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Professor Perceptions of Grit in Baccalaureate Online Education

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Professor Perceptions of Grit in Baccalaureate Online Education

by

Erica M. Aiken

MA, Virginia Tech, 2014

BS, Bluefield State College, 2011

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Undergraduate students who enroll in online courses and degree programs often struggle to make progress. Researchers have suggested that noncognitive traits like grit may contribute to student success. However, findings on grit have been conflicting and there is no research on professors' perceptions. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore professor perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, particularly its role in student progress and if there were any implications for teaching practice. Dewey's pragmatism, Garrison et al.'s CoI framework, and Rogers' diffusion of innovations theory came together to form the conceptual framework for this study. The research questions for this study were about professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate student progress and teaching practice. Data for this study came from semi-structured interviews with 10 professors from a small college in rural Appalachia. Interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and then hand coded and sorted into categories and themes. The findings from this study revealed that professors found grit to be integral in baccalaureate online education, serving as a glue holding positive behaviors together to promote student progress toward goals. Participants also believed that grit was a worthy subject for their own research and that professors should strive to develop grit in their online baccalaureate students. Findings from this study support social change through promoting student retention and progress in the online baccalaureate environment.

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Dedication

This study is dedicated to my three little bears: Walt, Winter, and Stella. I write this dissertation in memory of my beloved son who passed away in July of 2020. Walt, I simply cannot believe that I experienced your entire little life in the length of this program. I will miss your smiles, giggles, and encouragement. All that I do is to honor you and your sisters.

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I first must thank my advisor, mentor, and life coach, Dr. Jennifer Courduff. Your positivity is contagious, and I hope to be half the professor and researcher you are one day. You taught me a great deal about research, but most of all, you walked me through some of the darkest days of my life. You always found a way to show me the light. Oh captain, my captain! I need you as an advisor forever.

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Many thanks to my classmates and professors who have helped me along this journey to earning a PhD. I have learned so much from all of you. Thank you for the time you took to work with me on making this study happen! You all made school fun.

Finally, thank you to my family and friends who feel like family. To my parents and in-laws who were a constant source of emotional support (and nearly constant source of childcare), thank you! To my best friend, Brittany, who helped me laugh and hash out my ideas, I couldn't have made it through this process without you. Finally, thank you to my loving and supportive husband, Greg, who endured many hours of solo parenting so that I could write, read, and re-write.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

Undergraduate students have increasingly enrolled in online courses in the United States (Bettinger et al., 2017). The online classroom has allowed for students to learn anytime and anywhere with Internet access. Yet, students still struggle to pass these courses and degree programs (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Retaining online students and keeping them on track for timely graduation is a top priority for colleges and universities (Bowman et al., 2015). Researchers have studied the skills and behaviors that promote student retention. Recent studies have suggested noncognitive factors, one being grit, can promote retention in online courses and degree programs (Sharp & Sharp, 2016; Alqurashi, 2016). McClendon, Neugebaur, and King (2017) have suggested that teachers utilize strategies like deliberate practice for developing grit in online learners. There have been quantitative studies on the relationship between grit and student outcomes in online courses (Buzzetto-Hollywood, et al., 2019; Bazelais, 2016; Stewart, 2015). However, there have not been any qualitative studies about professors' knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, particularly their perceptions of the role of grit in student progress and teaching practice.

The purpose of this study was to explore professors' knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. I attempted to fill a gap in the literature as there are few qualitative studies exploring grit in online higher education, and none have been found that center on professor perceptions (Almeida, 2017; Gonzales, 2017). Studying grit within a qualitative framework using innovative as it

provided insight into the thoughts, experience, and practical expertise of online professors. The findings from this study could create positive social change by contributing to understanding if grit makes students successful in online undergraduate courses. The findings could also contribute to online teaching practice. In Chapter 1, I introduce the study through the background, problem, and purpose of the study. I detail the research questions, along with an overview of the conceptual framework and nature of the study. Finally, I explain the definitions of key terms, the assumptions, limitations, and significance of the study.

Background

Noncognitive factors play a role in online student retention (Bowman et al., 2019). The current body of literature on grit's relationship to student progress in online baccalaureate classes is conflicting. Some studies show a significant relationship between students' grit score and outcomes (Milward, et al., 2016; Dumke, et al., 2018; Saunders-Scott, et al., 2017), while others find only moderate or no relationship (Buzzetto-Hollywood, et al., 2019; Bazelais, 2016; Stewart, 2015; Ivcevic, 2014; West, 2015). None of these studies have been qualitative in design. Also, none of these studies focused on professors' knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. None of these studies focused on professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate student progress. No studies have explored professors' thoughts on integrating their knowledge of grit into their teaching practice. Therefore, the gap for this study was the lack of understanding of professor knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, and if that impacts student progress or teaching

practice. This study is needed to inform future research on the role of grit in promoting student retention.

Problem Statement

The problem for this study is the lack of understanding of professors' knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online education, particularly grit's role in student progress and teaching practice. Colleges and universities throughout the United States have moved to offering courses and entire degree programs in the online format. However, these online courses and programs struggle to retain students (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Researchers have identified the skills and behaviors that promote success in online students (Kauffman, 2015; Sharp & Sharp, 2016). Recent retention literature studied noncognitive factors' relationship with student progress (Bowman et al., 2019). One noteworthy noncognitive factor is Duckworth's (2014) grit, or the ability for a student to maintain intense interest for a goal despite setbacks. Some researchers have found a positive relationship between grit and academic performance in online courses (Aparicio et al., 2017; Wang & Baker, 2018), while others found only moderate or no relationship between the two (Kai Lai Lam & Zhou, 2019; Holdan et al., 2018). Other researchers are encouraging professors and retention experts to use strategies to develop grit in online students despite those conflicting findings (McClendon et al., 2017; Chuijitarom & Pirivasurawong, 2018). I seek to add qualitative data to the body of literature by interviewing professors regarding their knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. This study is important because the

findings might add to the scholarly discussion related to the merit of studying grit as a factor to promote student retention in online learning.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to better understand professor perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online education, particularly the role of grit in student progress and in teaching practice. In order to address the lack of qualitative, professor-focused studies in the grit in online higher education literature, I crafted research questions that were aligned to the problem and purpose of this study, and best lead to a basic qualitative design. I created a guide and interviewed professors on perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online education. I also asked professors about the role of grit in student progress as well as professors' own teaching practice (McClendon et al., 2017).

Research Questions

To explore professor perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online education, the study centered on the following research question and sub-questions.

RQ1. How do professors describe the role of grit in baccalaureate online education?

SRQ1. What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online student progress?

SRQ2. What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online teaching practice?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was grounded in three theories: Dewey's (1938) pragmatism, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) CoI, and Rogers' (2003)

diffusion theory. Dewey's (1938) theories of pragmatism and experiential learning provide insight into how everyone, including students and professors, learns through experience. Garrison et al.'s (2001) CoI theory builds on Dewey's (1938) pragmatism by defining the three presences that make up an effective model for online learning. These two theories formed the underpinnings for the research sub-questions on teacher knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate student progress and teaching practice. Garrison et al.'s (2000) explanation of teaching, social, and cognitive presence in online classes aided in understanding professor experiences. The presences also appeared during thematic coding cycles of the interview data. Rogers' (2003) diffusion theory provided an outline of how people within an organization learn of innovations and incorporate those innovations into their practice. This theory provided a lens for questioning professors on how they obtained the knowledge they have about grit as an innovative noncognitive trait. It also helped me to understand if and how teachers incorporated their knowledge and perceptions of grit into their online teaching practice. I decided to conduct this study at Small State College (SSC) which is a pseudonym to protect participant anonymity. I chose this setting to consider the diffusion of grit as an online learning innovation among online professors in one organization. In sum, the research questions centered on grit in the online classroom and teacher's knowledge, perceptions, and practice. The figure below illustrates the links between the research questions' three factors and the three theories that form the conceptual framework.

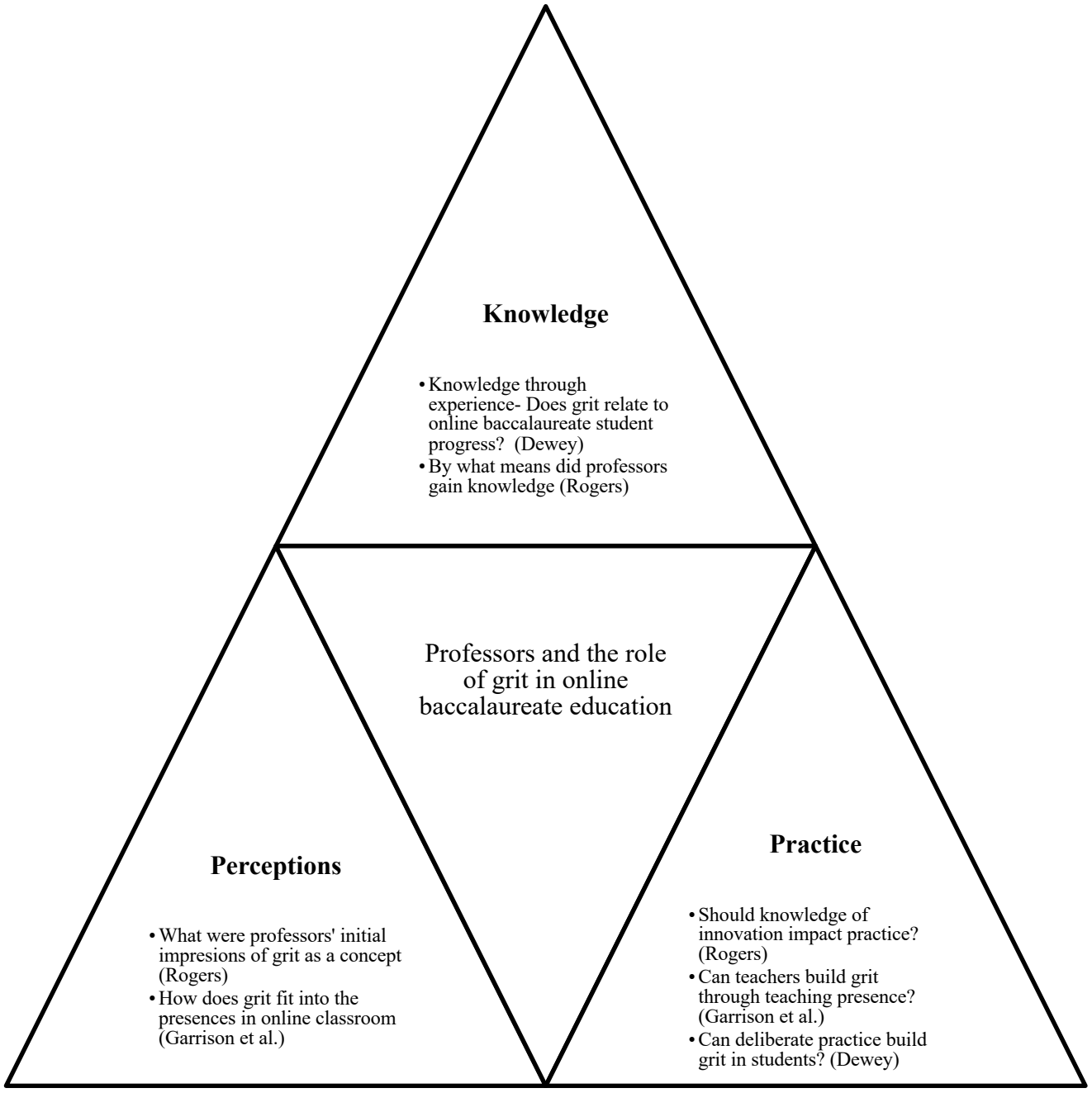

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Alignment to Research Question Components

All three theories and their applications to the formation of this study appear at length in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

Since the purpose of this study was to explore professor knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, and if that had any impact on student progress or teaching practice. A qualitative design was the best fit for my study as it is the best framework for understanding participant thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Patton, 2015). Authors in the field have called for qualitative work to understand the relationship between grit and student outcomes, as well as how grit should inform policy and practice in higher education (Dumke, et al., 2017; Almeida, 2017; Gonzales, 2017, Pryiomka, 2018). The basic qualitative design was the best fit for this study as it is one of the first studies on grit with a qualitative methodology. In this study, I answered that call for qualitative data and professor interviews. To read more about why a basic qualitative methodology was chosen for this study instead of other methods, see Chapter 3.

