Motivation.* Pintrich and Schunk (2002) define motivation as “the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (p. 5).


*Persistence.* “[R]elates to the act of continuing toward an educational goal” (Martinez, 2003, p. 3).
Retention. “[R]efers to the number of learners or students who progress from one part of an educational program to the next. In higher education, this is normally measured as enrollment from academic year to academic year” (Martinez, 2003, p. 3).

Synchronous online class. A class that is delivered entirely online using a live meeting application to host regularly scheduled class meetings.
CHAPTER 2:

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Student Retention in Online Higher Education

Introduction and background.

Online learning has been a presence in higher education for nearly three decades, dating back to the late 1980’s when the first online courses were offered over networked computers (Hill, 2014e; Levine, 1997; Simonson et al., 2012). Evolving from earlier methods for reaching distant learners, the origins of online learning can be traced back to the correspondence courses of the 19th and early 20th centuries in which students and instructors communicated and sent materials back and forth through the mail (Deming, Goldin, Katz, & Yuchtman, 2015; Reiser, 2001a, 2001b; Sener, 2015; Simonson et al., 2012). As the 20th century progressed, advances in communications technology allowed institutions to experiment with more efficient and effective ways to reach and educate distance learners. This led to distance courses being delivered by radio in the 1920s, by television in the 1930s through the 1950s, and then by satellite and fiber-optic communication networks in the 1980s and 1990s (Cuban, 2001; Deming et al., 2015; Reiser, 2001a, 2001b; Sener, 2015; Simonson et al., 2012). With the establishment of the modern Internet in 1985, it became possible to deliver distance education courses entirely online, however this mode of delivery did not become widespread until early Web browsers, such as Mosaic in 1993 and Netscape Navigator in 1994, made it a possible for distance education courses to be delivered via the World Wide Web (Hill, 2014e; Simonson et al., 2012).
Originally, the largest providers of online courses were for-profit institutions, along with a smaller number of public and private schools oriented towards meeting the needs of adult learners (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2014). These online courses and programs arose out of a need to provide access to students who were limited in their ability to travel to campus by factors such as distance as well as commitments to family and work (Levine, 1997; Sener, 2015; Simonson et al., 2012). The power of online learning to increase access to this segment of the student population became evident as early as 1997, when James Stukel, then president of the University of Illinois, predicted that the “Internet, and the technology which supports it,” would be “the third modern revolution in higher education” (Cuban, 2001, p. 102). Stukel believed that online learning would have as profound an impact on access to higher education as did the land-grant movement of the 19th century and the community college movement of the 20th century (Cuban, 2001; University of Illinois, n.d.).

By the early 2000s online education was quickly on the rise, with year-to-year increases in online enrollment consistently outpacing the growth of overall enrollment in higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2011). From 2002 – 2010, online enrollment grew at a compound annual rate of 18.3 %, while overall student enrollment across higher education increased at a yearly rate of just over 2 % (2011). Although the growth rate of online enrollments began to slow down in 2010, the number of online students enrolled continued to increase into the next decade, and by 2012, more than 1 out of every 3 students in higher education were enrolled in at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Allen & Seaman, 2015). In this relatively short amount of time, online learning has carved out its place in the landscape of higher education, with over 95% of “institutions
with 5,000 or more total students” offering some type of online distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 9). While the most popular online programs include business, information technology, and nursing, online offerings have expanded to just about every corner of the curriculum (Clinefelter & Aslanian, 2014).

The rise and widespread adoption of online learning in higher education can be attributed to several factors that can be categorized into those that are student-related and those that are institution-related (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Simonson et al., 2012). Chief among student-related factors that have contributed to the growth of online education is an increasing demand to learn in a format that is both convenient and flexible (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; DiConsiglio, 2010; Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003; Koper, 2015; Simonson et al., 2012). These elements are especially important to adult and non-traditional learners who are often limited by busy schedules and prefer not to be tied down to a fixed meeting time or location (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; DiConsiglio, 2010; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Koper, 2015; Park & Choi, 2009). Online learning frees students from these concerns by providing anywhere, anytime access to course materials, thus granting students the degree of convenience and flexibility that they seek. Other factors that have contributed to increasing student enrollments in online education include the ability to learn at their own pace, the opportunity to enroll in programs outside of their geographical region, and an overall lower cost when compared to learning in person (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2013; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009).

For institutions, factors that have contributed to the growth of online education range from the practical to the pedagogical. From an accessibility standpoint, delivering
courses online allows institutions to meet the demand for greater numbers of course offerings than they are physically able to accommodate on campus (Bannier, 2010). In addition, online courses allow institutions to reach students who are interested in enrolling, but not able to travel to campus due to distance or another type of limitation (Simonson et al., 2012). From a budgetary standpoint, offering courses online can also provide an option for institutions to serve a greater number of students at a lower cost (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012)

The rise of online learning has also coincided with a shift in pedagogy across higher education from a lecture-based, teacher-centered model to one that is grounded in active learning and is focused on the student (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Heyman, 2010; Ivankova, 2007; Simonson et al., 2012). This evolution has been aided by a newer generation of online tools, including blogs, wikis, podcasts, and social networking sites (collectively known as Web 2.0) that promote collaboration through the re-use and sharing of student created content (Simonson et al., 2012). As a result of these advances in online tools and pedagogy, institutions have found increased levels of interaction in their online classes, sometimes even exceeding what is found in the traditional classroom (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; Simonson et al., 2012).

As online education has grown, it has been met with increased acceptance across higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2015). When the Babson Survey Research Group first began tracking the state of online learning in U.S. higher education in 2002, less than 50 percent of chief academic officers believed that online education was critical to the long-term strategy of their institution (2015). However, by 2014, the percentage of academic leaders agreeing with the statement “online education is critical to the long-
term strategy of my institution” had reached an all time high of 70.8%, while those disagreeing with this statement are at an all time low of 8.6% (Figure X) (2015, p.15).

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** Online education is critical to the long-term strategy of my institution - 2002 to 2014. Adapted from “Grade Level: Tracking Online Education in the United States,” by I. E. Allen and J. Seaman, 2015, p. 15. Copyright 2015 by the Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group, LLC. Adapted with permission.

This acceptance of online education has been buoyed by a body of research over the past two decades that has shown no significant difference in the effectiveness of distance and online education when compared to traditional face-to-face instruction (Bernard et al., 2004; Clark, 1994; Dean, Stah, Swlwester, & Pear, 2001; Dillon & Gabbard, 1998; Russell, 1999; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Additional evidence-based support for online education can also be found in a 2010 meta-analysis comparing the effectiveness of online and face-to-face instruction which found that “on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face instruction” (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, p. ix). The authors caution however,
that in their analysis, online instruction was found to be more effective only when it was utilized as part of a blended learning approach. When a fully online approach was compared to a traditional classroom-based model, the two were found to be statistically equivalent. The authors suggest that the improved effectiveness of a blended learning approach is likely due to “differences in content, pedagogy and learning time” that are enhanced by the blended environment and have little to do with the medium through which the instruction was delivered (p. xv).

Despite the widespread acceptance of online learning across higher education, there are several barriers that remain a hindrance to its continued growth (Allen & Seaman, 2015). When compared to a face-to-face learning environment, chief academic officers across higher education believe that it takes students greater discipline to succeed in an online course and that lower rates of student retention continue to be a challenge. Concerning faculty, 78% of these academic officers believe that it requires greater effort and time commitment to deliver an online course when compared to its face-to-face counterpart. In addition, and perhaps most troublesome of all, only 28% of chief academic officers reported that their faculty have accepted the “value and legitimacy of online education”, a sentiment that has remained unchanged for over a decade (2015, p. 21).

Although it has come to permeate the landscape of higher education, online education has eluded one standard definition, with variations existing between institutions, states, accrediting agencies, professional organizations, and the federal government (Coswatte, 2014; Poulin, 2014; Sener, 2015; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). For example, in the state of Texas, a “fully distance education course” must be at least 85 percent online (Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2015). However, the
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), a regional accrediting body which reviews degree-granting institutions in Texas, requires that a majority of the instruction in a distance education course occur “when students and instructors are not in the same place”, setting the threshold for online content at just over 50% percent (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, 2014).

Research teams and professional organizations have put forward similarly conflicting definitions. In their yearly reports chronicling the state of online education in the United States, Allen and Seaman (2015) define an online class as one in which 80% or more of the content is delivered online. In 2015, the Online Learning Consortium, updated their definition of an online course to include only those courses in which 100% of the “activity is done online”, with no requirements for students to ever have to come to campus (Sener, 2015).

In 2012 the federal government began including information about online enrollment in their annual Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) survey (Deming et al., 2015). They place online education under the umbrella of distance education and define it as “education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously”. Courses in this category are “delivered exclusively via distance education” and technologies can include “Internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcasts, closed circuit, cable, microwave, broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite or wireless communication devices; audio conferencing; and video cassette, DVDs, and CD-ROMs, if the cassette, DVDs, and CD-ROMs are used in a course in
conjunction with the technologies listed above.” (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2015).

**Current enrollment in online higher education.**

The first decade of the 21st century was a period of rapid growth for online enrollments in U.S. higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Allen & Seaman, 2015). Double-digit increases in the annual growth rate were the norm, with the high point occurring in 2005 when online enrollments jumped by 36.5% from the previous year. This swift influx of learners helped to grow the number of students enrolled in at least one online class from 1.6 million in the Fall of 2002 to just over 6.1 million by the Fall of 2010. During the same time period, the rate of growth for online students far exceeded that of overall enrollments in higher education, which grew from 16.6 million total students in 2002 to 21 million in 2010 at a rate of between 1% and 7%.

Moving into the next decade, all signs pointed towards the continued growth of online enrollments across higher education, with nearly 90% of academic leaders believing it “likely” or “very likely” that online learners would soon become the new majority (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Christensen & Horn, 2013; Jaschik & Lederman, 2014; Nagel, 2011; Troop, 2014). However, by 2014, a closer look at enrollment trends began to reveal that both online and total student enrollments had been steadily decreasing since 2010 (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2015). The period between Fall 2012 and Fall 2013 saw online enrollments grow by only 3.7%, the lowest rate recorded since enrollment data was first collected by the Babson Survey Research Group (BSRG) in 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Concerning the recent decline in the growth rate of online learners, Clinefelter and Aslanian (2014) have suggested that online enrollments will eventually
reach a point of equilibrium in which they will continue to grow at a rate that is more in line with that of overall enrollments across higher education.

Table 1

*Enrollment Data for Degree-Granting Postsecondary Institutions in the United States: Fall 2002 – Fall 2014*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Enrollment</th>
<th>Annual Growth Rate</th>
<th>Students Enrolled in at Least One Online Class</th>
<th>Annual Growth Rate</th>
<th>Percentage of Students Taking at Least One Online Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2002</td>
<td>16,611,710</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1,602,970</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2003</td>
<td>16,911,481</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1,971,397</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2004</td>
<td>17,272,043</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2,329,783</td>
<td>36.5%</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2005</td>
<td>17,487,481</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>3,180,050</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
<td>17,758,872</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>3,488,381</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
<td>19.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2007</td>
<td>18,248,133</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3,938,111</td>
<td>16.9%</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2008</td>
<td>19,102,811</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4,606,353</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2009</td>
<td>20,427,711</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>5,579,022</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2010</td>
<td>21,016,126</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>6,142,280</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2011</td>
<td>20,994,113</td>
<td>-0.1%</td>
<td>6,714,792</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>32.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2012</td>
<td>21,253,086</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>7,126,549</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>33.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20,682,643</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>5,068,192</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2013(^a)</td>
<td>20,939,293</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>5,257,379</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall 2014(^a)</td>
<td>20,506,812</td>
<td>-2.1%</td>
<td>5,828,826</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\(^a\)Data from IPEDS. IPEDS began tracking distance education enrollments in 2012, while the Babson Survey Research Group stopped tracking online enrollments in 2013.

Although these numbers indicate a slow decline in the growth rate of online enrollments, data from the most recent year available shows a modest uptick between Fall 2013 and Fall 2014, resulting in a total of just over 5.8 million students in higher education enrolled in at least one online class (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Poulin & Straut,
These figures come from the U.S Department of Education’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) database and mark the third consecutive year that the annual IPEDS survey has been used to collect data on distance education enrollments (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2015).

Prior to IPEDS beginning to track distance learners in 2012, the most reliable source for online enrollment data in higher education had been the BSRG, who for over a decade have published an annual report on the state of online learning in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2015; Kolowich, 2014). However, when the first round of distance education enrollment data from IPEDS was released in 2013, it quickly became clear that the numbers from IPEDS differed significantly from those being reported by BSRG (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2014a). Specifically, BSRG reported 7.1 million online enrollments for Fall 2012, while IPEDS initially reported a much lower figure of 5.5 million, which was later adjusted downward to just under 5.1 million (Allen & Seaman, 2014; Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2014b; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2015).

These disparate numbers from BSRG and IPEDS soon drew the attention of analysts who saw the potential for this conflicting enrollment data to disrupt planning, policy, and budgetary decisions across higher education (Hill, 2014b; Hill & Poulin, 2014; Kolowich, 2014). As a result of these concerns, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education Cooperative for Educational Technology (WCET) conducted an investigation in order to identify the underlying causes of the discrepancy between the BSRG and IPEDS data, as well as to identify which count, if either, was correct (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill & Poulin, 2014).
During this investigation, WCET researchers found that differences in the terminology and methodology used during the data collection process were among several factors responsible for the opposing data being reported by BSRG and IPEDS (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill & Poulin, 2014). For instance, the BSRG survey asks institutions to report on the number of students taking online courses, while IPEDS tracks the number of students enrolled in distance education (Hill, 2014a). Although the terms “online education” and “distance education” are often used interchangeably, they do not always denote the same thing; online courses are delivered exclusively via the Internet, while distance education can also include courses that are delivered using a variety of other technology and communication mediums, including television, satellite, and fiber optic networks (Hill, 2014f; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2015).

In addition, BSRG and IPEDS differ in their definitions of what qualifies as an online or distance education class (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2014c). The BSRG definition includes classes in which 80% or more of the content is delivered online, while IPEDS only counts a course if the content is delivered exclusively, or 100% online (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2015). Also, in order to be counted by the IPEDS survey, a distance education course must be part of a for-credit undergraduate degree program (Hill, 2014c). BSRG, on the other hand, is designed to be more inclusive and counts “any offering of any length to any audience at any time” (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 39).

In regards to the different methodologies used by BSRG and IPEDS, the BSRG survey is voluntary, while the IPEDS survey is required reporting for all institutions across higher education who are eligible to receive funds under the federal Title IV
program (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Ginder, 2014). As a result, the enrollment figures presented by BSRG for Fall 2012 are an estimate based on a sample size of approximately 60% of all U.S. colleges and universities (Allen & Seaman, 2014), while the numbers from IPEDS are more comprehensive and “represent the full universe of all higher educational institutions” (Allen & Seaman, 2015, p. 9).

The WCET research team found that these differences in terminology and methodology, along with inadequate data collection systems and general confusion over the federal definition of distance education were found to have led to the over-reporting, under-reporting, and even the non-reporting of hundreds of thousands of distance education students (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2014d; Hill & Poulin, 2014; Poulin, 2014). Specifically, a more inclusive definition of online education, as well as an upward bias in reporting led to an inflated count for BSRG, while stricter reporting requirements, confusion over which students to count, and deficient reporting systems led to the lower count seen with IPEDS (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2014b; Hill, 2014d; Hill & Poulin, 2014).

Realizing that neither count was 100% accurate, but believing that the IPEDS figures were closer to the actual number of students enrolled online, BSRG ceased collecting their own online enrollment data in 2014 and began using enrollment figures from IPEDS in their annual report (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Allen and Seaman (2015) based their decision to switch to IPEDS on what they believed to be several significant advantages over the BSRG data, namely stricter reporting requirements and a sample that encompasses nearly the entire spectrum of U.S. higher education. It should be noted that BSRG recognized the shortcomings of their online enrollment data as early as 2003 and
subsequently petitioned the U.S. Department of Education for help in obtaining a more accurate count. Their request, however, was denied and the Department of Education did not intervene until they began tracking distance enrollments as part of their annual IPEDS survey in the Fall of 2012.

One final takeaway from the WCET analysis of the BSRG and IPEDS data is that the reporting biases identified in both surveys were found to have remained consistent over time (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Owing to this consistent bias, the growth rates reported by both surveys have been found to be directly comparable, with both BSRG and IPEDS reporting an approximately 3.5% rate of growth in online enrollments from Fall of 2012 to Fall of 2013. What this signifies, is that although the numbers from BSRG and IPEDS cannot be relied upon for an exact count of online enrollments, their data on year-to-year growth rates is accurate and can be used to identify and evaluate enrollment trends dating back to Fall 2002 (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2015; Kolowich, 2014).

Moving forward, BSRG, along with others across higher education are in general agreement that despite its faults, the IPEDS data is the best and most comprehensive source available for online enrollment numbers (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill, 2015; Hill & Poulin, 2014; Lokken & Mullins, 2015). In addition, it is believed that once institutions become more comfortable with the IPEDS reporting requirements and are able to come to a shared understanding of how to interpret the federal definition of distance education, many of the inconsistencies that have plagued the IPEDS survey data will begin to dissipate (Allen & Seaman, 2015; Hill & Poulin, 2014). Hill and Poulin (2014) do caution, however, that the National Center for Educational Statistics plans to continue making adjustments to the IPEDS reporting methodology through the Fall of 2015 and
advises others not to rely too heavily on this data until institutions have had time to adapt to these changes.

**The problem of student attrition in online higher education.**

The continued growth and rising popularity of online learning in higher education has not come without its own challenges (Ali & Leeds, 2009). Although online education provides students with numerous benefits, such as flexible scheduling, around the clock access to course materials, and increased access to educational opportunities, the high levels of student attrition found in this environment have consistently been identified throughout the literature as an area of significant concern (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Allen & Seaman, 2015; Angelino et al., 2007; Boton & Gregory, 2015; Bowden 2008; Carr, 2000; Clay et al., 2008; Diaz, 2002; Frankola, 2001; Hart, 2012; Herbert, 2006; Heyman, 2010; Holder, 2007; Islam, 2002; Kreideweis, 2005; Leong, 2011; Newman, Couturier, & Scurr, 2010; O’Brien & Renner, 2002; Tinto, 2006; Truluck, 2007).

This issue of low student retention is not exclusive to the online learning environment, and has long been a focus of research in higher education (Bean, 2003; Castles, 2004; Storring, 2005). Early studies on student retention sought to understand and identify the various motives and factors involved in a student’s decision to drop out of school, with a focus on the traditional 18-22 year old undergraduate population (Bean, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975). Seeking to grow upon this early research, others began to investigate the issue of retention with new populations of non-traditional and adult students as well as those students learning at a distance (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Billings, 1988; Fjortoft, 1995; Garland, 1993; Garrison, 1987; Holmberg, 1995; Kember, 1989; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). As learning and
communications technologies advanced, this field of study expanded once more, as researchers began to investigate student persistence in the context of online learning (Berge & Huang, 2004; Boyles, 2000; Hart, 2012; McGivney, 2009; Park, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

While all of this focus on the problem of student persistence has helped to bring about a greater understanding of this phenomenon, it has also served to highlight just how pervasive this problem is across higher education. Several researchers have noted the long history of retention issues in higher education (Berge & Huang, 2004; Schlosser & Anderson, 1994; Storring, 2005) with Tinto (1982) observing that dropout rates had remained consistently in the range of 40-45% for a period of roughly 100 years dating back to the late 19th century. This rate of attrition has continued unabated, as is evidenced by the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), which shows the 6-year graduation rate for full-time undergraduate students at 4-year institutions in the United States at 59%, equating to a dropout rate of 41% (Kena et al., 2015).

The situation is even more critical for students in distance and online learning programs, as they are faced with student persistence rates even lower that what has been reported in the traditional classroom setting (Berge & Huang, 2004; Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Holmberg, 1995; Howell et al., 2003; Lokken & Mullins, 2015; Moody, 2004; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999; Schlosser & Anderson, 1994; Stanford-Bowers, 2008). Although figures vary, Moore & Kearsley (1996) have reported attrition rates as high as 50% in distance education, which is just slightly above what is found in the traditional classroom setting, while reports show dropout rates in online classes typically in the range of 10-20% higher
than what is found in comparable face-to-face classes (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Angelino et al., 2007; Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Bart, 2012; Carr, 2000; Johnson, 2003; Tyler-Smith, 2006). In a recent study investigating student outcomes in the California community college system, not only did Hart, Friedmann, and Hill (2015) find lower persistence with online students, but also lower grades. This finding was consistent throughout the sample population and was independent of course of study or student demographics.

For students, dropping out of an online course or program can have serious consequences, both in terms of their financial and social well being (Hout, 2012). In regards to income, data has shown that young adults in the 25-34 age range who hold a bachelor’s degree earn 62% more than their peers who possess only a high school diploma (Kena et al., 2015). The economic boost provided by a college education has also been found to persist throughout an individual’s career, with researchers from Georgetown University reporting that college graduates will earn $1 million more over a lifetime than non-college graduates (Carnevale et al., 2015). In addition to the financial benefits of obtaining a degree, Hout (2012) found that a college education strongly correlates with increased “health, family stability, and social connections” (p. 39).

For those who drop out of their studies, additional risks can include delayed or non-graduation, lost tuition, and other financial penalties related to dropping out (Ali & Leeds, 2009; McGivney, 2004). Attrition can also take an emotional toll on students, potentially leading to feelings of disillusionment, inadequacy, and failure, all of which could end up discouraging students from ever enrolling in another course (R. J. McGivney, 2009; V. McGivney, 2004).

Low student persistence in online courses can also present significant problems
for colleges and universities, both from a financial and institutional quality standpoint (Ali & Leeds, 2009; Angelino et al., 2007; Holder, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2006). High numbers of student dropouts can negatively impact the finances of an institution in the form of reduced tuition revenue, wasted expenditures on underperforming programs, and reduced funding from government sources (Moody, 2004; Parker, 2003; Yorke, 2004). In addition, a majority of academic administrators say that high rates of student attrition stand in the way of the growth of their online programs, thus jeopardizing this source of revenue (Allen & Seaman, 2015). In regards to quality concerns, researchers have noted that low rates of persistence can have a negative impact on the perceived quality and effectiveness of an institution’s online programs (Angelino et al., 2007; Boton, 2015; Moody, 2004; Rovai, 2003).

Low student persistence in online education also has the potential to negatively impact the U.S. economy (Boton, 2015). As Wilson (2005) notes, college graduates are more likely to be employed, earn a higher wage and thus make a greater contribution to the economic prosperity of their communities. Another potentially negative impact of low student persistence on the economy can be seen in terms of unfilled jobs. Although increasing numbers of today’s workforce have recognized the need to continue their education and update their skills, high online dropout rates can contribute to a situation where there are not enough qualified workers to fill the available jobs (The Economist, 2014). Highlighting this problem, Carnevale (as cited in Wilson, 2005) estimates that the U.S. economy could be faced with a shortage of 14 million college educated workers by the year 2020.
In the preceding section, low student persistence was shown to be a problem across higher education. Although student attrition has long been an issue in the face-to-face classroom, high dropout rates affect an even greater number of students in the online learning environment. In addition to the impact that high dropout rates have on students, this issue continues to be a major concern for academic institutions and even the U.S. economy.

In recognition of the importance of student persistence in higher education, this topic has drawn the attention of a number of researchers over the years who have sought to attain a greater understanding of this phenomenon through the development of various theories, models, and frameworks.

The most influential and widely cited work in this area is Vincent Tinto’s (1975) longitudinal model of student dropout (Bean, 1982; Boyles, 2000; Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Kember, 1989; LeBrun, 2012; Rovai, 2003). Although Tinto focused on the traditional, classroom-based undergraduate student, his model has been cited as the foundation for the development of new theories and frameworks for understanding persistence in adult, non-traditional, distance, and online learners (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Berge & Huang, 2004; Boyles, 2000; Kember, 1989; Park, 2007; Rovai, 2003).

In the following section, Tinto’s (1975) model will be explored, along with several of the other predominant works in this area.

**Prominent models of student attrition and persistence.**

**Tinto’s longitudinal model of student dropout.**

In order to explain the process of undergraduate student attrition, Vincent Tinto (1973, 1975) developed his longitudinal model of student dropout (Kember, 1989;
Tinto’s model is rooted in sociological theory and is based on what was at the time current research on student persistence and attrition in higher education (Bean & Eaton, 2001-2002; Boyles, 2000; Tinto, 1975; Tinto & Cullen, 1973). In particular, Tinto’s model expands upon the work of Spady (1970), who is recognized as having developed one of the earliest known theoretical models of student dropout (Kember, 1989; LeBrun, 2012; McGivney, 2009; Tinto, 1975).

In addition to serving as the foundation for Tinto’s (1973, 1975) work, Spady’s (1970) retention model is notable as the first to incorporate Durkheim’s (1961) theory of suicide, which states that there is an increased risk of suicide for individuals who are unable to integrate themselves “into the fabric of society” (Tinto, 1975, p. 91). Spady adapted this theory to his model by reasoning that a student is more likely to drop out of school if they are not able to sufficiently integrate themselves into the academic and social systems of their institution (Kember, 1989; LeBrun, 2012; McGivney, 2009; Tinto, 1975).

In developing his own model, Tinto (1973, 1975) retained Spady’s (1970) focus on academic and social integration as well as Spady’s consideration of student dropout in the form of a longitudinal model (Bean & Eaton, 2001-2002; LeBrun, 2012; McGivney, 2009; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975; Tinto & Cullen, 1973). As such, Tinto’s model illustrates an ongoing, multidimensional process in which a student interacts with their academic environment over a period of time (Boyles, 2000; Purdie & Rosser, 2011). Nash (2005) summarizes Tinto’s model as follows:

Student attributes and family background affect initial levels of commitment to goals and the institution. These in turn affect academic performance and
interaction with peers and faculty, which in turn lead a student to be more or less “integrated” into the academic and social systems of the institution. Tinto proposed that a student who is more integrated is more likely to persist.

(Literature Review section, para. 1)

![Diagram of Tinto's model of student dropout]

*Figure 2.* Tinto’s longitudinal model of student dropout. Reprinted from “In Search of Higher Persistence Rates in Distance Education Online Programs,” by A. P. Rovai, 2003, *Internet and Higher Education, 6*, p. 4. Copyright 2002 by Elsevier Science Inc. Reprinted with permission.

At the core of Tinto’s (1973, 1975) model are the concepts of academic and social integration, which Tinto believes are primary predictors of student persistence (Bean & Eaton, 2001-2002; Boyles, 2000; McGivney, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2006). According to the model, a student’s level of academic integration is dependent on their grade performance and intellectual development, while the degree of their social integration is influenced by interactions with faculty and peers (Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975). High levels of social and
academic integration will result in a strengthened commitment to a student’s educational goals and to their institution, which in turn will make it more likely that they decide to persist in their studies (Boyles, 2000; Park & Choi, 2009; Tinto, 1975). Conversely, students who are unable to integrate into the academic and social systems of their university are more likely to drop out.

Tinto (1975) cautions, however, that academic and social integration should not be viewed as the lone predictors of student persistence. The situation may arise in which a student with low levels of academic and social integration will decide to continue with their studies, owing to a deep commitment to their institution or to their educational goals. Likewise, a student who is highly integrated into their institution may ultimately decide to drop out, as a result of a weak commitment to their institution or to achieving their educational goals.

Although Tinto’s (1973, 1975) work is widely cited throughout the literature as foundational to research on student persistence, his model has drawn some degree of criticism primarily on two fronts: first, the model does not account for the influence of any external factors on a student’s decision to drop out, and second, because the model was designed to explain dropout in a residential undergraduate population, there is limited applicability to nontraditional and distance learners (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1989; Nash, 2005; Purdie & Rosser, 2011; Rovai, 2003; Yorke, 1999). Concerning the lack of external factors in his model, Tinto (1975) explains that although it is not stated explicitly, external influences are accounted for in the penultimate stage of the model where it is implied that students will weigh the external pressures in their life against their level of commitment to persist. External influences in the form of family or
job obligations can either strengthen or weaken a student’s commitment level and in turn positively or negatively affect their decision to drop out. In regards to using the model to study nontraditional student populations, Tinto (1982) himself has noted that modifications to his model would be necessary if it were to be used to investigate distance or nontraditional students (Boyles, 2000; Sweet, 1986).

**Bean and Metzner’s model of nontraditional student attrition.**

In the early 1980’s, Bean and Metzner (1985), observed a shift in undergraduate student demographics towards increased numbers of “older, part-time, and commuter students” (p. 485). The downside to this trend, however, was that this new cohort of nontraditional learners tended to drop out at a higher rate than their traditional-aged, campus-based peers. Complicating this issue was a research base that up until that point had largely ignored the nontraditional student population, leaving a significant gap in the understanding of why these students drop out (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Boyles, 2000). In response to this problem, Bean and Metzner developed their own model of nontraditional student attrition, which would later become recognized as one of the first to address this specific population of students (Jun, 2005; McGivney, 2009).

Central to Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model is their definition of the nontraditional learner. Acknowledging the difficulty of classifying this diverse group of students, Bean and Metzner opted instead to highlight the areas in which nontraditional students differ from traditional undergraduate students. According to their definition, a traditional undergraduate student lives on campus, is between 18-24 years old, and is a full-time student. Therefore, they determined that a nontraditional student must meet at least one of the following conditions: commutes to campus, is older than 24, and attends
school part-time. In addition, because nontraditional students typically have competing
demands on their time, they are less concerned with, and are less influenced by the social
environment of their institution (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Graham & Gisi, 2000). Instead
they attend college primarily for academic reasons, hoping to gain some tangible, real-
world benefit as a result of their education (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Boyles, 2000;
Kember, 1989; Tinto, 1975).

Based on this understanding of nontraditional learners, Bean and Metzner (1985)
built their model of attrition upon the previous work of Spady (1970), Tinto (1975), and
Pascarella (1980). Similar to these previous models, Bean and Metzner depicted attrition
as a longitudinal process and also included elements such as student background
characteristics and academic variables. These earlier models (Pascarella, 1980; Spady,
1970; Tinto, 1975), however, were designed for traditional undergraduate students and as
such, emphasized a student’s social integration to their institution as a major factor in
their decision to drop out (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Bean and Metzner reasoned that
social factors were much less of a concern for nontraditional students, and instead
designed their model to account for factors external to the academic institution, such as
finances, hours of employment, family responsibilities, outside engagement, and
opportunity to transfer.

When viewed in its entirety, Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model indicates that a
nontraditional student’s decision to dropout is influenced by variables in three categories:
academic, background, and environmental. In addition, the interaction of these variables
will combine to produce both an academic and psychological outcome in a student, which
in turn will directly impact their decision to persist (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Park and Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003).

![Diagram of Bean and Metzner's model of nontraditional student attrition](image)

*Figure 3. Bean and Metzner’s model of nontraditional student attrition. Reprinted from “In Search of Higher Persistence Rates in Distance Education Online Programs,” by A. P. Rovai, 2003, *Internet and Higher Education*, 6, p. 6. Copyright 2002 by Elsevier Science Inc. Reprinted with permission.*

While Bean and Metzner’s (1985) model is well suited for nontraditional learners, it is worth clarifying that their model does not address students who are learning at a distance (Kember, 1989; McGivney, 2009; Rovai, 2003). As they indicated in their definition of nontraditional learners, Bean and Metzner’s model looks at adult, part-time students who commute to their school and attend class in a face-to-face setting. Students who are enrolled in a distance learning program will rarely, if ever, travel to campus and as a result their interactions with faculty, peers, and the institution are much more limited.
A model of attrition for distance students therefore would need to account for these factors as well as several other elements that are unique to this population (Kember, 1989).

**Kember’s model of dropout from distance education.**

By the late 1980’s, a solid body of research (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1980; Spady, 1970; Tinto, 1975, 1982) had developed around the topic of student persistence in higher education. Kember (1989) argued, however, that the bulk of this knowledge was focused on understanding dropout in the context of the traditional, face-to-face learning environment and did little to contribute to the understanding of why distance students drop out. In an effort to rectify this situation, Kember proposed the first theoretical model to specifically address the dropout of adult learners from distance education (Huett et al., 2008).

Based largely on the work of Vincent Tinto (1975), Kember’s (1989) model explains attrition from distance education as a longitudinal process in which a student’s decision to drop out is influenced by a string of variables, each directly or indirectly impacting the next (LeBrun, 2012; McGivney, 2009; Storrings, 2005). Beginning with student characteristics, Kember’s model emphasizes the importance of background variables such as family, work, and education in determining a student’s level of commitment to achieving their educational goals. If their goal commitment is strong, then a student will be more likely to succeed in the next phase of the model as they work to integrate their academic responsibilities with their external social and work commitments. Finally, prior to making a decision on whether to persist or drop out, students will conduct a cost/benefit analysis. During this process, a student will weigh the
costs of staying in school, both in terms of time and money spent, against the benefits of completing their degree or program. If the result of the cost/benefit analysis is favorable, then the student will likely decide to persist (Jun, 2005).

It should be noted that Kember (1989) believed that distance students would reassess the benefits of remaining enrolled multiple times throughout the course of their program. Changes in their academic standing or new pressures from their external environment would likely have an impact on other components in the model, resulting in new variables to be considered in the cost/benefit analysis. In order to accommodate this, Kember included a recycling loop in his model to indicate that the dropout process is continuous and may involve several iterations.


Although Kember (1989) retained Tinto’s (1975) longitudinal structure and a core focus on academic and social integration, the two models diverged in several key ways (Jun, 2005). First, where Tinto’s model had focused on full-time, residential undergraduate students, Kember instead hoped to explain the drop out process for mature,
adult students who were enrolled part-time and studying at a distance. Given these complicating factors, it was Kember’s contention that his model would need to have a greater focus on variables external to a student’s academic environment, such as their family, job, and social commitments. Kember theorized that while these external variables would not have much of an effect on traditional undergraduate students, they would have a much greater impact on the dropout decision of adult distance learners (McGivney, 2009; Storring, 2005; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

Another departure from Tinto’s (1975) model can be seen in how Kember (1989) perceives the variable of social integration. Although this element is a major component of both models, Tinto views social integration as a measure of how well students have integrated themselves into the academic community through interactions with faculty and peers. Conversely, Kember views social integration in terms of a student’s ability to balance their school work with outside commitments to their family, job, and social life (Jun, 2005; McGivney, 2009; Yorke, 2004).

Although Kember’s (1989) model has become one of the most widely cited models of persistence in distance education, at the time that it was originally proposed, Kember acknowledged that it was in need of further testing and therefore should only be considered as a “theoretical framework” (1989, p. 290; McGivney, 2009). These concerns however, were allayed years later when Kember (1995) published an updated and validated version of his model.

Despite this, it is reasonable to question the applicability of Kember’s (1989) model to modern forms of online distance education. While Kember based his understanding of distance education on a traditional correspondence model, today’s
online learning platforms allow for a much higher level of student-student and student-instructor interaction, while also introducing a number of new and potentially confounding variables to the persistence equation. Recognizing the need for a model that accounts for the impact of these online learning technologies, several researchers have since proposed updated models to address the problem of student attrition from online education (Berge & Huang, 2004; Packham et al., 2004; McGivney, 2009; Park, 2007; Rovai, 2003).

**Rovai’s composite persistence model.**

While acknowledging the contribution of previous models (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975) to the understanding of student persistence in higher education, Rovai (2003) observed that “these models were developed with on-campus programs in mind and, although they are broadly relevant to distance education programs, their ability to explain the persistence of online students is limited” (2003, p. 1). Rovai reasoned that the differences between traditional and online learning were significant enough that a new model was needed in order to better understand why these students drop out.

In developing a model to address these concerns, Rovai (2003) began by examining two of the most frequently cited models in the field of student persistence, those of Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985). Although these models were not entirely the best fit for online students, previous research (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992) had confirmed that each contained several elements that were “highly significant predictors” of student persistence (2003, p. 8). Specifically, Cabrera et al. (1992) found that Tinto’s variables of institutional commitment, goal commitment, and social integration were positively correlated with student persistence, while Bean and
Metzner’s environmental variables of finances, hours of employment, and family responsibilities were identified as affecting student attrition. Based on this analysis, Rovai adapted these components into his model, and reclassified them as internal and external factors. One other element that Rovai carried over from these previous models (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975) is that of student background characteristics. Variables such as age, race, sex and prior education, were featured prominently in both models and have since been cited by others for their effect on student persistence (Murguia, Padilla, & Pavel, 1991; Ross & Powell, 1990; Rovai, 2001; Schlosser & Anderson, 1994).

Next, in order to fill in the gaps where earlier models were lacking, Rovai (2003) conducted a review of the literature aimed at identifying variables specifically associated with online student success and persistence. As a result of this search, Rovai added the following components to his model: student skills for learning online (e.g., computer literacy, information literacy, time management, etc.) (Rowntree, 1995; Cole, 2000), online student needs (e.g., identification with the school, interpersonal relationships, accessibility to services, etc.) (Workman & Stenard, 1996), and pedagogy, both in terms of teaching and learning styles (Grow, 1996).
Once his research was complete, Rovai (2003) proposed a model of student persistence that combined the most relevant aspects of earlier models (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975) with items identified from the literature as critical to online student persistence. Divided into two sections, which he labeled as prior to admission and after admission, Rovai’s model shows how a student’s skills and background play a role in affecting a host of internal factors once they have begun their program of study. In addition, owing to the similarities between online and nontraditional learners, students in Rovai’s model must also contend with the added pressures of external commitments.

Figure 5. Rovai’s composite persistence model. Reprinted from “In Search of Higher Persistence Rates in Distance Education Online Programs,” by A. P. Rovai, 2003, Internet and Higher Education, 6, p. 9. Copyright 2002 by Elsevier Science Inc. Reprinted with permission.
When considered as a whole, the model shows how these factors interact and work together to influence a student’s decision on whether to persist or drop out.

Rovai (2003) cautions however, that even though his model is designed to account for the unique needs of online learners, there is no simple answer to the problem of student attrition. As he puts it, “adult persistence in an online program is a complicated response to multiple issues” (p. 12). These issues can include both internal and external factors, as well as student-related and institution related factors. Rovai advises that one must consider this entire picture in order to identify students at risk of dropping out.

*Park’s model for adult dropout in online learning.*

In 2007, Park proposed a model to explain the dropout of adult learners from online programs across higher education and corporate settings. Although Rovai (2003) had previously developed a model to address this segment of the student population, growing concern over high online attrition rates prompted Park to investigate Rovai’s framework in order to determine if any revisions were necessary. Park found that although the four main components of Rovai’s model (student characteristics, student skills, external factors, and internal factors) were supported by the literature on online attrition, several variables within these categories were lacking empirical support. In addition, Park noted that while Rovai’s model indicated that a student’s decision to persist is directly influenced only by internal factors, there was no clear consensus on this in the literature (Park & Choi, 2009). Based on these observations, Park proposed several changes to Rovai’s original framework and incorporated them into her model for adult dropout from online learning.
The most noticeable change that Park (2007) made to Rovai’s (2003) model is the elimination of the learner skills component. In her review of the literature, Park found that many of the variables that Rovai had included in this category, such as computer literacy, information literacy, and time management were lacking empirical support and could not be directly connected to a student’s decision to drop out from online learning. As a result, Park reasoned that learner skills should not be included in a model of online student attrition until more statistical research has been done in this area.