For this study, I interviewed 10 professors at SSC. I utilized a purposeful sampling strategy to select professors who have taught online and should have enough experience to provide rich interview data (Patton, 2015). Since this study was exploratory with a qualitative framework, I did not limit my selection criteria for professors to particular class levels (freshman, senior, etc.) or content areas. When recruiting professors to participate in the study, I did not invite those who are part of special protected populations. After the interviews, professors were invited to participate in a

follow-up interview in order to triangulate the data (Patton, 2015). The provost of SSC provided me with a list of professors who I could recruit for interviews. I contacted potential participants via email. After participants agreed to join the study, I had them read and sign the informed consent form and set up the interviews. I actively transcribed and coded data throughout the interview process in order to determine if I had reached saturation (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Definitions

The terms defined in this section were used throughout the study.

Asynchronous Learning: For this study, asynchronous learning refers to the ability for students to access and engage with online course content anytime and anywhere as long as they have Internet access (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Cognitive Presence: Cognitive presence is one of the three presences as defined by Garrison et al. (2000). Cognitive presence refers to the student's ability to interact with course content and build knowledge and skills.

Grit: This study utilizes grit as defined by Duckworth et al. (2014), which states that grit is a psychological factor made up of sustaining interest and ability to persist to reach long-term goals in the face of adversity.

Noncognitive Factors: Factors other than cognitive ability that can contribute to student success and retention in online higher education learning environments. These include character skills, twenty first century competencies, or social and emotional learning (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015).

Online Learning: In this study, online learning encompasses the web-enhanced systems for taking courses or programs in higher education (Garrison et al., 2000).

Social Presence: Social presence is another of the three presences that form the CoI model. Social presence refers to the learner's engagement with other learners and the instructor within the course, and how this can drive connection and engagement within the community (Garrison et al., 2000).

Student Progress: In this study, student progress refers to a student's ability to turn in assignments, perform well on assessments, and make progress towards their degrees in a timely manner. Student progress is necessary for student retention (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Teaching Practice: In this study, teaching practice encompasses the professor's teaching presence and social presence within the online course. For example, it can include the way the professor structures assignments and activities. It can also include the professor's social interactions with students in the course (Garrison et al., 2000).

Teaching Presence: Teaching presence is the third presence from the CoI model. Teaching presence refers to the professor's ability to create and control the learner's content and assignments within the course (Garrison et al., 2000).

Assumptions

Qualitative researchers should be forthcoming with their assumptions in order to ensure the reliability of the study (Levitt et al., 2018). In this study, I relied on two assumptions. First, I assumed that the professors who choose to participate in my study would be forthcoming and honest in their interview responses. My trust and reliance in

their honesty were necessary for me to form a comfortable bond and conduct interviews that provided rich qualitative data (Patton, 2015). Second, I assumed that the findings from this study will either suggest that professors perceive that grit does or does not have an impact on student progress in online baccalaureate courses. These findings should support further research on noncognitive factors that play a role in online student retention.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to one institution, SSC, in the Appalachian Mountains of the United States of America. The population for the study consisted of full time and adjunct faculty members who taught baccalaureate courses online. Teachers who teach only face-to-face courses were not included in the study as they could not answer the research questions. To ensure that the study was trustworthy, I used reflexive practices throughout the research process. SSC's provost provided me with a list of faculty members who taught courses online. I used that list to conduct purposeful sampling. For a detailed discussion of the practices to promote trustworthiness in this study, turn to chapter 3.

In order to promote accessibility for the researcher, I chose professors to participate in this study from the main campus of SSC. I interviewed 10 participants. Both the research site and number of participants were fitting for a qualitative study (Patton, 2015). Participants had taught online classes for at least one semester to ensure that they had adequate experience to provide thick and rich qualitative interview data

(Patton, 2015). I invited professors who complete the interview phase of data collection to participate in a follow-up interview.

Limitations

For this study, the first limitation was that it was a basic qualitative interview study that included participants from only one study site. Secondly, students, administrators, and other staff members on campus did not participate. Third, and most importantly, I was an adjunct for the institution where I conducted research and I attended this school as an undergraduate student. As the primary researcher, I remained aware of my biases and mitigated any that arose. Practices to control researcher bias can include reflective journaling, member checks, and reviewing findings with peers (Patton, 2015).

Significance

This study was significant in that it could address the gap in the literature by revealing professors' knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. This study was meaningful to the field of education, because my findings could also reveal if professors' perceptions of grit have had any influence in their online teaching practice. The study will contribute to the larger body of literature on grit in online higher education, particularly professor perceptions as I have found no research on this. Through the study, I recommended further professional development on developing grit in online courses. In the long term, this study could result in positive social change by supporting the effort to improve college retention and timely graduation.

Summary

Chapter 1 introduced the major underpinnings for this study, including the background, problem, purpose, and research questions. There were also sections introducing the conceptual framework and basic qualitative methodology. Finally, the chapter concluded with considerations regarding the assumptions, scope, and limitations of the project. In Chapter 2, I further develop the conceptual framework with Dewey's (1938) pragmatism, Garrison et al.'s (2001) CoI, and Rogers' (2003) diffusion theory. Then I provide an overview of recent research relevant to the factors at play in this study, and further define a gap that justifies the purpose and research questions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

While many students are enrolling in online degree programs, they are not all completing these programs (Frioriksdóttir, 2018; Sorensen and Donovan, 2017). Retention experts and college administrators are continually searching for avenues to promote student retention in online courses and degree programs (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Some of the new literature points to non-cognitive factors, particularly grit, as a means for promoting student success (Duckworth et al., 2007; Duckworth & Gross, 2014). However, the majority of studies on the role of grit in student success and retention have been quantitative in design and focused on the students. The problem for this study is that little is known about professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. The purpose of this generic qualitative study is to explore professors' perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online education, and how grit relates to student progress and teaching practice.

There are more students enrolled in online baccalaureate courses, and yet many of these students fail to pass their courses or graduate from their degree programs in a timely manner (Allen, et al., 2016). In order to support student success, researchers and administrators are turning their attention toward noncognitive factors that may support student success (Shaw et al., 2016). One of the most popular noncognitive factors in the literature is Duckworth's (2016) grit. While the research on grit has shown some links to positive student outcomes, the vast majority of this research has been both quantitative and centered on student grit scores. The findings have not always consistently shown a

positive correlation between grit scores and grade point average (GPA), therefore my study will supplement this body of literature with a greater understanding of professor knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, particularly student progress and teaching practice.

At the onset of this project, I completed the Research Process Conjecture Map. In this literature review, I began by researching all articles about grit in education published within the last five years. Once I felt that I had sufficiently reviewed that body of research, I moved onto the other broad, but key factors, including online learning, student success in online classes and programs, and noncognitive factors promoting student success. Finally, I looked for studies that might connect grit to student progress in online education.

Table 1

Research Process Conjecture Map

Theoretical conjectures based on theoretical framework	**Embodied conjectures: Research Questions**	**Embodied conjectures: Data needs**	**Intermediate outcomes: Data sources**	**Objective outcomes: Data analysis**
Learning interactions and experiences can shape thought processes and learning outcomes (Dewey)	RQ1: How do professors describe the role of grit in baccalaureate online education? SRQ1: What are professors'	Participant descriptions of experience teaching online courses and knowledge of grit as linked to student	Semi-structured interviews	Demonstration of knowledge: Descriptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online courses and the possible role of grit in

Noncognitive factors can impact teaching presence and social presence in a CoI (Garrison et al.)	perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online student progress?	progress in this context		student progress
Diffusion of information (Rogers)	SRQ2: What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online teaching practice?	Participant descriptions of experience teaching online courses and knowledge of grit as linked to student progress in this context	Semi-structured interviews	Demonstration of perceptions: implications on how knowledge is transferred into practice in online baccalaureate learning environments

This chapter has four sections. First is the literature search strategy, followed by the theoretical framework section. After that is the literature related to key variables section, and finally the summary and conclusions section.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature for this review was obtained through searching the following databases and search engines: Academic Search Complete, Arts & Humanities Citation Index, Business Source Complete, Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC), Education Source, PsycINFO, Directory of Open Access Journals, Project MUSE, Opposing Viewpoints in Context, Psychiatry Online, Emerald Insight, Google, Google Scholar, Proquest Dissertations, and Dissertations and Theses @ Walden. The United

States Department of Education and National Center for Education Statistics websites were also used as data sources. The keywords used to obtain results in various combinations were: *grit, online learning, online learning in higher education, post-secondary online education, e-learning, motivation, noncognitive factors for student success, higher education student success, teaching online courses, teaching in higher education, online courses, undergraduate online courses, student success, student retention, factors promoting student retention, post-secondary education, student self-regulation skills, diffusion theory, constructivist theory.*

The exhaustive research and review of the literature centered on peer-reviewed articles published between 2015 and 2020. Any older articles or books included in the literature review were seminal works essential to establishing the theories in the conceptual framework. The data from public education sites was useful to reinforce suggestions on the number of students enrolled in online undergraduate programs as well as the numbers of students dropping out of those programs. After conducting the review of the literature, it was evident that there were no apparent studies combining the same variables as this dissertation: professor perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. Since there were no other works on professor perceptions of the role of grit in online student progress, I focused on the mostly quantitative and few qualitative studies that made a case for grit as a factor in online higher education student progress. I supplemented those articles with other publications suggesting implementing programs and practices to develop student grit in undergraduate online courses. Saturation of the literature was achieved through the reviews of academic journals,

books, educational websites, and dissertations. This saturation was confirmed through checking citations of the most recent publications to ensure that all relevant articles were also included in my study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework drives this entire study. Dewey's (1938) theory of pragmatism and constructivism, Garrison et al.'s (2010) CoI framework, and Rogers' (2003) theory of diffusion of innovations provided foundational support for the research and interview questions and data collections methods. Dewey's (1938) theory of pragmatism and constructivism provides a basis for experience driving learning, which is true in the online baccalaureate classroom as well as for the professors seeking to understand noncognitive factors that support student success. Garrison et al. (2010) developed the CoI framework, which takes experiential learning into the online classroom. This framework gives researchers a way to understand the perceptions and experiences of teachers and students in an online environment. Experiential learning can be positive or negative, which forms an underpinning for Rogers' (2003) diffusion theory, as forming a positive or negative judgment of an innovation has everything to do with how quickly it is adapted. As grit continues to appear as an important noncognitive factor for success in educational literature despite being primarily studied in quantitative methods, it is worthwhile to explore what knowledge professors have on the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, as well as their perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate student progress and teaching practice.

Dewey's Pragmatism

In the pragmatic school, philosophers believed that what was practical should drive our pursuit and use of knowledge (Dewey, 1959). Pragmatics believed that humans mature and develop through experiences and that the accumulation of experiences coincides with attaining knowledge. Some theorists have taken these tenets and applied them to the education system.

John Dewey sought to understand and improve the conditions for education in order to create positive social change for all. Dewey (1938), through his understanding of education and philosophy, developed his own unique theory of pragmatism. His application of pragmatism called for educators to encourage hands-on learning experiences for their students (Dewey, 1959).

For students to have the best chances at success, Dewey (1938) encouraged educators to avoid rote memorization, which was the predominant pedagogical practice at the time. Instead, teachers should find ways to activate and build upon students' prior knowledge and experiences. By tapping into that past knowledge and those experiences, students would find the material both meaningful and useful and would be more likely to master the learning objectives (Dewey, 1938). Likewise, Dewey (1938) also encouraged students to take a hand in creating their own learning goals so that they might take more responsibility for their own learning. Dewey (1938) asserted that teachers could create connections with students through lessons that could nurture and engage.

Though the technology of Dewey's world was quite different than today, his strategies remain applicable to modern learning environments. Dewey (1959) asserted

that when learning through experience, the experiences could be either positive or negative, which impacted the takeaways for the students. Positive experiences led students to want to try new things. Negative experiences led them to avoid learning new concepts, and these students had a more negative attitude towards their education broadly. When students were not engaged in experiential learning, they were far more likely to be reluctant learners (Dewey, 1938). The happiest learners were those who had positive experiential learning in a variety of home, school, and social settings. The organic learning that came through everyday experiences empowered students to grow into those social systems equipped with the knowledge and power to create positive social change (Dewey, 1959).

Dewey's pragmatic theories for education aligned with the central research question of this study, as professors had to consider the knowledge that they have gained on grit and how they perceived that knowledge as coupled with their experiences in the online classroom. As mentioned before, though Dewey did not have access to the technology that we do today, his considerations for creating an innovative learning environment would align with studying new innovations that could foster student achievement. This study connected to those assertions two-fold, as grit is an innovative concept that may eventually be embedded into pedagogical choices, and that the learning environment in this study was entirely online.

Dewey in Current Research

Dewey's (1938) theoretical work on education and experience was foundational for the contemporary CoI theoretical framework. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010)

said that the CoI framework functioned on the assumptions from Dewey's work. Namely, both Dewey and CoI "believed that inquiry was a social activity and went to the essence of an educational experience" (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 6). All three of the major presences that appeared in a CoI- social, cognitive, and teaching- were built upon experiential learning concepts from Dewey (Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009). Therefore, it was best to explore and include the CoI conceptual framework in this study in order to apply Dewey's (1938) constructivist teachings to an online learning environment, which was the setting for this study.

CoI

Dewey (1938) wrote extensively about experiential learning in the face-to-face classroom, and Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung (2010) modernized the understandings to the online classroom. The authors created a framework to understand the interplay of various experiences and perceptions of the teachers and students in a CoI in online or blended classes. The conceptual framework provided a methodology for studying the effectiveness of learning experiences in an online setting. The three major presences that drive experiential learning in CoI are social, cognitive, and teaching. When students are socially and cognitively present and collaborate and discuss with peers and the instructor, they create new knowledge (Garrison et al., 2010). All three presences interplay to create learning and all of the subsequent literature utilizing CoI attempts to understand how those presences work together to drive learning.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence in a CoI consists of three components. First, instructors design and organize the content, schedules, and learning activities within the course. The second was the instructor's ability to guide discussions and foster collaboration among the students in the online classroom. Third, instructors were responsible for content instruction. While teaching presence isn't the only factor driving student learning, it did set the foundation and expectations for learning within the course (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Some studies have shown that teaching presence can be positively related to student satisfaction (Akyol & Garrison, 2014; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2016).

Social Presence

Social presence constitutes the student's ability to create relationships in the classroom (Garrison, 2007; Garrison et al., 2000, 2010). Communication, open communication, and group cohesion were three aspects of student social presence. Social presence encompasses social and emotional connections that students make in online learning environments (Garrison et al., 2000). It is difficult to analyze social presence without considering cognitive and instructor presence in any given course (Garrison, 2007). Collaboration among students is a driving force for social presence.

Cognitive Presence

Students are able to learn content, explore new information, and apply their learning through cognitive presence in the CoI (Garrison et al., 2010). This presence occurs through four phases of developing of inquiry: triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution. The effectiveness of cognitive presence within a CoI was

largely dependent on the quality of communication among students and instructors in the online course (Garrison et al., 2000).

CoI in Current Research

Current research utilizing the CoI framework both explores technological tools that could support communication and tries to look at the presences in isolation to determine effects on student outcomes. Positive social presence in a course has been linked to greater student self-efficacy (Hayashi, Chen, Ryan, & Wu, 2020). Richardson, Maeda, Lv, and Caskurlu's (2017) meta-analysis also showed positive correlations between social presence and course satisfaction as well as perceived learning within the course. Wang & Shan (2018) turned the tables and found that learners with greater motivation and self-efficacy were likely to demonstrate higher levels of cognitive presence, and therefore suggested teachers develop strategies to further develop motivation in their online students. Holbeck and Hartman (2018) argued that certain technological tools, including digital escape rooms, Flipgrid, Remind, and Loom to improve communication and therefore all three of the presences in the CoI framework.

This framework was helpful for this study, as professors may consider aspects of the CoI presences that could mitigate grit and its impact on student progress and teaching practice in online courses. Likewise, the underlying elements of all three presences informed the development of the research questions and interview guide. Nevertheless, since grit and noncognitive factors are newly being considered in online learning environments, they can be considered innovative components. Therefore, it was also best

to consider a framework that explores the way innovative concepts diffuse through organizations and impact practice.

Diffusion of Innovation Theory

Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovation theory offers insight into how members of an organization adopt and adapt to new innovations including technology and new ideas. Within this model, the adoption of the innovation occurs at the individual level and over time (Costa & Walsh, 2018). It is the individual and his or her attitude that decides how quickly he or she moves through the process of adopting the change (Raynard, 2017). This theory is helpful in developing a model to understand professor knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online student success.

According to Roger's (2003) theory, change occurs throughout five stages: knowledge, persuasion, decision, implementation, and confirmation. All individuals within the organization must follow these five steps in order to adapt an innovation into their practices, though the speed at which they go through these steps varies among individuals. In the first step, knowledge, the individuals in the organization learn about the innovation. The second step is persuasion, where the individuals make a positive or negative judgment towards the new technology or idea. Third, decision is when the individual may be pressured by leadership, participate in professional development, or conduct his or her own research to create self-knowledge. During the fourth step, implementation, the individual finally begins to work with or apply the innovation. Finally, during the confirmation stage, the individual decides if he or she made the right decision to implement the innovation. The more people who adopt an innovation in a

workplace, the more likely it is that others will also utilize that innovation (Rogers, 2003; Shaban & Egbert, 2018; Barbour & Schuessler, 2019).

Rogers (2003) wrote extensively about communication channels that carry information throughout the organization to individuals. They could include mass media in the forms of television, the Internet, radio, etc., and are popular sources of the knowledge base that individuals form about an innovation. Interpersonal channels, however, such as personal networks, hold more sway when it comes to the eventual decision to adopt or reject an innovation. If an individual perceives that peers are adopting the innovation, he or she is more likely to adopt the innovation as well rather than if the information came from a mass media communication channel (Rogers, 2003).

The way in which the innovation was introduced has some weight in how quickly the individual will accept and use the new technology or idea. Nevertheless, innovativeness is another important factor that Rogers (2003) characterized as "the degree to which an individual (or other decision-making unit) is relatively earlier in adopting new ideas than other members of a social system" (p. 22). Rogers (2003) also categorized five groups of people according to their propensity to innovate. These five groups are innovators, early adopters, early majority, late adopters, and laggards. Not surprisingly, the innovators are quick to accept and adapt to new innovations without extra encouragement. Next, Early adopters are often part of the organization's leadership and open to new technology and ideas but may need more instruction and training in order to feel comfortable implementing the change. After that, the early majority adopts the innovation slightly before the average person but wants to see more data to prove that

the technology or new idea will be useful and effective. Next, the late majority eventually adopt the innovation, but it takes more time to convince these members of the organization as they are skeptical of transformation. Finally, there are the laggards. They require the most success stories, statistics, and even pressure from leadership in order to adopt an innovation (Rogers, 2003).

Diffusion of Innovations in Current Research

Diffusion of innovations theory is a popular framework for researchers who study how technological innovations are adapted in educational contexts. The framework can adapt to examine a variety of innovations across education. The diffusion of innovations framework can allow researchers to gauge the effectiveness and levels of implementation of technology in order to suggest models for professional development (Shaban & Egbert, 2018). Other recent research has offered suggestions to librarians looking to utilize more e-books with students and professors in higher education settings (Raynard, 2017). Costa and Walsh (2018), found that the easier the innovation was perceived by stakeholders, the more quickly they would adapt to that innovation, which in this case was distance education at a small university. Other researchers, such as Barbour and Schuessler (2019), also encouraged administrators to make innovative practices, such as the flipped classroom model for nursing education, accessible for faculty and students to encourage implementation.

Therefore, this was a useful model for considering professor perceptions of grit in baccalaureate online education as well as its potential role in teaching practice. Grit is a noncognitive behavioral trait, which would be considered an innovation by Rogers'

(2003) definition as something new that could change practice. Since some publications were encouraging professors to consider grit in online higher education environments and even course design (McClendon et al., 2017), it was worth investigating how professors perceive grit as an innovation to be adapted. Small State College (SSC) was a fitting venue to explore how the innovation is being diffused, as it allowed the researcher to consider the unique dynamics impacting implementation of the innovation.

The following sections will detail online baccalaureate education and noncognitive factors that promote student progress, particularly grit. Both Dewey's pragmatic theory and Roger's theory of diffusion of innovations helped to frame the study by forming a foundation for how people learn, students or professors, and how new innovations work themselves through an organization and become adapted by members of that organization. Faculty at SSC might have been exposed to grit in professional development and possibly through the mass media explosion of the concept. Through interviews, I gleaned faculty's knowledge about the role of grit in online student progress as well as professors' perceptions about the role of grit in online teaching practice. I better understand how the faculty members came to have these perceptions, and their attitudes towards continuing forward with implementing strategies to develop grit in baccalaureate online students.

Literature Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Online Learning in Higher Education

With the increasing access to technology and broadband, students can now access their classes on the web. The Internet can bring information and the potentials for

collaboration all the way to the ends of the globe so long as there is infrastructure (Muljana & Luo, 2019). People can become scholars for free or choose to enroll in a world-class education program and complete all of the coursework from their homes. With such great potential for colleges and universities, the push for quality online courses and degree programs will only continue to grow as time moves on (Muljana & Luo, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics' 2018 report found that nearly 10% of men and women enroll in degree programs that are entirely online, and nearly half of all students take at least one class online in their baccalaureate degrees (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Online courses provide a financially savvy business investment for higher education institutions, and they afford opportunities to students and faculty alike.

Learning to teach online can be challenging and yet familiar in some ways for faculty. In two of the national surveys, professors have shown a heavy amount of uncertainty and reluctance towards teaching online (Allen et al., 2016; Jaschik & Lederman, 2016). Professors who teach online have professional development opportunities. For some, that may mean searching out the current empirical research online, but for many there are courses offered through organizations like Quality Matters (Robinson & Wizer, 2016). Just as in face-to-face classes, teachers must balance their pedagogical, social, and managerial roles in the classrooms. Uniquely to the online environment, the teacher must take on more technical responsibilities to support student learning (Kebritchi, et al., 2017). Just because students are enrolled in an online course does not mean that they are fluent in software and programs (Kauffman, 2015). In many

cases, the professors themselves need significant technological support (Martin & Ndoye, 2016).

Online learning is more student centered as the professors must design content that can be accessed asynchronously. In the online classroom, professors have moved from more traditional, teacher-centered instructional methods to student-centered methods to facilitate learning (Martin & Ndoye, 2016). It is difficult at times in order for instructors to see evidence of student participation and engagement outside of original contributions, but online students spent the vast majority of their time reading and observing (Kebritchi, et al., 2017). Despite these challenges, some students are able to complete their online coursework successfully, thereby obtaining their degrees and going on to become productive citizens (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

The greatest problem facing students, professors, and higher education administrators when it comes to online courses is the dropout rate (Allen & Seaman, 2014). Unfortunately, for many students, keeping up in an online environment proves too much to handle in addition to the typical stresses of life. If the students face significant personal challenges from their families, finances, or careers and cannot engage themselves in learning in that environment, they are far more likely to drop out of the course or program (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; McClendon et al., 2017). The quality of the learning environment can be a driving factor in student success (Scarpin et al., 2018; McClendon, et al., 2017). Some faculty would prefer the classes still be taught in a traditional, face-to-face environment (Willett et al., 2019). This could be because many faculty members believe that online classes do not properly meet the needs of at-risk

students or adequately engage those struggling students in the content of the class (Jaschik & Lederman, 2016). Some research supports this, as there have been studies that have found that students enrolled in online college classes have lower grades in the online classes and subsequent classes, and tend to be less successful than those students who exclusively take face-to-face courses (Bettinger et al., 2017; Kauffman, 2015). Nevertheless, with the demand continually growing for online options to support working adults, colleges and universities must find ways to support student success in online learning.

The problem that emerges from studying online higher education formed an underpinning for the social problem in this study. Too many students were struggling to complete their online courses and online degree programs. While professors were working to ensure quality online learning environments, they have to had considered what factors supported student progress.

Student Success in Online Learning

Higher education student success is a term that can have a variety of definitions. For the purpose of this study it means that students are able to earn a passing grade in an individual course, or a degree from an online program. Students who want to be successful in these courses must have a great deal of time-management skills in order to balance the demands of school, work, and family (Kebritchi et al., 2017).

Students often perform the best in online and college environments if they have the ability to work within small cohorts and develop relationships (Bonet & Walters, 2016) In many cases, adequate course design, and clear and consistent instructor presence

will support student success in online learning environments, as found in the qualitative study of professors by Rios, Elliott, and Mandernach (2018). Those professors who assign collaborative work with clear rubrics for engagement are more likely to have students engaged in their classes (Kebritchi et al., 2017). Students themselves tend to be more satisfied in online courses if they are conscientious and open to new experiences (Cohen & Baruth, 2017; Kauffman, 2015). Publications, conferences, and professional development opportunities for professors offer similar advice for structuring classes to maximize student engagement.