The next change that Park (2007) made to Rovai’s (2003) model was to adjust the placement of external factors. External factors were labeled as an after-admission variable in Rovai’s model; however, Park found that external variables can affect online students both before and after they have begun their course.

The final change that Park (2007) made to Rovai’s (2003) model was to redefine the relationships between several of the remaining components. In Rovai’s model, the relationship between external and internal factors was one-sided, with pressures from outside the academic environment impacting a host of internal variables. Park, however, found that external and internal factors are capable of influencing each other and adjusted her model to reflect this relationship. In addition, Park found that external factors can directly impact a student’s decision to drop out, whereas Rovai’s model depicts external factors as having only an indirect effect on this decision. Based on this evidence, Park adjusted her model to show that both internal and external factors can directly influence a student’s decision to drop out.

One component from Rovai’s (2003) model that Park (2007) left unchanged is that of learner characteristics. Park found that variables such as age, gender, education,
and employment status were frequently cited throughout the literature as having a significant, but indirect effect on student drop out.


When viewed as a whole, Park’s (2007) model explains that student background characteristics affect internal and external factors, which then interact with each other to directly impact a student’s decision to persist or drop out. Since proposing her model, Park has used it to empirically investigate the differences between adult online students who completed and those who did not complete an online course (Park & Choi, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009). On both occasions, Park found that her model was able to predict online student persistence. Park and Choi (2007; 2009) caution however, that their research was specific to students at only one institution, and included a limited number of variables in the categories of learner characteristics, external factors, and internal factors. In order to improve the model and increase its applicability, they recommend that the
model be tested on students at different institutions and include a greater number of variables as supported by the literature.

Factors impacting student persistence.

In a comprehensive review of the literature, Hart (2012) identified a number of evidence-based factors related to student persistence in online higher education. Factors that were found to positively correlate with student persistence were labeled as facilitators, while factors that were negatively correlated to student persistence were classified as barriers.

Facilitators of student persistence that were the most frequently cited in the literature included self-motivation, time management skills, the flexibility of the online format, and support from family, friends, co-workers, and fellow classmates. Goal commitment, while included as a primary component in several prominent models of student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1989; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975) was only cited by one study (Ivankova & Stick, 2007) in Hart’s (2012) review as a facilitator of student persistence.
Table 2

*Facilitators of Persistence in Online Learning as Identified by Hart (2012)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asynchronous format</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social connectedness or presence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College status and graduating term</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort with online coursework</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of Interactions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal Commitment</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As for barriers to student persistence, Hart (2012) found that non-academic issues were the most frequently cited reason for online student dropout. Variously labeled in models of student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1989; Park, 2007; Rovai, 2003) as external factors and environmental variables, non-academic barriers to persistence can include any issues related to a student’s family, job, or social commitments. The next most common barrier to online student persistence was isolation and decreased engagement. Hart cited several studies (Bunn, 2004; Ivankova & Stick,
2007; Morris et al., 2005) that found students are more likely to persist when they are enrolled in a course in which the instructor has provided multiple opportunities for students to engage with the content and interact with their peers.

College status, which refers to a student’s class level (e.g., freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) and graduating term were identified as both facilitators and barriers to online student persistence. Researchers (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Levy, 2007) have found that the closer a student is to graduation the more likely they are to persist, while a student who is at the start of their academic program is more likely to drop out.

Table 3

*Barriers to Persistence in Online Learning as Identified by Hart (2012)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-academic issues</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation and decreased engagement</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College status and graduating term</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auditory learning style</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic computer skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in accessing resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of computer accessibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, Hart’s (2012) review of the literature served to synthesize current research on online student persistence and to build consensus around the evidence-based factors most responsible for facilitating and impeding persistence. Hart noted that further research in this area is needed in order to bring about a greater understanding of the
“constellation of behaviors, attitudes, [and] skills needed by…student[s] to successfully complete an online course” (p. 39).

The Adult Learner

Demographic information.

Enrollment figures.

The number of adults enrolled in continuing or higher education has risen steadily over the past several decades primarily as a result of two forces: shifting demographics in the college aged population and a dynamic, technology-driven workplace that is continually in need of employees with an updated skill set (Hussar & Bailey, 2011 as cited in Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2011; Kasworm, 2003; Prescott & Bransberger, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2012; The Economist, 2014; Weise & Christensen, 2014). This influx of adult learners increased the enrollments of students ages 25 and over from approximately 2.4 million in 1970 to just over 6.3 million by the year 2000 (Kasworm, 2003; Snyder & Dillow, 2012).

Between 2000 and 2010 the number of adult students in higher education grew by 42 percent, making students 25 and over one of the fastest growing segments of the college student population (DiConsiglio, 2010; Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2015; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). This growth far outpaced the enrollment of students ages 24 and under whose numbers grew by only 34 percent during the same period (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). By the end of the decade, the number of adults enrolled in higher education had grown to nearly 9 million students, accounting for 43 percent of the students enrolled in higher education (Snyder & Dillow, 2012).
Although the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) (as cited in DiConsiglio, 2010) had predicted that this trend of rapid growth would continue, there has been a recent decline in adult enrollments that has coincided with an overall decline in enrollments across higher education dating back to 2012 (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2012a & 2015). In spite of this downturn, at the start of the 2015-2016 academic year, adults continued to make up approximately 40 percent of the student population in higher education (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015; Ruffalo Noel-Levitz, 2015).

Looking ahead, NCES predicts that college enrollments will stabilize while adult enrollments are expected to continue to grow at a rate that exceeds that of the traditional aged student population (Hussar & Bailey, 2009 & 2011; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). By the year 2020 it is estimated that adult enrollments will reach an estimated number of 10.7 million students (Hussar & Bailey, 2011).

Description.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2012b) defines the adult learner as “any student, undergraduate or graduate, 25 years of age or older” (p. 1). This definition is widely and consistently used throughout the literature on adult and nontraditional students in higher education (Bean & Metzner, 1985; DiConsiglio, 2010; Kasworm, 2003; McGivney, 2004; National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2015; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015; Shapiro, D., Dundar, A., Wakhungu, P., Yuan, X., & Harrell, A., 2015; Snyder & Dillow, 2012).

Learners in this age group come from a wide range of backgrounds and bring with them a diverse set of skills, knowledge, and experiences (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Semmar, 2006). Some adults enter into higher education having already earned a degree and are now seeking to change careers or earn an advanced degree or certification (DiConsiglio,
2010; Semmar, 2006). On the other end of the spectrum are adults with little to no experience in higher education who never attended college or may have dropped out before earning their degree (Semmar, 2006). When viewed as a whole, this group of learners represents a diverse segment of the student population and has a unique set of needs that are vastly different from the traditional undergraduate population (Castles, 2004; DiConsiglio, 2010; Holder, 2007; McGivney, 2004; Prescott & Bransberger, 2012; Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2015).

In describing the distinguishing characteristics and changing needs of adult students Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003) note the following:

They tend to be practical problem solvers. Their life experiences make them autonomous, self-directed, and goal- and relevancy-oriented—they need to know the rationale for what they are learning. They are motivated by professional advancement, external expectations, the need to better serve others, social relationships, escape or stimulation, and pure interest in the subject. Their demands include time and scheduling, money, and long-term commitment constraints. (Student/Enrollment Trends Number 3)

The demands on an adult learner’s time are especially important to consider as many adults have additional responsibilities beyond their studies, including commitments to their family, job, and community (McGivney, 2004; Prescott & Bransberger, 2012; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

**Reasons for enrolling in higher education.**

Adults primarily enroll in higher education for reasons that are career or job related (Aslanian, 2001 as cited in Kasworm, 2003; Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012).
Specifically, adults view higher education as a way to learn new skills or update their current skill set so that they can advance in their job, change career paths, or in the case of displaced workers, look for a new job (DiConsiglio, 2010; Kennamer, 2011; Kim & Creighton, 2000; Weise & Christensen, 2014). Emphasizing the career focused nature of adult learners, Wlodkowski (2008) states, “All…adult learners share a common goal: they want to use the knowledge and skills they acquire to enhance their careers or professional opportunities—for better jobs, higher salaries, coveted promotions, or simply staying competitive” (p. 34). Although less often cited than career related factors, adults are also motivated to enroll in higher education by transitions or triggering events in their family life, such as a change in marital status, a change in the number of dependents, moving to a new location, or reaching a milestone age (e.g., 30, 40, 50) (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012).

Owing to their busy work and life commitments, adults in higher education are increasingly choosing the convenience and flexibility of studying online (Aslanian & Clinefelter, 2012; DiConsiglio, 2010; Holder 2007; Weise & Christensen, 2014). As the number of students ages 25 and older continues to increase across higher education, Aslanian and Clinefelter reported in 2012 that this cohort was responsible for approximately 80% of online enrollments (Hussar & Bailey, 2011; Prescott & Bransberger, 2012; Snyder & Dillow, 2012). The increase in both overall online enrollments and the number of programs across higher education that are targeted towards adults suggest that this trend is likely to continue (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Cercone, 2008; Kasworm, 2003; Park & Choi, 2009).
Adult learning theory.

Introduction.

In order to meet the needs of adults in higher education, a theory of adult learning has emerged which has helped to serve as a guide for practitioners in adult education. Although there are a number of different views on how adults learn, adult learning theory is rooted in the assumptions that adults are self-directed learners who are motivated to learn by needs and problems that are situated in the real world (Brown, Dickson, Humphreys, McQuillan, & Smears, 2008; Brownstein, Rettie, & George, 1998; Cassidy, 2004; Chyung, 2007; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Rovai, 2003; Tyler-Smith, 2006). Equally important to adult learning theory is the recognition that adults vary greatly in terms of their background experiences and preferred learning styles (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Driscoll, 1998; Garland, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 2011). Owing to this diversity, Merriam (1993) advocates for “a multifaceted understanding of adult learning”, one that reflects “the inherent richness and complexity of the phenomenon” (p. 12).

The concepts behind adult learning theory are not new and can be traced back through history to ancient teachers, philosophers, and prophets such as Confucius, Lao Tse, Jesus, Cicero, Aristotle, Socrates, and Plato (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005). As Knowles states, “These notable teachers perceived learning to be a process of mental inquiry, not passive reception of transmitted content” (p. 35). As such, they developed and practiced techniques for teaching their own adult students, giving rise to several modern instructional practices/techniques such as the case method and problem-based learning (Knowles et al., 2005; Ozuah, 2005).
By the 7th century however, pedagogy (“the art and science of teaching children”) and its teacher-centered approach had become the dominant form of instruction in Europe and later on in the United States (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 36). It wasn’t until after World War I that a theory of adult learning began to emerge, owing to contributions from theorists, social scientists, and adult educators who believed that adults learned differently than children.

In terms of current practice, it was Eduard C. Lindeman who in 1926 established the foundation for modern adult learning theory with the publication of his book *The Meaning of Adult Education* (Knowles et al., 2005). In this work, Lindeman expanded on several ideas that would go on to become central to understanding the needs of adult learners, including: the value of an adult’s previous experiences, the impact on adults of outside influences (work, family, social commitments, etc.), and the need for a curriculum that is relevant and is able to be adjusted to meet the unique needs of individual students. In addition, Lindeman recognized the need for a student-centered approach where the instructor acts as a facilitator of learning as opposed to serving as the primary source of knowledge.

Based on Lindeman’s work, Knowles et al. (2005) identified five key assumptions about how adults learn that have since been supported by research. They are (p. 40):

1. Adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy.
2. Adults’ orientation to learning is life-centered.
3. Experience is the richest source for adult’s learning.
4. Adults have a deep need to be self-directing.
5. Individual differences among people increase with age.

**Andragogy.**

**History.**

Several decades later, Knowles (1970) would go on to incorporate Lindeman’s (1926) ideas into a unified theory of adult learning, which he termed andragogy (literally meaning, “the art and science of helping adults learn”) (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 61). The origins of the word andragogy can be traced back to German educator Alexander Kapp, who in 1833 used the word to describe the teaching method used by Plato with his adult students (2005). The term, however, fell out of use and was largely forgotten until the 1920’s when rising numbers of adult students throughout Europe and the United States brought about a renewed interest in the unique needs of adult learners (Knowles et al., 2005; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). By the mid-20th century, the term andragogy was being used widely amongst educators and academics in Europe and eventually was popularized in the United States by Malcolm Knowles (1970) with the release of his book *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: Andragogy vs Pedagogy*. Since this time, Knowles’ model of andragogy has gone on to become one of the most well known and widely cited theories of adult learning (Cercone, 2008; Merriam, 2001; Ross-Gordon, 2003; Ross-Gordon, 2011).

**Contrast with pedagogy.**

In developing his theory of andragogy, Knowles first examined the various assumptions of pedagogy and found that they did not fit into his conception of how adults learn (Chan, 2010; Knowles, 1970; Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2005; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). As early as the 1920s adult educators had begun to realize that pedagogical
teaching strategies such as “lectures, assigned readings, drill, quizzes, rote memorizing, and examinations” were not the best methods for teaching their adult students (1980, p. 40). Not surprisingly, adults were resistant to these pedagogical approaches and dropout rates were high (1980).

In order to address this growing problem, Knowles based his theory of andragogy on the central principle that adults have different characteristics and different learning processes than that of children; therefore, the two groups should not be taught the same way (Birzer, 2004; Houde, 2006; Knowles, 1980; Knowles et al., 2005; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). For instance, theories on pedagogy prescribe that learners are dependent on the instructor, extrinsically motivated, and that their orientation to learning should be subject oriented, whereas adult learning theory held that learners were self-directed, internally motivated, and that learning should be problem oriented (Chan, 2010; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Knowles, 1970; Knowles et al., 2005; Ozuah, 2005; Simonson et al., 2012). In addition, a learner’s previous experience is considered irrelevant in pedagogy, while adult learning theory views a learner’s experience as a valuable resource for learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Knowles et al., 2005; Ozuah, 2005; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Another key feature of the pedagogical model is that it is teacher-centered, and as such “assigns to the teacher full responsibility for making all decisions about what will be learned, how it will be learned, when it will be learned, and if it has been learned” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 61). Students in this context are submissive, while the instructor fills the role of transmitter of knowledge (Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Knowles et al., 2005). In contrast, Knowles realized that adults learn best in a student-centered approach where the learner takes an active role and is less reliant on the instructor
(Knowles et al., 2005; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Adult educators who adhere to these principles will eschew a traditional lecture based approach and instead employ a more collaborative approach where they act as a facilitator of learning (2009).

**Knowles’ six assumptions of andragogy.**

Based on these observations of the needs of adult learners, Knowles et al. (2005) identified six key assumptions on which his conception of andragogy is based:

1. *The need to know.* Adults will exert more effort if they are told what they need to know and why they need to know it. Understanding the value of what they are about to learn is important to adults.

2. *The learners’ self-concept.* Adult learners are independent and have “a deep psychological need to be seen by others and treated by others as being capable of self-direction. They resent and resist situations in which they feel others are imposing their wills on them” (p. 65).

3. *The role of the learners’ experiences.* “Adults come into an educational activity with both a greater volume and a different quality of experience from that of youths” (p. 65). These prior experiences are key to the identity of the adult learner and serve as a valuable recourse for their learning.

4. *Readiness to learn.* An adult is most ready to learn when they believe the topic is something that they need to know in order to effectively deal with a real-life situation.

5. *Orientation to learning.* An adult’s orientation to learning is life-centered (“or task-centered or problem-centered”), as opposed to subject centered (p. 67).
Adults are motivated to learn if the new knowledge has immediate application to a problem they are facing in the real-world.

6. **Motivation.** Adults are primarily internally motivated and are less responsive to external rewards.

In summarizing his theory of adult learning, Knowles et al. (2005) advises that, “A distinction between the concepts of pedagogy and andragogy is required to fully grasp the concept of andragogy” (p. 71). To that end, Table 4 provides a summary comparison of how the core principles of andragogy contrast with that of pedagogy.

Table 4

**Comparison of the Core Principles of Pedagogy and Andragogy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
<th>Andragogy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Need to Know</td>
<td>A student’s need to know is limited to what is necessary to pass an exam, course, or grade level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Learner’s Self Concept</td>
<td>Students are dependent on the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Experience</td>
<td>The teacher’s experience is more important than that of the student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readiness to Learn</td>
<td>A student’s readiness to learn is dictated by the teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation to Learning</td>
<td>Subject-centered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Andragogy in practice.**

Although Knowles (1970) originally presented his theory of andragogy as an either-or situation in which pedagogy is to be used with children and andragogy is to be
used with adults, he has since adjusted his stance and now suggests a more flexible interpretation of his model (Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000; Knowles et al., 2005). This shift in thinking occurred in the decade following the introduction of his theory of andragogy as Knowles realized that depending on the situation some andragogical techniques can work well with younger learners, while there may also be situations in which adult learners require a more supportive pedagogical approach (Knowles et al., 2005; Ozuah, 2005).

For example, children who are independent, self-directed, and have previous experience in a given subject area may benefit from a learner-centered approach that gives them greater responsibility for their learning and allows for some measure of self-direction (Knowles et al., 2005; Taylor & Kroth, 2009). Likewise, adults who are in a situation in which they are learning a subject for the first time will have little background experience to draw on, may not see how the subject is relevant to their lives, and consequently may be lacking in motivation. In such a case, these adult students may be more dependent on the instructor and require a supportive, teacher-centered approach (Knowles et al., 2005; Ozuah, 2005; Taylor & Kroth, 2009).

In deciding on which of these instructional approaches is the most appropriate, Knowles (1980) advises the adult educator to view andragogy and pedagogy as “two ends of a spectrum” with the appropriate instructional approach lying somewhere in between based on the context of the learning situation (p. 43). Contextual factors for the instructor to consider can include “individual learner and situational differences” as well as “the goals and purposes of learning” (Knowles et al., 2005, p. 3). It is this flexibility to adapt
and adjust the model to meet the needs of adult students in a given situation that Knowles et al. (2005) considers to be the greatest strength of his theory of andragogy.

**Summary and recommendations for adult learning.**

In an effort to help adult educators gain a better understanding of the unique needs of their students, Ozuah (2005) synthesized the core principles of andragogy along with key concepts from several prominent learning theories (behavioral, cognitive, constructivist, developmental, and humanistic theory) into a list of recommendations that outline the ideal conditions for adult learning to take place. According to Ozuah (p. 86), adults learn best:

- When they want or need to learn something
- In a non-threatening environment
- When their individual learning style needs are met
- When their previous experience is valued and utilized
- When there are opportunities for them to have control over the learning process
- When there is active cognitive and psychomotor participation in the process
- When sufficient time is provided for assimilation of new information
- When there is an opportunity to practice and apply what they have learned
- When there is a focus on relevant problems and practical applications of concepts
- When there is feedback to assess progress towards their goals.

Other recommended best practices drawn from andragogy and adult learning theory for teaching adult students includes the use of clearly stated course expectations, the
presentation of content in a manner that moves from simple to complex, opportunities for students to actively participate in their learning, and an instructor who understands the importance of providing feedback on student work (Ozuah, 2005; Simonson et al., 2012).

**Criticism of adult learning theory and andragogy.**

Ross-Gordon (2011) notes that over the years research in adult education has provided “substantial but not unqualified” support for many of the core principles of andragogy and adult learning theory (Research on Adult Learners in College Classrooms section, para. 1). In addition, scholars have credited the influence of andragogy for a shift seen in curricula across higher education as more undergraduate, graduate, and adult education programs transition from a traditional teacher-centered approach to one that is more focused on the learner (Cassidy, 2004; Pratt, 1993; Merriam, 2001).

Despite an increased awareness of the needs of adult learners and the support for a student-centered approach to instruction, both adult learning theory and andragogy have been subject to a fair amount of criticism. For instance, Cassidy (2004) points to a significant body of research that questions the validity of several key assumptions of how adult learn (Fox & Harvill, 1984; Newble & Jaeger, 1983; Norman, 1999; O’Neill, Baxter, & Morris, 1999; Tousignant & DesMarchais, 2002; Ward, Gruppen, & Regehr, 2002). Findings from this research have largely challenged the assumption that adults are inherently self-directed learners. For instance, Norman (as cited in Cassidy, 2004) argues that research has shown a lack of empirical evidence to support this aspect of adult learning theory. In addition, Norman (as cited in Cassidy, 2004) argues that in order for adults to be capable of self-direction, they must first be able to accurately assess their learning needs. However, Cassidy (2004) highlights research showing that adults lack
this ability and consistently produce inaccurate results when conducting self-assessments (Tousignant & DesMarchais, 2002; Ward et al., 2002 as cited in Cassidy, 2004). Kerka (1994) likewise dismisses the idea that all adults are self-directed, noting that this characteristic can vary between adults both in terms of their “willingness” and “ability to assume personal responsibility for learning” (p. 3). Meanwhile, Smith (1982) cautions adult educators that students who are not prepared to handle this responsibility can “respond with anxiety, and sometimes withdrawal” (p. 45).

Additionally, evidence has been presented that calls into question the andragogical principle of an adult’s readiness to learn, which states that adults will be more motivated to study a topic that has relevance to a situation that they are dealing with in real-life (Knowles et al., 2005). However, Fox & Harvill (as cited in Cassidy, 2004) discovered that when given the freedom to direct their learning adults will choose a topic that is comfortable to them rather than material that is relevant to their jobs and that would fill in gaps in their knowledge.

Another criticism with adult learning theory has to do with the premise that problem-based learning is well suited for adults. Knowles et al. (2005) states that adults prefer to learn from this approach: however, research into the training of physicians has found that although adults may prefer a problem-based learning approach, it did not result in increased competency (Kilroy, 2004; Norman, 1999 as cited in Cassidy, 2004).

Additional voices that have taken critical aim specifically at Knowles et al. (2005) theory of andragogy include those who have questioned the need for a separate theory of learning for adults based on their belief that there is no difference in the learning processes of adults and children (Elias, 1979; Houle, 1972; London, 1973 as cited in
Holmes & Abington-Cooper, 2000). Others (Davenport, 1987; Davenport and Davenport, 1985; Day and Baskett, 1982; Elias, 1979; Hartree, 1984; Tennant, 1986 as cited in Knowles et al., 2005) have rejected andragogy based on the mistaken notion that Knowles had intended for his theory to be a “one size fits all” approach for teaching adults (2005, p. 148). Knowles et al. (2005) later clarified that this was never his intent and instead advocated for a flexible application of his theory based on the context of the learning situation and the background of the learners. Knowles et al. (2005) himself has even contributed to the criticism of his theory, questioning whether or not andragogy is an appropriate approach to use with adults who are studying online. This is owing to Knowles’ belief that learning online requires an even greater amount of self-direction than some adults may be prepared to handle.

Perhaps the main critique of andragogy, however, is the lack of empirical support for its core principles, leaving some to question whether it should even be considered a theory (Grace, 1996; Houde, 2006; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007; Pratt, 1993; Rachal, 1994; Rachal, 2002). While Davenport (1987) advocated for rigorous testing of Knowles’ theory nearly twenty years ago, others (Merriam et al., 2007; Rachal, 2002) have noted that there has since been little progress in this area. Rachal (2002) notes that what little empirical research has been done on andragogy often ends up producing “inconclusive” and/or “contradictory” results (p. 211). In an effort to address these concerns, Knowles et al. (2005) has acknowledged the need for more research on his theory and continues to advocate along with others (Houde, 2006; Taylor & Kroth, 2009) for more empirical testing to be done. Davenport (1987) has stated his belief that if these
issues can be addressed, andragogy “has the potential [to serve] as a unifying framework for [all of] adult education” (p. 20).

**Academic Motivation**

**Introduction.**

**The complex nature of human motivation.**

Motivation is a psychological construct that is both varied and complex (Ahl, 2006; Jones, Watson, Rakes, & Akalin, 2012; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002), requiring an understanding of “a full range of human cognition and emotions” (Weiner, 1984 as cited in Kim, 2005, p. 18). Although there is general consensus around the basic notion of motivation “as something that gets us going, keeps us moving, and helps us complete tasks” there continues to be “much disagreement over its precise nature” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 5). Citing several of the issues that have contributed to this discord, Jones (2009) notes an overabundance of theories, inconsistencies across definitions and terminology, and a research base that is predominantly theoretical and is lacking in applied studies. In addition, Pintrich and Schunk (2002) suggest that our understanding of motivation has been hindered by earlier studies involving non-human subjects and also studies in which human subjects were observed while engaged in “artificial tasks” (p. 4). This situation has shown improvement over time, as recent research on motivation has placed a greater emphasis on the observation of subjects engaged in authentic tasks and settings (2002).

In spite of this transition towards a more authentic research paradigm, human motivation continues to be a difficult construct to study. For instance, one of the main challenges in studying motivation is that as a psychological process, motivation cannot be
directly observed and is therefore inferred from a subject’s behaviors, such as their “choice of tasks, effort, persistence, and verbalizations” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 5).

Another factor complicating the study of motivation is that motivation is largely influenced by personal variables (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity, and life experiences), which can lead to great variation between individuals (Ahl, 2006; Glore, 2011; Keller, 1987c; Kim, 2005; Schartz, 2014). A final obstacle in the study of motivation is that it lacks stability and tends to change over time, making this construct particularly difficult to measure (Coldewey, 1991 as cited in Schlosser & Anderson, 1994; Gabrielle, 2003; Huett et al., 2006; Keller, 1983; Song & Keller, 1999). As a result, the current state of research on human motivation is one in which “professionals disagree over what motivation is, what affects motivation, how motivational processes operate, the effects that motivation has on learning and performance, and how motivation can be improved” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 4).

**Historical overview of motivation theory.**

In order to gain a better understanding of this complex phenomenon, it helps to first understand several general theories of motivation of which many of today’s theories have evolved from (Ahl, 2006; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Based on a review of the literature on motivation theory, Ahl (2006) provides an historical overview of what she has identified as general, or “classical” theories of motivation (p. 387).

One of the earliest theories of motivation to exist outside of the field of philosophy is that of the economic human (Ahl, 2006). Theories in this field were developed out of a need to increase motivation amongst workers and held that humans are rational decision makers and are motivated by the path that offers the greatest (usually financial) reward.
Following rewards based theories were those based on the concept of the social human. These theories suggest that a human’s “social and emotional needs” play an even larger role in their motivation than financial and material rewards (p. 389). Next, the early 20th century saw the rise of psycho-biological based theories of motivation which stated that human motivation was a result of inner forces working from the subconscious mind, variously labeled as instinct and drive. Theories of the learning human came about in the middle of the 20th century and stood in contrast to the internal focus of the psycho-biological theories by suggesting that human motivation is a behavioral response to external stimuli and rewards and could be studied through direct observation. During this same time frame, Maslow (1954 as cited in Ahl, 2006) and several others were developing need-driven theories of motivation which posited that humans are collectively motivated by a number of intrinsic needs, ranging from basic physiological needs to those of a higher order, such as the need for achievement, recognition, and personal growth. The second half of the 20th century saw the rise of cognitive based theories of motivation, which posit that a human’s behavior is influenced by their thoughts, ideas, and perceptions of the world around them. Cognitive theories (e.g., self-efficacy theory, goal theory, attribution theory, etc.) have since come to dominate the landscape of motivation research and will be covered in greater detail later in this chapter.
Table 5

Classical Motivation Theories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Humans as</th>
<th>are motivated by:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Economic/rational</td>
<td>Rewards and punishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Social</td>
<td>Social norms, groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Psycho-biological</td>
<td>Instincts and drives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Learning</td>
<td>Stimuli and/or rewards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Need-driven</td>
<td>Inner needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Cognitive</td>
<td>Cognitive maps</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Definition of motivation.

Although motivation has been defined and interpreted in a number of ways (Ahl, 2006; Keller, 1983; Kleinginna & Kleinginna, 1981), there are several elements to this construct that can be agreed upon when viewed from a cognitive perspective (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). For instance, there is broad support for the “the importance of goals” in relation to motivational processes (Cheng & Yeh, 2009; Keller, 1983; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 5), with Kleinginna and Kleinginna (1981) identifying 20 definitions of motivation in which goals and/or goal-directed behavior are connected to motivation. Next, it is generally agreed that as a psychological process motivation is not directly observable, but instead can be inferred through behaviors such as choice of tasks, effort, and persistence (Bures, Abrami, & Amundsen, 2000; Keller, 1983; Maslow, 1970; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). A final element common to cognitive theories of motivation is
the idea that motivational processes are not only important in providing the impetus to
engage in an activity or pursue a goal, but they are also key in determining the amount of
effort one will expend in completing a task or in pursuit of a goal (Cheng & Yeh, 2009;
Based on these shared characteristics, Pintrich and Schunk (2002) define motivation as
“the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained” (p. 5). It is this
definition that “captures the elements considered by most researchers and practitioners to
be central to motivation” (p. 5).

**Academic motivation.**

Since this study is concerned with motivation in the context of adult online
education the term ‘academic motivation’ will be used in order to highlight the
distinction between motivation as a purely psychological construct and motivation as a
facilitator for student learning. In his research on the development of a model for
motivational course design, Jones (2009) uses the term ‘academic motivation’ to denote
the importance of motivation in regards to student learning and achievement and also to
differentiate between how motivation is viewed in various contexts (e.g., academic,
athletic, work, etc.).

The importance of motivation as it relates to student learning cannot be
understated, with numerous scholars acknowledging the significance of this link
(Efklides, Kuhl, & Sorrentino, 2001; Johnson, 2012; Jones, 2009; Keller, 1987c; Kim,
2005; Means, Jonassen & Dwyer, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Sperry, 2009). In one
of the earliest studies to formally quantify the effect of motivation on student
achievement, Fyans and Maehr (1987) found that motivation “plays a critical role in
determining school achievement”, accounting for up to 35% of the variance in student performance in their sample of nearly 10,000 high school juniors (p. 19). This finding is in line with other scholars who have also noted the positive effect of motivation on student performance and achievement in their own research (ChanLin, 2009; Gabrielle, 2003; Huett et al., 2006; Song & Keller, 2001). These positive results can be attributed to the studious behaviors that are more likely to be exhibited by motivated learners “such as attending carefully to the instruction, mentally organizing and rehearsing the material to be learned, taking notes to facilitate subsequent studying, checking their level of understanding, and asking for help when they do not understand the material” (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1992 as cited in Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 6).

**Academic motivation: Theories and models.**

Cognitive theories have come to hold sway over the field of motivation research (Ahl, 2006; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) and are united in their shared focus on mental processes such as “attributions, perceptions of competence, values, affects, goals, and social comparisons” (2002, p. 20). At issue, however, is that these theories do not always agree on which of these mental processes is the most important (2002). As a result, there is no one universal theory of cognitive motivation, but rather a variety of sub-theories, each one zeroing in on a specific set of mental processes (2006; 2002). Based on a review of the literature on academic motivation, an overview is provided of the cognitive theories found to be the most relevant to this study.

**Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.**

The construct of motivation can be broken down and described in terms of being “intrinsic or extrinsic in nature” (Kim, 2009, p. 319). An individual who is motivated
intrinsically will engage in an activity for its own “inherent satisfactions rather than for some separable consequence” (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 56). By contrast, an individual who is extrinsically motivated places secondary emphasis on the inherent value of an activity and is instead driven to action by external stimuli, such as the fear of punishment, the pressure of a due date/deadline, or the promise of a reward (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). An extrinsically motivated individual will engage in an activity “as a means to an end” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 272), as opposed to out of interest, enjoyment, or in the pursuit of some challenge (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Although current motivation theory recognizes the importance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as determinants of human behavior (Kim, 2005, 2009; Moshinskie, 2001; Park, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2000), intrinsic motivation is viewed as being the superior of the two, especially in relation to academic performance (Cheng & Yeh, 2009; Duchastel, 1997; Nicholls, Jagacinski, & Miller, 1986; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Scholars (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Lepper & Greene, 1978; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002) have also discovered that extrinsic incentives can have the unintended effect of decreasing a subject’s intrinsic motivation to complete an inherently interesting task, with Deci, Koestner, and Ryan (1999) concluding that “virtually every type of expected tangible reward made contingent on task performance does, in fact, undermine intrinsic motivation” (as cited in Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 59). It is theorized that this phenomenon is the result of the capacity of external rewards to exert a controlling influence over human behavior, thus bringing about a shift in an individual’s perceived locus of causality from internal to external (Deci, Nezlek, & Sheinman, 1981;
Deci & Ryan, 1991; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This reduction in an individual’s sense of perceived control leads to a diminished sense of autonomy and self-determination, both of which are necessary for maintaining intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In addition to being negatively affected by external rewards, intrinsic motivation has also been found to decrease with age, beginning as early as preadolescence (Harter, 1981; Lepper, Sethi, Dialdin, & Drake, 1997; Ryan & Deci, 2000). As an explanation, Ryan and Deci (2000) posit that as an individual ages, “the freedom to be intrinsically motivated becomes increasingly curtailed by social demands and roles that require individuals to assume responsibility for nonintrinsically interesting tasks” (p. 60). It is suggested, however, that this gradual decline of intrinsic motivation can be alleviated in academic settings by educators who incorporate elements of challenge, control, curiosity, and fantasy into their instruction (Lepper & Hodell, 1989 as cited in Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). These constructs have been found to promote intrinsic motivation in students by satisfying their basic needs of competence and autonomy while also enhancing the intrinsic interest of an activity (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Lepper & Hodell, 1989 as cited in Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Self-efficacy theory.**

Albert Bandura formalized the theory of self-efficacy in 1977 as part of his overarching social cognitive theory of motivation (Maddux & Kleiman, 2016). In the time since then, self-efficacy has become an important and widely studied construct in the field of human motivation (Bandura, 1994; Bures et al., 2000; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Defined as an individual’s belief in their ability “to
organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 3) self-efficacy is recognized as a representation of an individual’s perceived level of competence (Bandura, 1994, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). The need for humans to perceive themselves as competent is fundamental throughout the literature on motivation and is key to a number of motivation theories, including attribution theory, expectancy-value theory, goal theory, self-concept theory, and self-worth theory (Bandura, 1994; Jones, 2009).

Self-efficacy affects a wide range of human behavior and influences motivation in a number of ways (Bandura, 1994; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002), including determining “the goals people set for themselves; how much effort they expend; how long they persevere in the face of difficulties; and their resilience to failures” (Bandura, 1994, Motivational Processes section, para. 5). For instance, an individual with high self-efficacy beliefs will set challenging goals for themselves, exert more effort in pursuit of those goals, and continue to persist in the face of obstacles (Bandura, 1994; Bures et al., 2000; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). For this individual, their belief in their ability to achieve what they have set out to do is resolute. On the other hand, an individual who is lacking in self-efficacy will have little interest in pursuing new challenges and will decrease their effort or quit altogether when faced with obstacles (Bandura, 1994, 1997; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). This individual tends to focus on what they perceive as their own limited abilities and the likelihood of a negative outcome. Since self-efficacy is largely influenced by “personal factors, prior experiences, and social support” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 189) this construct can vary widely between individuals and situations (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002;
Gallagher, 1994 as cited in Park, 1996; Scribner, 2007) and will continue to fluctuate throughout an individual’s lifetime (Bandura, 1994).

When examined in an academic context, high self-efficacy has been found to be associated with increased student learning and achievement (Bandura, 1997; Bures et al., 2000; Jones, 2010; Schunk & Pajares, 2001). For example, in a meta-analysis of the literature on self-efficacy, Multon, Brown, and Lent (1991) found “positive and statistically significant relationships between self-efficacy beliefs and academic performance and persistence outcomes across a wide variety of subjects, experimental designs, and assessment methods” (p. 30). Given the importance of self-efficacy in relation to student performance, several scholars have recommended several methods to aid in enhancing students’ perceptions of self-competence (Bandura, 1994; Jones, Epler, Mokri, Bryant, & Paretti, 2013; Keller, 1987c). Bandura (1994) cites the importance of mastery experiences, social models, and social persuasion, Jones et al. (2013) recommends setting clear expectations, providing students with feedback, and “challenging students at an appropriate level” (p. 37), while Keller (1987c) provides a host of strategies aimed at increasing students’ confidence, thereby helping them to “form the impression that some level of success is possible if effort is exerted” (p. 5).

*Expectancy value theory.*

Expectancy-value theories and models are prominent and widely studied throughout the field of motivation research (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000), and are supported by a solid body of empirical evidence (e.g., Eccles, 1983, 1987, 1993; Eccles et al., 1989; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, 2000 as cited in Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). Based on the earlier work of Atkinson (1964 as cited in Eccles...
& Wigfield, 2002), Eccles et al. (1983) shifted expectancy-value theory away from its roots in behavioral psychology by choosing instead to focus on cognitive constructs in their subjects such as “causal attributions, subjective expectancies, self-concepts of abilities, perceptions of task difficulty and subjective task value” (p. 79). Following their initial study in which they used the expectancy-value model to understand the mathematics achievement behaviors of students in grades 5-12 (Eccles et al., 1983), Eccles and Wigfield have since examined, revised, and updated their model to reflect their ongoing research (Eccles, 1984, 1987; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992, 2000).

In its current state, expectancy-value theory posits that individuals’ achievement behaviors, such as “choice, persistence, and performance can be explained by their beliefs about how well they will do on the activity and the extent to which they value the activity” (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 68). As a result, individuals are more likely to be motivated to engage and persist in an activity when they have the expectation of a successful outcome and perceive that the outcome is valuable to them (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

In considering each of these constructs individually, Pintrich & Schunk (2002) note that expectancy beliefs are central to a number of other motivation theories and are considered to be “one of the most important mediators of achievement behavior” (p. 89). At its core, the expectancy construct is primarily concerned with the question, “Can I do this task?” (2002, p. 53). Individuals who answer yes to this question are more likely to engage in an activity than individuals who answer no. With the value construct, however, the question becomes, “Why should I do this task?” (2002, p. 60). In answering this
question, Eccles et al. (1983) notes that there are four components to the value construct that impact an individual’s decision to engage in an activity: attainment value, intrinsic value, utility value, and cost.

Attainment value refers to “the importance of doing well on a given task” (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, p. 72), especially when the task at hand is one that can confirm an individual’s “actual or ideal self-schema” (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 120). Intrinsic value refers to the satisfaction that an individual receives from completing a task that they are inherently interested in or enjoy (2002). By contrast, a task need not be interesting to have utility value, rather it must be relevant to an individual’s short or long-term goals (e.g., education, career) (2002). Finally, cost refers to the any type of negative outcomes that may arise as a result of completing a task, such as “performance anxiety and fear of both failure and success, as well as the amount of effort needed to succeed and the lost opportunities that result from making one choice rather than another” (2002, p. 120).