College students are not alone in their quest for success as colleges are fighting the war to retain students on all fronts—both online and in face-to-face environments. Some of the most popular ways colleges strive to retain students is through student support services such as tutoring, advising, and academic early warning indicator systems. In online settings, colleges can develop websites with quick links to orientation information, writing and referencing guides, and an all-in-one website with links to all of the popular student support services (Eaton et al., 2018). Aside from academic advising and student support services, universities were looking for other ways to support student success in online settings, which may have called for considering developing behaviors or other non-cognitive factors in the students.

Non-cognitive Factors Promoting Student Success in Online Learning

Non cognitive factors were one aspect of struggling students gaining attention in scholarly literature. Students in online courses must employ self-regulation, resilience, persistence, and conscientiousness. One of the more popular non-cognitive traits in recent

study has been growth mindset. Dweck (2013) described growth mindset as an individual's ability to see opportunity in experience and be more positive in the face of setbacks. Those students who have growth mindset are more likely to value their ability to work hard over how they appear to others or even grades. In an online setting, that means that individuals with growth mind set see opportunities in the asynchronous nature of learning rather than hurdles to jump in order to pass the course (McClendon et al., 2017). Achieving growth mindset may open students up to developing further behaviors that will support their academic achievement.

Researchers have long explored the role of student self-regulation and its links to success in face-to-face courses, and more recently in online courses. According to Sharp and Sharp (2016) "self-regulation involves learners' use of metacognitive and motivational processes to accomplish self-set goals" (p. 58). The term encompasses all activities students take on in order to monitor their own learning. Indeed, Pintrich's (2004) theoretical and conceptual underpinnings for self-regulation in college learners relied on some of the same underpinnings from Dewey's (1938) pragmatism. Learners are responsible for their own learning, they can monitor their own motivation and behavior, they can set and monitor goals towards their learning, and that self-regulation encompasses the individual, environmental, and achievement. There are a variety of behaviors that fall under the umbrella of self-regulation skills, but it's clear that online students must have the ability to set goals and monitor their own learning in order to meet the course outcomes.

Student self-efficacy is another noncognitive factor linked to online student success. Bandura (1997) defined student self-efficacy as a student's ability to believe in himself or herself to organize and execute the actions needed to attain goals. In a review of the literature, Alqurashi (2016) found that students felt self-efficacy in three particular areas regarding online learning- namely computer self-efficacy, Internet and information-seeking self-efficacy, and Learning Management Systems (LMS) self-efficacy. Not surprisingly, those students with more computer self-efficacy are more likely to be successful in online courses. Self-efficacy is different than a basic computer operational skillset, as self-efficacy is more of an attitude or belief in one's own capabilities to operate the technology for the class. Similarly, students with greater Internet searching self-efficacy were more likely to utilize online resources to engage with locating desired information.

While most of the non-cognitive factors seem to be completely under the student's locus of control, more recent literature suggests that online professors can and should foster positive motivational behaviors. Several publications advocate for professors to integrate the tenets of growth mindset in their online teaching practices (Hochanadel & Finamore, 2015). One popular way to foster growth mindset is through the use of deliberate practice exercises which ask students to role-play decision making processes that could lead them to goals in a simulation exercise (McClendon et al., 2017). Instructors can help students develop self-regulation skills by having a strong presence in the online classroom environment, and the use of a variety of online tools to promote performance, time-management, and learning-enhancement (Sharp & Sharp, 2016).

While all of the non-cognitive factors explored above can contribute to student success in online learning environments, this study focused on Duckworth's (2014) concept of grit. Much of the research on grit has been quantitative and student focused. It was helpful to examine professor knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online student progress.

Grit

Angela Duckworth and her colleagues introduced grit as a personality trait that could have a role in determining positive outcomes in education. Defined as "passion and persistence to meet long term goals" grit was the answer when Duckworth had set out to understand why some students were able to be successful in coursework despite having a lower intelligence quotient (IQ) than their classmates (Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014, p. 2).

If grit was a personality trait, the next step for Duckworth was to figure out how to distinguish it and measure it. Grit was defined as a personality trait comprised of two components: perseverance, and passion for long term goals. Duckworth took care to ensure that grit was truly a separate personality trait from conscientiousness, one of the big five personality traits that has been well documented in psychology literature. Duckworth and Gross (2014) also found that grit was a separate component of success than self-control. Von Culin, Tsukayama, and Duckworth (2014) when searching for motivational correlates for grit, also found that the desire for engagement was associated with perseverance, while the quest of pleasure was strongly linked with constancy of interest over time. After that, Duckworth took care to develop a validated quantitative

instrument, the Grit-S Scale, which was a self-reporting quiz that could allow a person to determine his or her own grit score. The Grit-S scale has formed the foundation for research about grit, which brought about mostly quantitative studies testing links between grit and achievement.

Duckworth's early research explored the links between grit and performance. These studies included testing first year students at West Point, children participating in the National Spelling Bee, and even first year teachers. All of the studies showed at least a moderate correlation between grit scores and performance or retention (Duckworth, 2007).

Grit in Education

When Duckworth turned her research into a TED talk in 2013, grit propelled into popularity throughout the education field. Government publications advocated for schools and teachers to integrate opportunities for failure and persistence in educational settings in order to develop core character competencies such as grit, tenacity, and perseverance (Shechtman et al., 2013). Articles on developing grit in students through setting daily goals, practicing pieces, and failing boldly (Fellows, 2019). Grit's entrance into popular education policy documents may have spurred further research in higher education environments.

The effects of grit in popular education literature carried from kindergarten through higher education. Charter schools such as Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) developed character competency programs alongside Duckworth to develop grit in their K-12 students. KIPP even developed report cards for use in their elementary, middle, and

high schools where teachers rank students on character components such as grit and curiosity (Anderson et al., 2016).

In higher education, there have been several studies that found similar results to Duckworth (2007) when analyzing grit and performance. Grit was found to be linked to higher grade point averages for women in graduate school (Cross, 2014). Grit, and particularly the persistence of effort factor of grit, was found to have a relationship with GPA in other contexts (Bowman, 2015). In one case, even when grit did not directly relate to higher GPA, grit was a statistically significant predictor of retention (Saunders-Scott et al., 2017). The findings have not always been positive in linking high grit scores with positive student achievement, but that will be discussed at length in the limitations section of this chapter.

Researchers have begun to trace the relationships between grit and other noncognitive factors alongside performance. The studies on grit have suggested that psychological capital, including hope, efficacy, resiliency, and optimism appear to drive gritty students towards successful academic outcomes at the collegiate level (Luthans, et al., 2019). One study did not show significant differences in grit and gender; however, the study sample was not overly gender balanced, however the relationship between gender and grit remains to be another area for possible study (Hodge et al., 2017). Hodge, Wright, and Bennett's (2017) study did, however, find that first generation college students were more likely to have higher levels of persistence of effort. They also found that engagement was a mediating factor between grit and academic productivity, meaning

that those who are grittier tend to be more engaged, which in turn leads to greater academic productivity (Hodge et al., 2017).

In an innovative qualitative study of noncognitive factors that support student success, Dumke, Tyndall, Naff, Crowder, and Cauley (2018) researched a group of successful undergraduate pre-health majors. The authors found that those students who were successful pre-health majors attributed the components of grit to their abilities to excel in undergraduate pre-health major coursework (Dumke, et. al, 2018). This study is one of the few studies published on grit using a qualitative framework. In this study, those students who were already labeled as successful pre-health undergraduate majors reported that they were driven by a passion and persistence of effort in order to reach their educational goals. When they struggled with their coursework, these successful students were able to seek out help from university supports. This study's framework was unique, and its findings reinforced the quantitative work linking non-cognitive factors to student success. This single study left room for further qualitative work on noncognitive factors that support student success in baccalaureate degree programs.

Overall, the literature on grit in higher education had conflicting results. However, grit has been linked positively to GPA and particularly student retention enough that colleges have even been advised to consider using grit as an admissions factor in addition to the traditional factors such as high school GPA or Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Testing (ACT) scores (Saunders-Scott et al., 2017). While no colleges are currently using the grit scale to make admissions decisions, it continues to be a hot topic in higher education journalism.

Grit in Online Baccalaureate Learning

Grit has been linked to successful student outcomes (Milward, Wardman, & Rubie-Davies, 2016; Dumke, et al., 2018; Saunders-Scott, et al., 2017). In huge Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) online, grit could make the difference between students completing the course even more strongly than their intention to complete (Wang & Baker, 2018).

Professors are now being advised to consider grit within their online teaching practices. Role-play can even be an effective strategy for having students develop content knowledge and skills that can support content mastery (Stevens, 2015). McClendon, Neugebauer, and King (2017) again asserted that students who displayed growth mindset should be given deliberate practice exercises in online courses in order to better develop the noncognitive skills to be successful in other online courses. With the evidence connecting grit to positive student progress, and the prevalence of Duckworth's work across media, it seems that many schools will be looking to develop this trait in students. Grit isn't a perfect construct or answer, however, as the findings have been inconsistent and there are some limitations.

Grit Limitations

Grit is not without its limitations. Since the early days with Duckworth's pioneering work, many researchers have tested the correlation between grit and performance in a variety of settings. Some of these studies have reinforced the conjecture that a higher grit score will correlate with better performance in academic settings (Aparicio et al., 2017; Bowman, 2015; Cross, 2014). Others revealed only minor or no

correlations between student outcomes and grit (Buzzetto-Hollywood et al., 2019; Bazelais, 2016; Stewart, 2015; Ivcevic, 2014; West, 2015). Akos and Kretchmar (2017) found that consistency of interest resulted in college students staying in the same major, while ability to overcome setbacks contributed to passing courses.

Perhaps the primary source of criticism of Duckworth's work comes from Marcus Crede, a psychology professor at Iowa State University. In a meta-analysis of the grit literature, Crede, Tynan, and Harms (2017) found that, at best, grit was only moderately correlated with retention and persistence, and very correlated with conscientiousness. In a more recent article, Crede (2018) again asserted that physical ability, cognitive ability, or admissions test scores were better predictors of student success than grit scores. Indeed, Crede (2018) criticized grit as a construct and its ability to be measured and called for different methods for measuring grit and its impacts. More recent authors echo the calls for refining grit as a construct in the larger psychology research tradition (Luthans et al., 2019).

Grit as a concept and how it is measured puts a focus on an individual's ability to overcome obstacles in order to reach long-term goals. Such a focus on individual traits can overlook the systemic problems for minorities or students with disabilities (Gonzalez Stokas, 2015; Anderson et al., 2016; Tefera et al., 2018). Such a focus on individual passion and persistence can also overlook the importance of student-professor relationships, which have been found to relate more to student success than grit in at least one study (Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019). Perhaps the lack of context surrounding grit

in empirical studies has inspired other authors who have considered the quantitative nature of the grit literature.

Quantitative methodology as the nearly sole method is the primary limitation for the body of literature surrounding grit. Researchers have called for more qualitative studies to inform our understanding of grit (Dumke, et al., 2017; Almeida, 2017; Gonzales, 2017, Pryiomka, 2018). From a theoretical standpoint, Pryiomka (2018) warned that the overly quantitative methods to validate the construct could have negative results. If the academic community is quick to accept quantitative findings that are conflicting, people may be judged based on unfair measurements, therefore it was best to supplement those findings with more qualitative studies that can put grit as a concept in context (Pryiomka, 2018). Almeida (2017) also made the call for qualitative research to inform the conflicting quantitative findings on grit. As opposed to the many quantitative studies focused on students' grit scores, "during interviews with educators, counselors, and others, a qualitative researcher is able to co-construct knowledge with participants as they share their perspectives on grit, providing a deeper understanding of the concept that can only be accessed through qualitative inquiry" (Almeida, 2017, p. 102). This call rang directly to the problem, purpose, research questions, and methodology of this study.

Summary and Conclusions

Grit as a noncognitive factor offers educators a new way to consider student success and supporting students at the baccalaureate level. Nevertheless, the findings linking grit to positive outcomes have not been consistent. Professors and retention experts are being advised to consider grit and other noncognitive factors to support

student success. After an exhaustive review of the literature, all of the studies surrounding grit have been primarily quantitative in framework and centered on the students. In order to better understand the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, we must strive to work with other populations knowledgeable about student success-namely educators. Likewise, it was better to take a qualitative approach that will provide rich data to supplement the previous quantitative findings.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to understand higher education professor perceptions of grit in baccalaureate online education. This study was best suited for a basic qualitative approach, and I utilized interviews with professors who taught online baccalaureate courses for SSC in order to understand professor perceptions. This study filled a gap in the literature by providing insight into teacher perceptions regarding the role of grit in baccalaureate online student progress and in teaching practice.