According to Pintrich and Schunk (2002), “Although there are many current motivational theories that include some type of expectancy and value constructs,” the expectancy-value model developed by Eccles and Wigfield and their colleagues is the one “that has generated the most theory and research on academic achievement in classroom settings” (p. 60). What they have found over the course of a number of large-scale and longitudinal studies is that in an academic context is that the expectancy and value constructs influence a wide range of achievement behaviors (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Meece, Wigfield, & Eccles, 1990; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield et al., 1997).
Most notably, an individual’s expectancy and value beliefs have been shown to positively impact their achievement choices, persistence, and performance (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). For example, in several studies carried out by Eccles, Wigfield, and their colleagues (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles et al., 1989; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992), students’ expectancy beliefs were “the strongest predictors of subsequent grades in math and English, even better predictors of later grades than were previous grades” (as cited Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 65). In addition, these same studies also found that students’ expectancy beliefs were positively related to their effort and persistence in the classroom. Students’ value beliefs, on the other hand, are strongly related to choice behaviors, such as their decisions on which activities they will engage in, which classes they will enroll in, and even what type of career they will pursue (Eccles et al., 1998 as cited in Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). For instance, Eccles and her colleagues (Eccles, 1987; Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles et al., 1984; Meece et al., 1990) discovered that students’ “task values predict course plans and enrollment decisions in mathematics, physics, and English and involvement in sport activities even after controlling for prior performance levels” (as cited in Eccles & Wigfield, 2002, p. 120). Pintrich and Schunk (2002) note, however, that it is important for students to have high levels of both expectancy and value beliefs, stating that a student with high expectancy for success will be less likely to engage in an activity if they do not value it, while an individual may value a task but choose not to engage in it if they fear that they will fail.
Motivation in online education.

Introduction.

As research from the previous section highlights, motivation is critically important in promoting behaviors that facilitate academic achievement and success (Bandura, 1997; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Multon et al., 1991; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Scholars (Simonson et al., 2012; Timmis & Cook, 2004) have also noted that motivation is an equally important part of the learning process in the online environment. In a series of studies of adults learning online, Kim (2004, 2005, 2006, 2009) found motivation to be an integral component of their success while others have found this to be true in online student populations ranging from high school students (Kim, Park, Cozart, & Lee, 2015; Lin, Wei, & Hung, 2012; Scribner, 2007) to community college students (Johnson, 2012; Pineau, 2007; Sperry, 2009) and to traditional undergraduate students (Huett et al., 2008; Kang & Tan, 2008; Kim & Keller, 2008).

Developing and maintaining a motivating online learning environment, however, can be a challenge for both instructors and instructional designers (Huett et al., 2006; Keller & Suzuki, 2004; Kim, 2005). As an example of several of the issues that must be overcome, Huett et al. (2006) notes that the student-centered and independent nature of online learning often requires students to be more highly motivated. Kim (2006) cites lower levels of interaction in the online learning environment as being problematic, while others (Glore, 2010; Johnson, 2012) have discovered that online students are not always motivated by the same instructional strategies that work with students in the traditional face-to-face classroom.
Whether face-to-face or online, what a learner finds motivating is largely dependent upon their individual preferences and previous experiences (Keller, 1999; Komarraju & Karau, 2008; Margueratt, 2007) which results in a situation where there is great variation from one learner to the next in regards to what instructional strategies and techniques they find to be motivating. Emphasizing this point, Komarraju & Karau (2008) state that “students enter the classroom with different types of academic motivation and drives that make them differentially receptive to specific instructional techniques” (p. 78). Based on this conclusion, Komarraju & Karau recommended that instructors implement “a variety of strategies” in order to better meet the motivational needs of all of their students (p. 70).

Because motivation plays such an important role in the online learning environment and because of the inherent difficulties in motivating online students, it becomes critical to identify any instructional elements that have been found to both enhance and impede the motivation of online learners. In the following sections, items that have been identified in the literature as enhancing student motivation are labeled as facilitators, while those that have been found to impede motivation are labeled as barriers. For the purposes of this study, research results will be limited to those studies focusing on an adult population.

**Facilitators to motivation.**

Motivational strategies that are categorized as facilitators can be further broken down into those that are course-related and those that are learner-related. In regards to course-related items that facilitate motivation, research has uncovered a number of instructional approaches that have been shown to increase motivation in adult online
learners. For instance, several scholars (Chyung, 2001a, 2001b, 2007; Chyung & Fenner, 2002; Chyung et al., 1999; Glore, 2011; Kim, 2005, 2006; Kim & Frick, 2011; Styer, 2007) have found increased levels of motivation in adult learners when strategies were implemented by the course instructor or course designer to capture and sustain students’ attention, to increase the relevance of the course, and also to boost levels of student confidence and satisfaction. Each of these four strategies are based on Keller’s ARCS (Attention, Relevance, Confidence, Satisfaction) Model of Motivational Design (1983, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1999, 2010) which in turn is rooted in motivation theory and has been validated for use in online learning (Chyung, 2001a; Huett, 2006; Keller & Suzuki, 2004; Song, 2000).

Other instructional strategies that have been shown to increase motivation in adult online learners include the use of multimedia elements such as animations and simulations in order to allow students to apply their knowledge to real-world situations (Kim, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009), while Chyung (2007) found that the use of contract learning, where students agree in advance to the terms and conditions of their learning, was a successful tool for sustaining adult motivation. Learner control, in terms of allowing learners some degree of freedom over the sequence and pace of instruction, choice of activities that they complete, when and where they complete their work, and who they will work with have all been cited by a number of studies (Bonk, 2002; Kim, 2005, 2009; Styer, 2007) as strategies that increase motivation. In addition, ensuring that a course is at a level of difficulty that matches the learners’ abilities, builds on learners’ previous experience, and incorporates elements of variety, novelty, curiosity, and fun
have all been shown to increase motivation in adult online learners (Bonk, 2002; Kim & Frick, 2011; Styer, 2007).

The social aspect of an online course has also been found to increase motivation in adult learners, with Kim (2004, 2005, 2006, 2009) citing course interactivity as one of the primary influencers of learner motivation in her studies of adults enrolled in self-directed e-learning courses. Over the course of her research, Kim found that two types of interactions were responsible for increasing motivation: interaction between the learners and the instructor (including technical support staff) and interactions between the learner and the course, through engaging built-in features such as animations, simulations and interactive quizzes. Other strategies for enhancing the social element of online classes that have been shown to increase motivation in adults include the use of group discussions, group or team projects, and fostering “a supportive community of learners” (Bonk, 2002, p. 12). Instructors can also contribute to the social element of a class and enhance student motivation by providing timely feedback and maintaining a visible and supportive presence (Bonk, 2002; Kim, 2006, 2009).

Several studies have also shown that elements of course design can contribute to enhancing the motivation of adult online learners (Glore, 2011; Kim, 2006; Styer, 2007). From a meta-analysis of research on adult learner motivation, Styer (2007) concluded that in order for an online class to be able to increase learner motivation, it should be well designed, easy to navigate, and frequently maintained. Glore (2011) found that easy access to course materials, the use of visual multimedia elements, and a well organized and professional looking course were all key elements of course design that enhanced learner motivation. Echoing several findings from the previous two studies, Kim’s (2006)
research also supported the need for ease of navigation and the use of multimedia while also highlighting the importance of designing a course that facilitates interaction between the students and instructor.

In addition to course-related elements that impact learner motivation, there are several learner-related elements that have been found to enhance the motivation of adults in an online learning environment. For example, in a study of adult learner persistence in an online doctoral program, Ivankova and Stick (2007) found several factors that increased students’ intrinsic motivation including their love for learning, the experience of learning in a new format, and viewing completion of the program as a personal challenge and/or a lifelong dream. In terms of other intrinsic elements that have been shown to increase student motivation, Styer (2007) found that learner interest, the desire to obtain new knowledge, and the learners’ self-efficacy, or belief in their ability to succeed in a course, were important to enhancing their motivation.

Extrinsic rewards have also been found to increase the motivation of adults learning online, specifically in the form of grades or a degree (Glore, 2011; Kim, 2009; Styer, 2007). In addition, adults who set goals, whether it be in the form of academic, vocational, personal, or social tend to show increased motivation as a result of establishing these targets for achievement (Styer, 2007). The strategic use of cognitive strategies and self-regulated behaviors during the learning process were also found to be factors that enhanced motivation in adult students. Styer (2007) identified these types of learners as those who “employ self-regulated behaviors to plan, organize, self-instruct, and self-evaluate as they learn. Self-regulated learners are able to manage and regulate their time and study environments, they monitor their own efforts, they learn from peers,
and they seek help and support as needed” (p. 20). Finally, it has been shown that
motivation increases in adult online learners when they are comfortable and fluent with
the technology and have previous experience learning online (Kim, 2005; Kim & Frick, 2011).

Barriers to motivation.

In regards to elements that have been found to impede motivation in adult online
learners, there are several factors related to the nature of being an adult student than can
impede the motivation even before elements of the online environment are even
considered. For instance, Ahl (2006) notes that an adult’s motivation to learn can be
hindered by a variety of factors which can be grouped into three categories:
“dispositional, situational, and structural (or institutional)” (p. 394-395).

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to Motivation in Adult Learners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Dispositional</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Insufficient self-confidence</td>
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<tr>
<td>Insufficient confidence for one’s ability to succeed in specific studies (i.e., insufficient self-efficacy)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative early school experiences that cause negative expectations of continued education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identification with a social group in which education is not highly valued</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Situational</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of interest</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of concrete, expected results from the studies</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Structural or Institutional</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of availability of education opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of information about study opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absence of childcare arrangements</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lack of study financing  
Scheduling problems  
A pedagogy not suited for adults  
Social norms that counteract participation in adult education  
Lack of job opportunities after completed education  
Work organization, where learning at work is discussed  

Ahl (2006) describes dispositional variables as an individual’s “personality traits, or personal qualities acquired through upbringing and early school experiences” (p. 394). These variables are closely tied to a learner’s psychological makeup and are determined by the individual needs of different learners. Situational variables are more strongly tied to a person’s life situation, and can be overcome by providing adult students with learning opportunities that offer concrete benefits. Although a lack of interest is commonly cited as a situational barrier, Ahl argues against this by pointing out that motivational theory assumes that humans are innately interested to learn, and therefore it should not be possible for a student to suffer from a lack of interest. Ahl suggests that students who are perceived to be lacking in interest are actually mislabeled and are more likely being hindered by some other type of motivational barrier. The final category of variables developed by Ahl is structural or institutional, which includes motivational barriers ranging from pedagogical to financial.

Theory on adult learning and motivation suggests that the removal of barriers from any of these categories will contribute to increasing the overall motivation of adult learners (Ahl, 2006). Employers and politicians are urged to implement policy reform aimed at overcoming motivational barriers at the structural (or institutional) level, while educators are urged to address motivational barriers through pedagogy. Ahl (2006) cites a number of studies in support of enhanced motivation through pedagogy, which have
found that “good educational experiences…(are) able to raise motivation in spite of obstacles located outside the educational situation” (see Husén, 1958; Knowles, 1980; Dufresne-Tasse, 1985; Stock, 1985; Vulpius, 1985; Hedin & Svensson, 1997; Wlodkowski, 1999).

In addition to these motivational barriers that are inherent to being an adult learner, research has uncovered several others that are specific to the online environment and can be classified as either course-related or learner-related. For instance, just as the course-related elements of attention, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction were found to enhance the motivation of adults learning online, the lack of these elements in an online class can present significant barriers to adult learners (Chyung 2001a, b). As Jun (2005) states, adult online learners “lose their motivation to learn and quit learning when they do not perceive instruction to be interesting or relevant to their goal. They also lose motivation to learn when they are not confident of the learning processes, and/or they are not satisfied with the instructional processes” (p. 41). Likewise, just as the elements of learner control and the application of knowledge to real-world scenarios were found to increase student motivation, Kim (2005, 2009) found that the motivation of adult learners was inhibited when these elements were lacking from their online coursework. As far as the social element of online learning is concerned Kim (2004, 2005, 2009) notes in several studies that the lack of interaction can be a major barrier to motivation, while Styer (2007) found the opposite, noting that some adults enroll in online courses “because they do not need and do not want to participate in the social aspects” of instruction (p. 113). In regards to learner-related factors that have been found to inhibit student motivation, Ivankova and Stick (2007) cite the difficulty of balancing one’s work and
studies as a barrier, while Kim and Frick (2011) have found that the solitary nature of studying online can be a barrier to those adult learners who prefer to learn in a traditional classroom setting.

**The effect of motivation on student persistence.**

In addition to the positive effect that motivation has on academic achievement, a large body of research has shown that motivation plays a key role in student persistence and retention (Bunn, 2004; Hart, 2012; Irizarry, 2002; Keller, 2008; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Visser, 1998; Visser et al., 2002; Zvacek, 1991). Likewise, scholars investigating student retention have cited a lack of motivation as one of the key reasons why students drop out (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Boton & Gregory, 2015; Glore, 2011; McGivney, 2009; Wang et al., 2003). In discussing this link between motivation and persistence, Visser et al., (2002) states that, “Although it may be tempting to point to instructional content and methods as the sources of low distance learning completion rates, it can be shown that it is often motivational problems, and not the instruction itself, which lay at the root of these statistics” (p. 94-95). Although motivation has been found to influence persistence in a variety of learning contexts (Fjortoft, 1995; Huett et al., 2008; Morris et al., 2005; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Osborn, 2001; Scribner, 2007) the research presented in this section will continue to focus on adults learning online.

In a review of the literature on persistence in online education, Hart (2012) cites several studies (Holder, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Kemp, 2002; Ojokheta, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009; Parker, 2005) in which motivation was found to lead to persistence in adult learners. For example, Ivankova and Stick (2007) conducted a mixed methods study
in which they investigated the persistence of adults enrolled in an online doctoral program. During the quantitative phase of this study, self-motivation was identified as one of five key predictors of persistence. In the qualitative analysis that followed, self-motivation remained as one of four key predictors of persistence. Ivankova and Stick concluded that “self-motivation had a significant effect on students’ persistence in the program” and “was a strong factor for successful matriculation in the distributed environment” (p. 127). Park and Choi (2009) reached a similar conclusion in their investigation of factors affecting the persistence of adults in a job-related online program. In a sample where 67% of the participants were classified as persistent learners and the other 33% were classified as dropouts, Park and Choi found that persistent learners differed significantly from dropouts in terms of family support, organizational support, and motivation.

In addition to the research identified by Hart (2012), the link between motivation and persistence in an adult online learning context has been identified in a number of large-scale studies. For example, Kim (Kim, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009; Kim & Frick, 2011) investigated factors influencing the motivation of adult learners enrolled in self-directed e-learning courses in both academic and workplace settings. Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative research methods, Kim identified factors influencing learner motivation and examined how these factors contributed to a learner’s change in motivation while enrolled in the course. As a result of this research, Kim concluded that a “lack of motivation is the major reason for learner attrition in online learning environments” (2005, p. 132). In another series of studies (Chyung, 2001a, 2001, b, 2001c; Chyung et al., 1998, 1999) Chyung and her colleagues investigated the impact of
motivation on student retention in an online Master’s degree program that was suffering from high rates of student attrition. In an attempt to alleviate this problem, strategies from Keller’s (1987c) ARCS model were implemented in order to increase the motivational appeal of courses across the curriculum. As a result of this intervention, the dropout rate in the Master’s program decreased from 44% to 22% in the span of only three semesters (Chyung et al., 1998).

Others who have investigated persistence in adult online learners have also found motivation to play a key role. For example, Aragon & Johnson (2008) utilized a mixed methods approach to investigate persistence in adult learners at a community college. After collecting data, an analysis was conducted of the differences between those who completed their courses and those who did not. Results from their survey of noncompleters fell into five thematic categories, with the largest group of responses (34%) falling into a category they labeled as “Personal/Time”. Lack of motivation was a major factor in this category, with student interviews revealing that “time constraints and lack of motivation were indicators for noncompletion” (p. 154). In another study, Jamison (2003) set out to predict the attrition of adults enrolled in asynchronous web-based distance education. Using an instrument that he developed around a set of motivation-related variables, including goal alignment, emotional activation, and capability beliefs, Jamison found that his model was able to successfully predict course completers and noncompleters with a success rate of over 90%. In addition to research situated in an academic context, studies on the retention of adult learners in the workplace have found that a lack of motivation is one of the primary reasons why students drop out (Frankola, 2001; Jun, 2005; Wang et al., 2003). Whether in the
workplace or in an academic environment, motivation has been cited throughout the literature on online education as a critical component for retaining adult learners (Bird & Morgan, 2003; Castles, 2004; Jones, 2013; Margueratt, 2007; Menager-Beeley, 2003; Müller, 2008; Packham et al., 2004; Park, 2007; Tyler-Smith, 2006).
CHAPTER 3:
METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methods that were used to investigate how adults experience motivation in online higher education. To begin with, a rationale is presented in support of the decision to conduct a phenomenological study. Next, an overview of the research setting and the sampling strategy that was used for selecting participants is provided. The data collection procedures are then described in full detail, followed by an in-depth discussion of the steps involved in phenomenological analysis. A description of the researcher’s background is then provided in order to make clear any previously held suppositions regarding the phenomenon under study. This chapter closes with a look at the strategies that were implemented by the researcher to enhance the trustworthiness of the study’s findings.

Rationale for Phenomenological Research

A review of the literature has demonstrated the need for a deeper understanding of motivation in adult online learners. Although a number of studies have investigated this topic, our understanding of how adults experience motivation in an online learning environment remains incomplete. For instance, while research has shown that adults can be motivated by a great variety of course and learner-related elements, there is no clear agreement on any single set of factors or specific instructional approaches for motivating adults in the online learning environment (Chyung, 2007; Glore, 2011; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Kim, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009; Komarraju & Karau, 2008; Styer, 2007). In addition, despite a body of research that has linked motivation to persistence in adults learning

Recognizing the need for further research in this area, scholars (Bannier, 2010; Johnson, 2012; Kim, 2005; Schartz, 2014) have suggested that a qualitative approach to this problem may allow for a more in-depth understanding of how motivation is experienced by adult online learners. For instance, Bannier (2010) posits that “quantitative research alone cannot fully explain dynamic constructs such as motivation” (p. 229), while Kim (2005) states that a qualitative approach will allow for a deeper exploration of motivation in online students and result in a “rich description[]” of this phenomenon (p. 37). It was with the intent to obtain this rich description of motivation in adult online learners, and in turn develop a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, that a phenomenological approach was chosen as the most appropriate method for this study.

Phenomenology has its origins in the work of philosophers such as Kant and Hegel and was later developed as an approach to research by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Groenewald, 2004; Richards & Morse, 2006). Later, it was the work of Alfred
Schutz (1899-1959) who advanced phenomenology “as a major social science perspective (Schutz, 1977)” (Patton, 2002, p. 105). As a method of qualitative inquiry, the focus of phenomenology is on the lived experience, or as Van Manen (1990) explains:

“[P]henomenology is the study of the lifeworld – the world as we immediately experience it pre-reflectively rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or reflect on it (Husserl, 1970b; Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences. Phenomenology asks, “What is this or that kind of experience like?” It differs from almost every other science in that it attempts to gain insightful descriptions of the way we experience the world pre-reflectively, without taxonomizing, classifying, or abstracting it. (p. 9)

Within this deeper understanding of the lived experience lies “the very nature of a phenomenon” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10) or what Van Manen (1990) and others (Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Moustakas, 1994; Richards & Morse, 2006) refer to as the essence of a phenomenon or experience. As Patton (2002) notes, it is this “assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience” that differentiates phenomenology from other methods of inquiry (p. 106). Although each individual participant in a phenomenological study experiences and perceives the world in a way that is uniquely their own, it is the aim of phenomenological research to identify the essences, or “basic elements of the [lived] experience that are common to members of a specific society, or all human beings” (Eichelberger, 1989 as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 106).
In order to arrive at the essence of a shared experience or phenomenon, the phenomenological researcher gathers data through “in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). According to Van Manen (1990), the phenomenological interview serves “as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon” (p. 66). The detailed descriptions obtained from these interviews “provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). By utilizing a phenomenological approach, it was the intent of this study to obtain a rich description of how motivation is experienced by adult learners in online higher education and through rigorous analysis, arrive at the essence(s) of this phenomenon.

Research Setting

This study was conducted from within the school of continuing and professional education at a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. This research location offers a diverse array of certificate and degree completion programs that are aimed at meeting the needs of the nontraditional adult learner. During the 2015-2016 academic year, this location counted approximately 2,800 student enrollments, the overwhelming majority of which were ages 25 and over, with an average age of 44 (School online marketing website). As is typical for learners in this demographic, the students enrolled at this school come from a wide range of backgrounds and exhibit a diverse set of skills, knowledge, and experiences.

In terms of course delivery, approximately 75% of the school’s programs are offered entirely online in either a synchronous or asynchronous format (School online
marketing website). An instance of Sakai is used as the school’s Learning Management System (LMS), while a plug-in for Blackboard Collaborate is used to host live online (synchronous) class meetings. Both Sakai and Blackboard Collaborate offer an array of tools and options for class management, communication, and interaction. In addition, although course sites that are created on the Sakai platform come pre-built with a standard palette of tools, faculty at this school have the freedom to make their own customizations. This gives faculty the flexibility to build sites that are uniquely suited to their teaching style and to the needs of their students. However, it creates a situation in which there is some variation in both the look and functionality from one course site to the next. Several resources, training, and support options are made available for faculty who teach online, although none of these are required. In addition, faculty are given the option of working with an instructional designer during the development of their online courses. Given this school’s robust online portfolio and sizable population of adult learners, this location was ideally suited for this study.

**Participant Selection**

In selecting participants for phenomenological research, it is important to locate individuals who have directly experienced the phenomenon under study “and can articulate their lived experiences” (Creswell, 2012, p. 150). Therefore, adult learners enrolled in the online programs at a school for continuing and professional education were chosen as the population for this study. Since it is not the purpose of a phenomenological study to produce generalizable results, a probability-based random sampling method was not appropriate. Van Manen (1990) advises against any attempt at generalization in phenomenological research, stating that, “The tendency to generalize
may prevent us from developing understandings that remain focused on the uniqueness of human experience” (p. 22). Instead, a purposeful sampling strategy was utilized in hopes of obtaining a deeper understanding and gaining new insights into the phenomenon of motivation in adult online learners (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) elaborates on the strengths of a purposive approach:

The logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry…Studying information-rich cases yields insights and in-depth understanding rather than empirical generalizations. (p. 230)

In order to obtain information-rich cases, participants for this study were selected using what Patton (2002) refers to as a combination or mixed purposeful sampling strategy. In providing a rationale for this approach, Patton (2002) notes that qualitative sampling strategies “are not mutually exclusive” and there are instances when two or more strategies are needed in order to achieve the objectives of a study (p. 242). Therefore, a purposeful criterion strategy was used as the initial method for gathering a sample for this study. Creswell (2012) recommends this approach for phenomenological research and notes that, “Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon” (p. 155). The criteria for students to be included in this study was their age (25 and over), enrollment status (enrolled in at least one online class during the current or previous semester), and consent to be interviewed.
Since it was one of the goals of this study to investigate the effect of motivation on student persistence, a sample was sought out that consisted not only of students who had successfully completed an online course but also those who had dropped out. Once this initial sample had been gathered, a stratified purposeful sampling strategy was employed in order to separate and explore the differences between these two subgroups (Patton, 2002). At this point, since the sample was a manageable size and the participants selected were able to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon, the sampling process was deemed complete. If it had been determined that either of these two subgroups were not large enough to provide an in-depth description of the phenomenon under study, then it would have been necessary to employ a snowball sampling strategy in order to locate additional information-rich cases (Patton, 2002). If this had been the case, the researcher would have contacted the appropriate program area personnel for assistance in identifying additional relevant cases. Conversely, if either of these subgroups had been deemed to be too large, then a purposeful random sampling strategy would have been utilized in order to limit the sample to a manageable number, while also increasing the credibility (although not the generalizability) of the study (Patton, 2002).

As for the number of participants in this study, Patton (2002) notes the importance of small sample sizes in qualitative research, stating that, “In-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable, especially if the cases are information rich” (p. 244). Creswell (2005, 2012), meanwhile cautions against too large of a sample, noting that the extensive amount of detailed information gathered from participants in qualitative studies can make large samples difficult to manage and may diminish “the overall ability of a researcher to provide an in-depth picture” of the phenomenon under
study (2005, p. 207). For phenomenological studies in particular, Creswell (2012) recommends a sample size of no more than 10 participants. While recommendations on sample size vary, there is a general consensus across the literature that samples in phenomenological research typically range in size from 1 to 10 participants (Groenewald, 2004; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Sandelowski, 1995; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

It was with these guidelines in mind that a minimum of 6 and a maximum of 10 participants was sought for the sample in this study. Rather than specifying an exact number of participants in advance of the study, Patton (2002) recommends a flexible sampling design in which a minimum number of participants is indicated “based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study and stakeholder interests” (p. 246). This strategy allows for additional participants to be added to the sample “if information emerges that indicates the value of [such] a change” (p. 246). However, if the initial sample of 6 participants is able to provide a rich description of the phenomenon and a point of saturation, or redundancy, has been reached, then no additional participants will be sought (Bowen, 2008; Groenewald, 2004; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mason, 2010).

**Data Collection**

**Participant recruitment.**

In order to recruit participants for this study, a letter (Appendix A) was sent by email to students enrolled in at least one online class during the current or previous semester at the research location described earlier in this chapter. This letter provided a brief overview of the study (including its importance, purpose, and methodology) and
invited all students who were ages 25 and over to participate. Additional information included any potential risks and benefits that could have been incurred by participating in this study as well as the participants’ rights to withdraw and for their responses to remain anonymous. Contact information for the researcher and appropriate institutional and IRB personnel was also provided in case there were any questions. The last section of the letter included a link for students to click on to indicate that they would like to participate in this study. This link took participants to a brief survey (Appendix B) that was hosted on the Qualtrics data collection platform where they were asked to provide demographic information, contact information, and indicate their consent to be interviewed. Participants were also asked to sign an institutionally approved hard copy of the consent form (Appendix E) prior to being interviewed.

As students began to sign up for this study, the researcher followed the sampling strategy described in the previous section until 10 participants had been selected. The researcher then contacted each of the participants in order to notify them that they had been selected for this study. During this initial contact, the researcher went over with each of the participants their options for scheduling an interview. As an employee of the institution where this study was set to take place, the researcher had access to the facilities at several affiliated academic centers spread out across the state, thus allowing for a great deal of flexibility in selecting a time and location that worked best for each participant. These off-campus locations offered quiet spaces such as offices and small conference rooms that provided an ideal setting for in-depth phenomenological interviewing. Every attempt was made to conduct the interviews in person at one of these locations. However, when such arrangements were not possible, interviews were
conducted online using a video-based live meeting application such as Skype, Google Hangouts, or Zoom. All in-person interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder as the primary recording device and a laptop with an external microphone as the backup recording device. Online interviews were recorded using the Camtasia software suite as the primary recording device and a digital audio recorder as the backup recording device.

Prior to the study, two pilot interviews were conducted with volunteers who met the criteria for the sample. In order to test both modalities, one interview each was conducted online and face-to-face. The purpose of these pilot interviews was twofold: to determine if any alterations needed to be made to the information and/or questions contained in the interview guide, and also to establish a time frame for participant interviews. As a result of this pilot phase, a few minor adjustments were made to the wording of the questions in the interview guide. In addition, it was determined that approximately 60-90 minutes should be allotted to complete each interview.

**Interview procedure.**

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews (Groenewald, 2004; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Patton, 2002) were used to investigate student perceptions of motivation in online higher education. As stated by Van Manen (1990), the purpose of phenomenological interviewing is two-fold:

1. it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material that may serve as a resource for developing a richer and deeper understanding of a human phenomenon, and
2. the interview may be used as a vehicle to develop a conversational relation with a partner (interviewee) about the meaning of an experience. (p. 66)
Although these interviews were conversational in nature, they had “a purpose and involve[d] a specific approach and technique” that was outlined in an interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 27). This guide (Appendix C) was structured according to the recommendations of Creswell (2005) and contained three distinct sections: an introduction, a list of guiding questions, and concluding remarks.

The introduction section of the interview guide was used to record details pertinent to the interview such as time, date, location, and a participant identifier. This section also included information to review with the participant prior to the start of the interview including the purpose of the study, a statement of confidentiality, and a reminder to sign the consent form. The second section of the interview guide contained a series of open-ended questions that the researcher used to elicit deep descriptions from participants of their lived experience with the phenomenon under study (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Although only the principle guiding questions were included in the interview guide, the researcher had the freedom to incorporate additional probing questions into the interview in order to seek clarification on what a participant had said and/or “to urge them to elaborate on their ideas” (Creswell, 2005, p. 223). Also included in this second section of the interview guide was space for the researcher to take notes on the responses given by the interviewees. The third and final section of the interview guide included reminders for the researcher to thank the participant for their time, give them the opportunity to ask any final questions, and then go over with them the procedures for reviewing the transcript of their interview.

The open-ended questions in the interview guide (Appendix C) were adapted with permission (Appendix D) from a set of questions that were originally developed by Jones
and his colleagues (Jones et al., 2012; Jones, 2016) to gauge student perceptions of the five components of the MUSICSM Model of Motivation: eMpowerment, Usefulness, Success, Interest, and Caring (Jones, 2009, 2016). This model was developed by Jones (2009) to assist instructors in designing courses that motivate students to engage in learning. According to Jones (2016),

Five key principles of the model are that instructors need to ensure that students:

1. feel **empowered** by having the ability to make decisions about some aspects of their learning,

2. understand why what they are learning is **useful** for their short- or long-term goals,

3. believe that they can **succeed** if they put forth the effort required,

4. are **interested** in the content and instructional activities, and

5. believe that the instructor and others in the learning environment **care** about their learning and about them as a person (Jones, 2009, 2015; www.theMUSICmodel.com). (p. 3)

Jones (2009) arrived at these five components after “analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing” the latest research on motivation from the fields of both education and psychology (p. 273). While the MUSICSM Model of Motivation (2009) incorporates elements of other well-known theories and constructs, such as expectancy-value theory, self-efficacy theory, and situational and individual interest, Jones et al. (2013) notes that it is the inclusion of constructs such as empowerment and caring and that situate the MUSICSM Model “in more recent research and theoretical frameworks” (p. 38). As a result, instructors can use the MUSIC Model to increase student motivation by
implementing strategies aimed at enhancing one or more of its five components (2009). Although it is not necessary for instructors to focus on each component of the model, Jones (2009) notes “the more that [they] can do to address all five of the components, the more successful they will be in motivating all of their students” (p. 273). As for the construct validity of this model, the “[r]esults of confirmatory factor analysis provide evidence that the MUSIC model components are distinct factors (Jones & Wilkins, 2010)” (Jones, 2010, p. 919).

Since its inception as a tool to aid instructors in designing motivating courses, the MUSICSM Model (2009) has also been used to investigate student motivation (Jones, 2015a). This has been facilitated by the development of the quantitative MUSICSM Model of Academic Motivation Inventory (Jones, 2015b) as well as several qualitative questionnaires and interview guides (Jones et al., 2013; Jones, 2016). As a result, this model can be applied to both online and face-to-face courses and has been adapted to investigate motivation in a variety of academic contexts with students ranging in age from elementary to post-secondary school settings (Jones, 2009, 2016).

In this current study, the previously mentioned set of open-ended questions (Appendix C) created by Jones and his colleagues (Jones et al., 2012; Jones, 2016) were used to assess how adult learners perceive motivation in online higher education. The original questionnaire was divided into five categories (one for each of the components of the MUSIC model) with each category consisting of two to four questions. These questions allowed the researcher to assess whether or not participants were motivated by their experience as an online learner and if so, which elements played a role in contributing to their motivation. Six additional questions (one for each of the five
components of the MUSIC model, and one overall) have been added to the questionnaire in order to assess how student perceptions of motivation affected their persistence in online higher education. When combined with a phenomenological approach to interviewing, this full set of questions allowed for participants to provide a detailed description of their lived experience as adult online learners. This in turn allowed for the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the link between motivation and persistence as well as the specific factors cited by adults as influential in their decision to persist in their studies.

Upon completion of each interview, the researcher took steps to ensure “the quality of the data” (Patton, 2002, p. 383). As Patton (2002) notes, “The period after an interview or observation is a critical time of reflection and elaboration. It is a time of quality control to guarantee that the data obtained will be useful, reliable, and authentic” (p. 384). In order to ensure this level of quality, the researcher first checked both recording devices to make sure that they functioned properly during the interview and that there was no missing data. Next, the researcher reviewed the recording and any notes that were made during the interview to check for areas of “ambiguity or uncertainty” (2002, p. 384). If this had been the case, the researcher would have contacted the interviewee in order to seek clarification on these issues. Finally, Patton (2002) advises that upon the conclusion of each interview, the researcher should take time to reflect and take notes on the interview process itself. These “process notes” should be used to reflect on such details as the rapport between the interviewer and participant, the interviewer’s questioning technique, and the quality of answers given by the participant (p. 384). The purpose of this period of reflection and note taking is for the interviewer to assess
whether or not they were able to obtain the types of answers that they were looking for from the participant (in terms of depth of description). If the interviewer was not successful in obtaining a rich description of the participant’s lived experience, then this time of reflection should be used to attempt to identify the cause(s) of the problem.

Once all of the interviews had been completed, the digital audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. Next, these interview transcripts were sent out to each of the participants so that they could be reviewed for accuracy and clarity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This process of member checking is a strategy that is commonly used by qualitative researchers as a method of increasing the credibility and validity of their studies (2000). Any notes or changes made to the transcript by participants during member checking were incorporated into the final manuscript of the study. Participant interviews (audio and transcribed) served as the primary source of data for this study. Secondary sources of data included any notes made by the researcher both during and immediately following participant interviews as well as notes made by participants during member checking.

**Data management and storage.**

Following each interview, recordings were uploaded to the researcher’s computer and then labeled according to the following convention: Participant-Letter, Date (e.g., Participant-A, 7_Nov_2017). One copy of each digital audio file was stored using an encrypted cloud storage service behind two-factor authentication, while a second backup copy was stored on an encrypted external hard drive that was kept in a locked drawer. Once all audio files have been backed up and securely stored, the original data was erased from the digital audio recording device.
Once all of the interviews had been transcribed, these text files were also labeled and stored following the same protocol as the audio files. By taking these steps, the researcher had removed all identifying information from the transcripts and recordings, thus “maintaining the confidentiality of the names of the participants” (Seidman, 2013). This same storage protocol was followed for all other digital and hard copy materials related to this study. Additional digital materials included email communication between the participants and researcher, while additional hard copy materials included the interview guides, informed consent agreements, and process notes.

Once all personally identifying information had been removed from these data sources, the only means of identifying the participants was through a Word document that linked each of the participant’s names to an anonymous identifier. This document (and a backup copy) was stored securely following the storage protocol outlined for all other digital materials related to this study. All data will be stored securely until this dissertation has been successfully defended, whereupon it will be destroyed or returned to participants upon their request.

Data Analysis

The purpose of phenomenological analysis is “to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon for a person or group of people” (Patton, 2002, p. 482). With this goal in mind, Moustakas’ (1994) method of transcendental phenomenological analysis was used to uncover the underlying structures and arrive at the essence of how adult learners experience motivation in online higher education. Moustakas’ (1994) method of analysis consists of four distinct stages: Epoche, Phenomenological Reduction, Imaginative Variation, and Synthesis of Meanings and
Essences. Patton (2002) notes that due to varying forms and traditions within the field of phenomenology there are a number of accepted approaches to conducting phenomenological analysis. With this in mind, he recommends the approach taken by Douglass and Moustakas (1985) stating that, “More than most approaches, they focus on the analytical process itself” (2002, p. 483).

**Epoche.**

As noted by Van Manen (1990), “Phenomenology must describe what is given to us in immediate experience without being obstructed by pre-conceptions and theoretical notions” (p. 184). In order to avoid these prejugdements and achieve an unbiased description of the phenomenon under study, it is necessary to undertake the first phase of Moustakas’ (1994) method of phenomenological analysis: the *epoche.*

“*Epoche* is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). Katz (1987) describes the process of *epoche* as follows:

*Epoche* is a process that the researcher engages in to remove, or at least become aware of, prejudices, viewpoints or assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation. *Epoche* helps enable the researcher to investigate the phenomenon from a fresh and open viewpoint without prejudgment or imposing meaning too soon. This suspension of judgment is critical in phenomenological investigation and requires the setting aside of the researcher’s personal viewpoint in order to see the experience for itself. (p. 36-37 as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 485)

The reason that the process of *epoche* is necessary is not “that we know too little about the phenomenon we wish to investigate, but that we know too much” (Van Manen,
1990, p. 46). Elaborating on this statement, Van Manen (1990) explains:

[T]he problem is that our “common sense” pre-understandings, our suppositions, assumptions, and the existing bodies of scientific knowledge, predispose us to interpret the nature of the phenomenon before we even come to grips with the significance of the phenomenological questions. (p. 46)

Therefore, during this phase of phenomenological analysis, it is necessary for the researcher to set aside their previous knowledge and dispositions towards the phenomenon under study in a process called bracketing. The term “bracketing” was borrowed from mathematics by Husserl (1911/80) who used it to “describe how one must take hold of the phenomenon and then place outside of it one’s knowledge about the phenomenon” (as cited in Van Manen, 1990). In order to achieve this receptive and unbiased state, Moustakas (1994) recommends a period of reflective-meditation in which “preconceptions and prejudgments enter the consciousness and leave freely” followed by a period in which the researcher will “label the[ir] prejudgments and write them out” (p. 89). At the conclusion of this phase, the aim for the researcher is to have developed the ability to be able to approach the phenomenon under study “with new eyes in a naïve and completely open manner” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 86).

**Phenomenological reduction.**

The second stage in Moustakas’ (1994) method of transcendental phenomenological analysis is the phenomenological reduction. It is during this phase that the researcher seeks to “derive a textural description of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon…from the vantage point of an open self” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).
The focus here is on identifying the individual constituents of an experience, describing them fully and texturally “within an experiential context”, and then reducing these descriptions to meaningful themes (1994, p. 91). In order to accomplish this, the researcher will follow four steps (1994):

1. Bracketing,
2. Horizonalizing,
3. Clustering the horizons into themes, and
4. Organizing the horizons and themes into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon.

The first step of phenomenological reduction is called bracketing. It should be noted that the process of “bracketing” is used for a different purpose during this second stage of analysis than it was used for during the *epoche*. During the first stage of analysis, bracketing was used to set aside any biases and presuppositions held by the researcher. During phenomenological reduction, however, bracketing is used to set aside any extraneous material from the transcribed data so that what is left is “data in pure form” (Patton, 2002, p. 485). Moustakas (1994) elaborates on this process: “[T]he focus of the research is placed in brackets, [while] everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic and question” (p. 97).