First, in this chapter, I l review the research questions and sub-questions, the core concepts within my study, and explain why this study is best suited for a basic qualitative approach. After that, I further examine my role in the research, my relationships, biases, and any ethical concerns that could arise from my study. Finally, I explain the trustworthiness and the procedures to protect those who will participate.

Research Design and Rationale

To explore professor perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online education, the study centered on the following research question and sub-questions.

RQ1. How do professors describe the role of grit in baccalaureate online education?

SRQ1. What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online student progress?

SRQ2. What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online teaching practice?

The central concepts for this study included Dewey's (1938) theories of pragmatism and constructivism, Garrison et al.'s (2010) CoI framework, and Rogers'

(2003) theory of diffusion of innovations. Dewey's (1938) theories of pragmatism and constructivism inform how the researcher understood experiential learning within online baccalaureate classes and how educators may have learned about grit as a concept. Garrison et al.'s (2010) CoI framework defined the types of presences that appear in the online learning environment, which provided a lens to frame questions about experiences teaching online. Social, teacher, and cognitive presences appeared again in coding and analyzing the interview responses regarding the role of grit in student progress. Finally, Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory assisted in analyzing how online educators obtained knowledge of grit as a noncognitive trait in online students, and how the source of knowledge may have shaped their perceptions in the role of grit in online teaching practice.

This study was qualitative in nature with a basic qualitative approach. As the research questions sought to explore educator's knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online education, it would not be appropriate to use a quantitative study as they produce statistical data. The goal for this study was to better understand faculty perceptions, and therefore interviews can provide that kind of data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Patton, 2015). The following table provides an overview of the alternative methods considered for this study and the reasons that they were rejected.

Table 2

Alternative Qualitative Methods Considered and Reasons for Rejection

Qualitative method	Method's purpose	Reason for rejection
Case Study	To better understand how individuals experience a phenomenon within a particular context.	Though this study was conducted at one small state college, the research questions are not particular to this context. The interview guide has been designed so that the study will be transferrable to other baccalaureate settings.
Narrative Inquiry	To find meaning regarding a person's culture through studying their stories and experiences of a phenomenon of interest.	Some of the interview questions asked educators to consider their experiences teaching online, but that is not the sole purpose of this study.
Phenomenology	To find the meaning and essence of the lived experiences of those who experience a particular phenomenon.	The educators shared some of their experiences with grit in students in an online setting, yet the purpose of this study was not solely to find meaning in those experiences.
Ethnography	To understand the culture of a group of people and how that culture impacts their thoughts and behaviors.	This study does explore how an innovation (grit) diffuses through members of a school, yet it did not seek to explore how the culture of the school impacts the thoughts and behaviors of its members.
Systems theory	To better understand how a system or organization functions.	The purpose of this study was to understand baccalaureate online educators' perceptions of the role of grit in online education. The functionality of the organization is not central to answering the research questions.

It was important to consider a variety of qualitative approaches before settling on the basic qualitative design for this study. The previous table provided an overview as to

why the other designs did not fit the conceptual framework, problem, purpose, and research questions. A qualitative case study was best for a study that examines a phenomenon within a unique context (Donnelly, Brenchley, Crawford, and Letts, 2013). Phenomenology and systems theory also heavily analyze the contextual dynamics of a particular phenomenon (Patton, 2015). These were not a good fit for this study, because though it was happening at one particular location, the research questions did not seek to define the school as a unique context impacting the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. Narrative inquiry and ethnography allow the researcher to delve into the stories and cultures of participants, which might be good avenues to explore after a baseline of qualitative research on grit in online baccalaureate classes have been established.

After considering a variety of qualitative approaches that could fit this study, basic qualitative design emerged as the approach that best aligned with the research problem, purpose, and questions. According to Merriam (2009), basic qualitative studies are best for those who want to understand "(1) how people interpret their experiences, (2) how they construct their worlds, and (3) what meaning they attribute to their experiences. The overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and experiences" (p. 23). Part of the problem for this study was that online professors are being informed about grit and strategies to integrate grit into their online teaching practices, and yet little was known about how professors perceive the role of grit in online learning. Through interviews, I was be able to understand the participants' experiences, the meanings of those experiences, and the processes they've been involved

with. In this study, that meant that professors reflected on their knowledge of grit as a concept and how they came by that knowledge. It also meant that the participants reflected on their experiences as online educators in order to make meaning of the role of grit in student progress. Finally, it meant that educators could reflect on possible processes to support teaching practice. A basic qualitative design was the best fit for this study, as I sought to better understand professor perceptions (Merriam, 2009).

Role of the Researcher

In this project, I was the sole researcher and interviewer. I contacted the appropriate administrators at SSC and the potential participants. I collected, recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and properly stored the data for the study. Currently, I am a certified English teacher for grades 6-12 and teach full time at a middle school. I am also an adjunct professor at SSC where the study took place. I have been in my role as an adjunct since the spring semester of 2019 and teach exclusively online since I reside several hours away from campus. My current job positions and rapport on campus did not interfere with my research. My most important duties as the researcher for this project were to develop a reliable and credible study and following guidelines for conducting interviews and protecting participants (Patton, 2015).

As the sole researcher for this study, it was important to consider any potential bias (Patton, 2015). One way to alleviate this bias was through the practice of reflective journaling, which I engaged in for the duration of the study. Reflective journaling allows the researcher to work in a reflexive manner (Patton, 2015). The participants in the study and I likely have taught some of the same students in online classes. It was important for

me to refrain from offering my opinions and experiences on working with those students, or how I viewed the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. Likewise, it was possible that I will have professors who taught me as an undergraduate, though probably not in an online setting. The journaling process allowed me to reflect on any issues of bias that might arise, and therefore I planned to journal my responses after every interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Methodology

Participant Selection

For this study, eight to 12 participants were interviewed. This number was sufficient to achieve data saturation. Saunders and Townsend (2016) noted that six to 12 participants are sufficient to achieve data saturation in most qualitative interview studies. In this case, it resulted in greater than 10% of the participant population based on the total number of SSC faculty who taught online classes. The participants in my study must have been faculty members at SSC and have taught baccalaureate online courses. The participants should be somewhat familiar with grit as a noncognitive trait from their professional development training, but if not, I included Duckworth's (2014) definition of grit for clarification during the interview. Students were not included in this study, as that population did not help me to answer the research question. I considered broadening my participants to include academic advisors and retention specialists. Administrators should not be included.

The study employed a purposeful sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling was common when selecting participants for a basic qualitative study. In purposeful sampling,

the researcher may select those cases which will provide rich information for study. The purposeful sampling strategy was voluntary for participants (Patton, 2015). In order to establish if participants met the criteria, I corresponded with them via an appropriate college email. See appendix A for the invitation email. I knew that a potential participant has met the criteria if they have taught online and have knowledge of grit.

In order to identify, contact, and recruit participants for this study, I worked with the Vice President of Academic Affairs. The deans of each school in the college provided me with spreadsheets of faculty members who teach online courses. I selected potential participants from those spreadsheets after confirming their online teaching status for SSC. For this basic qualitative study, I aimed to include eight to 12 participants for the interviews. Interviews continued until the data reaches the point of saturation (Patton, 2015).

Instrumentation

Semi-Structured Interviews

The first tool I used for data collection was a semi-structured interview guide. Using my research questions as a guide, I developed interview questions that would invite rich data and also make my participants feel comfortable during the interview (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The following table highlights the alignment between research and interview questions. The interview questions began with broader topics inviting participants to reflect on their experiences as online educators, which should have made them feel more comfortable and willing to share (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The questions were dually rooted in the research questions and the findings from the literature

review in chapter two. As it was a semi-structured interview, the researcher will allow for opportunities to gain additional information if it seems to add questions during the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). After each interview question is a follow-up question to probe for additional information from the participant. In order to establish content validity, I have shared this guide with my dissertation committee and peers in the research methods forum. I have also used this guide as a practice to interview family members who are professors to see if they produced answers that could answer my research questions.

Table 3

Interview Guide

Research Questions	**Interview Questions**	**Follow-Up Questions**
RQ1. How do professors describe the role of grit in baccalaureate online education?	IQ1. Tell me about your experience teaching in online courses and degree programs.	FQ: What do you think are some of the greatest challenges in these courses and programs?
	IQ2. What qualities in a student do you think contribute to student progress in online settings?	FQ: In your opinion, what noncognitive factors might contribute to student progress?
SRQ1. What are professors' perceptions regarding the role of grit in	IQ3. What is your knowledge of grit as a concept?	FQ: How do you see grit in educational context?
	IQ4. By what means did you learn about grit?	FQ: Did you find that you learned more from a professional development route,

baccalaureate online student progress?		your own research, or from media?
	IQ5. What, in your view, is the role of grit in online baccalaureate student progress?	FQ: Can you think of an example of student grit from your experience as an online professor?
SRQ2. What are professor perceptions of the role of grit in online teaching practice?	IQ6. Do you think that professors can help students develop grit?	FQ: If yes, how might professors support students developing grit? If no, explain why you don't think professors can help students develop grit.
	IQ7. Moving forward, do you see any way that we might include grit and other noncognitive factors into online teaching practices?	FQ: What resources do you need to support this change in practice?

Follow-Up Interviews

In order to ensure accuracy of the data as a form of member-checking, I scheduled follow-up interviews with the participants. For these interviews, I provided the participant with the full transcript of our first interview as well as the preliminary codes and themes that I had identified. I asked participants if the transcription and codes accurately captured the participants perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Participants had the opportunity to make corrections or provide additional information where it was appropriate. This step ensured accuracy of the interview data for my analysis.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The data for this study was collected from full and part time online baccalaureate professors from Small State College (SSC). First, I contacted the Vice President of Academic Affairs and explained the purpose and mission of the study. After gaining his permission, he provided me with a spreadsheet of faculty members that established a pool of potential participants. Using purposeful sampling, I contacted the professors via email to confirm that they met my criteria for inclusion in the study. Purposeful sampling was appropriate for this qualitative study as it was convenient for the researcher and it provided "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2015, p. 53). See Appendix A for the invitation email. If professors responded to the email and meet the criteria, I then provided them with electronic informed consent forms. I interviewed eight to 12 faculty members after receiving their informed consent paperwork. The informed consent form can be found in Appendix B. As this is my dissertation, I was the sole person conducting interviews and transcribing data. I conducted the interviews via Zoom. I utilized the cloud recording feature in Zoom, which included an automatic transcription service. To check those transcripts for validity, I replayed the recorded audio while reading the transcript.

Participants were provided with informed consent paperwork electronically and asked to choose a day and time they are available for interviews via Zoom. If it was not possible to conduct the interview using Zoom, I utilized phone conferences. The interviews took no more than an hour, but averaged around thirty minutes. If any

participants decided to withdraw from the study, I would have choosen a replacement candidate from the pool of eligible participants.

At the end of each interview, I reminded participants how they could access the study after its completion. After the study is published to ProQuest, I will share the full pdf document with all of the participants via email. I also reminded participants that I would reach out to them for a follow-up interview during the data analysis process to review the interview transcript and preliminary codes as a form of member checking.

Data Analysis Plan

The purpose of this study was to better understand professor perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online education. In a basic qualitative study, data analysis can include interpretation, coding, unitization, and eidetic analysis. For any naturalistic inquiry study, it was fundamental to engage in inductive analysis (Patton, 2015). The data collection consisted of two phases: semi-structured interviews and a follow-up interview. Each interview question was developed and aligned to the research questions. After conducting the interviews and transcribing the audio recordings, I coded in order to identify keywords, themes, and phrases to categorize the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). It typically takes several iterations of coding in order to produce thematic descriptions for data analysis (Patton, 2015). I hand commented and coded each interview. Then I identified common themes with the goal of producing rich, descriptive data analysis (La Pelle, 2004). After coding cycles, it was time to sort the codes into categories and place them in organized themes. This allowed for tracking patterns and themes to identify the findings of the study.

If any discrepancies should have arisen during data collection and analysis, they would have been appropriately included alongside the findings. If possible, I would have contacted the participant again in order to clarify the data discrepancy (Patton, 2015). If the data appeared to be correct after checking with the participant, then the negative case would have stood alongside each round of coded data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). It was possible that negative cases would contradict the main findings and solidify the credibility of the study (Patton, 2015). At any rate, rich variation in the data led to a better understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

Issues of Trustworthiness

All qualitative researchers should strive to provide transparency in order to increase trustworthiness (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness supports validity, transparency, and rigor of any qualitative study (Chandra & Shang, 2017). This section of the chapter elaborates on the strategies for ensuring trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this study.

Credibility

In order to establish credibility, I considered reflexive practices while developing the study (Patton, 2015). For this study, I as the researcher wrote original reflective journals to consider my own biases and preconceived notions at all stages of the study. After completing each interview, I reflected on the questions and responses. I planned to complete a peer debrief with my colleagues from my research cohort to control and understand any of my own biases that I could have been overlooking. Another key to ensuring credibility was interpreting the interview data with a focus on the purpose and

research questions for the study (Patton, 2015). The data collection did not end until saturation has been reached.

Transferability

Transferability, validity, and rigor are best established through the coding process (Patton, 2015; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This study was firmly rooted in the conceptual framework and the phenomenon being studied, which in this case was grit in online baccalaureate learning environments. The interview guide was aligned to the research questions. It served the purpose of producing thick descriptive data regarding professor knowledge, perceptions, and practices. To solidify transferability, the following paragraph reiterates the process for identifying and selecting participants.

I contacted the Vice President of Academic Affairs to share the purpose and obtained permission to conduct my study. This letter is in Appendix C. I then used a spreadsheet of professor contact information to reach out to professors via email with an invitation and my screening questions. After coming up with a pool of potential participants, I selected eight to 12 and schedule the interviews. None of the professors participating in this study were compensated for their time. Interviews were recorded and kept secure.

Dependability

The consistent cycles of transcribing, coding, categorizing, and re-coding the data helped to obtain validity and dependability (Patton, 2015). Valid data was necessary to ensure confirmability of the findings of a study. A researcher can establish content

validity through developing an interview guide that is unbiased (Patton, 2015). In this study, there was one round of semi-structured interviews and then a follow-up interview.

I sought dependability through triangulation and external audits. I conducted an external audit with three classmates who have recently graduated from the Ph.D. in Education program at Walden University. These researchers were trained and knowledgeable in qualitative methods and have proven their abilities to conduct qualitative research in their own dissertations. They were also independent of this study and therefore qualified to conduct the audits (Patton, 2015). After coding cycles, I also shared my results with the class in the dissertation research workshop to test the confirmability of the findings. As for triangulation, I sought to balance the findings from the semi-structured interviews by conducting follow-up interviews to serve as a member checking tool. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed. These transcriptions will be secured and saved alongside my notes and any other information related to this project until it is appropriate to destroy them.

Confirmability

In order for a study to be reliable, credible, and trustworthy, Ravitch and Carl (2016) asserted that the researcher must maintain an inquiry stance and utilize reflexivity to consider relationships, data, and context. This dissertation lent itself to becoming a credible qualitative study. After coding, I listened to the audio recordings again to ensure that I did not leave out any of the participants' viewpoints. The most important aspect of establishing confirmability was ensuring that the researcher maintains objectivity as he or she transcribes and analyzes the data. I was careful to completely transcribe the

interviews to ensure that the professors' knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate classes were clear. The follow-up interviews served as a form of member checking. The participants had the opportunity to review transcripts of their initial interviews as well as preliminary codes and themes in order to ensure accuracy of the data and my analysis.

Ethical Procedures

I contacted the Vice President of Academic Affairs at SSC to ask about conducting my study with his faculty members. After I presented my oral defense for this proposal, I completed the institutional site forms. I also completed my Institutional Research Board (IRB) application at Walden University and met with the provost to review the goals of my study. The provost presented my study and the appropriate forms to SSC's IRB. I continued to work with both Walden and SSC's IRBs until my study was approved. After receiving written permission from the provost to conduct my study with faculty members from SSC, I began the process for recruiting.

Once I review the spreadsheet with the data, I out an invitation email to the potential participants. For those who agreed to participate in the study, I sent them a copy of the informed consent form that I developed using Walden University's template. I protected the anonymity of each participant by assigning them a pseudonym, and those names were used as I transcribed the interviews. During the interviews, I captured audio recording and take notes. After the interviews, I checked my notes alongside the audio transcriptions to eliminate any overt bias on the part of the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I will keep all research materials under lock and key in my personal office at home

and on a computer protected with a secured password. Any field notes or audio recordings on external hard drives will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. After the five year research duration, I will destroy all documents related to my research in order to protect my participants' confidentiality.

Summary

In summary, Chapter 3 provided a description of the study's research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, the methodology, instrumentation, data collection and analysis play, issues of trustworthiness, and the ethical procedures. This basic qualitative interview study explored professor perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. It took place at a small college in the heart of Appalachia. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. The study consisted of one round of interviews followed by a follow-up interview for triangulation of data. Throughout the data collection and analysis processes, I adhered to ethical guidelines to ensure reflexivity and a trustworthy study.

In chapter 4, I will review the findings of this study. I will include codes, themes, and descriptions that emerge from the interviews. The chapter will include the setting, demographics, data collection and analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to better understand professor perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, particularly its role in student progress, and if that had any implications on teaching practice. My study was guided by one main research question and two sub questions.

RQ1. How do professors describe the role of grit in baccalaureate online education?

SRQ1. What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online student progress?

SRQ2. What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online teaching practice?

I collected data from ten participants through semi structured interviews using Zoom conferencing software due to the COVID-19 global pandemic. After transcribing the interviews, I identified codes, categories, and themes through thematic coding as described in chapter 3. In the following chapter, I will describe the research setting, demographics of the participants, explain the data collection process, data analysis, and revisit any issues of trustworthiness. Finally, I break down the results of the data findings for each of the research questions.

Setting

I recruited participants via email invitations between June 24 to July 15, 2020. I utilized their faculty emails that were listed on the school's faculty directory webpage. The provost provided me with a list of full and part-time faculty who taught online, but

he did not participate in recruiting any participants for the study on my behalf. Fourteen professors responded to my invitation email, and I provided all of them with the informed consent paperwork. Twelve professors completed the informed consent process, and I invited 10 of them to complete interviews. The remaining two professors wanted to wait until August to schedule their interviews, and I had reached a point of saturation in the data after conducting the first 10 interviews. After completing the informed consent process, I scheduled interviews with participants.

The interviewing process went smoothly. I conducted my first interview on July 6, 2020, and the final interview took place on July 24, 2020. The average time for the interviews was about 30 minutes. The longest interview was an hour long, and the shortest was 15 minutes. The entire data collection process took exactly one month. At the beginning of each interview, I reminded the participant of the voluntary nature of the study and reviewed the purpose of the study. I also reminded them that I was using an automatic recording feature within Zoom, and that they could leave the interview at any time for any reason. As the interviews ended, I told participants that I would reach back out to them for a quick follow-up interview to review their transcripts and my preliminary codes. I also notified the participants that I would share the results of my study as soon as it was finalized. It was important to note that COVID-19 was increasing in numbers of infection and deaths at the time of this study. It was possible that this may have influenced the way that participants answered the interview questions. It was important to consider the possible additional stress participants were experiencing during data interpretation.

Demographics

The ten participants were a mix of nine full and one part time faculty from Small State College. Seven participants were females and three were males. All of the participants had multiple years of experience teaching online baccalaureate courses at Small State College. Table 4 contains the demographic information of all 10 participants.

Table 4

Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Teaching Subject Area	Full-Time or Adjunct
Participant A	Female	Education	Full Time
Participant B	Female	College Skills	Adjunct
Participant C	Male	Political Science	Full Time
Participant D	Female	Education	Full Time
Participant E	Female	Humanities	Full Time
Participant F	Male	Education	Full Time
Participant G	Female	Psychology	Full Time
Participant H	Female	Radiologic Technology	Full Time
Participant I	Female	Business	Full Time
Participant J	Male	Business	Full Time

Participants' Profile Narratives

The participants in this study all taught online baccalaureate courses for SSC. The participants had varying levels of experience teaching online classes, but all of them had

taught online for at least five years. Some described themselves as “digital immigrants” and others had been teaching online for the duration of their careers. Even the “digital immigrant” professors had been teaching online for several years and thought they had adjusted to learning the technology well. The following sections describe the participants’ familiarity with teaching online baccalaureate courses, and a bit about the kinds of classes that they teach online.

Participant A

Participant A in this study has taught baccalaureate classes online for seven years. She is a full time professor in the education department, and her courses include introductory education classes for freshmen and sophomores. She also teaches upper-level special education topics classes for juniors and seniors.

Participant B

Participant B has been teaching online courses as an adjunct for SSC for the past 8 years. She has taught a variety of history courses as well as the freshman Building Successful College Skills (BSCS) course. She has taught students of all grade levels in her history courses. The BSCS class is specially developed for freshman students who were placed in developmental reading and mathematics classes. This skills-based course serves to prepare students to navigate their college careers and attempt to mitigate the high drop-out rates typical in that student population (Mellor, et al., 2015).

Participant C

Participant C has taught online for a variety of institutions for over 10 years. He primarily teaches social science courses. Some of his political science classes, including

international relations electives, are fully online. He teaches all grade levels of undergraduate students at SSC.

Participant D

Participant D has been teaching online courses for SSC for eight years. She teaches students of all levels in the education department. Most of her classes are focused on special education.

Participant E

Participant E has been teaching undergraduates online for about ten years. She teaches students of all levels in humanities courses. She has primarily taught composition classes, but has also had grammar, literature, and other electives within the department.

Participant F

Participant F has been teaching baccalaureates online at SSC for about eight years. He works within the education department and teaches a variety of child development classes. He also teaches several reading classes online.

Participant G

Participant G in this study has been teaching online courses at SSC for about five years. She works in the social sciences department and teaches all levels of students in psychology classes.

Participant H

Participant H works in the allied health department and teaches radiologic imaging classes. She has been teaching a variety of courses online for approximately ten

years. She has experience working as an administrator in the college and has attended many trainings on best practices for retaining undergraduate students.

Participant I

Participant I has taught online courses at SSC for her entire career in academia, nearly ten years. She started as an adjunct and worked her way up to a full time teaching position. She teaches a variety of classes for the school of business.

Participant J

Participant J has been teaching online courses for over ten years at SSC. He works for the school of business and primarily teaches economics and business law courses. He is a certified course evaluator with Quality Matters and has a vast knowledge of best practices for online teaching.

Data Collection

There were 10 full or part-time faculty members who taught online courses for SSC that participated in this study. The criteria for selection was that the participants must be professors, full or part-time, who taught at least one semester of baccalaureate online courses for the college. I recruited all of my participants through their faculty emails. I sent an initial invitation, and if they responded with interest, I provided them with a description of the study and the informed consent paperwork. All ten of the participants understood and agreed to the conditions of the study. After obtaining informed consent, I scheduled interviews using Zoom conferencing software.

I was able to conduct all of the interviews between July 6 and 24. Participants F and I needed to reschedule their original interviews due to unforeseen circumstances. At

the beginning of each interview, I reminded the participants of the voluntary nature of participation and that they could leave at any time without penalty. I also warned them that if they would disclose that they were engaging in any illegal activities, I had to report them. I tried to speak with all of the participants about their summers before beginning the interview questions in order to build a collegial relationship and set a comfortable tone for the interview. Most of the participants spoke about staying home due to COVID -19, but they did not initially discuss its impact on online learning. I then reminded participants that I utilized the secure cloud recording feature within Zoom to record and transcribe all of the interviews. I also used my iPhone as a backup recording device.

All of the interviews were semistructured and followed the seven questions I developed in the interview guide. Each question had a planned follow-up question, but there were a few circumstances where the participant would have already given me the information I needed for the follow-up question, so I did not have to ask it. My questions were designed to learn more about professor perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, specifically if it had any role in student progress or teaching practice. I did open up the interview with some more broad questions about professors' experiences teaching online as well as their perceptions of reasons that students struggle and reasons that students were successful. If I was unsure of any answers during the initial interviews, I did ask participants some questions in order to clarify.

After conducting the interviews, I received an automated transcription from Zoom nearly immediately. I downloaded the transcription and listened to the recording of each interview at least two times to go through and make corrections to the automated

transcripts. I then followed-up with each of the participants to ensure their accuracy of depicting participant opinions and perceptions. Once participants had agreed to the accuracy of the transcripts, I moved to coding the data.