The next step in the phenomenological reduction stage is a process called horizonalizing. During this step, the researcher identifies and labels all statements from the data set that are “relevant to the [research] topic and question” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). These statements, or horizons, are considered as the constituent elements of the phenomenon and are all given equal weight during this stage of the analysis. In order to
allow greater focus on the horizons, any statements found to be irrelevant, repetitive, or overlapping are removed from the data set (1994). Next, codes are applied to the horizons. During qualitative data analysis, codes are typically used to identify “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 63). This process assists with the organization of the data and helps to prepare it for the next stage of analysis: clustering the horizons into themes.

During the third step of the phenomenological reduction process, the researcher clusters the horizons identified in the previous step around themes (Moustakas, 1994). In explaining the process of thematic analysis, Van Manen (1990) offers several ways for the researcher to conceive of themes, ranging from the functional, “Phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of [lived] experience” (p. 79), to the metaphorical:

[Phenomenological themes] are more like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes. Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through. By the light of these themes we can navigate and explore such universes. (p. 90)

In order to arrive at the themes for this analysis the researcher reads through the data that was coded during the horizontalization process and begins to combine related statements into “overarching theme[s]” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Braun and Clarke (2006) advise that, “Data within themes should cohere together meaningfully, while there should be clear and identifiable distinctions between themes” (p. 91). Once the themes
for analysis have been determined, a final check must be performed in order to determine if they are essential to the phenomenon under study (Van Manen, 1990). Asking questions such as, “Is this phenomenon still the same if we imaginatively change or delete this theme from the phenomenon?” or, “Does the phenomenon without this theme lose its fundamental meaning?” allows the researcher to determine the essential nature of a theme (Van Manen, 1990, p. 107).

All themes and codes used in this study were developed over time in an ongoing, non-linear process that involved a great deal of back and forth between the themes, codes, and original data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Moustakas (1994) captures the essence of this phase of the analysis when he states, “The task requires that I look and describe; look again and describe; look again and describe; always with reference to textural qualities” (p. 90). This method of considering the data over time and from multiple perspectives served to bring clarity to the data set and allowed for the themes to emerge (1994).

The final step of the phenomenological reduction phase is to organize the horizons and themes that were developed in the previous steps into a coherent textural description of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). “Such a description…facilitates clear seeing, makes possible identity, and encourages the looking again and again that leads to deeper layers of meaning” (1994, p. 96). It should be noted, however, that although the researcher has arrived at a textural description of the phenomenon, the process of phenomenological analysis is not yet complete (Patton, 2002). Patton (2002) explains: “The textural portrayal is an abstraction of the experience that provides content and illustration, but not yet essence” (p. 486).
Imaginative variation.

Following the phenomenological reduction, the next phase in Moustakas’ (1994) method of transcendental phenomenological analysis is imaginative variation. During this stage, the researcher seeks to develop a deeper meaning of the phenomenon under study by creating a structural description of the lived experience (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). This structural description is derived from the textural description of the phenomenon that was developed during the previous stage of analysis and its purpose is to elucidate “the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced; in other words, the “how” that speaks to conditions that illuminate the “what” of experience” (1994, p. 98). In order to arrive at this description, the researcher must rely on their imagination and intuition in addition to a number of other creative thinking processes, such as “varying the frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (1994, p. 97-98). Patton (2002) notes that “Douglass has described this [process] as ‘moving around the statue’ to see the same object from differing views” (p. 486). As a result of the imaginative variation stage, the researcher will have developed a structural description of the phenomenon that has “enhanced or expanded” the themes that were arrived at through phenomenological reduction (Patton, 2002, p. 486).

Synthesis of meanings and essences.

The final stage of Moustakas’ (1994) method of transcendental phenomenological analysis is the synthesis of meanings and essences. During this stage, the researcher integrates the textural description obtained from the phenomenological reduction with the
structural description that was developed during imaginative variation in order to produce
“a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole”
(Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). The purpose of this synthesized description of the
phenomenon is to portray “the lived quality and significance of the experience in a fuller
or deeper manner” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 10). Moustakas (1994) however, cautions the
researcher against attempting to develop an exhaustive description of the lived
experience. He notes that the results of a phenomenological analysis can only be
considered representative of the essences of an experience “at a particular time and place
[and] from the vantage point of an individual researcher” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100).

**Researcher Background**

In order to approach the phenomenon under study from an open and unbiased
perspective, it is necessary for the phenomenological researcher to set aside any
previously held knowledge and dispositions regarding their topic. Therefore, the
following section will detail the researcher’s background and experiences as they relate to
how adults experience motivation in an online learning environment.

My personal conception of the phenomenon under study has been informed both
by my experiences as an adult learner and as a professional working in the field of online
adult education. In regards to my role as an adult learner, I have completed nearly 30
online classes over the course of two graduate programs. During this time, I have
experienced the full spectrum of what online education has to offer, ranging from
asynchronous to synchronous course delivery, primarily text–based learning
environments to those that incorporated a variety of multimedia, and highly interactive
and engaging classes to those where I felt a sense of detachment from my peers and/or the instructor.

As for my role as a professional in the field of online adult education, I have worked for several years as an instructional designer both inside and outside of academia. For instance, I am currently an instructional designer at a school of continuing and professional education situated within a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. In my role at this institution, I work with other faculty to design and develop online courses across 16 academic programs in a variety of content areas, all aimed at meeting the needs of adult and nontraditional learners. Prior to working in higher education, I also spent several years working as an instructional designer for a firm outside of academia that developed solutions for workplace training.

In addition to my academic and professional experiences with adult learners and how they experience motivation in an online learning environment, my personal understanding of this phenomenon has been shaped by what I have learned and what I continue to learn about this topic on a near-daily basis. For instance, regardless of whether I am in my role as a student or as a professional, I am always researching and learning more about some facet of online education. Over the years, this ongoing process of learning has included attending professional conferences, conducting scholarly research, participating in classes and/or professional development workshops, reading industry publications, and taking part in discussions with colleagues.

As a result of these experiences, I have learned a great deal about online higher education and what is considered to be motivating to adults in this environment. Along the way, I have also developed a number of biases and personal opinions on this topic.
What I have found, however, is that these preferences tend to change over time and can oftentimes be conflicting. For example, while I have found synchronous classes to be much more motivating than those delivered asynchronously, when given the choice between the two, I have more often than not opted for the asynchronous option. To me, not being tied down to a specific class meeting time and having the freedom to be able to complete the coursework whenever I choose far outweighs any benefits of being more motivated in the synchronous environment. Essentially, I have found that as an adult learner there is a need to balance my desire for a motivating online learning experience with my need for a flexible and accommodating class schedule.

I have also found that as a student, while I generally prefer synchronous classes and find them to be more motivating, this has not always been the case. For example, I have experienced synchronous classes that were faculty-centered and lacking in engagement, while some of the asynchronous courses that I completed were student-centered and high in interaction. In these instances, I found the asynchronous courses to be much more motivating. It wasn’t the mode of delivery that had an impact on my motivation, but rather the instructor’s approach to the class and/or choice of pedagogical methods.

The point being in this comparison of how I have experienced motivation in both synchronous and asynchronous courses is that in my experience, there has been no one delivery method or instructional approach that can be guaranteed to be motivating to all adult online learners. What works to motivate one student might not work for the next. Likewise, what one student finds motivating can change from semester to semester, or even from class to class.
In my professional experience as an instructional designer, I have found this same pattern to hold true. For just about every type of instructional approach or technique that has been cited in the literature as being motivating for adult learners, I have seen examples of when they have worked well in one class and poorly in another. In addition, I have worked with instructors who have chosen to implement instructional strategies that they believed to be motivational (e.g., a lecture-based, faculty-centered approach), but ran counter to what would be considered best practice, only to see it work well for them. In regards to how I have seen this play out with adult learners at my institution, information gleaned from course evaluations has only served to support my own personal experience, in that what adult learners find motivating not only varies from class to class, but also varies from student to student.

What all of this means can be hard to discern. Examples that both support and refute accepted research and pedagogical practice abound. I am left to conclude that overall so much of what adult students find motivating depends on the context, i.e., their instructor, their peers, their academic program, their personal preferences, their life outside of their coursework, etc. It is my belief that in order for an instructor to be successful in designing and delivering a class that is motivating to adult learners that all of these contextual elements be identified, considered, and addressed based on the instructor’s available time, ability, and resources. Furthermore, I believe that an instructor will have the most success when implementing not just one, but a variety of motivational instructional strategies that have been purposefully selected in order to best meet the needs of their students.
Trustworthiness of the Research

In order for the results of a study to be considered as credible, or “worth paying attention to,” Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that they must meet four conditions: truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality (p. 290). These criteria are known in the “conventional paradigm” (quantitative methodology) as internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity (p. 290). Lincoln and Guba, however, suggest that these measures are inappropriate for the naturalistic paradigm (qualitative methods) and offer instead an alternate set of criteria that are better suited to this methodology: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Table 7). In order to establish and enhance the trustworthiness of their study, the qualitative researcher is advised to implement strategies aimed at addressing each of these criteria (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004).

Table 7

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<th>Criteria</th>
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<td>Truth value</td>
<td>Internal validity</td>
<td>Credibility</td>
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<td>Applicability</td>
<td>External validity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consistency</td>
<td>Reliability</td>
<td>Dependability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutrality</td>
<td>Objectivity</td>
<td>Confirmability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Credibility.

In order to establish the credibility in their research, Lincoln & Guba (1985) assert that the qualitative researcher must accomplish two tasks. The first task is to demonstrate that the study was conducted “in such a way that the probability that the findings will be found to be credible is enhanced” (p. 296). The second task is to seek approval from each
of the participants indicating that the findings of the research accurately and credibly represent their perceptions of the phenomenon under study. In order to accomplish these tasks, the researcher implemented several strategies that made “it more likely that credible findings and interpretations will be produced” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 301).

The first strategy that the researcher used to enhance the credibility of the findings was peer review and debriefing (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose of this strategy was to obtain an external perspective from a peer who has knowledge of the research topic and can “challenge assumptions made by the investigator” (Shenton, 2004, p. 67). Feedback obtained from these debriefing sessions was used to strengthen and refine the study; thus, enhancing its credibility (Shenton, 2004).

The next strategy that the researcher used was negative case analysis, or what Creswell and Miller (2000) refer to as disconfirming evidence (Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Shenton, 2004). Using this strategy, the researcher sorted through the data contained in the “preliminary themes and categories” that were developed during the data analysis stage “for evidence that [was] consistent with or disconfirm[ed] these themes” (Creswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127). Patton (2002) notes that it is the researcher’s willingness to openly consider “why certain cases do not fall into the main pattern” that can substantially add to the credibility of their findings (p. 555).

In addition to the verification strategies described above, the researcher implemented several credibility enhancement measures suggested by Shenton (2004), the first of which was the adoption of well-established research methods. In order to enact this strategy, the researcher laid out a plan for data collection and analysis that was well
supported in the literature on qualitative methodology (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Creswell, 2005; Creswell & Miller, 2000; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2013; Van Manen, 1990). Next, the researcher developed a familiarity with the culture of the institution where the study took place. This allowed for a greater contextual awareness of the institution and participants as well as helped to build trust between the researcher, participants, and institutional contacts (Shenton, 2004). A final strategy, based on Shenton’s (2004) recommendations was to implement tactics during the interview process to help “ensure honesty in informants” (Shenton, 2004, p. 66). To accomplish this, the researcher took steps to build rapport with the participants, assure them that there are no right or wrong answers, and carefully review the consent form, making sure to go over participant confidentiality and their right to withdraw from the study. This approach helped to ensure participants that they were free to “contribute ideas and talk of their experiences without fear of losing credibility” (2004, p. 67).

Two final methods that were used to enhance the credibility of this study are member checking (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004) and clarification of researcher bias (Glesne, 2006; Shenton, 2004), or researcher reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln & Guba (1985) refer to member checking as “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility” in a study and view this step as necessary to ensure that the researcher is presenting an accurate representation of the participants’ realities (p. 314). As for the clarification of researcher bias, Glesne (2006) advises the qualitative researcher that, “Continual alertness to your own biases and theoretical predispositions assists in producing more trustworthy
interpretations” (p.167). For more detail on how these two strategies were implemented, see the Data Collection section of this chapter for information on member checking and the Data Analysis section of this chapter for information on clarification of researcher bias.

**Transferability.**

The next criterion for enhancing the trustworthiness of research findings is transferability. The criterion of transferability is based on the quantitative concept of external validity, which “is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 253). This concept, however, is not so easily applied to qualitative inquiry. Noting the small sample sizes and the “importance of context” inherent in qualitative research, Shenton (2004) questions “whether the notion of producing truly transferable results from a single [qualitative] study is a realistic aim” (p. 71). Focusing on this question of transferability, Lincoln & Guba (1985) assert that in order for an investigator to make any inferences regarding the transferability of a study, they would first “need to know about both [the] sending and receiving contexts” (p. 297). Since it is not possible for the researcher to know the context in which their research results may be applied, their responsibility shifts instead to providing rich, descriptive data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). In other words, “It is…not the naturalist’s task to provide an index of transferability; it is his or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgments possible on the part of potential appliers” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 316).

Therefore, in order to enhance the transferability of this study, the researcher employed the strategy of writing with rich, thick descriptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000;
Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Creswell and Miller (2000) note that by describing elements of the study such as the participants, setting, and themes in vivid detail that the researcher is creating “verisimilitude, statements that produce for the readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the events being described in a study” (p. 129). These descriptive statements then allow the reader “to make decisions about the applicability of the findings to other settings or similar contexts” (2000, p. 129). In addition to vividly describing the context of the study, Shenton (2004) also recommends extending this strategy to provide a detailed account of the “phenomenon under investigation” (p. 70). This will enable readers of the study to “compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those that they have seen emerge in their situations” (2004, p. 70).

**Dependability.**

Lincoln & Guba’s (1985) criterion of dependability is closely aligned with the quantitative concept of reliability. In the context of quantitative inquiry, reliability is used to refer to the replicability and repeatability of results (Golafshani, 2003). In other words, “Reliability describes how far a particular test, procedure or tool, such as a questionnaire, will produce similar results in different circumstances, assuming nothing else has changed” (Roberts, Priest, & Traynor, 2006). In order to address this concern in a qualitative study, Shenton (2004) recommends that the researcher provide a detailed account of their methods. This strategy serves the purpose of “enabling a future researcher to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results” (2004, p. 71). In order to increase the dependability of this study, the researcher included an in-depth description of the methodological process, including participant selection, data collection,
Confirmability.

The final criterion for establishing the trustworthiness of research findings is confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Henderson and Rheault (2004), “Confirmability implies neutrality and asks, ‘Was there an attempt to enhance objectivity by reducing research bias?’ A study is confirmable when procedures and results are free from bias” (p. 37). In order to reduce and eliminate researcher bias, Shenton (2004) advises that “steps must be taken to help ensure as far as possible that the work’s findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (p. 72).

In order to accomplish this, Shenton (2004) recommends three strategies, the first of which is for the researcher to acknowledge any previously held beliefs or assumptions regarding the topic under study. The second is to identify any weaknesses or shortcomings in the study’s design and discuss any potential effects that these might have on the results. Finally, Shenton recommends providing a detailed description of the methodology in order to allow for the “integrity of research results to be scrutinized” (p. 73). These strategies were implemented at various stages of the research process and are included in the final report. For instance, researcher bias was disclosed during the epoche phase of data analysis, weaknesses of the study are discussed in the limitations section of Chapter 5, and a detailed methodological description is provided in Chapter 3.
Table 8

*Summary of Strategies for Establishing Trustworthiness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Strategy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility</td>
<td>Peer review and debriefing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative case analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adoption of appropriate, well recognized research methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Development of early familiarity with culture of participating institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tactics to help ensure honesty in informants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Member checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clarification of researcher bias</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability</td>
<td>Rich, thick description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provision of background data to establish context of study and detailed description of phenomenon in question to allow comparisons to be made</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability</td>
<td>In-depth methodological description to allow study to be repeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmability</td>
<td>Admission of researcher’s beliefs and assumptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition of shortcomings in study’s methods and their potential effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>In-depth methodological description to allow integrity of research results to be scrutinized</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Introduction

Transcendental phenomenological analysis was implemented as the chosen method to determine the essence of how adult learners experience motivation in online higher education. Beginning with a description of the sample, the results of this multi-step process are then presented in three stages: Themes and Textural Description, Structural Description, and the Synthesis of Meanings and Essences.

Description of the Sample

The participants who made up the sample for this study were recruited from the research location that was previously described in Chapter 3. In order to be considered for this study, participants were required to be age 25 or older as well as be enrolled in at least one online class during the current or previous semester. A detailed sampling strategy (see Chapter 3) was implemented and a diverse sample of 10 students was chosen to participate in a phenomenological interview in which they were asked to describe how they experienced motivation in an online learning environment.

Of the 10 students who were selected for this study, the sample was fairly balanced in terms of both gender and age. For instance, there was an even number of male and female participants while a variety of age groups were also well represented. In addition, the sample was also well-balanced in terms of the participants’ previous online experience, with students ranging from novice (1-2 classes completed) to those who were quite experienced (10+ classes completed).
There was also a good mix of course topics represented in this sample, reflective of the various types of academic programs in which the participants were enrolled. For example, the research location offers a mix of graduate level certificate programs in a variety of business and professional content areas as well as a Bachelor’s degree completion program with an interdisciplinary focus. As a result, the courses represented in this study are an eclectic mix that runs the gamut from cybersecurity, to art history, to leadership.

The one element of this sample that could have been a little more evenly balanced was that of the number of participants who completed their course. Although the researcher had hoped to find an even number of students on both sides of this category (those who had finished their course and those who had not), this did not come to fruition. Scheduling issues with one of the participants was one of the factors that led to the imbalance in this category. The other was the issue of a few participants who had dropped their class relatively early on in the semester and as a result, were not in it long enough to provide a detailed description of their experience. It is the researcher’s opinion that a few minor changes to the recruitment letter and/or participant demographic survey could have prevented this problem.
### Table 9

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>Course topic</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>Finished class</th>
<th>Online classes completed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner A</td>
<td>Public Policy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner B</td>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner C</td>
<td>Art History</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6-10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner D</td>
<td>Project Management</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner E</td>
<td>Cybersecurity</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45-54</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner F</td>
<td>Cybersecurity</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner G</td>
<td>Art History</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner H</td>
<td>American Foreign Policy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner I</td>
<td>Human Resources</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner J</td>
<td>Photography</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Presentation of Data and Results of Analysis**

**Themes and textural description.**

In accordance with the data analysis plan, transcendental phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the transcripts of each of the 10 participant interviews. During the stage of phenomenological reduction, 12 distinct themes emerged which were then organized into 4 categories: Course Related, Instructor Related, Online Learning Related, and Student Related. Relevant subthemes were later identified in order to facilitate further analysis. All categories, themes, and subthemes are presented in Table 10.
Table 10

Themes and Subthemes Organized by Category

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course Related</td>
<td>Choice &amp; Personalization</td>
<td>The benefit of having choices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Individualized attention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Content &amp; Organization</td>
<td>Need for updated content</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Use of varied resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Importance of structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevance &amp; Applicability</td>
<td>Relevance drives student interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Applicability to real-world problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor Related</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Clear and specific course expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course Facilitation</td>
<td>Instructor enhances learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor detracts from learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor Presence</td>
<td>Level of instructor engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Responsiveness to students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Caring about student success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Learning Related</td>
<td>Academic Rigor</td>
<td>Workload is high, can be overwhelming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Benefits of rigorous coursework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>Importance of flexibility for adult learners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Role of delivery mode</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Flexibility built in to the schedule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student Perceptions</td>
<td>Learning online can be boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor perceived as being too busy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Student-instructor relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Learning online is less engaging than learning face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Related</td>
<td>Peer Influence on Learning</td>
<td>Benefit of learning from peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Desire to see examples of peers’ work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Perception of Synchronous</td>
<td>Peer interaction is not always valuable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Classes</td>
<td>Benefits of real-time interaction with instructor and peers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Varied Needs of Adult Learners

Difficult staying focused during live class sessions
Balance coursework with outside commitments
Learner expertise is recognized by the instructor
Importance of support materials
Expectations for a high-quality learning experience

Each of the themes and categories were more or less equally represented in the participant interviews and therefore are organized alphabetically by category in the following section. Within each category, a textural description of each theme is provided “within an experiential context” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 91). In order to facilitate the readability of the data, all participant responses were edited to remove conversational fillers, e.g., “like,” “you know,” “uhh,” etc. Also, in addition to using anonymous identifiers for all participants, all references to the names and gender of their instructors have been replaced with “the instructor,” “they,” “them,” “their,” etc.

Course Related

Choice and personalization.

The benefit of having choices.

Throughout the interviews participants brought up a number of examples in which they felt that the learning process had been influenced by their own personal choices. For instance, Learner G reflected favorably on his experience in an art history course in which he had a wide degree of “latitude” in constructing his posts to the class discussion forum.

Well there were assignments where we had to have a certain minimum amount of interaction in the online forums, but we had freedom to choose what we were gonna say or what we were going to talk about. [The professor] had some prompts
for discussion topics, but we were free to pick something else that came out of our own reading. So, some people went with the prompts and some people didn't. I would usually have my responses be something…that came to me as I was reading. So, there was some latitude there, which I liked.

In explaining what he liked about this approach, Learner G stated that “…because we had some freedom to choose how we would respond to the reading, that meant that my own personal response to each week's reading was something that was seen as valuable by the professor. So, that was satisfying.”

Going beyond the discussion forum, participants noted the numerous choices they had throughout their coursework. For instance, students in a cybersecurity class commented on the freedom that they had in selecting their readings each week. Learner E explained:

We were given flexibility on the journal articles we had to review on a weekly basis. [The instructor] said they have to be within the topic of what we were discussing that week. So, if [the topic] was in encryption, it had to be something on encryption. If it was something in networking, then you would do that. … As long as it was from a peer-reviewed journal, [the instructor] was happy with it.

Learner F explained why this element of personal choice was beneficial in completing the weekly article review assignments.

I suppose [the instructor] could have assigned an article and said, ‘Everybody should review this one article.’ And I think allowing us to select our own articles, it made it more interesting for us…

I enjoyed that, because I found some things that were definitely interesting that others probably wouldn’t have, because of the different backgrounds and lines of work that we’re in.

Other participants enjoyed the freedom of being able to select their own topics for various papers and projects that were assigned to them throughout the semester. Learner G noted that while they did have “parameters” for two of the papers that were assigned,
the students in his class “had a lot of room to pick how [they] wanted to do those things.”

Learner I described the freedom he had to make choices on a group project:

And I will say also with the group project, that was open-ended. You could select a topic or anything that you wanted to pursue, and as long as you submitted your plan to the instructor and the topic was verified that it was legitimate, it wasn’t way off in left field… and then move forward from there.

Learner I added that he “liked the flexibility of that group project to choose your own topic and take it a direction that you wanted to go with and work with someone.”

Another participant related her experience from a project management course in which she was able to choose the topic for a class project that aligned with her own personal interest in the environment. As such, Learner D chose to approach the task of developing a project management plan with a focus on sustainability. She explained:

So, if we can kind of tailor it to our interest then that makes it so much better. And that’s what I was able to do with looking at sustainability and kind of looking at [project management] from that perspective, and how that can have a major impact on industry and businesses.

I think the fact that [the instructor] did give us the opportunity to choose our own project management plan and project management topic, that gave us something that we were interested in.

Having the ability to make personal choices, however, didn’t work out as well for every participant in this study. Learner G recounted an instance in which the freedom he had in choosing a topic for the course’s final paper resulted in a learning experience in which he did not feel successful.

And then for our final paper, we had to choose a person from the [Renaissance] period to create a wiki about them and also write a paper about them. … I chose a poet. She wrote mostly religious poetry and I felt like my background wasn't…I didn't know enough about religious poetry to be able to analyze the content and the style of the poetry…So, I did the best with the paper that I wrote and I got a good grade, but I felt like there were pieces that were missing because… I didn't feel like I had gained enough knowledge, especially in this one field to be able to
do [a deeper analysis of the poetry].

Despite this experience, Learner G reflected that although the high level of choice that he experienced during his class may not be for everyone, he believed that it allowed for a highly personalized learning experience.

I imagine there are people who would rather not be given a choice, they just want to have an assignment and do the assignment, but I liked the idea of being able to have more choice in there, more options. So, I felt like there's a professor who's telling us information, we're doing a lot of reading, we're covering a lot of material, and history, and watching videos, and listening to music, but I sort of felt like the course was partly constructed by my choices. And each of the rest of the other people in the class made completely different choices than I did. And so everybody got almost a different class. So, their posts and responses and papers were different than mine. And even if we chose the same topic, we responded differently, and so each of us basically constructed our own course in a way. So, there was definitely a lot of material to cover in common, but how we responded to it was something we could affect.

*Individualized attention.*

Aside from choice, another element that added to the personalization of the online student experience is the level of individual attention provided by many of the instructors. Even in an asynchronous class, Learner C described how the instructor was able to add a personalized element to the class through the use of a pre-recorded weekly lecture.

[The instructor] just recorded lectures and then posted them. And then, [they] would tailor the lectures according to what went on in the discussion board post the week beforehand. So, if one of us made an unusual comment or observation, [the instructor] would respond to that in the lecture. So you could, I guess, argue that some of us may have altered the course that [the instructor] took with the material.

Learner G described the high level of individualized attention that he received from his instructor on the class discussion forum and what that meant to him as a student.

Well, you know having the feedback be specific to each post. I mean that's my own thoughts, [the instructor] is responding to my own thoughts. So, that's not just a generic ‘Good job.’ It was, ‘You know, I like the way that you brought out
this point,’ and [the instructor] was specific about what I had said. So, that was about me being an individual person.

There was one time where I disagreed with another student and posted something, sort of a counter view to what they had posted, and [the instructor] thanked me for being careful in my response so that it didn’t start an argument or something and that I was able to sort of give a different point of view without causing offense. So, [the professor] is definitely reading our individual posts and taking care to let us know that that was what [they] were doing. So, I think that fits the bill of personal.

When asked if he believed if all of the students in the class received this level of individualized attention, Learner G replied “I believe so. As far as I can tell, as far as I remember [the instructor] always came in and responded somehow to what people had posted.”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Learner I recounted his experience in another course in which he felt that the attention that he received from the instructor was anything but individualized. After receiving feedback on a few assignments that he felt was “generic” and lacking in specificity, Learner I began to suspect that a number of the students in the course were receiving the same “copied and pasted” feedback. He related the initial incident where these suspicions were confirmed by a peer in the same class.

So, I was in communication with another classmate and I said, ‘Well, here were [the professor’s] comments.’ And they said, ‘Wow, verbatim, the same comments.’ And I was like, ‘Okay, let me keep my eye on that.’

In another incident from later on in the semester, Learner I noted that the feedback that he had received on a case study included references to “a different business that another group had been assigned.” Learner I explained:

So, I think that the professor just accidently copied and pasted that one that [they] did for all the others into mine because it’s like, ‘Wonderful feedback. Unfortunately, I didn’t do that case study. I did the other one.’ And then I verified it through that other classmate and they were like, ‘Yep, same thing with me, verbatim.’ So, I don’t feel like the feedback was individualized.
Although Learner I completed the class and was happy with his grade, this lack of individualized attention made him feel that the instructor “really blew through” several assignments that had taken him “hours of work” to complete.

**Content and organization.**

*Need for updated content.*

Several participants spoke about the content of their courses being in need of an update. Specifically, students noted that although the topics of their courses were current, the material covered in their classes was out of date. In addition, participants expressed disappointment that their instructors did not make more of an effort to tie in current events. For instance, in a course on public policy, Learner A made the following observation:

> I guess one other thing I will say, we didn’t really do anything with current issues, even though it was an election year and it was a public policy course. And I do think probably there was a whole lot going on that we could have actually looked at and incorporated possibly, and that would have been pretty interesting.

And I think probably, teachers have the syllabus they’ve been using, and more than once during this program when I opened the syllabus, it would have a really old date on the top of it. It’s like, ‘Okay, you need to update that.’ So, I think people just carry things forward. They get it worked out and maybe don’t take a fresh look all the time because that does take time and effort.

When asked about changes that could have been made in a class on cybersecurity to make it more interesting and enjoyable, Learner E stated:

> Well, definitely some fresher content. Maybe [the professor] could’ve provided some additional case studies where people have solved cybersecurity shortfalls. … There seems to be a cyber-attack happening every week, I mean, a big one. There’s a bunch of little ones happening all the time, but something definitely more current that could’ve been woven into this. ‘This is what happened. This is how it was fixed.’ So, it was not very current at all.
Learner E followed up this remark noting the benefit of tying course content to current events by stating, “I think that would’ve really helped me understand the material better.” Other students from this same class noticed that this course was further weighted down and made less useful by a textbook that “was published in 2001. Which is, in the cyber world, that’s stone age.” Learner F elaborated:

So, the book was kinda outdated, if you can imagine a book from 2001, in terms of cybersecurity, a lot has changed, so that was kind of not as useful as I thought it would be. There were chapters where I’d read up on these technologies and these standards that were complicated and took a while to get through, and then you’d look for it online, it’s like, ‘Oh yeah, that was done…that was kind of the big thing in 2001 to 2004, 2005, and then by 2008, no one really did it anymore.’ So, I thought that was kind of odd.

Learner I, frustrated by the frequent use of older case studies in a human resources management class, noted the difficulty of “looking at this problem that we’ve got as if it’s a current problem, a current issue, but in reality, that was 20 years ago. If I wanted to figure out what they did, I’d just go [to] Google and figure [it] out.”

*Use of varied resources.*

Despite the dated content and materials in some of the classes, other participants had a more positive view, noting that there were a good variety of resources and materials available in their classes. For instance, Learner G noted the mix of resources in an art history class:

I think it was really well planned and I think the content for each week was well-chosen. There was enough reading to…there was more than one reading each week, so it wasn't just one thing that we were looking at. We were getting different perspectives on each week's topic, and we covered art, and music, and writing, and poetry, and lots of different things. So, it was well-varied and there were some videos and films to watch. So, I think it was, both content and variety was a good mix.
Another student from the same class commented on the mix of resources and the benefit of having secondary sources when the primary sources were difficult to understand.

There were a wide range of materials that [the instructor] gave us to read. So, if we didn’t identify or have a good grasp on one material, we could always look to another. And some of the reading material was really dense, so it was helpful to have really, like five articles. If you didn’t want to read Machiavelli’s play, you could read something else. So that was helpful. Sometimes professors only give you one reading and say, ‘You need to understand this.’ And it’d be kind of intimidating if you don’t really get it. So, it was helpful to have a good array of things to choose from. (Learner C)

Although some participants commented on the variety, others wished for greater use of instructional multimedia, such as “animated slides”. Learner E noted that in a cybersecurity class, “When things are complicated and they turn into a spaghetti diagram, or like a flowchart, it’s neat to see things pop up and see interactions, more animations, exchanges in the networking protocols.” These types of slides allow the instructor to “start simple and end complicated” as they “build on these concepts”. Meanwhile, Learner I noted that more “variety in the mediums” such as instructional videos would have made the course more interesting and enjoyable and would have helped him to be more successful in learning the material.

So, for example, maybe instead of writing one week on a prompt and pulling together research, you could watch a Ted Talk and then comment on that piece on the discussion board about what you thought of what the presenter was giving you and going over. So yeah, as I think about it, adding a little more variety into that with different mediums could have made it more interesting.
**Importance of structure.**

In regards to how their courses were structured, most participants reported a highly structured learning environment in which there was a routine to the weekly activities. This was typified by a comment from Learner B:

> So, in terms of the expectations of the course and the way that the structure was, it was very self-learning, you know, read a chapter, do the homework and then provide a discussion...there was a discussion board online. So, you would do this weekly...you had to turn in your things every week. And the course just kept moving.

But, this amount of structure was not considered a bad thing, as most participants appeared to appreciate a highly structured online learning environment.

> I will say, too, I think probably you could say the structure of the class was boring in that it was repetitive, it was predictable, it was the same thing over and over, but I actually really appreciate that as a learner. I like to know what to expect. I like predictability. I like to get into a groove and a routine with a particular professor. So, I think some could call that boring, but for me, it was like reassuring structure. (Learner A)

Learner J also appreciated the highly structured environment in her class, while noting that there was a tradeoff in flexibility.

> There was nothing that was flexible about this course. There were due dates for the discussion boards. There were due dates for reading materials. There were due dates for responses and homework assignments, which that is an aspect that I liked. I like to know what's expected of me and I don't want to insinuate that this is a bad thing.

Learner J added that when faculty provide students with “a lot of grading structure and assignment structure” it shows that they care and “really sets [students] up for success, in a lot of ways.”

Over the course of the interviews, several participants related examples of how the highly structured environments in their classes had helped them to complete large-scale projects.
And also, the assignment structure [the instructor] had was such that if we did what we were supposed to do every week, when we got to the final project, which was very lengthy and comprehensive, we would have a really nice outline and just have to do some additional tweaking and research and so on. But [the instructor] kept saying right along, ‘You’ll want to do this assignment. You’ll be very happy later on that you did.’ And it was true, like everything we did built toward really helping us out in the end. (Learner A)

Learner G noted the benefit of a class wiki project that helped students to build upon their work week-by-week as it evolved into their final project.

So, we had to make a wiki entry for the [artist] that we were profiling, and [the instructor] asked us to give a brief description of that person along with at least a preliminary thesis for our final paper at the six-week or seven-week period. So, we did have to do some early on, or mid-semester thinking about what our final project was going to be and actually turn something in. And then the wiki project was due before the final, and all the wiki content was probably going be on the person in our papers. So, all that was steps leading towards the final. It would have been very difficult to just put it off until the last minute. You had to do something all the way through.

Despite these benefits, some participants did have issues with how their courses were structured. For instance, instead of a course that was structured to gradually build students up, Learner D had a course that assigned a research “paper due the very first week of the semester.” Commenting on how this made her feel, Learner D said, “I felt like I stuck my finger in a light socket.” She then recommended that the instructor “give students a little time to get kind of up to speed” before assigning such a major project.

Another participant who had an issue with the structure of her class noted “that this class was not necessarily set up to be that successful, since a tremendous portion of the grade depended on one group project.” Describing how she thought this scenario might play out, this participant stated, “And so, I just felt that it was not setting me up for success and I could see that train wreck coming quickly.” Elaborating on this, she stated:

I couldn't be successful because when more than 40% of your grade is dependent upon one project that includes the effort of other people. I just…that is not a
recipe for success. Because not only are you asking me what I know as a student, but you’re also asking me to manage people, their time, and their level of intellect to match whatever expectations that I have to give me a grade. And I'm sorry, but I find that to be counter intuitive. I would have rather written more papers, and done a group project, and spaced out the grading. (Learner J)

Course alignment with syllabus.

Another issue relating to course content and organization that came up during the interviews was that of alignment. More specifically, several participants noted that their course didn’t live up to how it was advertised in the course catalog and/or syllabus. For instance, in describing a course in cybersecurity that he had enrolled in, Learner E stated:

The course title and the course description I thought were fantastic; it was the world of cybersecurity today, it was called dynamic security architectures. So that means, because we live in a very dynamic cyber world where things are constantly changing, so you want to set up this infrastructure that can respond to threats faster than the humans can. That’s not what we got in there.

Learner F, who was enrolled in the same course, also noted the lack of alignment between the course’s title and its content.

I expected it to be more about architecture, since that was the name of the course, but it seemed more of a generic network-security kind of lecture series. A few of us were actually commenting on, when we talked offline, whether this was the slide deck from a wrong course. It was weird. It was a weird course.

Later on, Learner E commented on how this lack of alignment left him feeling unprepared to complete the final project.

Also, the [final] project, which was a very interesting case study, that I think if the course lived up to what its intention was, would’ve nicely prepared you to address the case study, but it didn’t. I thought the case study was useful, but at the end of the day, we were inadequately prepared, that’s my assessment anyway, to properly apply our knowledge that we should’ve gained to solve the case.

This lack of preparation for the final project left Learner E feeling “ill-equipped,” “scared,” and “worried [that he wouldn’t] get a passing grade.” Despite these fears,
Learner E said that the final “wasn’t too bad”, but that in order to be successful he had to rely on his “prior knowledge in cybersecurity” rather than what he had learned in the course. Reflecting on how he was able to get a passing grade on the final project in spite of the lack of preparation from the course, Learner E stated that “I would say more than half [of the knowledge that I used to complete the project] was from my prior experience in the career field.”

In another course, a student reflected on the difficulties that she encountered when the instructor “deviated from the description of the course” that was provided in the syllabus.

So, the description of the course was photography as art; that what makes photography considered art. And in order to discuss that, it was said explicitly that you did not need any technical knowledge or experience taking photos. But unfortunately, since most of the class were photographers…, it turned into something that was not part of the course description, which was that it became extremely technical. And those of us who were not photographers, it was impossible to follow the conversation. (Learner J)

Learner J believed that the course ended up going in this more technical direction as a result of the instructor “cater[ing] to the masses instead of catering to the individuals that did not have experience with [photography].” Even though the instructor had “said multiple times in the class, ‘This is not meant to be a technical class,’” Learner J noted “that’s all the discussions ended up being.” Learner J elaborated on the “frustrating” nature of trying to work through this course:

Because when I'm sitting in a class where I have done the work that is on the syllabus, which is read X number of pages and actively read it, which I'll have taken notes on, and then I get to the class and the class is not touching on the content but touching on this button on my Canon camera, which was not included in the reading…then I feel I’ve wasted my time and that I can't be successful in a course like that. I would’ve never signed up for a course like that.
As a result of this misalignment between the course description in the syllabus and the way that the course actually played out, Learner J felt that she “could not be successful” and ended up deciding to drop this course.

Relevance and applicability.

Relevance drives student interest.

The relevance and applicability of course content is a topic that was brought up multiple times throughout the interviews. Participants viewed relevance as a key element of their coursework, useful for driving their interest in the material and also for motivating them to engage in the learning process. For example, Learner F responded enthusiastically when describing the relevance of a class that he had recently started.

So, I found the course I’m taking now and we just had our first meeting last night, online, live lecture, and it was really good in terms of content. It’s really great, up to date, and I feel it’s really relevant, so it’s really encouraging. It makes me want to continue with the course, and not just for getting the credit, but for actually learning and enjoying it.

Several students also cited the relevance of a course’s topic as a “selling point” and reason for enrolling in the class. When asked what she liked about her course in American foreign policy, Learner H stated:

Well, the topic. I mean, most of us, if you sign up for a class it’s not because you’re mandated to take it, but because you’re interested in the topic. So, for me, I was definitely interested in the topic. It was right after elections and I thought it was important to have a better understanding of American foreign policy. I have an idea what our policies are, but I really wanted a more in depth look at it.

Learner A talked about how she appreciated the relevance of her course on public policy and noted that the fact that she was able to apply what she had learned to real-world conversations made all of the hard work of being an adult student worthwhile.
Well, I thought it was a good topic. Public policy affects every aspect of our lives and we frequently do not think about that, are not aware of it, so it was enlightening in that sense.

You know, for me, it takes discipline to put the time and energy into doing all the reading, all the writing when I am working full-time. And the fact that I came away with things to talk about, that I would talk to my friends or my husband about Social Security and here’s how I think we could fix it, and here’s how I think we could fix our healthcare policy, and here’s how I think people are looking at it wrong, that was a real selling point for me. I mean, it was stimulating and that made it all seem more rewarding and more motivating, even to do the [parts of the course] that felt like a slog.

Other participants who found their content of their course to be relevant included Learner B, who talked about the workplace communication strategies that he had learned in a leadership course.

Yeah, the content was interesting in general because you just got a different perspective about the way communication works. So, the book was actually really interesting because it gives you the definitions and then it says how it’s applicable. … So, [the book] kinda made it into science, human interaction in a scientific way. And so, it’s something that I’d never done before. I’m not science-based, I’m finance-based.

So, the way that we talk, and our mannerisms, how they affect how our ideas are expressed, our tone. Things like that I found very interesting because it wasn’t only like, ‘Oh, okay, this is interesting.’ It’s like, ‘Oh, this is relevant to life in general.’

One interesting point that came across during the interviews was that in order for a course to be considered relevant by students, the topic of the course did not necessarily have to be current. For example, on one end of the spectrum there was Learner J, who enrolled in a photography course partly because of her interest in how the topic connected to current trends in technology and social media. She stated that “the increased usage of cell phones, and Instagram, and Facebook” made her feel “that this was a really pertinent class.”
However, on the opposite end of this spectrum were two students who took a course on female artists of the Renaissance and found the 400 year-old subject matter to be quite relevant. For instance, Learner G noted a documentary that was shown during the course which detailed a modern-day effort of to find and restore the work of female artists from the Renaissance period. He noted that “that was an interesting thing, sort of seeing this work that’s an ongoing project that’s a current day thing that I had no idea existed.”

As for Learner C, when asked if she thought the content of the Renaissance course was applicable to her day-to-day life, she replied insightfully:

Yeah, I think so. There’s a lot of interesting anecdotes from the material that I find are, at least from my perspective, still present. Like how female artists were criticized for their appearance or their demeanor rather than the merits of their work, for example. So, although I always kind of knew that that was probably the case, I hadn’t really examined it in detail. So, it’s interesting when looking at current events, or some modern day feminist writer saying these things, to have the perspective that I definitively know this was the case. So that’s fulfilling and helpful to have that background.

There were, however, a few participants who found their courses to be not as relevant as they would have liked. For example, Learner F described his experience in a cybersecurity class that did not meet his expectations in terms of relevance:

More relevant content would have made it more interesting and enjoyable for me. I mean, I don’t really take courses to have fun…maybe I’m just old-school, but some professors are like, ‘Oh, we’re gonna have fun in this course.’ Okay, but that’s not as important to me as getting the relevant knowledge and learning a lot.

I was expecting this course to kind of have on a scale of one to ten in relevance, like an eight or a nine, and it ended up being like a two or three.

In another example of a course that wasn’t as relevant as it could have been, Learner A described a missed opportunity to tie in current events to a course on public policy:
I guess one other thing I will say, we didn’t really do anything with current issues, even though it was an election year and it was a public policy course and I do think probably there was a whole lot going on that we could have actually looked at and incorporated possibly, and that would have been pretty interesting.

Applicability to real-world problems.

Another element that can add to the relevance of a course is when students are provided with the opportunity to apply what they are learning to real-world problems or even issues that they are currently facing in their careers. Participants cited numerous examples of this throughout the interviews. Learner B noted how this can sometimes be difficult, but also beneficial, as it requires the learner to engage in “critical thinking.”

Yeah, we would be able to base our questions from our personal or professional life. I think that is always something that [the instructor] wanted us to do. Like, it always had to fall back into what we had learned that week. So, I think that’s even harder, obviously, because it’s kind of like critical thinking, right? So, it’s what did you get from this chapter, and then how can you apply it to your personal life?

In a course on human resources management, Learner I noted that it was interesting to learn “how compensation works, and how organizations and companies structure it differently, and different kinds of compensation models that are put into place, and even some atypical situations too.”

Both Learners E and F commented on the relevance of a few of the assignments that they completed in a cybersecurity class. Learner E discussed a case study project in which students “were given a problem that a company was experiencing and [then] were supposed to take what [they had] learned from the class and build a security architecture to solve their problem.” Because it was a real-world problem that they were being asked to solve, Learner E noted the creative thinking processes that were required:

…you could definitely use your own creativity on how you wanted [to solve it]... I don’t think there was a correct way, probably some ways are better than others.
You had to make some trade-offs, you couldn’t handle all things. But you have to prioritize. You have to use your noggin a little bit to come up with a solution.

Learner F described how he enjoyed applying what he had learned in the course to a final paper in which students were tasked with developing “a security architecture” to a real-world scenario. When asked what he enjoyed about this assignment, Learner F stated:

It was very practical. It touched pretty much all aspects of the course and really brought them together. And I think part of it is because I do enjoy doing this kind of work, so it wasn’t just kind of an assignment of doing it for the sake of completing a course. It was like, ‘Oh, this is pretty interesting. I enjoy this and it’s good practice for other situations in the real world.’

For Learner F and a number of other participants, the fact their courses promised to develop useful knowledge and skills that were relevant to their current and future career goals was one of their primary reasons for choosing to enroll in their programs. Learner F stated:

I think usefulness is one of the primary motivations for me. So, I work in an IT-related field, and part of my responsibilities are growing or extending to include IT security, which is why I’m taking this program. And so, it’s directly related, and I choose the courses that are directly related to what I’m doing, and so that’s kind of the number one reason for me to all this.

I was really excited when I saw this program…the entire certificate program. It was exactly what I wanted to extend my knowledge. And I was actually participating in a security assessment at the time when I was applying [to the program], which really helped me to imagine the possibilities of what I could contribute to my organization through learning these types of things about architecture and cybersecurity management in general. So that was a big motivation for me.

Learner I thought that the course he took in human resources management was “relevant and said that “goes back to the whole intent of why I enrolled in it in the first place.” He stated that “looking forward, this is an area of study that I can see myself professionally moving toward.”
As for Learner D, she took her course in project management as the first step in a long-term goal of obtaining her PMP (Project Management Professional) certification. Commenting on the relevance of the course content, she stated that “…a lot of the things that we went over were very applicable to what I do, and what I hope to do in the future.” She added that this was her primary motivation for taking this course and “wouldn't have done it otherwise.”

Although many of the participants in this study found their courses to be relevant to their current or future careers, there were however, a few students who were not able to actually apply their new knowledge and skills. For instance, Learner I was enrolled in a course in human resources management, but at the time he was working in an unrelated field. He described the challenge that this presented:

…I kind of envied some of my other classmates who already had positions in Human Resources, to be able to use their professional practice, go back and really correlate [the course content] very closely to what they do, or something that their office does or their department does. Whereas for me, I’m kind of on the, professionally speaking, I’m on the outside looking in.

Other participants who had difficulty in applying what they had learned in their courses to their jobs included Learners A and B. In the case of Learner A, she related how she felt that too much of the course content was “theoretical” and “not that concrete and hands-on”. Although she enjoyed the course and felt that it was “beneficial” and “rewarding”, she stated that she didn’t “necessarily know how much [she would] be able to apply it to [her] career.” She contrasted her experience with that of her husband, who was taking a course in IT.

You know, it’s interesting because my husband is in an IT program where he actually learns how to do things, like how to program, how to code. He starts a course, he doesn’t know it. He finishes a course, he knows how to do this thing. And my whole thing has been so different in that what I’m doing is learning about
things and gaining knowledge. But how I can directly apply that, and whether I will directly apply that is…it’s pretty ambiguous. So, I don’t – I don’t hold that against this particular program. I think it’s just sort of the nature of this type of degree and where I’m at in my career.

As for Learner B, he described the difficulty that he had applying what he had learned in his leadership class to his job in the financial sector. It was his assessment that he was at a stage in his career that didn’t quite align with what was being taught in his class. When asked whether he was able to apply what he had learned in class to his job, Learner B stated:

Whether I used it personally, not so much. I’d say that as of now, it’s been the other way around; I’ve applied my work to my studies, not vice versa…yet. I guess because it’s still that learning phase, and also because I’m early in my career as well. I’m still not a manager, or partner, or any of that stuff.

Although he wasn’t at a point in his career where he was able to apply what he had learned in class to his job, Learner B was already starting to see how he would be able to do so in the future. Reflecting on some of the material that he had covered in the course, Learner B stated:

…I was reading these articles and they were very motivational, the book assignments that [the instructor] gave us. So it kinda motivated me, saying, ‘Oh, in the future I can be like this,’ or ‘When I have the opportunity at my job, in a couple of years from now or whatever, I can apply these tools and kinda have that leverage over people.’ So that definitely made me feel good in that sense.

Instructor Related

Communication.

Clear and specific course expectations.

Communication issues with their course instructor was something that was brought up frequently by the participants in this study. From concerns over the clarity of course expectations to the quality and timeliness of instructor feedback, participants had a
great deal to say on this topic. For example, Learner F recounted how his instructor had failed to provide clear and specific instructions for a number of assignments throughout the class. When discussing the assigned weekly article reviews, he said that “I guess you could do the article review how you wanted to,” noting that there was a “lack of guidance” from the instructor not only in choosing a topic, but also in what was to be included in the review and what direction the review was supposed to take (e.g., summary, critique, etc.)

In another example, Learner F recounted the lack of clarity surrounding the final paper:

I was thinking about our final research paper, it was a little disorganized, and so I think some students didn’t realize that there was an actual topic that was set out…there was some confusion about that.

Learner F noted that there was also some confusion related to course due dates. When asked whether the instructor allowed for any flexibility on when assignments could be turned in, Learner F stated:

Yeah, it’s funny, it wasn’t so much flexibility for our sake, I think our professor wasn’t that clear on when certain dates fell, like what day of the week, so it was like, ‘Oh yeah, it’s the wrong day. We’re gonna push it back a few days so it falls on the Sunday or the Monday things need to actually be due.’ So, it wasn’t really for our sake; it was a mistake on [the instructor’s] part.

As a result of this lack of clear communication from the instructor, this led to a situation where Learner F felt that he might not be successful in the course.

...there were some impediments to success and some process issues. I mentioned before [the] lack of an introduction to the class, and the setting of expectations, and at least in the beginning, slow communication with the students, which lent an air of unpreparedness on the instructor’s part.

Noting the level of confusion that this caused, Learner F stated: “It sounds kinda weird, but sometimes, if it’s so confusing, then you just don’t ask any questions, because
you’re just like, ‘What is going on?’” Eventually, Learner F and his classmates were able to push for clarification from the instructor during one of their weekly “online live meetings.” As a result, Learner F notes that the students finally were able to get clarification on “what [the instructor] wanted, what [they were] expecting, [and] how [they were] gonna grade.” Learner F said that once the students took this step to intervene, the instructor got “pretty good about giving guidance about particular subjects, but it took a while to get to that…a point where there was enough clarity on how things were supposed to work…”

In another class, Learner D found it difficult to understand what all of the requirements were, because instead of being listed clearly on the syllabus, mostly “all the assignments were embedded in the course lecture notes and the slides.” She explained how difficult this made things:

We would have about 26 slides each week, and then you would have pages and pages of lecture notes that went with the slides, so, two separate files. … And in order to find out what the assignment was, we had to read through all the lecture notes to find the assignment because it was embedded in there. And I just think that [the instructor] should have those all on a page of the syllabus. You know, this is assignment number one, this is assignment number two, and have that all there so students can see upfront.

Sympathizing with one of her peers who ended up dropping the course, Learner D stated, “And I can see that, because [they] couldn’t read the syllabus ahead of time and kind of plan [their] schedule accordingly…”

Other students described how, in lieu of clear expectations from their instructor, it was necessary to read between the lines and “interpret” what was really being said. Learner A related her experience in trying to determine what her instructor was looking for in terms of the number of pages required for an upcoming paper.
It’s interesting because teachers always say what it is they’re looking for, and you find out what they do and don’t mean. For example, this particular professor, I found out that they give a page limit that they expect, and if somebody goes significantly over that limit, that does not count against them in any way.

I’m thinking of this because the example paper that the instructor posted actually was much longer than the assignment needed to be and I remember thinking, ‘Well, okay, that’s good. It means I can make mine longer if I want to. That’s bad if that means that’s expected when that’s not what it says in the syllabus.’

Learner F described how a lack of feedback on how he was doing in the class made it necessary for him to try and interpret sparse comments from the instructor during the live class sessions. He explained:

There was some feedback in the online sessions, ‘You guys are doing a great job.’ … Which kind of helped me discern that, in spite of the lack of feedback for some of the assignments, like the article reviews, that it was gonna be okay, if that makes sense. So, you kinda interpret some of the things the professor says in certain ways to manage your own expectations of how hard the grading’s going to be, and stuff like that.

Despite the lack of clear communication from their instructors that was experienced by several of the participants in this study, there were also some students who had the opposite experience. For example, in describing the helpful guidance that she had received on a research project, Learner C noted that her instructor “was clear on what they were looking for, so I wasn’t spending a lot of time on avenues in my research that weren’t relevant.”

Another participant noted the extra effort that her instructor made in making sure that all of the students were clear on the parameters of the class.

[The instructor] posted short videos where [they] explained the content of all the different assignments with PowerPoint. [This instructor’s] class sessions were basically…the opportunity to ask questions and get clarification and make sure that we all understood. And I kind of got the sense that maybe in the past, [this instructor had] been accused of being unclear or students had not been happy or something because [the instructor] was just absolutely bending over backwards to...
make sure that we understood the parameters [and] understood the expectations. (Learner A)

_Instructor feedback._

In addition to noting the benefits of having course expectations clearly communicated by their instructor, participants also cited the benefits of receiving timely and substantial feedback. For example, “getting good responses from the instructor on a timely basis” made Learner F feel successful, while Learner A noted that “[g]etting feedback that I was getting good grades made a difference for me.” When Learner D was asked what made her feel successful in her class on project management, she replied:

> Well I haven’t gotten my [final course] grade yet, but the feedback from the professor [on the final exam] said, ‘Honestly, this is the best response I’ve ever received. I’m not just saying that, I think you really put together a well thought out response.’ Hearing [the instructor’s] feedback was reinforcing, that’s something that was meaningful.

Learner D went on to add that because she received this level of feedback “on each assignment” she could tell that the instructor “was thoroughly interested [in] mak[ing] sure we succeeded in the course.”

For Learner A, instructor feedback was critical in providing assurance that she was on the right track with her coursework. For example, Learner A described how she often felt unsure of herself when starting out in a new class and didn’t begin to feel settled in until she received positive feedback from the instructor. She stated:

> Every course I took, I initially had some trepidation. … I definitely put a lot of time and energy in and frequently worried, ‘Should I be doing more? Am I doing more than I need to be doing? What is the appropriate level?’ And in every single course, once I started getting back A’s I was like, ‘Okay, what I’m doing is correct. I’ve got that feedback, I’ve got that reinforcement and now I have an idea of what I should be doing.’
It’s difficult because I think all of the professors made it clear what they were looking for, but until I actually submitted an assignment and got that feedback, I was nervous about whether I was interpreting it correctly.

For Learner C, the feedback provided by her instructor made her feel successful and gave her a sense that the instructor “care[d] about how [she] was learning and that [she] was absorbing the material.” Learner C elaborated:

[The instructor’s] comments about how I was dissecting the artist, and then the public’s response to the artist, and all those different things in the papers made me feel that I had a really good grasp on the material, that I wasn’t struggling in any way, and I wasn’t struggling to write this stuff or come up with these ideas.

Learner C also noted that although her instructor “gave a lot of really positive feedback,” she could tell that it was sincere. She stated:

Yeah, and I trust [the instructor’s] evaluation of my work, that [they’re] not giving me a false sense of accomplishment, if that makes sense. I think [the instructor] would be the type of person to really take me to task if [they] thought I wasn’t doing a good job, so… it helps.

Many of the participants noted, however, that feedback on its own wasn’t enough. In order for the comments from their instructor to be meaningful, the feedback had to be detailed and specific. Learner G described how the detailed feedback from his instructor made him feel confident that he had a good grasp on the course content.

So, [the instructor] responded to each person's weekly posts with words of analysis, or clarification, or praise if it was something particularly insightful. And so that was public, so other students could see that. … And then each week, as part of the weekly grade for that posting, [the instructor] also would give private feedback. And so, [they were] definitely reading what we had written and taking the time to respond individually. It wasn't just, ‘You guys are doing a great job.’ It was, each person got their own feedback. So that was great.

You know it made me feel like that I was getting it, that I was understanding what the content was and that I was responding not the way I should, but the way that I was thinking academically about the topic, that feedback helped me know that I was on the right track.
This level of detail and specificity in their instructor’s comments, however, was not the case for many of the participants in this study. Indeed, both Learners E and F expressed a desire for “more substantive feedback,” with Learner E commenting during the interview as if his instructor was present in the room, “[A]re you even reading the stuff we’re putting out here? I don’t think you are.”

The term “superficial” was used by a number of participants in describing the feedback that they received from their instructors, while Learner I noted the feedback he received was “very generic.” He stated that, “[T]he comments and the gradebook on the discussion prompts were just, ‘Thoughtful response this week. Good job,’ or ‘Nice work with the discussion prompt.’” Learner I added that this gave him the sense that his work wasn’t being “read through very thoroughly, just because nothing specific from the papers were mentioned in the comments.”

In the case of Learner C, she related how although she did receive feedback from her instructor on her posts to the class discussion forum, the feedback wasn’t detailed enough to help her improve or explain the variation in her grade from week to week. She stated:

[S]ometimes, the feedback would be totally positive, and then the corresponding grade would be 17 out of 20, versus the other grades that I would get would be 20 out of 20. And looking back at the post, even if I have the rubric that [the instructor] provided right next to it, I couldn’t identify what my shortcomings where with that post. So, if I wanted to improve for the next week I would have to kind of guess about like, ‘Okay, well, was the length of the paragraph too short?’ or, ‘Should I have done more analysis?’

If it’s only positive feedback it doesn’t really explain why the points were taken off, that’s not really constructive criticism. Like when [the instructor] gave me 16 out of 20, but said ‘Your comments this week were incisive as usual.’ So, it doesn’t really help me to understand why I got 16 out of 20.
She added that this lack of specificity cost her “a lot of time” looking back at her previous work and “trying to figure out what exactly did I do right in this week [that] I didn’t do right in this [other] week?”

In addition to their desire for more detail and specificity, a few participants noted the importance of timeliness when it came to receiving feedback from their instructors. Learner C said “that usually there was a three-day delay in getting a response” from her instructor, noting that this was a weakness of “the asynchronous format” and made it “difficult” to ask questions. When Learner A was asked about the timeliness of feedback in her course, she stated “I don’t think there was a long gap, but it was not real immediate either.” Learner F also noted issues with the timeliness of the feedback in his course, stating that “the grading and feedback came relatively late in the game.” Citing the importance of prompt feedback, Learner F added that “grades are important” to students and that “it’s a good thing to have grades relatively soon after submittal so you can have a better sense of whether you’re successful or not.”

**Course facilitation.**

*Instructor enhances learning.*

Throughout the interviews, participants had a lot to say about the job that their instructors had done in facilitating their online classes. Comments were wide ranging on this topic, resulting in a fairly even mix of participants who felt that their instructor’s course facilitation skills enhanced the learning process and those who felt that their instructor’s lack of these skills detracted from it. As an example of a student who felt that her instructor enhanced the course, Learner D described her experience in a project management class:
So, what I found interesting was…the questions that [the professor] asked. I really felt that those were thought provoking, I felt that they challenged us. They really challenged me to think about, ‘What is this question about? Is there any literature on this?’ But then once I did some research, I was like, ‘Wow, there’s a lot out there on this.’ I just thought it was very thought provoking, very challenging, the research aspect, and seeing what other journals there are on project management.

Learner D added that although the content of this course was at times “really dry…the questions that [the instructor] asked really made it seem more interesting.”

Learner C described how her class on art history was made more interesting because of the way that the instructor “encouraged [the class] to engage with the material.” In conducting research for a class project, Learner C described how she “followed [the instructor’s] example” in going to a new “depth” in her research that she “hadn’t really done…before in another class.” Providing more detail on the process, she stated:

So, in order to do that, at least the way I approached it, was digging through the artist’s life, their work, how they were seen at the time, the obstacles they had, all those kinds of things. So, how I gathered all that information, …I got onto [the library databases], and I found eyewitness accounts, or like old documents, where I had first-hand accounts of people who had met with the artist. So, I thought that [the instructor] would appreciate that because [they] used those in [their] own lectures.

In addition to encouraging the class to go deeper with their research, Learner C noted additional examples of what her instructor had done to facilitate student learning, including creating interesting discussion prompts “just to kind of jumpstart thinking if you didn’t have anything come to mind initially” and also posting pre-recorded lectures that helped Learner C to gain a better understanding of the assigned readings. Learner C stated:

So sometimes, if the material was kind of dense, I would wait to read…I would just skim it but not really read it thoroughly, wait for [the instructor] to post the
lecture, and then read it after I’d listened to the lecture because it would help set up the context to view the painting, or whatever it was.

Several other participants also provided examples of how their instructors utilized various instructional strategies to enhance their learning. For instance, Learner I described how his instructor kept a group project on track, even though it was mostly self-paced. He stated that:

…the professor would give reminders about just keeping you all informed that your group project is due in three weeks. So, ‘You should be finalizing your written report by this time, and then going back and fact checking,’ or doing whatever. [The instructor would] give little reminders…

Learner A cited an example of how her learning experience was enhanced by a recommendation from her instructor to go outside of her “comfort zone” and complete an optional assignment.

The professor recommended that we try to interview a person who was knowledgeable in the field, and I did that and I think that was helpful and beneficial. I wouldn’t have done that if that wasn’t recommended, so that was sort of a good recommendation to get outside of my comfort zone. And it wasn’t mandatory, it was optional.

Although Learner G described the asynchronous discussion forums in his class as a place where “responsible” people were having “civil” conversations, he noted how these discussions were enhanced by the instructor’s skills as a moderator:

And the professor, [they] didn't really have to keep people on topic, but [they] kept sort of adding something to the discussion that maybe we didn't notice or hadn't seen. … [O]r if somebody had touched on something but didn't fully explore it [the instructor] would sort of say, ‘Oh, and look at this one other point,’ and expand it.

Instructor detracts from learning.

There were several participants, however, who reported instances in which their instructor’s lack of course facilitation skills detracted from the overall learning
experience. For instance, Learner E described his experience in a class in which the instructor’s participation in the discussion forums was limited to comments such as, “Good points,” “Thanks for commenting,” and “Thanks for posting.” When asked if the instructor ever tried to challenge a student’s posting or steer the conversation in a new direction, Learner E responded, “I didn’t see any of that.” He added that, “At a certain point, I just stopped engaging because [the discussion forums] were just a waste of time.”

Overall, Learner E did not think very highly of his instructor, stating “The instructor was very knowledgeable, I grant [them] that, but [they were] a horrible teacher. [They] really didn’t care too much about success for the students.” Elaborating on this statement, Learner E described what he perceived as the instructor’s lack of attention to evaluating student work:

But after I started turning in things and all I’m getting is 100’s, and they’d be like this [snaps], so you know the [professor] just wasn’t reading it. So, I think everybody picked up on that: it doesn’t matter what we do, we’re going to get a passing grade, we’re going to get an A.

Learner E followed this statement by acknowledging that “There’s no way I should [have gotten] 100 percent on these things that I’ve turned in.”

Other participants in this study described issues with how their instructors had facilitated a learning environment in which there was too much focus on the faculty and not enough on the students. For instance, Learner J discussed how the instructor in her photography class spent more time than she would have liked talking about their own work:

I feel that the instructor could have used a lot more photos, because this was a photography class. And not just [their] own pictures. It just seemed really weird…I'm positive [they’re] a very talented professor, but nobody likes somebody that only really talks about themselves. So, it would’ve been more enjoyable if [they] had used outside sources.
In another example of a faculty-centered learning environment, Learner A described her frustration with an instructor in a public policy course that spent an exorbitant amount of time talking about their own past professional experiences:

The professor of the public policy course, it was a lot more…well, I’ve had a lot of professors in my life who worked in the field for like 5 minutes and then got a Ph.D. and have worked in academia ever since. And so, [this instructor] really frequently referred to [their] experience on Capitol Hill like 30 years ago and I just was not interested in hearing about that repeatedly.

In citing an example from a previous semester, Learner A added that she thought it was “really nice” when, she had an instructor comment to the class on how they “had learned so much from all of our message postings, and that even after so much time in the field, [the instructor] learned so much from all the things that we shared.”

A final area where participants cited issues with their instructor’s course facilitation skills was in the context of the live online class meetings. These problems ranged in significance from minor inconveniences with the technology and time management, to more critical issues in regards to how faculty approached and taught their class.

As an example of some of the minor issues that participants experienced, Learner D expressed frustration with her instructor’s ability to utilize some of the features in the live online meeting tool. She stated:

Yeah. I think actually [the instructor] was having some difficulty actually utilizing some of the material [in] the live sessions. I think [they] couldn’t get [their] PowerPoints working [during the live sessions], so it was a little bit challenging for [them]. I think [they] needed some help.
In another example of an instructor who had difficulty with the online learning tool, Learner E described an incident in which the instructor’s lack of skill with the drawing tool only served to muddle a point that was trying to be made.

…so [the instructor is] using the sketch function [in the live meeting application] to talk about network and protocol exchanges, and [they’re] drawing arrows. By the time [they] stopped talking about it, the whole page of the screen was covered in this yellow marker. You couldn’t even see what was going on.

Other students described course facilitation issues during the live meetings that were more closely related to their instructor’s inability to pace the class session and manage their time. For instance, Learner A described how the live sessions in her class “dragged” and “lacked focus”:

This particular class, there were live sessions that we could log into. … And they tended to run over, they tended to already be like 90 minutes, and a lot of it just wasn’t very tight in terms of the content, or very useful, and I just didn’t like that format as much.

Although attendance at these sessions was not mandatory, she added that:

…if we didn’t participate, we were supposed to watch the whole thing. And the idea of watching a meandering 90-minute class session that I hadn’t been part of sounded worse than just sitting through it. So, that whole piece, I could have done without.

As for course facilitation issues that had an even more negative impact on student learning, Learner E described his experience in a class where the instructor “was very one-directional in [their] teaching method” and “wasn’t very interactive with us students.” He explained what the live online sessions were like:

[The instructor] was definitely in a rush during all the [live online] sessions. [They] wanted to get the information out. [They] fielded questions toward the end, but I thought…my sense was my classmates too weren’t really happy with the discussion. There was definitely not much discussion among the classmates during the class.
Learner E described his instructor’s approach during the live sessions as “stream of consciousness” and stated that although the students could “ask a question if [the instructor] covered some material too fast…[the instructor] was just reading off of the slides, so either you got it or you didn’t.”

Learner J also described the issues that her instructor had in facilitating live online class meetings. Reflecting on her class on photography, Learner J felt that early on in the semester the course began to deviate from how it was described in the syllabus, e.g., it was advertised as non-technical, but quickly became technical. She described how this trend carried over into the live meetings, noting that this was where the course really got off track.

[During t]he live meetings, there were many students that were very excited to talk about all of these topics and to pick [the instructor’s] brain, because [the instructor] was a plethora of information. Unfortunately, in doing that and indulging everyone with these conversations, it deviated from the content of the class and therefore took away from the time for the average student who didn't have the technical capability to keep up with it. And I feel that [the instructor] could have said, ‘We’re going to start a separate post for questions like this, and I will address the technical issues there, but for now, let's keep to the syllabus.’

Learner J surmised that her instructor was lacking in the “people management” and online “classroom management” skills necessary in order to rein in the class discussions when they began to veer towards the technical. She added:

I want to clarify that I find [the instructor] to be a fascinating individual, and very accomplished, and I admire [them]. So, it’s just [their] ability to teach an online course. The difficulty with an online course is to ensure that there is a lot of structure, because you're not in front of students, and so you have to be able to manage people. Your people management skills need to be, and organizational skills need to be high to be an instructor, and [the instructor] just did not possess that people management skill.
Instructor presence.

Level of instructor engagement.

Although the participants in this study were not asked directly about instructor presence, they cited a number of examples of their instructors being highly engaged and/or active participants in the learning process. For instance, as an example of a class with a high level of instructor presence, Learner G described his experience with an instructor who took the time to provide students with both private and public feedback on all of their contributions to the class discussion forums:

So, whatever our analysis was of the reading, or maybe a topic that we brought up that no one else had brought up, [the instructor] posted privately to us as part of our grade for the posting, but also [they] gave us a [public] comment of, ‘Interesting point you made,’ or ‘I hadn't seen this analysis before,’ or something like that. So, that was good feedback and it was good to hear.

Learner G added how he felt that the level of attention that he received from his instructor may have been even greater than what he would have received in a face-to-face class setting.

I think [the instructor] made sure that we all, at least I felt like I was getting contact from [them] in [their] role as professor and that [they were] paying attention to what I was doing. And it was good, probably maybe even more than it would've been in an in-person class. I mean, sometimes you can get, if you’ve got a big class, you can sort of get lost in there.

Learner C, on the other hand, felt that her instructor’s participation in the class discussion forum was “sparse” and that there “could have [been] more interaction” with the students “especially because [the course was] asynchronous.” She compared this to another online course that she had recently taken in which the instructor was highly engaged with the class.

[This instructor] was a fantastic professor in that [they were] really engaging…[they were] on the discussion boards all the time responding to people.
So, that was really…it helped to further the connection not only if you had problems with something, but that you didn’t have to just assume that [the instructor] was reading all these posts, because [they were] actually responding to them, or asking someone to clarify a statement, or just furthering the…trying to make it less like an online class and more like an in-person meeting.

Other students, however, described their experiences in courses in which they felt that they had much less contact with their instructor than they would have liked. For example, Learner E described his experience in a class that was offered on a compressed schedule:

It was a compressed course, eight weeks, which was okay with the work load [the instructor] gave us for the course. But I thought there was very little contact time for an eight-week course because it was one hour a week. That’s all we got with the [instructor]. I thought at least it would be…and sometimes [the instructor] had to stretch it to an hour, sometimes it was just 45 minutes, 50 minutes.

What little contact Learner E did have with the instructor occurred during the weekly live online meetings. Although the instructor was present for these sessions, Learner E noted that “[t]here was really no engagement” and very little “interaction during the class.” Citing an example of what these sessions were like, Learner E stated, “[W]e’d ask [the instructor] questions, ‘Tell us about this project.’ [The instructor] said, ‘Oh, it’s easy, just read it. Read the book, study the lectures, you can do the project.’ That was about all we had.” In addition to this lack of engagement during the live meetings, Learner E stated that he also had concerns about “getting a response from the teacher,” noting that it didn’t seem that the students in his class had “much influence over the instructor.”

Learner H also felt the need for a greater instructor presence in an asynchronous online class that she was enrolled in. Citing her preference for synchronous online courses, Learner H felt that the lack of a live lecture made her asynchronous class “less
engaging.” She stated, “I get nothing out of it. There’s no motivation. I need that teacher to lecture on what we’ve been reading all week.” She added that while she does “learn a lot from [her] classmates” during the live meetings, it is the instructor’s presence that she feels is “very important, more important than the classmate part.”

Learner H also brought up how she believed that if synchronous meetings are not an option that a pre-recorded lecture can help to build instructor presence in an asynchronous class. She noted that this approach had worked out well in a previous online class that she had taken where instead of holding a live meeting, the instructor “upload[ed] a recorded lecture that you [could] listen to on your own time.” Learner H noted that even though pre-recorded lectures are missing the live element, the benefit is that students are still able to hear the instructor’s voice. She stated that this would have helped in her asynchronous class where the text-based communication from her instructor came off as “kinda cold.” She went on to explain that “I think if we could have heard [the instructor’s] voice, there might have been a little bit of more warmth and caring, if that makes any sense.”

Responsiveness to students.

Participants also commented on a number of other factors related to instructor presence, including how responsive their instructors were to their needs, how receptive they were to their concerns, and how much they cared about student success. For example, participants in this study found their instructors to be fairly responsive to a variety of issues that occurred during their classes. Learner G recalled his instructor’s quick response to a specific issue with the course site and then went on to note how this level of attention was typical whenever a problem arose:
There was one glitch when a video that [the instructor] had assigned us to watch, the access to it for students had expired. So, what [the instructor] thought was a working link didn't go anywhere. And so, we gave [the instructor] feedback and [they were] able to get that repaired…

[The instructor] was available by e-mail when we had some of those glitches. [They] responded pretty quickly to e-mail. I know some of us sent [the instructor] messages and [they] maybe would post something to the whole class, ‘There's a problem with this link, I'm going to fix it,’ or ‘I have fixed it,’ or something like that.

As for Learner F, although he had an instructor who wasn’t very responsive to email, he found that when reached over the phone, the instructor turned out to be attentive and quite “helpful.”

So, [the instructor] did make [themselves] available via email and cellphone. [They were] not really great about timely response to the email, but…if you called [them], [they] would pick up the phone and talk, and it was actually the best way to get in touch with [the instructor], which was interesting. So, that was helpful.

I think it would have been discouraging if [the instructor] wasn’t answering [their] phone calls, like if [their] phone call response, timeliness, was as bad as [their] email [response], then I think that would have been pretty discouraging. I think I would have still done the work and just kind of gone through it, but I think it would have been more disconcerting…there would have been a lot more uncertainty about whether I was doing things the right way.

Learner F summarized: “[The instructor] just seemed really busy. That said, I think [they] showed the relatively appropriate amount of attention and responsiveness to the students, and I think that helped.”

Other participants, however, described how their instructor was not as responsive to their needs as they would have liked. For instance, Learner B related an example in which he felt that his instructor didn’t make an effort to intervene when Learner B’s performance began to slip in the class. He described how some type of intervention from the instructor may have helped:
But yeah, I think that a short email or something that [the instructor has] noticed your change in performance or whatever, them just checking up on you. It really does help. Little things really do affect us, at least for me. So, I’m not saying it would have changed the whole situation because you can’t say that. You can’t be that exaggerated, but yeah, maybe. You never know, right?

As an example of a participant who felt that their instructor was not being receptive to their concerns, Learner J described her experience in a photography class. Although the course had been presented in the syllabus as a non-technical study of “photography as art,” Learner J described how the course quickly changed course and went in a more technical direction than she was prepared to keep up with. Realizing that the class was not working out for her, Learner J recalled how she reached out to the instructor to express her concerns:

And I did express several times that I was extremely frustrated, in the most respectful way possible, that this class seemed to really veer to the technical and I did not have this kind of technical background. And so, [the professor] was like, ‘Oh, it’s not technical.’ So, [they were] just in this complete state of denial regarding this course.

As a result of the instructor’s lack of receptiveness to Learner J’s concerns, the course continued on in a technical direction, and Learner J ended up dropping the course. When she was asked what the instructor could have done differently, Learner J responded:

[The professor] could have really addressed my concerns. And [they] could have taken my concerns and asked, ‘What do you think I can do better?’ [They] could have asked for help. [They] could have asked for advice and for help, and I think that’s hard for professors to do from students sometimes.

Reflecting on this experience, Learner J added that had her instructor “listened, and been a little more humble, and wanted to hear what we, and especially myself had to say...then I could have continued in the course.”
Caring about student success.

A final element of instructor presence that a number of participants brought up during their interview was that of the instructor caring about their students’ success. For example, when asked if her instructor did anything to give her the impression that they cared about whether or not she did well in the course, Learner C stated:

Yeah, the commentary that [the instructor] gave to go along with the grade for the discussion board post, and then the papers, [the instructor] commented on how well they thought that I analyzed the material or had done a good job. [The instructor] gave a lot of really positive feedback, like, ‘Oh, you demonstrated a good understanding of this material,’ and gave a lot of positive validation in that way. So yeah, [the instructor] did demonstrate that [they] did care about how I was learning and that I was absorbing the material.

In another example in which a student felt a high level of caring from their instructor, Learner J related an experience in which she was contemplating dropping out of a course, but decided instead to stick with it because of how much the instructor cared. She stated:

…this past summer, I was in a class that I almost also dropped. I couldn't believe that two semesters in a row…but I stuck with this professor, and the reason that I did is because [they were] so caring. Even though [this instructor] came off like [they weren’t caring], if you just called and spoke to [them] one-on-one, it made all the difference in the world.

[This instructor] really opened up the line of communication and that helped. And I think [they are] one of those professors that really could use a lot of training on classroom management, utilizing the technology…[they’re] new to this. But [they were] apologetic and [they] did listen and have a humbleness about it, and so I did stick with their class and enjoyed it.

Reflecting on the relationship between online students and their instructors, Learner J added that she believes that online higher education has evolved to the point where there is a “different dynamic now” and that instructors “need to learn to listen to
their students because we, I think have adapted to this technology (online learning) before they have in a sense.”

**Online Learning Related**

**Academic rigor.**

*Workload is high, can be overwhelming.*

The participants in this study were nearly unanimous in having described their online classes as academically rigorous and requiring a great deal of work. Several participants also specifically recalled the amount of time that was spent on both writing and research. For instance, Learner H noted how her instructor had “demanded a lot of writing within [the discussion] forums,” Learner B described his class as having “a lot of papers,” and Learner D commented that there was a “heavy emphasis on research” in her class on project management.

Although these requirements resulted in a high workload for a number of the participants in this study, most acknowledged that the amount of coursework that they had been assigned was appropriate. When asked about it, Learner I stated:

Yeah, I don’t think the content was overwhelming at all. It was a lot to do, and certainly I did have those moments where it was like, ‘God, this is annoying. I’ve got a discussion prompt this week, I’ve got to wrap up this project plan, I’ve got this other thing going on in my personal life, and I’ve got this other thing going on in my job.’ So, ‘Gosh, this is annoying,’ but you make it through.

Even with a course that had run on a condensed schedule, Learner G described how although the timing made things more difficult, the workload was still manageable.

I think it was a ten-week course. ... And I felt it was a little bit of a rush, because we were covering probably what was about the same amount of material as in a 14-week class, but in 10 weeks. ... Other than that, I felt like it was a reasonable amount of work and that the weekly deadlines were perfectly reasonable and there was no reason not to be able to meet those.
There were a few participants, however, who described feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work that they had been assigned in their courses. For instance, Learner D recalled how in addition to the weekly coursework, her class was required to complete five papers which she described as “pretty time consuming” and involving a significant amount of “outside research.” She also noted how the timing of the first paper caused her to wonder if she was going to be able to keep up with the class.

This course, I was pretty amazed [with] the level of rigor, because we had a research [paper] the first week. … I did put that in the [course evaluation] that I don’t think you should do that the first week of a class. … It feels like we went from zero to fifth gear.