As stated in the chapter 3 plan for data analysis, I assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect their identities. I used a simple alphabetic system and changed each of the participants' names to a combination of "Participant" and a letter between A-J (i.e., Participant A). I removed the recordings, notes, and all confidential data from the password-protected cloud storage and put them on a password-protected external hard drive that I kept locked within my office. There were no unexpected circumstances that arose during data collection. The data collection process closely followed the procedures that were detailed in chapter 3.

Data Analysis

As the study was a basic qualitative study, I collected data through conducting semistructured interviews, transcribing those interviews, and then analyzing through inductive coding. Using the principles of thematic analysis, I engaged in first and second cycles of coding to search for patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) defined six phases for thematic analysis of qualitative data. First, researchers must familiarize themselves with the data through checking transcripts, listening to recording, and taking notes several times. Second, researchers should move through the data to generate a first set of codes. Third, researchers must review the codes and begin identifying patterns and preliminary themes. Fourth, the researcher reviews the themes against the initial codes and the raw data. Fifth, the researcher solidifies the

names and definitions of the themes. Finally, the researcher generates the report for the data and presents the findings.

After conducting interviews, I checked the transcripts against the audio recordings. I then read through each of the interviews, listened to the recordings, and reviewed my reflective journals several times. I hand-coded the data in Microsoft Word by creating a table and making comments in the column beside the interview transcript. As suggested by Patton (2015), I chose a paragraph for the unit of meaning and began identifying initial codes. After the first cycle of codes, I reviewed the list and combined redundant codes. I then reviewed all of the transcripts against the initial codes list to make sure that the codes were comprehensive. After that, I began combining codes into subcategories and categories. Table 5 depicts the categories and subcategories that emerged alongside the initial codes.

Table 5

Categories from First Cycle Codes

Category	**Subcategory** Initial codes
Profile of an SSC Online Learner	First Generation College Student (5) Limited Technology (5) Non-traditional student (4) Difficult Home Environment (4) Reading Comprehension (3) Student with children (3) SSC Learners (2) Information Processing (2) Full-time Employment (2) School-life Balance (1) Digital Immigrant (1)
Online vs. Face-to-Face	Face-to-Face (4) Freshmen Face-to-Face (2) In-person Communication (2) Freshmen moldable (1) Online isolation (1)
Perceptions of Grit vs. IQ	**IQ** Motivation over IQ (5) IQ detriment to motivation (1) IQ below 83 (1) **Grit** Overcoming Obstacles (8) Content Mastery (3) Overcoming Disabilities (2) Overcoming Challenges (1) Overcoming Setbacks (1) Prepared (1) Passionate about material (1)
Behaviors that Promote Progress	Motivation (23) Discipline (23) Time Management (12) Passion (7) Independence (4) Student Seeking Knowledge (3) Determination (3)

	Consistency (2) Prepared (2) Curious (1) Inquisitive (1) Resilience (1) Self-Control (1) Confidence (1) Maturity (1) Overcoming Obstacles (1) Peer Interaction (1)
Behaviors that Impede Progress	Late Assignments (6) Procrastination (4) Not Logging In (1) Lack of Interest (1) No Time Management (1) No Organization (1)
Student Progress	Goals (16) Career (3) Employment (2) Degree Completion (1) Graduation (1)
Teacher Presence	Assignments (33) LMS (8) Engage (6) Video for Instruction (6) Discussion Boards (5) Workload (5) Real-world Connections (4) Course Setup (3) Clear Directions (2) Mobile Learning (2) Building Skills (2) Student-Centered Instruction (1) Engaging Assignments (1)
Relationships and Communication	Student-Professor Communication (20) Encouragement (16) Student-Professor Relationship (11) Video for Communication (5) Professor Sharing Experience (3) Online Isolation (2) Professor Grit (1) Professor Word Choice (1) Professor Availability (1)

	Individualized Communication (1) Check in on Students (1) Assignment Feedback (1) Students Asking for Help (1)
Professional Practice	Professor Interest in Grit (16) Professor Research (9) Quality Matters (4) Educational Buzzwords (4) Knowledge from Media (2) Required PD (2) Professor Research (1) Conferences (1)

The categories emerged directly from the initial codes and the interview transcripts where professors shared their perceptions, opinions, and experiences. The codes were divided into nine distinct categories, which eventually were divided into three themes that aligned with the research question and subquestions. The themes that emerged from the data were *overcoming challenges, defining goals and making progress, and scholar-mentor.* The following sections detail the study's categories and provide examples from the participant interviews.

Profile of an SSC Online Learner

The first category that emerged from the initial codes was *profile of an SSC online learner.* All of the codes contributed to the unique profile that made up a typical SSC online baccalaureate student. Codes included non-traditional student, SSC learners, student with children, school-life balance, full time employment, difficult home environment, first generation college students, limited technology, digital immigrant, reading comprehension, and information processing. Essentially, the professors perceived that SSC students faced an "uphill battle" to attend college courses online due to the

demographic and social issues that are prevalent throughout Appalachia. While all students must overcome challenges to complete online college coursework, professors reflected on how many of their students lack the support systems at home, financial stability, and familiarity with technology. This category helped to define the baseline situation for many SSC online learners and served as a contributing factor for them needing grit to make progress in their online education.

Every participant mentioned the unique undergraduates who attend online classes at SSC, and then later linked those circumstances to a need for grit in order to persist through online classes. Students at SSC face unique challenges while attending courses online in Southern West Virginia. Participant B reflected on the challenges that students face with accessing the internet when she said that, "you're lucky to have maybe a high speed internet connection." Even if students had access to technology, they may have lacked the skills and training to use it properly. Participant D said, "Just as an example, I had a hybrid course and when I was teaching students how to log in…a student raised her hand and said, 'What's a mouse?'" Though she was referencing a hybrid course, this lack of exposure to computers and technology came up often as professors discussed students taking online courses. Some professors noted the prevalence of possible undiagnosed learning disabilities among the student body. Participant A noted that, "I do think that many of our students at [SSC] struggle with executive functioning issues." Participant G echoed those sentiments when she said, "You know State is kind of a special place we've got, you know, a specific type of student and sometimes we do have students that are lacking in their reading comprehension skills." Those undiagnosed learning disabilities

and struggles with reading comprehension would make taking baccalaureate classes online particularly difficult.

Many participants reflected on the realities of life for students in rural Appalachia. Participant J said,

> You got these students that are coming in that are already disadvantaged and they got all this other shit coming down on them. And in school…my father's in prison and my mother's dead, because my father killed her, or they were addicted to drugs. I got to worry about even having a roof over my head. I've got a child myself and I'm still a child, and I've got no stability for them and you know I'm working a job for tips that don't pay squat and right now I can't begin to comprehend that domain shit.

Participant I's example student captured the struggles of SSC online learners who begin with so many disadvantages. Simply surviving for these students would require grit and determination. This sets the stage for a need for grit in order to make progress in an online course.

Online vs. Face to Face

Professors not only described the challenges that students face outside of school, but they also considered the issues that arise from online coursework. The participants in this study frequently noted that online courses were isolating, and particularly more difficult than face to face classes. Professors noted that in face-to-face classes, it was easier to establish relationships with students and remind them of upcoming due dates. They also emphasized generally that it was not a good idea for freshmen students to take

too many online courses, as they needed to establish themselves in the face-to-face environment first. Therefore, the second category that emerged from first-cycle codes was *online vs. face to face*. Codes included freshmen f2f, freshmen moldable, online isolation, in-person communication, face-to-face. Professors did not speak about these challenges as extensively as those in the first category. Nevertheless, the codes in this category again set the stage for understanding the foundational need for gritty students to make progress in online coursework.

Most participants discussed the demands of online courses in comparison to face-to-face courses. Participant C captured this category well when he noted, "The biggest online challenge for students taking a course is whether than can discipline themselves to read the syllabus and complete the assignments online without having a proctor as in an in-class course." As a result of the challenging nature of online classes, a few participants firmly believed that first semester SSC freshmen should not be enrolled in any online courses. Participant F noted, "I always tell freshmen, first semester, you need to do face-to-face, then try online. So many times, freshmen come in wanting all online. I think we set them up for failure when we do that." Several other participants, like Participant E, considered the struggle for developing relationships in online courses as opposed to face-to-face courses as the students "aren't walking by your office every day." The codes that emerged and formed this category again set the stage for understanding what challenges in online courses students might need grit to overcome in order to make progress.

Perceptions of Grit vs. IQ

The third category that emerged from the first cycle codes was *perceptions of grit vs. IQ*. The particular contrast between IQ as a measure of academic ability and grit may have arisen from the question in the interview guide regarding non-cognitive skills that support student progress in online baccalaureate coursework. This category emerged from the two separate subcategories, IQ and grit. Codes in the IQ subcategory included IQ detriment to motivation, motivation over IQ, IQ below 83. Codes in the grit subcategory included overcoming challenges, obstacles, setbacks, and disabilities, passionate about material, prepared, and content mastery. Nine out of the 10 participants concurred that grit played a greater factor in online baccalaureate students making progress than IQ. The tenth participant, Participant J, also agreed grit was important, but did say that it is very difficult to get a person with an IQ less than 83 through an undergraduate program.

IQ

Professors generally dismissed the notion of IQ being a predictive indicator of student success or progress in online baccalaureate courses. Participant C considered a high IQ

> may oftentimes be a detriment, because, okay, if a student believes they are superior to their classmates or above the material, of course…Sometimes I get students like that who become unmotivated and either they will not complete our assignments or they will say, 'Well, all I need is a passing grade of a D in this course' and will skip certain major assignments.

Participant C was not the only participant to consider high IQ to be a possible disadvantage for students who would then not try as hard to learn the material.

Participant G, when considering the qualities students need to make progress in online courses, said, “I don’t think IQ and intelligence really plays that much into it, it’s, it’s more the motivation and kind of having the planning skills to get it done.” Only Participant J clarified that a student with an IQ lower than 87 might not be able to persevere through online baccalaureate coursework as, “the military says they can’t do anything with them, so I’m not sure what we can do.” He still clarified that attitude was generally more important than IQ. Participants had a great deal to say about the role of grit in online baccalaureate student progress.

Grit

The professors in this study had a general understanding of grit as an “educational buzzword” but defined it as a broad scope of positive behaviors. Participant B actually learned about grit through her CrossFit exercise classes, but she understood grit as, “it’s almost like sticking with something…consistency. And it’s part of CrossFit, just showing up every day.” Participant E said, “I often find that we use words in education that are a variation on concepts we’ve known. Is it [grit] a simplified word for what we’ve been doing all along?” However, after I offered the definition from the current literature, Participant E concluded, “I think the role of grit is central in baccalaureate student progress. Students need that passion to make it through their courses, and eventually, to graduation.” Other participants, like Participant G, were familiar with the academic definition of grit. Participant G expanded on that definition by giving examples of gritty

student behavior, “Yeah, even if they fail at something, they’re willing to just come back and try harder. You know, they don’t give up there. They’re really just motivated to push through, and you know, get it done.” Participant G, however, did not think that grit was essential to pass online courses, but she did think there would be a difference in grades for grittier students. She said,

> I do think there are those, you know, 15% or so [with little grit] who can make it through an online class, but I do believe you would see an academic difference in the grades on those students…I feel like [gritty students] would be higher grade-wise than that 15% who are just able to make it along.

Professors learned about grit through a variety of avenues, which I discuss further in the sections related to the findings in the context of the conceptual framework. Despite slightly differing definitions, all participants found grit to be a significant factor in promoting student progress towards goals.

Behaviors that Promote Progress

Professors, when answering the question about factors promoting online baccalaureate student success, all listed non-cognitive, or behavioral factors. Therefore, the category that emerged from the codes was, *positive student behaviors that promote progress.* The codes in this category included motivation, discipline, time management, consistency, prepared, curious, inquisitive, passion, resilience, self-control, confidence, maturity, independent, student seeking knowledge, determination, perseverance, overcoming obstacles, and peer interaction. These were some of the prevailing codes

from the interview data, and therefore it may be wise to consider the role of grit in baccalaureate online progress as the glue that holds the positive behaviors together.