Learner D added:

When I had to do that first [paper] there on the first week…I thought, ‘Oh my God, am I gonna make it through this?’ You know? I did question if I was gonna be able to make it through.

In addition to the papers, there was also a heavy research requirement for the final exam, which Learner D described as “five essay questions” that “you had to do research” to complete. She recalled thinking to herself at the time, “Wow, this is gonna be a lot.”

Although Learner D was able to manage the workload and finish the course, she did note that one of her peers ended up having to drop the class “because [they] just [were] overwhelmed by the amount of work.” Reflecting on this, Learner D stated, “So, it was a really rigorous class, and I think that some people weren’t prepared for the workload.”

Another participant who reported being overwhelmed by the amount of work in their class was Learner B, who described the trouble that he had in keeping up with the writing assignments in a class on leadership. Learner B explained: “So, [the class] was a heavy task for me because I’m a slow writer, and for me it takes more effort.” Learner B
also reflected on how the type of writing that was required for this class was different than the writing he was used to doing for his job in the financial sector. He explained:

And I think this is just something that I’m learning too, because I’m an auditor, so I do write, but it’s just…I’m not a writer. And [this class] was a lot of papers. So, I can write well, but it takes time.

As a result of these factors, Learner B “took a lot longer than [he] should have” on several of the writing assignments early on in the semester and soon fell behind. As the work continued to accumulate, Learner B reached a point where he felt that he was not going to be able to catch up, and so he decided to drop the course. Learner B suggested that perhaps he could have been more successful in this course had the instructor not emphasized writing so much and instead included a greater variety of assignment types, such as “multiple-choice” tests and quizzes.

Benefits of rigorous coursework.

Most participants recognized, however, that although the writing and research requirements for their classes were demanding, these activities were highly beneficial elements of the learning process. For instance, Learner I commented on how he benefitted from the writing requirements in his course on human resources management:

[J]ust working my way through [the course] and doing those different kinds of exercises and writing about [the course topic] boosted my learning in the area.

And what I found particularly helpful…I actually engaged with the learning process through my writing. So, I used my writing and reading to kind of create a synthesis of those two things. And as I’m writing, I’m putting my own thoughts together and formulating a perspective on the material. So, I found that useful.

In addition, Learner D found that the research requirements in her course served to enhance her learning:
And so, I like to do research, I like to learn about new things. So, I think the fact that [the instructor] did require research is in a way kind of empowering, instead of just regurgitating what was in the book. You could do research and kind of feel like you’re expanding your knowledge, and you learned more.

This positive effect that writing and research had on student learning also appears in some cases to have been reciprocal. For instance, a few participants observed that their writing and research skills had benefitted as a result of their coursework. Learner C described how her class in art history helped to refresh many of the academic skills that she hadn’t used since high school.

Well, as a student [in a Liberal Arts degree completion program], I’m still coming back to the traditional ways of writing, and assignments, and using MLA format, and Chicago format, and all those research skills that I kind of forgot when I was out of school. So that really helped to hone those skills that I had learned in high school ten years ago. But while working, I wasn’t using any of that, [for example] doing the annotated bibliography or relearning how to check citations.

Learner C also noted specifically, how the class “assignments really helped [her] writing skills,” stating:

Most of [the instructor’s] criticisms about my writing wasn’t about the content, it was about grammar. Which kind of threw me, because I would’ve never thought that would’ve been my shortcoming. So, that helped me to figure out where I need to focus this semester.

Learner G was another participant who felt that his writing and research skills benefitted from his coursework:

It’s always good to get more feedback about writing, to improve that. I think it's a [4500 level] class, so it's probably the most advanced class that I've taken. So, it was good to get sort of a push to be more rigorous in my writing and research. Yeah, so I guess the writing skills, I mean writing an analysis of what you're looking at and what you are seeing…it's all [useful].

Despite the level of academic rigor cited by nearly all of the participants in this study, Learner J commented on how it seemed to her that online education has not always
been perceived this way by those within academia. Learner J, however, offered a counter
to this sentiment by summarizing what her experience has been like as an online learner:

And I feel that a lot of the academic community has really kind of frowned upon
online courses as if they are not difficult. But I can tell you that the most difficult
courses I've ever had have been in an online form, in which I have learned the
most because I'm writing critically almost every single week…and being graded
on it. There’s no BSing your way through these classes at [this university].

**Flexibility.**

*Importance of flexibility for adult learners.*

The flexibility of the online environment is something that was touched on by a
number of the participants in this study and cited as a key advantage of this format.
Several participants described how the flexibility of learning online allowed them to
maintain a reasonable balance between their academic, professional, and personal lives.

For instance, Learner G described how the online nature of his course in art history
“worked out perfectly” and allowed him to keep his summer travel plans with his family.

So, part of the reason that I wanted to take an online course this summer was
because there was a lot of traveling that we had already planned, and so I wanted
to be able to work from anywhere. And so, we were out west in Utah and Seattle
one particular week and I was able to still do my coursework, complete whatever
tasks that I needed to do, do readings on the airplane and things like that. And it
was great for the flexibility of that.

Learner E also appreciated the flexibility of learning online, citing the extra time
that it gave him with his family:

Yeah, I definitely liked sitting at home on my couch and absorbing the
information, which gave me more time with my family. I could have dinner with
my family and then just go upstairs and take the course. That was wonderful.
Role of delivery mode.

Several participants also referenced the flexibility of the online learning environment as it related to a specific mode of course delivery. In general, asynchronous courses were described as providing students with a fairly high level of “freedom” as students were not required “to show up to a certain class at a certain time.” Learner G elaborated on the flexible nature of his asynchronous course:

I didn't have to be there at a particular time. There was a deadline for the weekly posts and the responses, but you could respond right away or you could wait to the very last minute. Any time during that week you could do the response and the post.

Learner I also noted his appreciation for the flexibility of the asynchronous learning environment; however, he did find the flexibility of his asynchronous class to have certain limitations.

Yeah, I like that [the class was asynchronous]. There’s flexibility built into that and the professor kind of moderates that by setting those deadlines and those due dates for things so that you do have the liberty to work at your leisure. But it’s only over the course of two or three days, because it’s due on Wednesday.

Speaking as if he was the instructor, Learner I continued (somewhat sarcastically), “So, I’m gonna release it on Monday morning so you have the wonderful flexibility between now and Wednesday to choose when you’re going to work on it.”

Learner I concluded his thoughts by stating:

So yes, that’s flexibility, but there are constraints there. There are restrictions. [For instance,] if it was an especially slamming week and I really couldn’t get to it until Friday, that wasn’t an option because you were penalized if you didn’t meet [the deadline] by Wednesday.

Although most participants seemed to value the flexibility afforded by learning asynchronously, there was one student for whom this was not the case. While stating that she initially thought that the flexible nature of her asynchronous course “would be a good
thing,” Learner H quickly changed her mind after experiencing what it was like to learn in a synchronous class. She explained how her perceptions changed:

So, in the beginning, I liked the idea of taking a class that I didn’t have to show up for, because I was taking three classes this past Spring. So, I liked the idea of having one more night free. And I was thinking of what it was like back at [the community college] when all my classes were [asynchronous], and I was like, ‘Oh, this will be great. It’s just a bunch of reading, and I’ll have to do my writing, and it’ll be fine.’ So that is the mindset I had going into it. That changed within two weeks. I was like, ‘No, I don’t like this anymore.’

When asked what had changed to make her feel this way, Learner H explained that while she was enrolled in her asynchronous class in American foreign policy, she was also concurrently enrolled in two synchronous online courses. Although these were the first synchronous courses that she had ever taken, she “quickly realized” that this was her preferred method of learning, specifically citing her preference for a live instructor “to lecture on what [she had] been reading all week.” Learner H added, “Even though it’s more restrictive because you have to show up to class… I get more out of it.” As a result of this realization, Learner H ended up dropping her asynchronous class, despite knowing that this decision would “put [her] behind from graduating on time.”

Learner H went on to reflect that although there is less flexibility in a synchronous learning environment, that the trade-off is “still worth it.” She explained:

You know, prior to coming to [this university], I would never have thought that I would have enjoyed an environment like that (asynchronous). To me, I would have been like, ‘[Sighs] That’s just one more thing that I have to worry about every week, showing up to class.’ But coming here, it’s been a different…I love that. I love showing up to class in the [synchronous] online class.

Although synchronous online classes were generally perceived by participants as being less flexible than their asynchronous counterparts, there were a few students who reported instances in which their synchronous courses did afford them some flexibility.
For instance, Learner D appreciated having the flexibility of being able to dial in to her synchronous online class when she was not able to be at her home computer. She recalled:

One I had to just call in on the phone because I was offsite, I wasn’t at home, which was great to be able to do that. It’s really nice to have the flexibility to call in, I’d never done that before. And just the professor being receptive to that, if you’re calling in [during] the live session.

Other participants reported that their synchronous classes were made more flexible by their instructor’s policy of not requiring attendance. For instance, Learner F stated that “There was a lot of flexibility given to us whether we needed to attend the live classes.” He added, “It wasn’t that important to [the instructor] whether we were actually there during the live class or not, as long as we understood that we were supposed to actually watch the lecture at some point.”

Learner A explained how she was also given this same flexibility in her synchronous class, but still felt like it was important to attend.

And you know, [the live sessions] weren’t mandatory, but I sort of felt like this professor has never met me. [The instructor] only knows my name by my assignments I submit, so if I show up to these [live meetings] and contribute, it is probably beneficial. It will probably help in grading. So, even though they weren’t mandatory, I sorta felt like I should be there.

*Flexibility built in to the schedule.*

Going beyond the delivery mode, several participants brought up various elements of their online classes that they felt had an impact on the overall level of flexibility. For instance, although most of the courses adhered to a weekly schedule, it appears that students had a great deal of flexibility within each week as to when they
were required to complete their work. Learners C and F explained how this worked with their class discussion forums:

For discussion board posts, they were due within five days of when the documents were available, and then you had five days to read it [and] make a post. So, there’s quite a bit of leeway there. (Learner C)

So, you had to reply at least once to each of the forum topics. Those were set out at the beginning. You could kind of see every week what the topics were going to be. So, I think they were due before the next class, so you had basically one week to post one of your responses to each of the topics on the forum. So, you could choose when [to post your responses] over the course of that one week. (Learner F)

Other participants reported that this same level of flexibility carried over into other types of assignments. For example, Learner I mentioned a group project that “was self-paced as long as you met the deadline of to turn in your project plan” while Learner E commented that his instructor “was really flexible” about when students were required to turn in their weekly article reviews. He noted that if you “missed [a review] one week” you would have the flexibility to make it up.

In addition to the article reviews, Learner E recalled how his instructor’s flexibility with due dates extended to most of the other assignments from his class. He stated:

[T]he instructor gave us the option to…[they] didn’t care when the work needed to be submitted. [The instructor would] like to see it weekly or by the published due dates, but we were given the option of a choice to submit everything by a certain cut-off date, that [the instructor] wasn’t going to accept anything after that date.

Other participants reported having the flexibility to work ahead in their online classes. For instance, in describing his course on cybersecurity Learner F stated that although “there were due dates that were set out at the beginning of the course through the syllabus…there were no restrictions on when you could start things; you could start
things as early as you wanted.” He went on to describe how “all the resources were laid out; there was one textbook and then all the slides for the entire course were provided at the beginning.”

In the case of Learner G, he explained that although he had the flexibility to work ahead in his class, he did not take advantage of this feature.

Most of the readings were posted at the beginning of the class, so you could actually read ahead if you wanted to. I sort of kept with the weekly format just because I didn't have time to read ahead, but I could have, it was totally possible. And yeah, the final paper I probably should have done some more work ahead of time. It was a little bit of a crunch at the end, but it would have been totally possible for me to work on that sooner.

This flexibility to work ahead, however, was not afforded to all of the participants in this study. For instance, Learner C described how the materials in her class on art history were released according to a weekly schedule. Given the complexity of the material, this made things more difficult for her. Learner C explained:

That was one thing I did not like, because I like to read ahead. Some of these pieces were kind of long or really kind of confusing, so sometimes it takes a little bit longer to digest the material, especially older language from the Renaissance can be kind of confusing. So, [the instructor] had opened all the material up like for I think two days at the beginning of the semester, and then all of a sudden it…if it was a setting in [the LMS] or something, it just stopped.

So, that was limiting, it would've been helpful to be able to have access to those beforehand.

Learner C added that this restricted access to course materials also conflicted with her preferred learning style and ended up costing her time.

Well, the material would have been nice to access like maybe two weeks in advance, or something. Just because the way I learn, I learn better with paper copies, so I have to print everything out. And sometimes, if there’s printer problems or my computer is slow or something, if the material’s posted on Monday, I’m already wasting time during the week printing those things out when I could have just done that ahead of time.
Other participants in this study also reported a similarly inflexible online learning experience. Learner H described having “no flexibility as far as when things were due” in her class on American foreign policy, while Learner D stated that there was no flexibility in regards to whether or not she “wanted to participate in the live sessions and…how much [she] wanted to participate online,” noting that she “had to fulfill all the requirements.” As for the class discussion forum, Learner D stated: “You had to follow the schedule…you had to make sure you had your post in. Everything had to be due Saturday by 6:00 p.m., that was the cut off. So, there was no flexibility.”

For some participants, however, a lack of flexibility was not necessarily seen as being disadvantageous. For example, although both Learners I and J also were not afforded a great amount of flexibility in their courses, both reflected that they were satisfied with this arrangement.

I don’t think I did have much of an opportunity to work ahead. Two things that come to mind with that. Well, the first thing was the discussion prompts were just kind of issued on a weekly basis. They weren’t all released [at the beginning of the semester], and maybe I would have benefited from that a little bit, but there are pros and cons to everything. So, it’s tough for me to say whether or not that would have benefited me astronomically. The reality is I just kind of went with it. ‘Oh, weekly discussion prompt. This is my work for this week in this area so I’m going to do it and then the next week will be released another one.’ (Learner I)

There was nothing that was flexible about this course. There were due dates for the discussion boards. There were due dates for reading materials. There were due dates for responses and homework assignments, which that is an aspect that I liked. I like to know what's expected of me and I don't want to insinuate that this is a bad thing. (Learner J)

**Student perceptions.**

Over the course of conducting the interviews for this study, it became apparent that there were a number of commonly held perceptions amongst participants in regards...
to the online learning experience. These perceptions held true across the sample, even though the participants varied greatly in terms of their online experience (from those who were taking their first online course, to those who had completed 10 or more).

*Learning online can be boring.*

One common perception to emerge from the participant interviews was that of the online learning experience being “boring,” “repetitive,” and “monotonous.” While these reactions were not altogether unexpected, it was somewhat surprising to hear how many of the participants accepted these attributes as a natural part of learning online, with some even citing the benefits of a boring online learning experience and making justifications for why it had to be this way. For instance, Learner I described how he felt about participating in a weekly discussion forum:

I mean, it’s monotonous. Yeah, it’s monotonous. But you know, I won’t say it’s devoid of value, because it certainly has value. And again, that’s as I understand it. And as I understand the taking of [a] class in the online format, that’s just what happens. You have to do these things. You have to demonstrate your knowledge, and put together your responses, and write about this stuff.

Speaking generally about discussion forums, although Learner J found them to be uninteresting, she provided a rationale for their continued use:

I think that the instructors do their best to ensure that people are keeping up with the reading by proposing a [question] with the discussion board post, where you have to pull content in from the reading to ensure that you are doing the work. That is to be expected. And even though it might not be the most interesting, I understand that that’s a way of them keeping track of who’s doing the work.

As for Learner A, although she noted that her class “was boring in that it was repetitive [and] predictable” she stated that this was actually something that she liked and found “reassuring”. She went on to state that before participating in the interview for this
study, she had always “kind of [taken] for granted” that learning online “is the way it is” and never paused to consider that it could be a richer experience. She added:

…I felt like that’s what I was signing on for and I was okay with that. And it’s interesting to think about, ‘Well actually, there would have been a few tweaks that could have made it more interesting and more enjoyable and made me feel more of a sense of control.

*Instructor perceived as being too busy.*

Another perception of the online learning experience that was shared by a number of the participants in this study was that of their instructors being too busy to attend to routine course matters, such as communication, grades, and keeping their class site updated. Some participants attributed their instructor’s busy schedule to geography (“I don’t think [the instructor] was from around here, so I know [their] time was limited”), while others speculated that their instructor’s attention may have been diverted by their additional teaching commitments.

Instead of being bothered by this, participants seemed to accept it as just another part of the online learning experience, just as they had when discussing how they felt about their courses that were boring. For instance, although Learner F commented that his instructor had “seemed really busy” and “was not really great about timely response to…email,” he noted his acceptance of this conduct by stating that he believed that his instructor had “show[n] the relatively appropriate amount of attention and responsiveness to the students.”

As for Learner I, he described his experience in a class in which he felt that the instructor was too busy to provide any kind of meaningful feedback on his assignments. Although he did receive grades and comments from the instructor on his work, Learner I
felt that this feedback was “very generic” and added that it was “obvious” to him “that a lot of the individualized comments [that he received] were really copy and paste jobs.” Learner I believed that the lack of substantial feedback from his instructor was likely a result of their busy teaching schedule, stating that his instructor was “probably an instructor for multiple online courses and possibly multiple different universities.”

*Student-instructor relationship.*

A third perception of the online learning experience that was brought up by several participants was that learning online made it more difficult to develop a meaningful relationship with their instructors. Rather than being disappointed by this, participants indicated that along with boring courses and busy instructors, this was just another expected part of being an online student. This sentiment was exemplified by Learner F, who justified the lack of a relationship with his instructor by noting that this was the type of thing that he had “lower expectations” for:

I feel like maybe because it’s online…the relational part of it is less important. There’s lower expectations I’d have than if I were in a physical class with people, with the professor there. I feel like the relationship and the personal caring would be more important [in the face-to-face class]. So, I feel like because I have lower expectations, that maybe impacts the fact that it’s not as important [to me].

Learner G also explained that as an online learner, developing a relationship with his instructor was not something that he had any type of expectations for.

And because it's an asynchronous class and the professor isn't even in [this state], I almost had no expectation that there would be any personal interaction. … [I]t's just like, we’re online and we may not really get to know each other, and so that's okay. We’re focused on the work…

Participants also went on to cite a variety of reasons for why they felt that student-instructor relationships were more difficult to develop in the online environment. For
instance, noting the differences between the face-to-face and online environments,

Learner F speculated that class size could be to blame:

I would almost expect in-person, if you’re going to a class and spending a semester with a professor, provided that there are few enough students, it probably makes some sense for the professor to actually get to know you a little bit. I mean…that would probably help the student feel cared about more.

And I think the current instructor for the class I’m taking right now is doing more of that. But then, of course, you’re like, ‘There are a ton of online students,’ and so you have to limit your expectations of how much time the instructor can actually spend with each student.

Other participants felt that the “limited” communication options available in their course sites made it more difficult to develop a relationship with their instructor. For instance, Learner H described her asynchronous course as “not really an environment that would allow for something like that,” adding that the text-based communications that she received from her instructor lacked “tone” and came across as “kinda cold” and “rigid.” She went on to say that “I think if we could have heard [the instructor’s] voice, there might have been a little bit of more warmth and caring.”

Although most of the participants in this sample seemed to have had no expectations for any kind of relationship with their instructor, this was something that Learner A felt should have been “even more important online.” She went on to state: “I mean, online, you never meet [the instructor]. So, it’s sorta like I’m sending in money and I’m getting back grades. But you know, what’s the relationship and what’s the interaction?”

*Learning online is less engaging than learning face-to-face.*

Overall, a consistent element running throughout these student perceptions was the idea that the online learning experience was perceived to be somewhat less engaging.
and interactive than the experience of learning in the traditional face-to-face classroom.

This was articulated in greater detail by several participants who made direct comparisons between the online and face-to-face learning environments. For instance, although he enjoyed his online course, Learner G felt that it would have been even better in terms of discussion quality and interaction had it been held in person.

If we hadn't had those travel plans, I’m beginning to learn that I prefer in person classes because of the interaction that happens amongst the students and the professor in the room. You can sort of do some of that online. You can do some of it asynchronously. You can do more of it in some ways synchronously when you’re meeting together with people online. But there’s still something missing. The immediacy is not quite there. So, [the class] was great, and I learned a lot, but I think there would’ve been another 20 percent of satisfaction added on to it if it had been an in-person class, because I think the discussion would have been much more lively.

I think this is the difference between being in class, in person, as opposed to being online, because…people disagreed with each other, and people had opposing points of view or counter arguments for different things, but I think if we had been in person it would have been richer, somehow. But it was good. For an online class I felt like it worked well.

Learner E also described feeling that his experience as an online student was not quite as “rich” as an in-person class would have been. Despite not getting as much out of the class as he originally thought he would have, Learner E felt that the experience left him better prepared to advise and help to set expectations for other students who may be interested in studying online. He stated:

[N]ow I have quite a bit of empathy for the online student experience, which I didn’t have before. … I wish it was a more positive experience because it makes it more difficult for me to promote that. But at least now I can manage expectations better and go ‘Oh, wow, online learning is better than classroom learning.’ I can’t make that claim. It’s different. Now I can really gauge expectations going, ‘Well, there are a lot more independent things you have to do here. Obviously, the conversations aren’t quite as rich as you would have [in-person]…well, [they don’t] have the potential of being quite as rich.’
In a final example from a participant who felt that their learning experience would have been improved had it been offered in a traditional face-to-face format, Learner I described a group project from a class on human resources management. Even though Learner I felt that his partner was “a strong writer and a strong researcher” and that they “worked well together,” he believed that his experience was hindered by the limitations of the online learning environment. He explained:

> Because [with] online learning, you’re kind of just only interacting via messages, you’re only interacting via text prompts. I had a couple of phone conversations [with my partner], but to me that’s not enough to establish a real, legitimate linkage there with a partner that can pull you more into the Human Resources field. It would need to be like a face-to-face experience I think for [it] to go to that level.

**Student Related**

**Peer influence on learning.**

*Benefit of learning from peers.*

The ability to interact with and learn from their peers was cited by nearly all of the participants in this study as invaluable components of the online learning experience. For the most part, participants reported learning a great deal from their peers and specifically mentioned the benefits of being exposed to “opposing viewpoints” and “different perspectives.” For Learner J, the opportunity to learn alongside a group of peers that did not share her background in business was part of the allure of taking a class in photography. She explained:

> I was excited because we had a lot of artists [in our class], which I’m not exposed to often. So, I felt like having access to people like that would be a challenge, but also interesting.
As for Learner H, she described how the differences amongst her peers made a course on American foreign policy more interesting and enhanced her learning of the subject matter.

Everybody has a different background and a different opinion about American foreign policy. So yeah, I always learn a lot from my peers, because we all have different backgrounds. And so, you learn a different perspective whether you agree with it or not, but it’s still knowledge.

For the majority of the participants, their interactions with peers took place in the asynchronous discussion forums that were built into their course sites. Learner F explained how this worked in his class on cybersecurity:

So, you would [use the discussion forums to] post responses to topics, and there was also an area that you could post your article review for others to take a look at and educate themselves on. I think that was optional…but if you thought it was something interesting that you wanted to share with the rest of the class, that you thought it would benefit them to learn about, then you could do that.

Learner F particularly liked the aspect of the class where students used the discussion forums to share their weekly journal article reviews. He noted that he enjoyed being able to “look and see what everybody else was working on, or what they found interesting.” He added, “So, you learn a lot from that. I think that was a good thing.”

Learner F also enjoyed using the discussion forums to learn more about what his peers from “different backgrounds and line[s] of work” were getting out of the class. He explained:

I think hearing why [my peers] were taking the course and what their thoughts were, and kinda how they were taking the material in and what they were making of that, I thought that was interesting. Yeah, it’s always interesting to hear what other students are getting out of it and what their responses are, what they’re thinking of, what they find interesting.

In a course on project management, Learner D commented how she was able to learn a great deal from her peers who were already working in the field:
[The peer comments were] very useful because a lot of students in my class were project managers, so they were talking from their experience. And since I’m not currently a project manager, but I’ve done project management, it was helpful to hear what they had to say. And I always loved reading their posts and listening to the discussions online and just engaging with fellow colleagues.

Learner D added that “being able to read other peoples’ perspectives” on the topic in the class discussion forum was much better than just having to read “the dry textbook,” which she described as being “like a manual.”

Other participants commented on how they benefitted from the feedback that they received from their peers in the online discussion forums. For instance, Learner A commented that she “did get positive feedback on the message board from peers and in some cases, it would be fairly well thought out and…valid,” while Learner F felt that the “responses” and “encouragement…from the other students in the class” played “a big part” in his feeling successful throughout the course.

When asked if felt that the feedback that he had received from his peers in the class discussion forums had helped to make him feel successful in his course, Learner G answered:

Well, yeah it’s always good to hear if somebody appreciates something that you’ve said, and…so, I think [that] happened pretty much all around the class. So everybody was very positive and supportive of each other, but it wasn't just ‘Great post’ or [something] superficial. There were actual conversations back and forth, some of them quite long. So that was good.

Although Learner G initially found the class discussion forums to be beneficial, he recalled feeling that this tool was not being used to its full potential. Based on this hunch, Learner G proposed an idea to his instructor for setting up a student-controlled forum where peers could interact and exchange ideas that were related to the course, but
not necessarily to that week’s topic. Learner G described the impetus for this idea and explained how it was received:

[I]n the [LMS], there were forums that were pertaining to different topics in the course…but there was no place for us to begin a discussion. Like, if we wanted to talk with our classmates about something, there was no place to…begin a conversation.

So, I asked for the professor to create a forum in which we could post. And partly that was because there were things that I had found…that I thought might be of use to other people in the class but I had no real good place to put them.

So, [the instructor] created a forum for us called Graffiti and it was a place where we could post things that we had found and then respond to them and use them. And I think that it got a good response from everybody else and most people were using it to post things that they had found. And so, I felt like that was an enhancement to the class…

Going beyond the discussion forums, Learner I described how he benefitted from working with one of his peers on a group project. Even though he had never met his classmates in person, he explained how he was able to choose a partner that he knew he would work well with:

It’s always interesting with asynchronous learning online, the whole group projects. You don’t get the benefit of face-to-face. So, I went with somebody that I had experience with from the former classes that I took who I knew had, from reading their posts and from speaking with them in a synchronous session, I knew was really good, really smart, had a good writing style, and someone I knew I’d jive well with, and so we linked up and formed a group of two.

Learner I added that although this was a group project, the instructor had given students the option to work by themselves. Although he had tried going solo on an earlier project, Learner I found the workload to be too heavy for one person. As a result, this time around he decided to work with a peer, and found that this approach helped to make the project “nice and manageable.”
Desire to see examples of peers’ work.

In addition to working and interacting with their peers, participants mentioned how it was also helpful to be able to see examples of their peers’ work. For instance, Learner A explained that she liked to be able to see how her peers were answering questions in the class discussion forum before going in and posting her own response. She described how she benefitted from this in a class on public policy and also noted how discussion forum assignments were made more difficult when this option was not available.

[W]e could go on the message board and look at what was already there and who had posted what and read the responses before we posted ours. Sometimes that was kinda helpful to me as a model of about how long are other people making it, you know, sort of what direction are they going in.

And other professors, you did not have access until you posted yours. You were really going in blind and that was just sort of interesting. It definitely made it easier in a way to be able to see what other people were doing and sort of assess what was expected.

Learner A went on to explain how she had developed an approach to the discussion forums where she would judge her work against that of her peers. She stated:

Also, it’s kind of unfortunate maybe, but I definitely tend to measure my success based on how I think other people are doing and so if I thought my posts were better or longer or sooner, I tended to feel like well I must be doing pretty well in comparison to the rest of the pack.

When asked if he felt that he would have benefitted from seeing examples of work from his peers in a class on leadership, Learner B said:

Yeah, that would [have been] a lot of help. And not in a sense of trying to cheat, but in the sense of what [the instructor] really expects from us. … Because it’s true, when you don’t know, you don’t wanna put too much effort, but you don’t wanna put too little. I’m sure the professors would love for us to put a lot of effort, but unfortunately, at least for me I don’t have the time to go out of my way and write a ten-page paper. It’s also about that balance. So, when things are
assigned and [the instructor doesn’t] provide a lot of guidance as to what their expectations are, you don’t know how to measure it.

Learner G also felt that it would have been helpful to see more of his peers’ work, especially on assignments that are typically only seen by the professor. He explained:

When we write our papers, that’s something we turn into the professor, and we don't see what each other has written. Some classes do a peer review of work. This one, we didn't have that. I don't know if there would be an easy way to do that, especially with the compressed time. And then also our final project, we only turn it in at the end, and only the professor sees what we've written.

I’ve been starting to feel like I would like to see the work that other people do, partly to compare it to my own and maybe there’s things I could learn from them, but also, I want to know if they wrote something interesting. I also want to read that. So, I want to see more of my fellow students work as we go.

Learner G concluded his thoughts by saying, “We’re [already] getting feedback from our professor, but we can also learn something from each other.”

*Peer interaction is not always valuable.*

While most of the participants in this study cited the benefits of interacting with and learning from their peers, this was not the case for everyone. For instance, while some participants felt that their online learning experience was enhanced by interacting with peers from different backgrounds, Learner B felt that this made learning more difficult. He explained:

[I]t’s hard because, I feel like the people that I worked with, you know, the other students, were in very different fields. I don’t think anybody was in accounting. Everybody else was in finance or just other random things. So, it’s harder to…it’s good and it’s bad. It’s harder to identify with somebody since you work differently. Your head is different compared to theirs.

And if I would read the…discussion boards, and [my peers] would be talking about working for a bank or whatever, I felt like that’s irrelevant. I don’t really care. So, I think the teacher thought, ‘Oh, that’s very useful.’ But it’s not. Unfortunately, it’s not relevant for me. So, I don’t really care.
In addition, although a number of the participants found interacting with their peers on the discussion forums to be a valuable learning experience, there were several others who did not. For instance, Learner I was critical of the types of peer-to-peer interactions that took place in the asynchronous online environment.

[S]o, this is a criticism I have not just with the class, but maybe the online format in general, is that I find the format doesn’t lend itself particularly well to those appropriate challenges to ideas or points. It’s really just for everyone to kind of get along and get through it. I want to say just close to 100 percent of all the responses from whatever I wrote, whatever anyone wrote, was just positive and reaffirming. Like just nothing but affirmations of ‘I agree. Good point. You mentioned something interesting here.’

I didn’t see any, ‘I actually disagree with you there and here’s why. Here’s this article to pull in.’ And that may just be because everyone’s in the same boat and [those types of critical comments can lead to] resistance…and it’s difficult to do that in an online discussion post format.

Learner C also felt that the peer-to-peer interactions in the discussion forums were not as beneficial as they could have been. Just as Learner I had observed, Learner C identified the general reluctance of her classmates to challenge each other’s points as the root cause of the problem.

[T]here were a lot of comments from my peers in the discussion board forums that they would say, ‘Oh, I’m grateful for your post. I didn’t think of that,’ or ‘Your take on this was unusual, I appreciate that.’ Which I guess is complementary, but I didn’t really feel challenged in a way. Or no one was like, ‘You make this claim, but I don’t really see the evidence for that.’ I feel like it’s all just positive comments.

Learner C noted that the tone remained positive all throughout the class discussion forum “even when [she] thought somebody’s take was kind of not very good, or kind of simplistic, or just [didn’t] contribute anything to the class.” She added, “So [the discussion forum] wasn’t really helpful in advancing your grasp of the material or interacting with others. I didn’t really feel it was worthwhile.”
Perception of synchronous classes.

Benefits of real-time interaction with instructor and peers.

Although it was not unanimous, the majority of the participants in this study preferred for their online courses to be delivered in a synchronous format. Not only did these participants cite the ability to interact in real-time with their instructor and their peers as a key factor in their learning, but they also agreed that the benefits of learning synchronously outweighed any additional flexibility that they would have gained by enrolling in an asynchronous class.

For instance, although he was enrolled in an asynchronous class at the time of the interview, Learner B described how he would have preferred for it to have been offered synchronously. Citing the advantages of interacting live with a group of peers, he stated:

Something that would have been beneficial is maybe have some [live meetings] …where people can talk about their ideas or their problems. So, I think when you’re in a group setting…people are less fearful to ask about dumb questions, or deadlines, or even ask about getting an extension or changing things. I wouldn’t have the courage to [ask about these kinds of things], especially if I’m by myself.

Even when he wasn’t the one asking the questions, Learner B added that one of the advantages of learning in a group is that oftentimes “the questions that you had in your head are answered…just by [other] people talking and hearing what they’re saying.”

Not only did Learner B find the synchronous format helpful for having his questions about the course answered, he also felt that being able to have a live discussion with his peers would have enhanced his understanding of the course material. Learner B went on to explain what he believed to be the advantages of learning from peers in a real-time, group setting.

[It sounds very nerdy, but] I feel like that’s what I really liked about college or high school, when you learn in a [live] group setting and [you can] express[.] your
own views to people. … Even side comments, things that weren’t supposed to be part of the conversation, or were because of the way that the conversation moves really helps. When you grab a thought and then everybody joins in and then you end up with something that’s really different, I feel like that happens more in [a live] setting versus a[n asynchronous] group discussion.

Concluding his thoughts on his preference for learning in a synchronous environment, Learner B specifically cited what he believed to be the advantages of speech-based, peer-to-peer, interaction.

I think that human interaction plays a large role [in learning]. I mean, a lot of things can get lost in translation when you write something. But there’s nothing like hearing their voice, their tone, their mannerism, the way that they talk. Really you can get a better picture [of what the instructor and other students are trying to say].

As for Learner C, her preference for synchronous classes stemmed from her belief that this format provides students with more opportunities to engage with their class. She explained:

So, I feel like with asynchronous, you’re really only engaging with the material and the professor once. Whereas with the live meeting classes, you’re engaging twice, or more than once. Because you’re in the [live] class, you’re reading the material, you’re doing the discussion board post, and then you can go back and watch the lecture. But with asynchronous, it’s more disjointed or kind of removed, where it’s hard to facilitate that connection.

In addition to providing more opportunities for engagement, Learner C felt that the synchronous class sessions held several other advantages over learning asynchronously. For instance, although she felt that it “was helpful to get someone else’s perspective” in the asynchronous discussion forums, Learner C stated that it was her “personal preference…to be able to talk about [the material] in a classroom setting versus reading about it.”

Another advantage of the synchronous format that was cited by Learner C was the ability to receive immediate feedback from the instructor. Learner C explained that this
was not the case in her current asynchronous class, noting “that usually there was a like three-day delay in getting a response” from the instructor. Learner C recalled how this hindered the learning process, especially when she would have a question about something from one of the instructor’s pre-recorded lectures.

If you had a question, it was difficult to write down what [the instructor was] saying, pause the lecture and formulate a good question that you’re going to ask later, write the email, and then wait a few days to get a response.

Although Learner H was another participant who had stated a strong preference for synchronous course delivery, she admitted that this was not always the case. During her interview, she recalled how she was previously enrolled in a program at another institution in which all of her online courses were delivered asynchronously. Learner H explained that at the time, the asynchronous format was her only option and she “didn’t realize there was another way” to learn online. However, once Learner H enrolled in her current program, she was exposed to her first synchronous course and “quickly realized” that this mode of delivery was a better fit for her preferred learning style.

Once she had experienced learning in a synchronous online class, Learner H decided that she was not going to be able to continue with an asynchronous course that she had previously enrolled in. When asked what it was about her asynchronous course that made her feel as if she had to drop it, Learner H replied:

It truly boiled down to the fact that I got used to [the live] lectures. I got used to that interaction and I missed it, cause I realized I wasn’t as engaged. And I didn’t feel like I was learning what I was supposed to be learning in that class because of that missing part. So that added to my lack of motivation.

I think if there would have been a lecture part of it, and I could have been more engaged with my classmates and my professor. And if I could have heard [the instructor] lecture on the questions that [they were] giving us to answer, I might have been able to stay with that course and be more involved in it because I think
I would have understood it more.

As for Learner F, although he felt that the content of his instructor’s live lectures could sometimes be “boring,” he felt that the real value of the synchronous class sessions was in the structure and “focus that [they] brought to the course.” Learner F explained how he felt that these sessions provided a measure of built-in accountability and also helped to improve his understanding of the course material:

I liked the online lectures. I think they provide a focus to the class. I think there’s something about having that time where…everybody was expected to be together. You’re not just kinda doing things on your own pace. That fosters the learning process for me.

It’s hard to forget about the class or to get distracted if you know that you’re meeting this week and you have to have some preparation for that. It’s kind of like a metronome, you know, tick, tick, tick, and kind of where you are in the [learning] process, and then what you should be doing. So, I thought that was good, I liked that.

_Difficulty staying focused during live class sessions._

Although the majority of the participants in this study stated a preference for synchronous course delivery, there were a few participants for whom this was not the case. For instance, Learner E felt that the live sessions in his cybersecurity class were not very useful and described having difficulty focusing his attention during sessions that alternated between his instructor’s “stream of consciousness” and “reading off of the slides.”

As for Learner A, although she was comfortable with the format of the synchronous class sessions and found them to be akin to the more traditional classroom-based lectures that she was used to, she also found it difficult to focus her attention during the live class sessions. She stated:
[T]he longer, less structured format was more like a classroom environment, so it was familiar to me and I could understand the benefits of it. But in regards to having a full-time job and trying to fit this in, I also just don’t pay attention as well when I’m sitting in front of my computer. So, it was not my preferred format.

Making things more challenging, Learner A added that not only were the live sessions “boring,” but “[t]hey dragged, they ran over [time], [and] they lacked focus.” Based on this experience, Learner A felt that she would have preferred it had the class been offered in an asynchronous format with pre-recorded lectures. She explained how this has worked well for her in previous courses:

One other thing actually that I will say about this, I have had courses where the lectures were pre-recorded. We could listen to them on our own time and they were brief, maybe 10 or 12 minutes. They were pre-rehearsed, pretty polished. I really appreciated that format.

**Varied needs of adult learners.**

As is typical of the adult learner population, the participants in this study spanned a wide range of ages and varied greatly in terms of their background and previous life experiences. This led to a sample in which there were marked differences amongst participants in regards to their educational background (ranging from associate’s to doctoral level), work experience (ranging from those just starting out, to those looking to change careers, to those established in their career), and experience as online students (ranging from those taking their first online class to those who have taken more than 10).

*Balance coursework with outside commitments.*

As a result of their diverse backgrounds, the participants in this study exhibited a wide range of needs while engaged in their coursework. While some of these needs were shared by all of the participants, there were other needs that were felt by only some. An
example of a need that was shared by all of the participants in this study was that of having to balance their coursework with outside commitments to their family and/or job.

Although this need was expressed in one way or another by each of the participants, it was Learners D and J who best illustrated the various demands encountered by a typical adult student.

Because work, being a full-time employee, and trying to get all this done is a lot, you know? So, I haven’t taken a class as a full-time employee since graduate school, and the time [that] I did, I went down to part-time because it really impacted the quality of my work.

[The course work] took a lot of time, and this has just been a really busy summer, just with [my job], taking a class, and we have a lot going on here at our house, putting our house on the market, and my kids are out of school, so there’s a lot going on. So, it took a lot to get through this course and to just carve out that time. (Learner D)

I love online learning environments. I am a mom and it provides me the opportunity to both work, be a mother, and be a student simultaneously. It is a necessity for me and if [this university] did not offer that I could not be a student. (Learner J)

As a result of this need to balance their online coursework with their busy lives, a number of participants found it necessary to implement strategies aimed at helping them to manage their time. For instance, Learners G and F described how creating and sticking to a schedule helped them to stay on top of their coursework.

So, realizing that the readings were substantial and I needed to stay on top of them was something I figured out fairly early on. And so, I kind of changed my scheduling of how I was managing my time, and then once I got on top of that, that was okay. (Learner G)

I felt like I was doing pretty well throughout the course…[and] that helped me continue to do what I was doing and structure my own time, and figure, ‘Okay, so this kind of schedule that I’m doing for myself of doing the readings for a couple days, and then doing posts on these days, and article review on these days, okay, that’s working for me.’ So, I think if I wasn’t being successful, I think I would have had to reevaluate, and change my work process, if that makes sense.
Other participants described their own strategies for getting the most out of the limited amount of time that they had available to devote to their coursework each week. For instance, Learner A explained how she would identify what she believed to be the key elements of the class for that week and then focus her attention only in those areas. She stated:

I think at this level, it is a reality that it’s very unlikely that you’re gonna read, word for word, every chapter that’s assigned and do every response in a thorough manner or it would just be so many hours of work. And so, trying to decide where is it okay to cut corners, where do I need to focus, how do I put the effort in in the way that will pay off the most.

As for Learner I, he explained that during a busy week he would analyze the topics in the discussion forum and choose to answer the one that would take him the least amount of time.

If it were a particular week that we were given a choice of the topics to post on for a discussion forum and you had two that would have required a lot more [work], like, ‘Oh lord, I’m going to have to dig deep and get into this and totally understand it,’ versus the one where I’m like, ‘Ah, okay, I know that because of that chapter I kind of breezed through.’ I’ll write about that one. That right there might have occurred in a week where I had a lot of things going on in other areas [of my life]. So, I just kind of grabbed onto [the easier option] and wrote [about] that.

Although most of the participants in this study were able to implement strategies that helped them to balance their course work with their outside commitments, Learner B described how his inability to do so led him to drop a course in leadership. In recalling this experience, Learner B noted that although he enjoyed the topic and felt successful during the first few weeks of the course, he soon began to fall behind in his work. When asked what he felt had contributed to him falling behind, Learner B explained:
I think time. Time was a big factor. And I think…it’s a balance. When you get so excited about something you learn and you wanna just keep reading it…and keep thinking about it, there comes a time where you need to stop and move on.

Learner B described how this initial excitement about the topic led to him spending a greater amount of time on his coursework than he had originally planned.

I think more than anything…I didn’t know how to measure my time. And I think that because of the fact that I put so much time in these [first] couple weeks, I just thought in my head, ‘Man, I’m not gonna have the time to do it next week.’

Realizing that this approach to his coursework was not going to be sustainable, Learner B decided to drop the class. He explained:

I felt like I couldn’t handle it. I felt like it was something that was overwhelming… And at that moment, I was working a lot of hours. … So that time management, that balance between my life, work, and studying, it just kinda fell through. … So, I just felt like, ‘No way, I gotta prioritize.’ And unfortunately, it had to be that decision…to drop the class.

As a result of this experience, Learner B believed that he had learned some valuable lessons about managing time as an adult learner. He explained:

[N]ow I know how to do it, because I have never taken a class at work before. You know, when you’re in college, it’s different. Once you’re working, it’s harder. So, you have to learn how to do it.

[I]t’s way different working than studying…that’s two [separate] things. So, there is that second side, which includes when to do it, how to create a space in your personal life to put those hours in, and also figuring out how many hours it takes too.

Because the professor can say, ‘Oh, this will take you three hours.’ But it can take you five hours, because of how much you want to learn…But then you kinda say, ‘Wait, hold on. I gotta turn this in as well. I can’t be taking five, ten hours doing this every week.’ You gotta also keep the ball rolling. So, it’s about learning about that balance…you’ve been going through every single detail, [but] you have to also turn in the assignments as well.
Learner expertise is recognized by the instructor.

In addition to having to balance their coursework with their outside commitments, the participants also expressed the need to be viewed by their instructor as being capable of making valuable contributions to their class. As professionals with years of experience working in their respective fields, these participants needed to feel that they were being heard by the instructor and that their perspectives were seen as having a certain value.

This need was best stated by Learners A and B.

I don’t really need [the instructor] to express interest in my personal life, but the fact that I’ve been a practicing clinical social worker for over 10 years, I work with the severely mentally ill, very impoverished population, I do want to feel like that is perceived as a viewpoint that can contribute to the class discussion. So, the idea that I have something to bring to the table because of the fieldwork that I do and have done, having that validated is very meaningful. (Learner A)

I’m very proud, what I’ve done in my career or the licenses that I have got and stuff like that. And I think that all that stuff provides a full picture of what that person is. If I were to know that [the instructor] know[s] me a little bit more as a person, of where I’m coming from, I’m not just this dumb person that just wants to get the grade, or I don’t even know why I’m in this class kind of sense. They know that I deserve to be in the class, and that I have good points and I make solid thoughts about what we learn. It would make me feel good about the course and want to continue. (Learner B)

Importance of support materials.

The remaining needs that were articulated by the participants in this study were divided into two groups: those that were expressed by novice online learners (participants taking their first or second online class) and those that were stated by experienced online learners (participants having completed 10 or more online classes). For participants in the novice category, there was an overriding need for their instructors to do a better job at providing class orientation and support materials. For instance, Learner F described his
experience starting out in his first online class, only to find that the instructor had done little to prepare. He explained what might have helped:

Some communications, I think, would have been good. Like introductory kind of communications, ‘Welcome to the class,’ and ‘Our first lecture’s gonna be on this date,’ and that sort of thing would have been good. And just kind of an overview. … The professor seemed unprepared, in some ways, for [the class], so I think [those things] would have been…helpful.

As for Learner E, who was also starting his first online class, he found that there was little support available to help him to get started with the Learning Management System (LMS). He described how he was able to overcome this obstacle.

Being my first time on [the LMS], it was a little weird. I got some help from [a co-worker who had experience with the LMS] a little bit. She helped me out because we were both taking a summer class. So, she showed me, ‘Oh, this is how [the student information system] works and [how the LMS works].’ I said, ‘Oh, okay.’ So, it was nice getting a little one-on-one with her so I knew where to go and how to do that, being a first-time student.

Learner E contrasted this experience to the orientation that he received upon enrolling in a new online course at a different institution.

So, for example, the [other] course that I’m taking now…they have student support folks that bring you all online…even before you’re studying anything academically. [They] help you navigate through everything, ‘This is how you do the online sessions, this is how the LMS works, this is how you upload.’ And [they] walk you through some tutorials on how you upload a document, where you see your grades. So, this whole cloud of mystery with online learning, to someone who’s doing [this for the] first time, is lifted, because it was very high touch [and] you have to do [it] even before the class [has] started.

While Learner C didn’t have any problems getting started with the LMS, she explained that as a new online student, she would have benefitted from having support materials available to help refresh her writing skills. Learner C described how this presented an obstacle in getting started with her course:

So I’m trying to re-learn [those writing skills]…cause I had learned it before, but now I somehow forgot…re-learn it through online tutorials, books on grammar,
and stuff like that. So, I guess you wouldn’t say it’s a really serious thing, but it’s just...people aren’t going to take you seriously if you can’t really write well.

I had actually asked the professor for guidance on how to help get a good tutorial on grammar and syntax. [The instructor] said, ‘Have a friend or relative who you trust that is able to write review your papers.’ … And then [the instructor] also suggested taking my old papers to the writing center and then they can review it and tell me kind of where generally sentences are either run-ons, or excessive verbiage, or something. So, I guess I was kind of on my own in that respect.

Although she did receive some guidance from her instructor, Learner C said that she was looking for something “more concrete.” As a result, she ended up conducting her “own research on how to fix the problem” and eventually found the support that she was looking for in a combination of places, ranging from external websites to another instructor’s course site.

As for Learner G, although it wasn’t his first online class, this was the first class that he had taken in a compressed 10-week format. Not having experienced this type of class schedule before, Learner G didn’t initially realize how important it was “to jump in at the beginning and really get going.” Now that he has experienced it for himself, Learner G felt that he would have benefitted from some type of introduction to the class that would have alerted students to the compressed nature of the schedule. He explained:

[I]nstructors who are teaching in a ten-week course, or a shorter course, could emphasize the compressed nature of it at the beginning. I don't know if I would've believed them until I actually experienced it, but that could be something that they could mention or warn people about. I suppose a typical professor who’s teaching a 4500 [level] class is probably usually dealing with people who have already learned this lesson, but I hadn't, because I hadn't taken an online summer class before.

*Expectations for a high-quality learning experience.*

In regards to the participants who were categorized as experienced online learners (those having completed 10 or more online classes), this group was quite comfortable
with the online format and did not have a need for any type of orientation or support materials. However, based on their past experiences, these participants were well aware of the elements that constitute a quality online learning experience and as a result, felt the need for these elements to be present in their current classes.

For example, one of the needs stated by the participants in the experienced category was for their instructors to utilize pedagogy oriented to the adult learner. Citing the high level of choice and flexibility that he was afforded throughout a class in human resources management, Learner I noted that this type of pedagogy is to be expected, and described it “as pretty routine for adult learning.” As for Learner J, she described her disappointment when her needs for a student-centered and interactive learning experience were ignored in favor of an instructor-centered, lecture-based approach. She explained:

I like the synchronous meetings because I feel like it keeps me engaged in the class. But if I have a professor who just wants to hear the sound of their own voice, then it's just a bore to get through. My last class this summer, I had a teacher with two PhD's and [they were] incredible…[they were] brilliant, absolutely brilliant, but [this professor had] zero people skills. And you really need that to be an online teacher and realize that you can't just lecture at students. That's not how they learn best and that's not necessarily the [university’s] philosophy of learning either.

Another need that was cited by the experienced participants was for their courses to be led by instructors who had adapted to teaching in the online environment. Learner J expanded on her thoughts in this area:

I've just become really critical of how teachers teach, because I have been taking online classes for so long. So, when you have a teacher that has a really difficult time teaching online, you become more easily frustrated. Because, I’ve adapted to this as a student and I’m doing my job, and I sort of expect you to adapt as a professor as well.

I feel like for so long, we as students have been asked to modify ourselves. First from going from paper textbooks to being digital and online, which for those of us
with learning disabilities, it’s hard. But we do it, and we work at it. … So, I expect [my professor] to be an adapting professor.

The final need that was stated by the experienced online learners was for their instructors to be open to listening to, and acting upon various student concerns. Or, as Learner J explained it, she expressed a need for her online instructors to possess “a sense of humbleness, of continuing to be open and listen to what students have to say about how you run your classroom.” Learner J described her recent experience in a class in which the instructor did not meet this need:

[The professor] could have really addressed my concerns. And [they] could have taken my concerns and asked, ‘What do you think I can do better?’ [They] could have asked for help. [They] could have asked for advice and for help, and I think that’s hard for professors to do from students sometimes.

Learner J concluded her thoughts by providing an example of a technique that one of her previous online instructors had used to gauge the needs of their students on a weekly basis.

And I have been in online courses with [this university] where there was one professor that does something that’s called benefits and concerns. And [they do] that at the end of every single class. And I think it’s excellent because it’s a way to anonymously say how you’re feeling about the class and how that particular class went. So, that’s what I think [the other instructor] could [have done differently].

**Structural description.**

Following the identification of the themes, the next step in Moustakas’ (1994) method of transcendental phenomenological analysis is that of imaginative variation. During this stage, the researcher utilizes their imagination, intuition, and a varied frame of reference to expand and enhance the textural themes that were developed during the previous stage. In order to do this, the researcher is advised to consider universal structures, such as “time, space, bodily concerns, materiality, causality, relation to self, or
relation to others” (p. 99). The goal of this process “is to arrive at structural descriptions of an experience” or what Moustakas refers to as “the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced” (p. 98). As a result of the imaginative variation, three structural themes were identified to explain how adult learners experienced motivation in online higher education: Relation to Self, Relationship with Others, and Time.

**Relation to self.**

In the context of this study, the universal structure of Relation to Self was identified as a theme underlying several facets of the participants’ learning experience. Specifically, Relation to Self can be connected to the participants’ desire for their courses to be aligned with their personal needs and expectations in the areas of content, structure, and pedagogy. In regards to course content, participants felt that their courses were more “beneficial” and were made “more interesting” when the content was directly related to their personal goals and needs. For instance, throughout the interviews participants described how they chose to enroll in courses that promised to develop the knowledge and skills that they considered necessary in order to achieve their career and/or education-related goals. Statements such as “I choose the courses that are directly related to what I’m doing,” and “I was really excited when I saw this program…It was exactly what I wanted to extend my knowledge,” reflect the importance that participants placed in this area.

In addition to enrolling in courses that were related to their personal goals, another way in which participants were able to keep the content of their courses aligned to their needs was through the elements of choice and personalization. For instance,
participants described having a great deal of “choice” and “freedom” over the direction and content of a variety of class projects and assignments ranging from posts in the class discussion forum to final papers and projects. As one participant stated, “[W]e had parameters…but we had a lot of room to pick how we wanted to do those things.” This level of choice was highly valued by participants and was instrumental in keeping the course content aligned to their personal goals and needs.

Relation to Self was also found to be underlying the participants’ desire for their courses to be structured in such a way that met their personal needs and expectations for flexibility. Whether they were “traveling,” “working a lot of hours,” or caring for children, the participants in this study expressed the need for a course structure that would allow them the flexibility to maintain a reasonable balance between their academic, professional, and personal lives. For these participants, the flexibility of the online format “worked out perfectly” and allowed them to complete their “[course]work from anywhere” and spend “more time with…family.” In addition to allowing for flexibility, participants were also looking for their courses to provide them with the structure that they needed to be successful. For instance, most students reported that they “really appreciate[d]” courses that were highly structured and had a routine feel to the weekly activities. Although one participant noted that this level of structure could be seen by some as “repetitive” or “boring,” she found it to be “reassuring” and noted that it helped to keep her on track. Courses that were structured to allow for flexibility within the context of a “predictable” weekly framework were seen as best meeting the personal needs of the participants in this study.
The final area in which Relation to Self was found to be an underlying structure was in the participants’ desire for their instructors to utilize instructional methods that were oriented to their needs as adult learners. For instance, participants expressed the need for a student-centered learning experience in which their past experience and expertise played an important role. This sentiment was best captured by one participant, who said:

[T]he fact that I’ve been [practicing in my field] for over 10 years…I do want to feel like that is perceived as a viewpoint that can contribute to the class discussion. So, the idea that I have something to bring to the table because of the fieldwork that I do and have done, having that validated is very meaningful.

In addition, while some students enjoyed their lecture-based synchronous classes, others felt that this format was lacking in interaction and placed too much focus on the instructor. As one participant observed of this approach, “[Y]ou can't just lecture at students. That's not how they learn best…” Instead of “longer, less structured” lectures, several participants stated their preference for instructors that utilized shorter, student-focused, pre-recorded videos. This approach not only provided students with added flexibility, but also fulfilled their needs for a more student-centered learning experience.

**Relationship with others.**

The next universal structure to emerge from this analysis was Relationship with Others. In the context of this study, Relationship with Others was found to be underlying the participants’ relationships with their instructor and peers. Rather than being a solitary endeavor, participants described how their experience of learning online was impacted by these relationships in various ways.

For instance, the participants’ relationship with their instructor was primarily connected to the theme of Course Facilitation and the sub-theme of Instructor Feedback.
In regards to course facilitation, participants relied on their instructors to engage them in the course topic and provide them with a meaningful learning experience. Whether their courses were synchronous or asynchronous, students expected a certain level of interaction with and guidance from their instructors. Participant comments in this area, however, were spread fairly evenly between those who felt that their instructor’s course facilitation skills had enhanced the learning experience and those who felt that their instructor’s lack of these skills had detracted from it. For example, while some participants noted how their instructor “encouraged [the class] to engage with the [course] material” and “really made [the course topic] seem more interesting,” others recalled instructors who weren’t “very interactive” and who didn’t seem to “care too much about success for the students.”

Relationship with Others was also seen as underlying the sub-theme of Instructor Feedback. Throughout the interviews, participants noted how the feedback that they received from their instructor was not only “meaningful,” but it was also integral in providing them with the guidance that they needed to be successful in their courses. In addition, participants also noted that they placed a high level of trust in their instructor’s “evaluation of [their] work.” For instance, one participant who had received “a lot of really positive feedback” from her instructor stated:

I trust…that [they’re] not giving me a false sense of accomplishment…I think [the instructor] would be the type of person to really take me to task if [they] thought I wasn’t doing a good job.

Not all participants, however, were able to place this same level of trust in the feedback that they received from their instructor. For instance, noting the “superficial” comments that they had received on their assignments, a number of participants
questioned whether their assignments were even being “read through very thoroughly.”
In addition, other participants felt that their instructor’s feedback wasn’t detailed enough
to be very helpful. As a result, this lack of “specific” and “constructive” feedback left
some students to question whether or not they were on the right track with their course
and unsure of what they needed to do to improve from week-to-week.

The structure of Relationship with Others was also identified as underlying the
participants’ relationship with their peers. Throughout the interviews, participants
described how they valued the opportunity to interact with their peers and described how
their relationship with them was a beneficial component of the online learning
experience. For example, regardless of their backgrounds, participants felt like it was
“always interesting to hear” what other students had to say. As one participant stated, “I
always learn a lot from my peers, because we all have different backgrounds. And so, you
learn a different perspective whether you agree with it or not…” Participants also felt that
they benefitted from the feedback that they received from peers on their work, noting that
students were generally “very positive and supportive of each other” and provided
“helpful” and “well thought out” commentary. Not all participants agreed with this
sentiment, however, as some felt that the feedback that they received from peers,
particularly in the class discussion forum, “was just positive and reaffirming” and didn’t
challenge any of their “ideas or points.” Rather than find fault with his peers, one
participant felt that the problem was more attributable to the “online format in general”
which he felt didn’t “lend itself particularly well to those appropriate [peer-to-peer]
challenges.”
In addition to describing the ways in which they did or did not benefit from their relationships with others, a number of participants commented on the difficulty of developing meaningful relationships within the context of the online learning environment. Rather than being frustrated by this, participants seemed to accept it as a natural part of the online learning experience and even stated that this was something that they had lower expectations for. This was best evidenced by one participant who stated:

I feel like maybe because it’s online…the relational part of it is less important. There’s lower expectations I’d have than if I were in a physical class with people, with the professor there. I feel like the relationship and the personal caring would be more important [in a face-to-face classroom].

Although participants found it difficult to form meaningful relationships with both their instructor and other students, they were more focused during their interviews on the relationship, or lack thereof, with their instructors. Several participants explored this issue in greater depth and went on to cite a number of possible reasons for why they felt that student-instructor relationships were more difficult to form online, including: class size, limited communication options, and their instructor’s busy schedule.

In spite of these obstacles, a few participants felt that they had been able to successfully develop a meaningful relationship with their instructor. Most notably was one participant who had considered dropping her class, but decided against it because of how much her instructor had shown that they cared. Although the majority of the participants in this study had perceived relationships with others as being harder to form, this participant noted that when she had encountered a difficulty with her class, the relationship that she had developed with her instructor “made all the difference in the world.”
Time.

The final universal structure to emerge from this analysis was that of Time. During the interviews with the participants, time was a recurring element that permeated their experience as online learners. As adults with busy schedules and multiple outside commitments, the participants in this study were cognizant of any course-related elements that had impacted their time.

For example, whether it was the flexible nature of the online learning environment, the way in which their courses were structured, or the guidance that they had received from their instructors, participants recalled a number of course-related elements that had helped them to save, or better manage their time. In regards to the flexible nature of the online learning environment, participants in asynchronous classes liked not having “to show up to…class at a certain time,” while those who were enrolled in synchronous classes appreciated being given the option of attending their class in person or watching a recording later in the week. In addition, students explained how they were better able to manage their time when their courses were highly structured and followed a “predictable” routine. Other structural elements that helped participants to save or better manage their time included self-paced projects, flexible due dates on assignments, and the option to work ahead. The final course-related element that participants reported as having saved them time was the guidance that they had received from their instructors in the form of clear course expectations and detailed instructions for their assignments. For example, an instructor who “was clear on what [they were] looking for” was able to save one participant from “spending a lot of time on avenues in
[her] research that weren’t relevant.” It was this type of guidance that helped participants to save and better manage their time throughout their online learning experience.

On the other hand, there were also a number of course-related elements that had impacted the participants’ time in a negative way, including course structure, instructor feedback, and a lack of support materials. For instance, although some participants had experienced courses in which the structure had helped to save them time, other participants described structural elements of their courses that had cost them time. An example of this was a participant who recalled how her course was not aligned with the syllabus. In describing how this had negatively impacted her time, she stated:

[W]hen I'm…in a class where I have done the work that is on the syllabus…and then I get to the class and the [instructor] is not touching on the content, but touching on [an unrelated topic]…then I feel I’ve wasted my time and that I can't be successful in a course like that.

Participants also felt that their courses had cost them time when they were structured in a way that prevented them from working ahead. For example, a participant who preferred doing her reading from paper copies felt that she was “wasting time during the week printing [the course material] out when [she] could have just done that ahead of time.” Another area in which the participants’ time had been impacted was in regards to the quality and timeliness of their instructor’s feedback. For instance, in lieu of detailed feedback from her instructor, one participant recalled the extra time that she had spent “trying to figure out” why points had been deducted on her assignments, while other participants noted how delayed feedback from their instructors had left them feeling “uncertain[] about whether [they were] doing things the right way” for days, or even weeks at a time. A lack of support materials was the final area in which participants felt that their time had been negatively impacted. For instance, participants reported that they
had spent extra time looking for help on a range of issues related to their class, including how to use the Learning Management System and how to improve their writing skills. Had this type of support been provided by the instructor or the institution, the participants would have had more time to devote to their coursework.

While most of the participants in this study were able to successfully complete their classes, they acknowledged that their courses were “a lot to get through” and “took a lot of time.” In regards to the participants who had completed their courses, several of them described how they had implemented strategies to help manage their time. For instance, one participant described how he had developed a study schedule for himself that he monitored and adjusted as needed throughout the semester. In describing his process, he stated:

[S]o this kind of schedule that I’m doing for myself of doing the readings for a couple days, and then doing posts on these days, and article review on these days, that [was] working for me. So, I think if I wasn’t being successful, I think I would have had to reevaluate, and change my work process, if that makes sense.

Though most participants were able to successfully manage their time, there was one participant who noted that time management was a major issue for him and was the primary reason he was unable to complete his class. In recalling what went wrong, this participant described the difficulty he had in managing his time and how it led to him falling a little further behind each week until he reached a point where he was “overwhelmed” and felt “like [he] couldn’t handle [the class]” anymore. Because he also happened to be “working a lot of hours,” this participant felt that he wasn’t going to be able to get caught up, and so he made the decision to drop his class. Summarizing the situation, he stated, “So that time management, that balance between my life, work, and studying, it just kinda fell through.” Despite having to drop the class, this participant felt
that the experience had taught him some valuable lessons about managing his
time and in turn, had left him better prepared for his next class.

**Synthesis of meanings and essences.**

The final step of Moustakas’ (1994) method of phenomenological analysis is the synthesis of meanings and essences. It is during this stage that the researcher integrates the textural and structural themes that were identified in the previous two stages into “a unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (p. 100).

The textural themes included in this synthesis are representative of four categories: Course Related, Instructor Related, Online Learning Related, and Student Related. Textural themes in the Course Related category include: Choice & Personalization, Content & Organization, and Relevance & Applicability. Some of the relevant sub-themes in the Course Related category include: The benefit of having choices, Need for updated content, and Applicability to real-world problems.

Textural themes in the Instructor Related category include: Communication, Course Facilitation, and Instructor Presence. Some of the relevant sub-themes in the Instructor Related category include: Instructor feedback, Instructor enhances learning, and Level of instructor engagement.

Textural themes in the Online Learning Related category include: Academic Rigor, Flexibility, and Student Perceptions. Some of the relevant sub-themes in the Online Learning Related category include: Benefits of rigorous coursework, Importance of flexibility for adult learners, and Learning online can be boring.
Textural themes in the Student Related category include: Peer Influence on Learning, Perception of Synchronous Classes, and Varied Needs of Adult Learners. Some of the relevant sub-themes in the Student Related category include: Benefit of learning from peers, Balance coursework with outside commitments, and Importance of support materials.

In addition to the textural themes, the structural themes included in this synthesis are Relation to Self, Relationship with Others, and Time.

In the context of this study, the goal in synthesizing these textural and structural themes was to uncover the essence of how motivation was experienced by a particular group of adult learners enrolled in online higher education. As a result of the synthesis of textural and structural themes, the essence of this experience was revealed as the participants’ Goal Commitment and their Need for Guidance.

**Goal commitment.**

In regards to goal commitment, an underlying theme in all of the participant interviews was the connection between their experience as an adult online student and their current or future goals. Whether these goals were career oriented, education oriented, or simply related to personal growth, the participants’ commitment to these goals impacted their experience in a number of key ways. For example, all of the participants indicated that it was their commitment to their goals that drove their interest in the subject matter and led them to enroll in their chosen online course and/or program. When speaking about this connection between their coursework and their goals, one participant stated that, “[A] lot of the things that we went over [in the class] were very applicable to what I do, and what I hope to do in the future.” She added, “I know that this
is gonna be useful for me in the long run…I wouldn't have done it otherwise.” This sentiment was shared by a number of other participants who stated that the relevance and applicability of their chosen course of study to their future goals, is “why [they] enrolled…in the first place” and was “the number one reason for…all [of] this.”

In addition to providing students with the motivation to enroll in their chosen course of study, their goal commitment was instrumental in their ability to persist and overcome any course-related obstacles. For instance, participants described having to contend with “outdated” course materials, instructors who were lacking in online course facilitation skills, and learning activities that they considered to be “boring,” “monotonous,” and “repetitive.” In addition, several participants also felt that the online learning experience was not as engaging and interactive as they would have liked, noting that if their course “had been in person, it would have been richer.”

In spite of these obstacles, when the seven participants who completed their courses were asked if they had encountered anything that had negatively impacted their motivation to finish, they each replied with a resounding “No.” Their commitment to their goals was such that nothing was going to stand in their way. As one participant stated, “I don't think there was anything that would've kept me from continuing. … [T]o get the degree, I would probably finish any class I start unless something went horribly wrong.” Another participant echoed this sentiment when she stated, “I think I’m motivated enough where it would have to be really bad for me not to finish the course…So, I’ll do whatever it takes to finish.” As for the three participants who did not complete their classes, although their academic progress had been delayed, each remained committed to their long-term goals. This was evidenced by the fact that all
three decided to remain enrolled in their programs and continued to take other online courses that were aligned with their goals.

Another area in which goal commitment appeared in this analysis was in its relationship to the theme of Flexibility. For the adult students in this study, the flexibility afforded by learning online allowed them to balance their coursework with their outside commitments to their family and/or job. As a result, the flexibility of the online environment allowed them to continue with their education and remain committed to their goals. This relationship between flexibility and goal commitment was best expressed by a participant who explained her need for a flexible learning option while pursuing her degree. She stated:

I love online learning environments. I am a mom and it provides me the opportunity to both work, be a mother, and be a student simultaneously. It is a necessity for me and if [this university] did not offer that I could not be a student.

A final area in which goal commitment was connected to the themes from the data analysis was in the participants’ desire for course content and activities that were aligned with their career and/or learning goals. This was reflected in the theme of Choice and Personalization as well as in the theme of Academic Rigor. For instance, a number of participants commented on the high level of choice that they were given in their classes and noted how this allowed them to keep their coursework aligned to their goals. Participants found that having choices over what to read, write, and work on made their coursework “more interesting” and allowed then to “learn[] a lot more” than they would have otherwise.

As for academic rigor, although participants found their coursework to be challenging, they recognized that this level of rigor was necessary in order for them to
gain the knowledge and/or skills to achieve their future goals. For example, although one participant “was amazed [with] the level or rigor” in her class and even questioned if she “was gonna be able to make it through,” she acknowledged that the course had “expanded her knowledge” and prepared her to move into the next phase of her career. This was a common refrain throughout the interviews and made clear the connection between academic rigor and goal commitment.

Need for guidance.

The second essence that was found to be underlying the participants’ experience was that of their need for guidance. Whether they needed help getting started with their course, understanding a particular concept, or completing one of their assignments, each of the participants expressed a need for guidance with some aspect of the online learning experience.

An example of the type of support and guidance that participants reported needing early on in the semester included some type of “introductory communications” from their instructors welcoming them to the class and providing them with an overview of the meeting times and course requirements. Participants noted that this was especially important for classes that were running on an atypical schedule, such as the compressed 10-week courses that were offered in the summer. One participant who was new to this format noted that he would have appreciated some guidance from the instructor advising students of how important it is “to jump in at the beginning and really get going.”

In addition to needing guidance from their instructor, participants also expressed a need for tutorials and/or other support materials to help them to get started with their online learning experience. For instance, a participant who was a new user of the
institution’s Learning Management System (LMS) didn’t know how to get started and had to turn to a co-worker for help. He felt that a tutorial on how to “navigate through everything…how the LMS works…how you upload a document, where you see your grades” would have helped to lift the “whole cloud of mystery with online learning [for] someone who’s doing [it for the] first time.”

Other participants felt that it would have been helpful to have had support materials available at the start of their course to refresh their research and writing skills. As is typical of many adult learners, one participant noted that these were skills that she had “kind of forgot[ten] when [she] was out of school,” and added that “while working, [she] wasn’t using any of that.” Although this participant recalled having “asked the professor for guidance on…grammar and syntax” she didn’t get the kind of help that she was looking for and ended up having to conduct her “own research on how to fix the problem.”

Even once their classes had gotten started, participants continued to express a need for guidance from both their instructor and their peers. In regards to guidance from their instructor, participants cited the need for a highly structured learning environment. Participants felt that instructors who set their classes up with “a lot of grading structure and assignment structure” were providing much needed guidance and “really set[ting] [their students] up for success.” As an example of this, one of the participants described how his class was structured in such a way that students were asked to complete their final project in multiple stages over the course of the semester. This participant appreciated the guidance that this structure provided and noted that “[i]t would have been very difficult” to complete the project without it.
Another area in which students expressed a need for guidance from their instructor was in relation to the theme of Communication. For instance, a number of participants in this study described how their instructor failed to provide the class with clear and specific course expectations. This “lack of guidance” led to “confusion” over the exact nature of several course requirements and as a result, left students wondering if they were going to be able to successfully complete their course. Instructor feedback was also cited by a number of participants as an area in which they would have liked to have received more guidance. For instance, although some participants were satisfied with the feedback that they received from their instructors, others felt that the feedback was “superficial,” “generic,” and could have been “more substantive.” An example of this was a participant whose assignments were returned with points deducted, but no feedback from the instructor to tell her where she went wrong or how to improve. This lack of guidance cost the participant “a lot of time” looking back at her previous work and “trying to figure out what exactly” she did wrong.

A final area in which participants expressed a need for guidance from their instructors was in understanding complex course content. Although this need was expressed by all of the participants, some participants received the guidance that they needed while others did not. For example, one of the participants described how she found it “helpful” that her instructor provided the class with “a wide range of [supplementary] materials” (including pre-recorded lectures) to help students better understand the required readings that were particularly “dense.” However, on the other end of the spectrum were participants who received little to no guidance from their instructors in helping them to understand complex course material. One example of this
was a participant who commented on the lack of guidance from his instructor during synchronous class meetings, noting how the instructor “wasn’t very interactive with [the] students” and was “just reading off of the slides.” As a result of this lack of guidance, the participant felt that he “didn’t learn very much” from the course and ended up having to rely on his “prior knowledge” in order to successfully complete the final project.

In addition to having a need for guidance from their instructors, the participants in this study also felt the need to receive guidance from their peers. One way in which this need was expressed was by participants who were moving into a new career field and were hoping to learn from others in the class who were more experienced. For example, one participant stated that because her peers “were [speaking] from…experience” she found it “helpful to hear what they had to say” in the class discussion forums. This participant added that the guidance that she received from her peers in this manner was much better than having to learn the content from “the dry textbook.” In addition to receiving guidance directly from their peers, participants also expressed the desire to see examples of their peers’ work on various assignments and projects throughout the semester. Whether they used their peers’ work “as a model” or as a sample to compare their own work against, participants felt that the ability to see their peers’ work gave them a better understanding of what their instructor “really expect[ed]” and in turn, left them better prepared to complete their assignments. Although the opportunity to see examples of their peers’ work was afforded to a few of the participants in this study, most stated that this type of guidance was an element that was missing from their classes.
Summary

Transcendental phenomenological analysis was used to determine the essence of how adult learners experienced motivation in online higher education. During the first stage of analysis, a textural description of the phenomenon emerged, along with twelve distinct themes: Choice & Personalization, Content & Organization, Relevance & Applicability, Communication, Course Facilitation, Instructor Presence, Academic Rigor, Flexibility, Student Perceptions, Peer Influence on Learning, Perception of Synchronous Classes, and Varied Needs of Adult Learners. During the next stage, the textural themes were enhanced and expanded through the process of imaginative variation. This process resulted in the identification of three underlying structural themes: Relation to Self, Relationship with Others, and Time. During the final stage of analysis, the textural and structural themes were integrated in order to reveal the essence of the experience. As a result of this process, the essence of the phenomenon under study was revealed as Goal Commitment and the Need for Guidance.
CHAPTER 5:
CONCLUSION

Introduction

This study utilized a phenomenological approach to investigate how adults experience motivation in the context of online higher education. The findings of this study are presented in this chapter first in the context of the two primary research questions that were initially asked in Chapter 1. Next, the results of this study are discussed in relation to the existing literature on persistence in adult online learners. This chapter concludes with a look at the implications of this study, a discussion of the limitations, and recommendations for future research.

Findings

Research question 1.

What effect does motivation have on the persistence of adult online learners?

In order to determine the effect of motivation on student persistence in online higher education, a sample of 10 participants were recruited from a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Each of the participants met the criteria for the study of being at least 25 years of age and enrolled in at least one online class during the current or previous semester. Since it was one of the goals of this study to investigate the effect of motivation on student persistence, a sample was sought out that consisted not only of students who had successfully completed an online course but also those who had dropped out.

Once the sample had been chosen, in-depth interviews were conducted using a questionnaire developed by Jones and his colleagues (Jones et al., 2012; Jones, 2016) to
assess how adult learners perceive motivation in online higher education. This questionnaire consisted of five categories, one for each of the components of the MUSICSM Model of Motivation: eMpowerment, Usefulness, Success, Interest, and Caring (Jones, 2009). These questions allowed the researcher to assess whether or not participants were motivated by their experience as an online learner and if so, which elements played a role in contributing to their motivation. Six additional questions (one for each of the five components of the MUSIC model, and one overall) were added to the questionnaire by the researcher in order to assess how student perceptions of motivation affected their persistence in online higher education.

As a result of this process, a clear connection was revealed between motivation and persistence in adult online learners. All participants who perceived two or more components of the MUSIC model as well as motivating factors external to the MUSIC model stated that they felt motivated to persist and went on to complete their classes. Each of the participants who dropped their classes felt that the MUSIC components were lacking, having perceived only one or fewer, and stated that they did not feel motivated to persist. Therefore, in the case of this particular sample, motivation contributed to the persistence of a group of adult online learners who completed their classes, while a lack of motivation detracted from the persistence of those participants who dropped their class (see Table 11).
Table 11

How Motivation Impacted Student Persistence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identifier</th>
<th>MUSIC component(s) perceived</th>
<th>MUSIC component(s) lacking</th>
<th>Motivation impacted by external factors</th>
<th>Motivated to persist</th>
<th>Finished class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learner A</td>
<td>S, I</td>
<td>M, U, C</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner B</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>M, U, S, C</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learner C</td>
<td>M, U, S, I, C</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner D</td>
<td>U, S, I, C</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner E</td>
<td>M, I</td>
<td>U, S, C</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner F</td>
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<td>U</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner G</td>
<td>M, U, S, I, C</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner H</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>M, U, S, I</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner I</td>
<td>M, U, S, I, C</td>
<td></td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learner J</td>
<td>M, U, S, I, C</td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M = eMpowerment; U = Usefulness; S = Success; I = Interest; C = Caring.

Research question 2.

What factors are perceived by adults as being influential in their decision to persist in (or drop out of) their online studies?

In order to identify the factors that are perceived by adults as being influential in their decision to persist (or drop out of) their online studies, the participants of this study were asked to identify the component(s) of the MUSIC model that they felt had either positively or negatively impacted their persistence. In regards to the seven participants who had completed their classes, the components of Success and Interest were cited the most often as having been influential in their persistence. As for the remaining MUSIC components of eMpowerment, Usefulness, and Caring, although they were mentioned less frequently, each was cited by at least one participant as having influenced their decision to persist. Additionally, each of the seven participants who finished their classes
said that they were also motivated to persist by at least one factor that was external to the MUSIC model.

In regards to the three participants who did not finish their classes, each cited a lack of MUSIC model components as having contributed to their decision to drop out. For example, these participants noted that at least three MUSIC model components had been missing from each of their classes. It was the lack of these components, rather than any external factors, that they cited as having contributed to their decision to drop out. Although a lack of Success was cited the most frequently by participants as contributing to their decision to drop out, the remaining components of the MUSIC model were each cited twice.

Once each of the participants had identified the MUSIC model component(s) that had influenced their decision to persist (or drop out of) their online studies, the contributing factors within each component were then extracted from the data. As a result of this process, the researcher was able to identify the individual factors that were perceived by the participants in this study as having been influential in their decision to persist (or drop out of) their online studies. These factors were then organized alphabetically within each MUSIC component and are presented in Tables 12 (factors contributing to persistence) and 13 (factors contributing to drop out). Factors that are external to the MUSIC model, but were cited as having contributed to student persistence, are included where applicable.
### Table 12

**Factors Cited by Participants as Influential in Their Decision to Persist**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MUSIC component</th>
<th>Factors influencing persistence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| eMpowerment     | Attendance is optional for synchronous class meetings  
|                  | Course schedule is flexible, students can choose when to start and complete certain assignments  
|                  | Coursework/assignments allow for student choice |
| Usefulness       | Knowledge/skills applicable to learner’s current career  
|                  | Knowledge/skills applicable to learner’s future career  
|                  | The opportunity to learn from peers who have relevant professional experience |
| Success          | Being assigned a manageable workload  
|                  | Class is highly structured  
|                  | Expectations for the class are clearly stated/communicated  
|                  | Instructor shares examples of student work from previous semesters  
|                  | Peer feedback  
|                  | Positive feedback from the instructor  
|                  | Receiving good grades  
|                  | Regular feedback from the instructor  
|                  | Student feels that the time and effort put into the class will result in a good grade  
|                  | Student is able to complete coursework on time  
|                  | Student is confident in their ability to successfully complete the coursework |
| Interest         | Course materials are interesting  
|                  | Students are able to align coursework to their area(s) of interest  
|                  | Students are interested in course topic  
|                  | Students can interact with the instructor and peers during synchronous class sessions  
|                  | The course topic is relevant to real-world issues  
|                  | The course topic is relevant to the student’s current/future career  
|                  | The course topic is tied to current events  
|                  | The coursework (assignments/projects) is interesting  
|                  | The instructor made the course more interesting |
Caring

The instructor is available by phone for questions
The instructor is flexible and accommodating to student needs
The instructor is responsive to student questions/concerns
The instructor is sincere, not going through the motions
The instructor provides detailed and helpful feedback
The instructor provides structure and clear expectations for the course
The instructor sets a high standard for student work
There is a high level of student-instructor interaction during synchronous meetings

External

Belief that the course will aid in career advancement
Class is part of a professional certification program that the student is pursuing
Course will not be offered again for another year
Desire to maintain a good academic record/transcript
Desire to prove that they can do well in school
Desire to refresh/update skills
Does not want the money spent on tuition to go to waste
Does not want time and effort spent on the class to go to waste
Does not want to have to reimburse employer for tuition

Family

Goal of finishing certificate/earning degree
Long-term goal of going to graduate school
Need to earn professional development credits
Spouse is also in school/taking classes
Student believes that by the end of the course they will have gained new knowledge and/or skills
Student is committed to finishing what they start
Student is nearly finished with their degree/certificate program
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MUSIC Component</th>
<th>Factors influencing decision to drop out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>eMpowerment</td>
<td>Course is highly structured, no flexibility with the weekly schedule and due dates</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course structure does not allow students to work ahead</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coursework does not allow for student choice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coursework is overwhelming, student feels that they have no control over the course</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student feels that they can’t ask the instructor for flexibility/accommodations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness</td>
<td>Course delivery mode does not match student’s preferred learning style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course deviates from what is stated in the syllabus/course catalog</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instructor has difficulty keeping class discussion on topic</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of interaction between student-instructor, student-student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Success</td>
<td>Course delivery mode does not match student’s preferred learning style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Course deviates from what is stated in the syllabus/course catalog</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coursework is overwhelming</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Grading is not evenly spaced out, too much emphasis on 1 project</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Instructor feedback is not positive and/or encouraging</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Instructor has difficulty keeping class discussion on topic</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of clear expectations on assignments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of instructor presence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of peer interaction</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of variety in assignment types</td>
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<td></td>
<td>No examples of student work from previous semesters</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Public nature of asynchronous discussion forums is intimidating</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Student is unable to manage their time</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Text-based instructor feedback lacks warmth and caring</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>Course delivery mode does not match student’s preferred learning style</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Course deviates from what is stated in the syllabus/course catalog</td>
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<td>Course materials are boring</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of instructor presence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Lack of variety in instructional resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Area</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>are not given the opportunity to align coursework to their area(s) of interest</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Synchronous class sessions are faculty-centered</td>
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<td>Caring</td>
<td>Student does not sense that the instructor cares about their success</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The instructor does not address student concerns about the class</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The instructor does not do enough to learn about the students and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>incorporate their relevant experience into the class</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The instructor does not reach out to check in with students when their</td>
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<td></td>
<td>performance slips/they fall behind</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* Several factors were cited multiple times in different MUSIC categories. For instance, lack of instructor presence was cited as a reason why one participant felt that they couldn’t be successful and also as a reason why they had lost interest in their class.

**Discussion of the Results**

**The effect of motivation on student persistence.**

The results of this study are consistent with a large body of research that has found motivation to be an integral component in student persistence and retention (Bird & Morgan, 2003; Boton & Gregory, 2015; Bunn, 2004; Castles, 2004; Fjortoft, 1995; Glore, 2011; Huett et al., 2008; Keller, 2008; Menager-Beeley, 2003; Morris et al., 2005; Morrow & Ackerman, 2012; Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Osborn, 2001; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Scribner, 2007; Visser, 1998; Visser et al., 2002; Zvacek, 1991). Although this effect has been found in a variety of learning contexts, it was the aim of this study to investigate the effect of motivation on persistence in a sample of adult online learners. In accordance with previous research on this population, this study has found that when motivation is present in adult online learners, they are more likely to persist and complete their classes (Chyung, 2001a, 2001b, 2001c; Chyung et al., 1998, 1999; Hart, 2012; Irizarry, 2002; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Jamison, 2003; Jones, 2013; Margueratt, 2007; McGivney, 2009; Müller, 2008; Ojokheta, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009). Likewise, when
motivation is lacking, the findings of this study align with research that has shown that unmotivated students are more likely to drop out (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Frankola, 2001; Jun, 2005; Kim, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2009; Kim & Frick, 2011; Packham et al., 2004; Park, 2007; Tyler-Smith, 2006; Wang et al., 2003).

The findings of this study are also supported in the literature by the work of scholars who have developed various models for understanding and explaining student persistence in higher education (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Berge & Huang, 2004; Kember, 1989; McGivney, 2009; Packham et al., 2004; Park, 2007; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975). Motivation appears as a critical component in a number of these models; influencing students to persist when it is present, and contributing to their decision to drop out when it is lacking. As one of the earliest and most prominent works in this area, Tinto’s (1975) longitudinal model of student dropout views motivation in terms of a student’s goal commitment, which Tinto argues is “central to an individual’s decision to drop out of higher education” (p. 41). This conception of motivation as a student’s commitment to achieving their goals and/or earning their degree is also found in a number of other well-known models as a critical factor impacting student persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Kember, 1989; Rovai, 2003). In regards to more recent models that were specifically developed to address the problem of attrition in adult online learners, a lack of motivation was found to lead to student dropout in Park’s (2007) model for adult dropout in online learning, while motivation in the form of “a student’s desire to complete the[ir] course” was found to be “the second strongest factor…linked to student persistence” in McGivney’s (2009) conceptual model for predicting adult student persistence in an online course.
Factors impacting the persistence of adult online learners.

This study uncovered a number of factors that were cited by adult learners as having been influential in their decision to persist in, or drop out of, their online classes. Those factors that were found to have positively influenced students to persist are referred to here as facilitators, while those factors that had impeded student persistence are labeled as barriers (Hart, 2012). Within each of these categories, factors that were cited by participants as having impacted their persistence are further classified as course-related, instructor-related, and student-related.

Facilitators of persistence.

For the participants in this study, relevance and applicability were two of the primary course-related facilitators of persistence. When students felt that they were gaining knowledge that was relevant to their careers and/or that they could apply to real-world situations, they were more motivated to persist. These findings are supported by research conducted by Bocchi, Eastman, and Swift (2004) who “found that applicability of concepts is a key element” in retaining adult learners in an online MBA program (p. 252). In addition, Park and Choi (2009) found relevant course content to be “particularly predictive” of persistence in a group of adult learners enrolled in various online programs at a large Midwestern university (p. 207). Other course-related facilitators of persistence that were identified by the participants in this study included high levels of interaction (student-student and student-instructor) as well as the convenience and flexibility of studying online. These factors were also seen as facilitators of persistence in a number of previous studies on adult online learners (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Müller, 2008; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Sullivan, 2001).
In regards to instructor-related facilitators of student persistence, a number of participants in this study cited instructor feedback as a key factor in their decision to persist. When the feedback from their instructor was positive, contained detailed and helpful information, and arrived at regular intervals, the participants were more motivated to persist. The importance of instructor feedback is supported in the literature by Jamison (2003) who found that student perceptions of the quality of the feedback that they received from their instructor could be used to predict the persistence of adults enrolled in asynchronous web-based distance education. Another instructor-related facilitator of persistence cited by the participants in this study was the quality of their instructor. For instance, participants noted how their instructor’s ability to enhance otherwise dry course topics and facilitate engaging online discussions were influential in their decision to persist. The importance of quality online instructors in retaining adult online students has also been identified as a key factor in student persistence by Ivankova and Stick (2007). Other instructor-related factors that participants had cited as contributing to their persistence included instructors who were flexible and accommodating to student needs, responsive to student concerns, and who clearly stated their expectations for the class. These factors have all been found to contribute to persistence in other studies on adult online learners (Bocchi et al., 2004; Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

As far as student-related facilitators of persistence are concerned, interest in the course topic emerged as one of the most frequently cited factors by the participants in this study. In addition to being motivated to persist by their interest in the course topic, participants cited the ability to align their coursework to their interests as a key factor that had positively influenced their persistence. The identification of interest as a critical
factor influencing the persistence is supported by the work of Chyung (2001a) who saw the attrition rate of an online Master’s degree program decrease by 22 percentage points over the course of only three semesters when classes were redesigned to more closely align with the students’ personal and professional interests. Another factor that was cited by a number of participants as having influenced their persistence was their commitment to finishing what they started and earning their certificate or degree. For some participants, this factor was their primary reason for finishing their class and seemed to overshadow all others by comparison. McGivney (2009) reached a similar conclusion in a study of adult learners when he found “robust empirical support” for a student’s desire to complete their degree as one of two background characteristics influencing their decision to persist in an online class (p. 111). A final student-related factor that influenced the persistence of the participants in this study was extrinsic motivation. For example, several students reported that they were motivated to persist by needs related to their career and/or family. The importance of extrinsic motivation as a facilitator of persistence is supported in the literature by Ivankova and Stick (2007), who found that “career advancement, earning the credentials, recognition, and increase in pay” all contributed to the persistence of adult learners in an online doctoral program (p. 121).

Although the majority of the factors that were cited by the participants in this study as having contributed to their persistence were supported by the existing literature, there were a few that could not be found in any studies related to persistence in adult online learners. For instance, two participants reported that one of their primary motivations to persist and finish their class was so that they didn’t have to pay back the tuition money that had been paid by their employer as part of their continuing education.
benefits. Money was also a facilitator of persistence for another participant who had paid for his own tuition out of pocket and didn’t want it to go to waste if he happened to drop the class. Although the idea of not wanting to waste or pay back money was a concern for these participants, no mention could be found in the existing literature of adult students being motivated to persist by these concerns.

Another area in which the results of this study contrasted with the existing literature was in regards to instructor feedback. For instance, a number of participants in this study reported that they were motivated to persist and finish their class by the feedback that they had received from their instructor. Although the timeliness of this feedback was a concern, participants appeared to place a greater emphasis on the quality of the feedback and how detailed and helpful it was. Research conducted by Ivankova and Stick (2007), however, found the opposite, in that adult learners were more concerned with the timeliness of instructor feedback rather than the quality of it.

There were also two notable factors that were cited in the literature as facilitators of persistence in adult online learners that were not cited by any of the participants in this study. The first of these factors is the learner’s self-efficacy, or confidence in their ability to successfully complete their online class. Although these factors did not appear in this study, confidence and self-efficacy beliefs are cited throughout the literature as critical factors influencing the persistence of adult online learners (Chyung, 2001a, 2001, b, 2001c; Chyung et al., 1998, 1999; Holder, 2007; Jamison, 2003; Jun, 2005). The second factor that appears in the literature as a facilitator of learner persistence but was not found in this study is the support that learners receive from both internal and external sources. When learners feel supported by external sources, such as family, friends, and co-workers
as well as internal sources, such as advisors, mentors, and peers, they are more likely to persist in their online classes. Although examples of this are cited throughout the literature (Bunn, 2004; Holder, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Jamison, 2003; Kemp, 2002; Müller, 2008; Park & Choi, 2009), none of the participants in this study mentioned internal or external support as having influenced them to persist in their class.

**Barriers to persistence.**

In addition to the factors that had facilitated student persistence in an online class, the participants in this study cited a number of factors that had acted as barriers. Course-related barriers included a lack of interaction (student-student and student-instructor), being assigned an overwhelming amount of coursework, and a misalignment between the course and the participant’s preferred learning style. Although each of these barriers had a negative impact, it was the misalignment between the participant’s class and their preferred learning style that had presented the greatest obstacle. For example, one of the participants decided to drop the asynchronous class that she had been enrolled in after realizing that she preferred to learn in a synchronous format. Another participant cited the extra time and effort that it took him to complete writing assignments as one of the contributing factors in his decision to drop his class. Had the instructor offered a greater variety of assignment types that better matched his preferred learning style, this participant felt that he may have been able to persist and finish the class. These findings support the work of several other scholars who have also found the misalignment between a learner’s course and their preferred learning style to be a barrier to persistence in adults learning online (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Frankola, 2001; Müller, 2008; Wang et al., 2003).
In regard to instructor-related barriers to persistence, participants cited communication issues with their instructor as one of the main factors that had contributed to their decision to drop out. For example, one participant noted that when he began to fall behind in his class the instructor never reached out to check in on him. Another student recalled that although she did receive feedback from her instructor, the tone was not very positive or encouraging. In both cases, the participants cited these issues as having contributed to their decision to drop their class. These barriers to persistence were also identified in research conducted by Wang et al. (2003) who found that adult learners were more likely to persist when their instructor follows up, or checks in on their progress, as well Ivankova and Stick (2007) who found that “[s]tudent[] persistence was positively affected by [the] support and encouragement they received from the faculty” (p. 126). In addition to communication issues with their instructor, another participant cited her instructor’s course facilitation skills as one of the main reasons for dropping her class. This participant recalled being frustrated by synchronous class sessions that were faculty-centered and as well as the instructor’s inability to keep class discussions on topic. Student disappointment with their instructors was also identified by Müller (2008) as the second most frequently cited barrier to persistence in a group of adult learners enrolled in an online degree completion program.

The primary student-related barrier to persistence to emerge from this study was difficulty with time management. Specifically, one of the participants explained that the main reason that he had dropped his class was an inability to maintain a balance between his “life, work, and studying.” Problems with time management have also been identified in a number of studies throughout the literature on adult online education (Aragon &
Johnson, 2008; Bunn, 2004; Frankola, 2001; Packham et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2003). Müller (2008) in particular identified balancing multiple responsibilities as the number one barrier to persistence for the adult participants in his study, with 75% of them citing this as a factor.

The majority of the barriers to persistence that were identified by the participants in this study were consistent with existing research on adult learners in online higher education. There were, however, a few barriers that were identified by the participants in this study, but could not be found in the existing literature. For instance, two of the participants felt that a lack of choices in their class had negatively impacted their persistence. Both of these students felt that they may have been more motivated to persist if they had been given more choice over which articles to read, which discussion forum posts to respond to, as well as other parameters related to their course schedule and assignments. Another factor that had negatively impacted the persistence of one of the participants was having an instructor who did not do enough to get to know him and incorporate his relevant background and experiences into the class. Although this was not cited as a barrier to persistence in the literature on online education, the role of an adult’s experience in their learning is one of six key assumptions in Knowles’ et al. (2005) theory of andragogy and is cited as a key factor in how adults learn. The final barrier to persistence that appeared in this study but not in the existing literature was an instructor who failed to address student concerns about the class. While acknowledging that it is likely difficult for faculty to accept constructive criticism from a student, one of the participants in this study felt that her instructor’s lack of responsiveness to her concerns was a primary reason for dropping her class.
There were also a few other factors that were cited in the literature as barriers to persistence in adult online learners that were not cited by any of the participants in this study. For instance, a number of studies found that issues related to poor course design can negatively impact student persistence (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Frankola, 2001; Wang et al., 2003). Specifically, issues such as a confusing course site, difficulty accessing materials, and difficulty communicating with the instructor were all identified as barriers to student persistence. Another barrier to persistence that was cited in the literature but not by any of the participants in this study was a lack of support. As Park and Choi (2009) note, “Adult learners are more likely to drop out of online courses when they do not receive support from their family and/or organization while taking online courses, regardless of learners’ academic preparation and aspiration” (p. 215). A final barrier to persistence that was cited in a number of studies but was not a concern of the participants in this study was problems with technology (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Bunn, 2004; Frankola, 2001; Müller, 2008; Packham et al., 2004). Any time that the LMS or course-related technology was brought up by the participants in this study it was either in a positive or neutral light.

**Implications**

In investigating the effect of motivation on the persistence of adult learners in online higher education the results of this study have largely confirmed previous research on this topic. For instance, motivation was found to have contributed to the persistence of the participants who had completed their classes, while a lack of motivation detracted from the persistence of those participants who dropped their class. In addition, this study
has identified a number of key facilitators and barriers to persistence, the majority of which were found to align with previous research on this topic.

By providing support for existing research, this study has implications for various stakeholders invested in adult online higher education including faculty, instructional designers, and administrators of online programs. For instance, stakeholders are advised to give thoughtful consideration to student motivation and place it at the forefront throughout the design and delivery phases of online courses. Not only has research shown motivation to be critically important in promoting behaviors that facilitate academic achievement and success (Bandura, 1997; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Multon et al., 1991; Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2000), but this study and a number of others have also found that motivated students are more likely to persist and finish their online classes (see Chapter 2, pp. 84-87).

Faculty and instructional designers are also advised to consider the various facilitators and barriers to student persistence that were identified in Tables 12-13 and discussed in greater detail earlier in this chapter. Although it is not possible to incorporate each of these factors into a single online course, each should be taken into consideration during the course design process and weighed against contextual elements such as delivery mode, student characteristics, goals of the course, etc. Likewise, stakeholders are advised to be aware of, and avoid if possible, any factors that were identified as barriers to student persistence.

With motivation being identified both in this study and in the literature as a key factor impacting the persistence of adults learning online, it is also recommended that those involved in online course design and delivery incorporate strategies aimed at
increasing the motivation of their learners. An issue to be aware of, however, is that because motivation is largely dependent upon a learner’s individual preferences and previous experiences, there is a great deal of variation from one learner to the next in regards to what they find to be motivating (Keller, 1999; Komarraju & Karau, 2008; Margueratt, 2007). To this end, it is recommended that instructors and/or course designers implement a variety of motivational strategies in order to better meet the needs of all of their students (Komarraju & Karau, 2008).

Finally, for administrators of online programs and other institutional personnel who must contend with the issue of high dropout rates from their online classes and programs, the results of this study indicate that an increased focus on motivation has the potential to reverse this trend. It should be cautioned, however, that although motivation is a critical factor in student persistence, there are many other factors at work influencing a student’s decision to persist or drop out (Hart, 2012; Rovai, 2003). As Rovai (2003) states, “adult persistence in an online program is a complicated response to multiple issues,” and one must consider all internal and external facets of the student experience in order to better understand and explain this phenomenon (p. 12).

**Delimitations and Limitations**

There are a few elements of this study that may affect the applicability and/or generalizability of the results. These elements fall into one of two categories: those that were under the control of the researcher and those that were beyond the control of the researcher.

In regards to the former category, this study was conducted at a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participants were enrolled in
either a certificate or degree completion program that was being offered by the university’s school of continuing and professional education. In addition, all participants in this study were drawn from the adult learner demographic (ages 25 and over). Finally, the focus of this study was limited to students who were enrolled in a fully synchronous or asynchronous online class. Students who were enrolled in a hybrid or blended online class were not included in this study. Given these delimitations, the results of this study are representative of this specific group of learners and may have limited transferability beyond this population.

There were also a few other components of this study that were beyond the control of the researcher and may potentially limit the results. First, although this study asked participants to describe their experiences from an online class that they were currently or recently enrolled in, the participants may have been unintentionally influenced by any previous experiences as an online student. Another factor that had the potential to limit this study was the participants’ ability to accurately and truthfully gauge their motivation. For instance, because this study asked participants to recall their experiences from a semester long (15 week) course, the researcher was reliant on the students’ ability to accurately recall and describe any relevant experiences and perceptions that may have occurred several weeks prior to their interview.

Next, there were a number of course-related factors that were outside of the researcher’s control. For instance, because participants were drawn from a mix of courses and programs, there was some variation in regards to the subject matter and whether or not the course was an elective or program requirement. Accordingly, there was also some variation between instructors in regards to their level of skill in delivering an online class.
Finally, although all of the courses under examination in this study were hosted on the same Learning Management System (LMS), there were no institutional requirements for instructors to utilize a standard set of tools or course elements.

Another limiting factor to this study included the researcher’s own potential bias stemming from his previous experience as an online student, instructor, and course designer. In addition, because this study was conducted at the same institution where the researcher is employed as an instructional designer, it is possible that the researcher may have had some level of influence over the design of the courses involved in this study.

A final limiting factor that was beyond the control of the researcher included any type of technical difficulties (hardware and/or software related) experienced by either the students or instructors that may have negatively impacted their learning experience.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study was a small qualitative research project that was conducted from within a school of continuing and professional education at a large public university in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Given the small sample size and the fact that the participants were drawn from a single school, the results of this study cannot be generalized to a larger population. In order to address some of the limitations inherent in such a design, recommendations for potential future research are discussed in this section.

For those wishing to retain a qualitative methodology, it is recommended that the researcher conduct a greater number of interviews for an even more in-depth look at the phenomenon under study. Although the interviews in this study varied in length from 60-90 minutes and allowed for the participants to provide an in-depth description of their experience as online learners, it is the researcher’s opinion that even more information
could have been gleaned from multiple interviews. To this end, a future study might consider following Seidman’s (2013) method of phenomenological interviewing in which a series of three interviews are conducted with each participant. Another recommendation for additional qualitative research on this topic is for a longitudinal study in which participants would be interviewed and asked to reflect on their motivation to persist over the course of several semesters. This would allow the researcher to track student persistence over time, assess whether or not student motivation to persist changes over time, and if so, develop a better understanding of what factors might be responsible for this change. It is also recommended that future qualitative research on this topic be expanded to include adult online learners not only from different schools, but also from different types of schools, e.g., community college, certificate programs, undergraduate, graduate, etc.

If generalizability is a concern, it is recommended that both of the research questions that were answered in this study are addressed by a large scale quantitative research project. A study involving a greater number of students and spread out across a number of different research sites will not only produce generalizable results, but it would also provide further insight into the link between motivation and persistence in adult online learners. Those conducting quantitative research on this topic are advised to use the MUSIC Inventory (College Student version) developed by Jones (2016).
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Participant Recruitment Letter

From: Kevin Lucey kl4qw@virginia.edu
To: (participant email addresses will be entered in the BCC line to ensure confidentiality)
Subject: Help Improve Online Learning: Participate in a Study!

Hello, my name is Kevin Lucey and I would like to invite you to participate in a research project investigating the effect of motivation on adult online learners. Specifically, I am seeking to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between motivation and student persistence in finishing an online course. In addition, I am hoping to learn more about which elements of the online learning environment are considered by adults to be the most (and/or least) motivating.

In order to do this, I would like to know more about your experience as an online student at SCPS. Your insights will contribute to a growing body of research on motivation in online education and may potentially lead to an enhanced learning experience for future online students both here at SCPS and across higher education.

Compensation:
If you are selected for this study and complete the interview, you will be compensated for your time with a $25 Amazon gift card.

Details:
If you are selected to participate in this study, you will be asked to take part in an in-depth interview, lasting approximately 60-90 minutes. This interview will be conducted in-person at the University of Virginia academic center that is the most convenient for you (e.g., Charlottesville, Richmond, Falls Church, Newport News, etc.) at a time and date of your choosing. If it is not possible to schedule an in-person interview, arrangements will be made to conduct the interview online using a live meeting application (e.g., Skype).

Participant’s Rights & Confidentiality:
You are under no obligation to participate in this study. If you do volunteer and are selected to participate, you have the right to withdraw at any time. If you are selected for this study, your identity will be kept confidential. All names will be removed from the final report and replaced with an anonymous identifier (e.g., Learner A, Learner B, etc.).

How to Volunteer:
To participate in this study, you must be at least 25 years of age and enrolled in at least one online class during the current or previous semester. Since this is a small qualitative research project, not all those who volunteer will be selected to be interviewed. If you meet these conditions and would like to volunteer, please click on the following link to complete a short (4-6 minutes) demographic survey:

https://virginiahisd.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_2fVGlNU1tBjkZ5j
Once you have completed this survey, you will receive an email from me with details on the next steps.

**Contact Info & Questions:**
If you have any questions about participating in this study, please feel free to contact me directly at k4gw@virginia.edu or 434-243-7611. You may also contact my doctoral advisor, Dr. David Carbonara at 412-396-4039.

For questions related to human subjects in research, you may contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board (412-396-4032) or Dr. Tonya Moon, Chair of the University of Virginia Institutional Review Board for Social and Behavioral Sciences (434-924-0823).

Thank you for your time and consideration!
Appendix B: Participant Demographic Survey

Demographic Survey for Online Learner Motivation Research

Thank you for clicking on the link to my survey! This survey contains **9 questions** and should take **4-6 minutes** to complete.

By completing this survey, you are volunteering to participate in one 60-90 minute in-depth interview. Since this is a small qualitative research project, not all those who volunteer will be selected to be interviewed.

Before you can begin this survey, you will need to review and agree to a consent statement which covers your rights as a participant in this study as well as any associated risks and benefits.

Please click on the blue "double arrow" button in the lower-right corner of the screen to begin.

Consent To Participate in a Research Study
[PLACEHOLDER FOR OFFICIAL CONSENT FORM]

Please indicate your consent below:
- Yes, I agree to volunteer for this study. (4)
- No, I would not like to volunteer for this study. (5)

Display This Question:
If Consent To Participate in a Research Study [PLACEHOLDER FOR OFFICIAL CONSENT FORM] Please indicate... No, I would not like to volunteer for this study. Is Selected

I am sorry that you do not wish to volunteer for this study.

Please feel free to contact the researcher (Kevin Lucey) with any questions or concerns at kl4qw@virginia.edu or 434-243-7611.

Please click the blue "double arrow" button in the lower-right corner of the screen to submit this survey.

Condition: I am sorry that you do not ... Is Displayed. Skip To: End of Survey.

Q1. Please enter your name.
   - First (1)
   - Last (2)

Q2. What is your preferred method of contact?
- Email (1)
- Phone (2)
Q2. What is your preferred method of contact? Email Is Selected
Q2a Please enter your preferred email address.

Q2b What is the best number to reach you at?
*Please include area code, e.g., 434-243-7611*

Q3. Are you able to come to one of the University of Virginia academic centers listed below to participate in an interview?
- Charlottesville,
- Falls Church,
- Newport News, or
- Richmond
- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q3a Which UVa location is the most convenient for you?
- Charlottesville (2)
- Falls Church (3)
- Newport News (4)
- Richmond (5)

Q3b Would you be comfortable using a live meeting application such as Skype in order to be interviewed online?
- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q4. What is your gender?
- Female (1)
- Male (2)

Q5. What is your age?
- 25-34 (1)
- 35-44 (2)
- 45-54 (3)
- 55-64 (4)
- 65 or over (5)
Q6. When did you most recently take an online course at SCPS?
☑ I am currently enrolled in at least one online course at SCPS. (1)
☑ I was enrolled in at least one online course at SCPS during the previous semester. (2)
☑ It has been at least 2 semesters since I have been enrolled in an online course at SCPS. (3)
☑ I'm not sure. (4)

Q7. Select the program that your current (or most recent) SCPS online class(es) is (are) from.
You may choose more than one program.
☑ Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies (1)
☑ Bachelor of Professional Studies in Health Sciences Management (2)
☑ Business and Professional Certificates (e.g., Accounting, Human Resources Management, Project Management, etc.) (3)
☑ I'm not sure. (4)

Display This Question:
If Q7. Select the program that your current (or most recent) SCPS online class(es) is (are) from. You may choose more than one program. Business and Professional Certificates (e.g., Accounting, Human Resources Management, Project Management, etc.) Is Selected

Q7a Select the program that your Business and Professional certificate class is from.
☑ Accounting (1)
☑ Cyber Security Management (2)
☑ eMarketing (3)
☑ Federal Acquisition (4)
☑ Health Sciences Management (5)
☑ Human Resources Management (6)
☑ Information Technology (7)
☑ Leadership (8)
☑ Leadership in Human Resources Management (9)
☑ Procurements and Contracts Management (10)
☑ Project Management (11)
☑ Public Administration (12)
☑ Public Relations (13)
☑ I'm not sure (14)
Q8. What is the total number of for-credit online courses that have you have ever completed? Include courses that you have completed at SCPS as well as those from other institutions.

- 1-2 (1)
- 3-5 (2)
- 6-10 (3)
- 10 or more (4)

Q9. Have you dropped out of an online course at SCPS in the past 12 months?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this study!

You will be contacted by the researcher (Kevin Lucey) within 2 business days with details on the next steps.

In the meantime, please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at kl4qw@virginia.edu or 434-243-7611.

Please click the blue "double arrow" button in the lower-right corner of the screen to submit this survey.
Appendix C: Interview Guide

Project: The Effect Of Motivation On Student Persistence In Online Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study Of How Adult Learners Experience Motivation In A Web-Based Distance Learning Environment

Time of Interview:
Date:
Location:
Participant Identifier:

Introduction:
1. The researcher will briefly review the following items with the interviewee:
   - Purpose of the study
   - Overview of the interview process, including an explanation of the MUSICSM Model of Motivation and how it will be used
   - Description of how the data will be managed to protect the confidentiality of the interviewee
2. Next, the researcher will ask the interviewee to review and sign the consent form.
3. Prior to beginning the interview, the researcher will then turn on and test the digital audio recorder.

Guiding Questions (tense may be adjusted depending on when the course occurred):

Empowerment
1. What choices did you have during the course?b
2. What could be changed in this course to make you feel you had more control over your learning?a
3. Which aspects of this course give you control over this course?a
4. Do you feel that the elements that we discussed in this category had any impact on your decision to complete/drop out of this course?

Usefulness
1. What do you find useful about this course?b
2. What could be changed in this course to make it more useful to you?a
3. Do you feel that the elements that we discussed in this category had any impact on your decision to complete/drop out of this course?

Success
1. What makes you feel successful in this course?b
2. What makes you feel as though you cannot be successful in this course?b
3. What could be changed in this course to help you feel you could be more successful in it?a
4. Do you feel that the elements that we discussed in this category had any impact on your decision to complete/drop out of this course?
Interest

1. What do you like about this course?b
2. What do you find interesting about this course?b
3. Which parts of this course are boring?b
4. What could be changed in this course to make it more interesting and enjoyable?a
5. Do you feel that the elements that we discussed in this category had any impact on your decision to complete/drop out of this course?

Caring

1. What could be changed in this course to make you feel that the instructor cares about whether you learn the course content and do well in the course?a
2. What does the instructor do to provide you with the impression that they care about whether you learn the course content and do well in the course?a
3. What does the instructor do to provide you with the impression that they care about you as a person?a
4. Do you feel that the elements that we discussed in this category had any impact on your decision to complete/drop out of this course?

Overall Motivation

1. Overall, do you feel that motivation played a role in your decision to complete/drop out of this course?
   • If so, what were the elements of the class and/or areas of the model that you feel most contributed to/detracted from your motivation?

Concluding Remarks:
The researcher will conclude the interview by taking the following steps:
1. Thank the interviewee for their cooperation and participation.
2. Ask the interviewee if they have any questions and then let them know how they can contact the researcher if a question comes up at a later date.
3. Assure the interviewee of the confidentiality of their identity.
4. Review the next steps, notably the procedures for reviewing the transcript of their interview.

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Appendix D: Permission to Use Questions From the MUSIC℠ Model

Subject: Re: Open-Ended Survey Questions & The MUSIC Model
Date: Monday, February 15, 2016 at 8:33:07 AM Eastern Standard Time
From: Brett D. Jones
To: Lucey, Kevin (kl4qw)

That sound good Kevin. You have my permission to use those open-ended items or modify them in any way as long as you cite the User Guide or the article most directly related.

Good luck!
Brett

On Mon, Feb 15, 2016 at 8:29 AM, Lucey, Kevin (kl4qw) <kl4qw@eservices.virginia.edu> wrote:

Hi Dr. Jones,

Thanks for the articles and also for the guidance on using open-ended questions to assess the constructs of the MUSIC model.

I am still in the early stages of putting my dissertation proposal together, but if it looks like I might want to adapt/create a qualitative instrument based on the MUSIC model, I will be in touch to request your permission to do so.

Thanks for your help!
Kevin

From: “Brett D. Jones” <brettjones@gmail.com>
Date: Monday, February 15, 2016 at 5:46 AM
To: Kevin Lucey <kl4qw@eservices.virginia.edu>
Subject: Re: Open-Ended Survey Questions & The MUSIC Model

Thanks for the message Kevin. If you're really interested in qualitative items, then you can items similar to those in the User Guide or those in some of the attached articles. The key is that they assess the constructs in the MUSIC model, the exact wording can be changed to meet your needs. It's more critical for quantitative items to stay exactly the same as the MUSIC inventory items.

Let me know if you have any questions and good luck!
Brett

On Sun, Feb 14, 2016 at 4:41 PM, Lucey, Kevin (kl4qw) <kl4qw@eservices.virginia.edu> wrote:

Hello Dr. Jones,
My name is Kevin Lucey, we briefly met at the Higher Ed Pedagogy conference last week after your presentation, *How to Diagnose and Improve Low Student Motivation in Your Courses* on Thursday morning.

I am a doctoral candidate at Duquesne University and I was the one who was asking about the MUSIC model and if it had ever been used to collect qualitative data.

You had mentioned that you had a few articles/papers on hand that I might be interested in where open-ended questions were used to assess students’ perceptions of the components of the MUSIC model.

I have visited your website and reviewed several of your articles, including the User Guide for the MUSIC model. I noticed in the User Guide that there is a section for open-ended questions starting on p. 39.

If you know of any other studies in which open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative data on the MUSIC model, please let me know. I am looking for an instrument to qualitatively assess the motivation of adult learners in the online learning environment.

Thanks so much for any help that you can provide!

Kevin Lucey

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Kevin Lucey  
*Instructional Design & Support Specialist*  

**University of Virginia | SCPS**  
104 Midmont Lane, Charlottesville, VA 22904  
Phone: 434.243.7611 | Fax: 434.281.5550  
www.scps.virginia.edu
Appendix E: Participant Consent Form

Duquesne University
Institutional Review Board
Protocol #2017/02/1
Initial Approval: 07/14/2017
Expires: 07/13/2018

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE:
The effect of motivation on student persistence in online higher education: A phenomenological study of how adult learners experience motivation in a web-based distance learning environment

INVESTIGATOR:
Kevin Lucey, MM
Ed.D. Candidate in Instructional Technology & Leadership
104 Midmont Lane
Charlottesville, VA 22904
434-243-7611 | luceyk@duq.edu

ADVISOR:
David D. Carbonara, Ed.D.
Assistant Professor
School of Education, Instructional Technology
327A Fisher Hall
600 Forbes Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15282
412-396-4039 | carbonara@duq.edu

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:
This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in the School of Education at Duquesne University.

PURPOSE:
You are being asked to participate in a research project that seeks to investigate the effect of motivation on adult online learners. Specifically, this project seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between motivation and student persistence in finishing an online course. In addition, this project seeks to learn more about which elements of the online learning environment are considered by adults to be the most (and/or least) motivating.

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In order to qualify for participation, you must be:

- At least 25 years of age, and
- Enrolled in at least one online class during the current or previous semester

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:

To participate in this study, you will be asked to complete a brief demographic survey. This survey will be administered online, contain 9 questions, and should take approximately 4-6 minutes to complete. In addition to completing a brief demographic profile, you will be asked to provide your contact information and answer a few questions about the online course(s) that you are currently or have recently been enrolled in at SCPS.

If you are selected for this study, you will be asked to allow the researcher to interview you. The audio from this interview will be recorded and transcribed into text. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be conducted in-person at the University of Virginia academic center that is the most convenient for you (e.g., Charlottesville, Richmond, Falls Church, Newport News, etc.) at a time and date of your choosing. If it is not possible to schedule an in-person interview, arrangements will be made to conduct the interview online using a live meeting application (e.g., Skype).

Following the interview, you will be sent a copy of the transcript. You will be asked to review this transcript in order to make sure that I have accurately captured your thoughts and perceptions. At this time you will be free to make any edits, deletions, or add any clarifying comments to the transcript that you see fit. Once you are through, you will be asked to return this annotated copy of the transcript to the researcher.

These are the only requests that will be made of you.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

If you are asked to reflect on an online class that you have successfully completed, there will be minimal risks associated with participating in this study, but no greater than those encountered in everyday life. However, if you are asked to reflect on an online class that you did not complete, the interview may bring about feelings of disillusionment, inadequacy, and failure.

Although there is no direct benefit to participating in this study, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that the information that you provide to the researcher may reveal new insights and will also contribute to the existing research on the relationship between motivation and retention in adult online learners.

COMPENSATION:

If you are selected for this study and complete the interview, you will be compensated for your time with a $25 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview.

Participation in this project will require no monetary cost to you.
CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your participation in this study and any personal information that you provide will be kept confidential at all times and to every extent possible.

The information that you provide in the online demographic survey will only be used to assist the researcher in choosing a participant pool for this study and will not appear in the final report. This information will be stored behind 2-factor authentication on the Qualtrics data collection platform. Qualtrics employs industry-leading standards for data security and meets or exceeds all federal requirements in this area (https://www.qualtrics.com/security-statement/).

In order to maintain the confidentiality of your identity, the recording (audio file) and transcript (text file) of your interview will be labeled with an anonymous identifier (e.g. Learner A, Learner B, etc.). The original copy of each of these files will be stored using an encrypted cloud storage service behind two-factor authentication, while a backup copy will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive that will be kept in a locked drawer in the researcher's home.

The only means of linking your name to your interview data will be through a Word document that attaches each of the participant's names to their respective anonymous identifier. The researcher is the only person who will have access to this document. This document (and a backup copy) will be stored securely following the protocol outlined above.

No names will be used in the final report. Any information that you provide during the interview that appears in the final report will be attributed to your anonymous identifier.

Any study materials with personal identifying information will be maintained for three years after the completion of the research and then destroyed.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

You are under no obligation to participate in this study. You are free to withdraw your consent to participate at any time. If you wish to withdraw from this study, simply inform the researcher by phone (434.243.7611) or email (kl4qw@virginia.edu). Any data already collected will be destroyed.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read the above statements and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.
I understand that should I have any further questions about my participation in this study, I may call the researcher, Kevin Lucey at 434.243.7611, or his doctoral advisor, Dr. David Carbonara at 412.396.4039. Should I have any questions regarding protection of human subject issues, I may contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board, at 412.396.1886 or Dr. Tonya Moon, Chair of the University of Virginia Institutional Review Board for Social and Behavioral Sciences at 434.924.0823.

________________________________________________________________________

Participant’s Signature

Date

________________________________________________________________________

Researcher’s Signature

Date