When participants considered factors that promoted baccalaureate online student progress in question two of the interview guide, every participant listed non-cognitive behaviors. Time management, organization, and motivation were the most frequent positive behaviors that professors discussed in their interviews. Participant G said, "I mean, time management is definitely probably the biggest one. You know, that anti-procrastination…trying to get things done before the due dates and setting aside enough time to work on things." Participant I clarified that further by noting "that is going to be the key part of it is the willingness to get on and do the work and follow those deadlines that are set forth and to do it without somebody nudging them along." In the interview guide, which is the text of Chapter 3, the second question asked professors about challenges for students in online courses, while the third asked about qualities that helped students be successful. These questions were before my questions about grit, yet many professors still listed grit as a factor that would promote student progress in their answers. Interestingly, later most professors did also say that for those students who lacked the behaviors that promote progress, professors could help students develop grit and other skills through communication and mentoring relationships.

Behaviors that Impede Progress

As with positive behaviors, professors also considered negative behaviors and a lack of certain skills as the greatest contributing factors to students failing online courses or dropping out of programs. The next category that emerged from the data was, *negative*

student behaviors that impede progress. Codes in this category included procrastination, late assignments, not logging in, lack of interest, no time management, and no organization. Most of these codes appeared in interviewees' responses to the question about challenges that students face in online baccalaureate courses. Participants considered grit necessary to favor positive behaviors over negative and make progress toward their goals.

All of the participants also considered behaviors that would impede online baccalaureate student progress. Participant C discussed a few of those behaviors. She said, "Many of them are reluctant to communicate with the instructor when they are struggling…Online students struggle with managing competing distractions. They struggle to prioritize and manage their time effectively." Procrastination and lack of time management were common codes across the interviews. Participant F considered the negative implications of turning in assignments late when he said, "I think the big thing is procrastination. My classes open on Sunday and they close the following Sunday at 11:59. I don't take late work…just the fact that you're late, that doesn't work real well." The lack of time management and low motivation came up as challenges for online students in every participant's interview. Participant H said that she could tell if students were going to struggle with negative behaviors pretty early in the course. She said,

> Really often discussion boards are a great place to kind of figure out about the student and how they're going to do. Because if they answer that very first thing with one or two sentences, rather than, you know, going into it a little bit, then

you kind of figure out who's going to be a little more able to do it, and who you're going to have to pull along.

Generally, professors did seem to think they could help students overcome these negative behaviors through developing grit through course structure, communication, and building relationships with students.

Student Progress

Professors in this study had a unique understanding of what constituted students' goals. Therefore, the next category that emerged from the data was *student progress*, as it includes the codes from the first cycle that defined student progress. The codes in this category included goals, degree completion, graduation, employment, and career. In essence, professors saw the role of grit as a glue holding positive behaviors together, a tool for overcoming negative behaviors, and a foundation for defining and making progress towards goals.

It was interesting that most participants expanded on the definition of student progress or success. In his interview, Participant F considered progress to be linked to goal orientation within an online class, "I guess it's like a drive or a focus in an online student. I guess first of all you have to look at yourself and ask some questions. What's the purpose of this class/ How is it going to help me reach my goal? What do I want to take away from this class?" Participant D captured definition of student progress that goes beyond graduation when she said, "for my students include degree completion and essentially employment." For others, it's the capacity to improve their quality of life and life for their families. Participant I, when reflecting on a gritty student she taught, said the

student wanted to "move, you know, through the educational process so she could do better and have a better life than what she was having in Serbia…and she hopes to stay in the United States and work, and then at some point, go back and be able to help out her home country." Therefore, participants considered student progress to be a term encompassing short and long-term goals for students.

Teacher Presence

The next category that emerged from the first cycle codes was *teacher presence.* This category included the codes: discussion boards, LMS, course setup, clear directions, mobile learning, building skills, engage, real-world connections, workload, student-centered instruction, engaging assignments, and video for instruction. Most of the codes in this category arose from the data from participants answering questions about the role of grit in online teaching practice. Professors generally believed that if they could adequately structure their online courses and deliver relevant and engaging lessons, they could support students in developing grit. It's worth noting that none of the professors suggested that the assignments should overtly address grit, but instead that engaging lessons could drive student passion, and therefore support behaviors associated with grit. Interview data suggested professors saw grit as something that could be fostered in online baccalaureate students through course structure.

All of the participants considered their online teacher presence as a role in promoting student grit and progress. Participant E said,

> I see us incorporating and supporting developing grit in the way that we structure our online courses. Utilizing Quality Matters principles, we can set up a course

> with a predictable format…The instructor can create authentic assignments that focus on content without requiring an overwhelming amount of work.

Similarly, Participant F reflected on supporting positive student behaviors through his structure of his course when he said, "For me, you know, I think the most important part is the directions I give, I do lots of videos for those online only classes. I need to explain exactly what's going on, exactly what the assignment is." Many participants felt that engaging assignments would improve student performance and bolster developing grit. Participant I said, "They need to learn in a way that's interactive so they can see how this would be actually out in the real word…trying to get to what they're passionate about." Participants saw opportunities for developing grit in students through their structuring of online courses and assignments, but also through developing relationships and communicating with their baccalaureate students.

Relationships and Communication

The next category that emerged from first cycle codes was *relationships and communication*. This category included the following codes: student-professor communication, professor word choice, professor availability for contact, individualized communication, check in on students, assignment feedback, students asking for help, encouragement, video for communication, student-professor relationship, online isolation, professor sharing experience, professor grit. These codes had some of the highest counts from the overall data. Participants discussed the importance of relationships and communication in their answers to nearly all of the interview questions.

Interview data suggested professors saw grit as something that could be fostered in online baccalaureate students through relationships and communication.

Relationships and communication was one of the dominating categories that emerged from the first cycle of coding. Participant C drew the connection between communication and relationships when he said, "Well, all interaction establishes a relationship." Participant A, my first interviewee, set the stage for the importance of relationships in the online classroom when she said,

> I really try to transcend that virtual barrier in online classes…I lay my cards out on the table. I tell my own story as a single mom with two disabled boys and a third child. I relate to them, and then I don't take excuses…It helps the students to see your struggle and then relate to you.

Some professors suggested a plan for encouraging communication and building relationships with online students. Participant I said,

> So if you're going to have 10 office hours and have two virtual, maybe planning a five minute check in via Zoom or, you know, Skype or whatever it may be, just to sit down and just check in with that student…just so they can see you and see that you're a real person.

Participant E pushed for "individualized feedback" on assignments so that students felt a more personal relationship with the instructor.

Likewise, participants saw relationships and communication as a way to help their students develop grit. Both Participant A and Participant J advocated for sharing their own personal stories of overcoming hardships to pursue their higher education.

Participant I said that using communication could help students "develop that grit" and she also advocated for getting to know online students well. Participant I said, "those with low grit, that really just speaks to the instructor to go and find what they might be passionate about. Maybe they don't even know what they're passionate about." Then, through that investigation, professors tied that knowledge of student interests back to designing real-world, engaging activities.

Professional Practice

The final category that emerged from first-cycle codes was *professional practice.* This category included the following codes: professor interest in grit, professor research, educational buzzwords, conferences, knowledge from media, required PD, and quality matters. These codes were not as prevalent in count as those in the *teacher presence* or *relationships and communication* categories yet helped to better explain how the professors came to learn about grit and their attitudes towards further professional development to include grit in their teaching practices. Participants in this study had a positive attitude towards grit as a construct, though a few did note the nature of "educational buzzwords" that come and go in the field. Nevertheless, all of the participants expressed interest in further research and professional development on incorporating grit into online teaching practice. Therefore, professors understood grit as a noncognitive factor in students that could possibly be developed and contribute to their making progress in online coursework. As a result, all professors felt that it was their duty as scholars and professionals to learn more about grit through research, conferences, and professional development.

The professors all considered learning about grit and other ways to promote online baccalaureate student progress to be one of their duties as professionals. Participant A, passionate about studying her interests, said, “I am a research nerd. At night, after everyone goes to bed, I look through journals and the Internet. Grit really captured my interest, so I’ve been doing a lot of reading on grit and motivation.” SSC as an institution also encourages quality online instruction. Participant E said, “As an institution we are working to have everyone follow the Quality Matters standards to ensure student-centered online instruction.” Participants not only conducted research on their own or participated in online professional development, but they also discovered grit while attending professional conferences. Participant H explained that her knowledge of grit “actually came from going to a Higher Learning Commission workshops and that sort of thing where I learned about grit.” Overall, all of the professors stated that they would be interested in participating in further training regarding developing grit in their online baccalaureate students.

Discrepant Cases

There were no significant discrepant cases in any of the interviews in relation to the study’s central themes. Faculty did provide different examples of their experiences and used somewhat different verbiage to describe the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, yet the codes, categories, and themes that emerged from the data consistently aligned with the data from each interview transcript. This consistent alignment reinforces my conclusions about professor’s perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, particularly its role in student progress and teaching practice.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

After each interview, as planned, I completed either a written or voice memo reflective journal. I utilized these journals while conducting peer debriefing to help keep track of my own biases as a researcher and to utilize reflexive best practices (Patton, 2015). For this study, peer debriefing included discussing the data and my analysis with qualitative researcher peers. It functioned to help me identify any potential bias, selective perceptions, or predispositions during the data collection and analysis process (Patton, 2015). My debriefing partners were aware that I had attended this institution as an undergraduate and knew some of the professors. I had never taken any of the participants' online courses. When discussing the interviews and early findings, my peers would push me to analyze if I was drawing conclusions directly from the interview data or from any prior knowledge I had of the participants. During the data collection and data analysis phases, I kept a keen eye on my research questions and the purpose of this study. I continued interviewing participants until I felt that I had reached saturation of the data.

Transferability

During the interview process, I used multiple devices for recording and also took detailed notes on paper. Zoom generated automatic transcripts within minutes at the end of each interview. I then listened to the recordings and corrected each transcript. Finally, I followed up with each participant to ensure the validity of each transcript. All of these measures helped me to gather reliable data and to solidify transferability.

Dependability

I sought dependability in this study through external audits. The Walden IRB application process and review cycles with my committee established one audit into the dependability of the study. In addition, I sought an external audit with students who had recently graduated from Walden University after successfully completed qualitative dissertations. All of these practices contributed to the dependability of the study.

Confirmability

Finally, to ensure confirmability of the findings, I developed an interview guide that was rooted in the purpose and research questions of the study. All of the questions were open-ended with planned follow-up questions to allow participants to express all of their experiences, thoughts, and perceptions without interruption (Patton, 2015). My reflective journals, notes, and interview transcripts were thorough and therefore allowed me to analyze and synthesize the data and ultimately obtain confirmability.

Results

In this study, I had one research question and two subquestions. While analyzing the interview data, I kept the research questions at the forefront of my mind to ensure that my codes, categories, and themes both reflected the participants thoughts, opinions, and experiences, while also fully answering the study's questions. After multiple rounds of coding and data analysis, three themes emerged from the categories from the data. Each of the three themes captures the essence of one of the major research questions. Table 6 below provides an overview of the connections between the research questions, categories, and themes of the study.

Table 6

From Categories to Themes

Research Question	Themes	Categories
RQ1: How do professors describe the role of grit in baccalaureate online education?	Overcoming Challenges	Profile of an SSC Online Learner Online vs. Face-to-Face Perceptions of Grit vs. IQ
SRQ1: What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online student progress?	Defining Goals and Making Progress	Behaviors that Promote Progress Behaviors that Impede Progress Student Progress
SRQ2: What are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online teaching practice?	Scholar-Mentor	Teacher Presence Relationships and Communication Professional Practice

Theme One: Overcoming Challenges

The first theme that emerged from the categories was *overcoming challenges.* The categories that fed into this theme were *profile of an SSC learner, online vs. face-to-face, and perceptions of grit vs. IQ.* The theme *overcoming challenges* best captured the categories and codes that emerged around RQ1 from this study. RQ1 stated, how do professors describe the role of grit in baccalaureate online education? All of the participants acknowledged that the role of grit in baccalaureate online education was that grit was a catalyst for students overcoming challenges. Challenges included those inherent to being an online baccalaureate student in Appalachia, the challenges of

learning online in general, and the importance of grit, not IQ in overcoming these challenges and making progress.

SSC students face unique challenges as they live in Southern West Virginia. Before even attending college, these people struggle due to societal problems. Many of them grew up below the poverty line and have parents or family members who struggle with drug addiction. Participant B, while discussing her students with diverse backgrounds, said, "They are coming from a variety of backgrounds. One young man, this summer, has served jail time…The age range, you know, ranges from fresh out of high school all the way up to, I think, a lady was in her 60s last semester." Many of the students attending SSC are first generation college students, and the wide variety of ages of students creates unique situations that the professors feel they must recognize and support. Not only do students struggle due to socioeconomic concerns, but many of them lack some of the basic tools necessary for attending baccalaureate classes online. Participant J noted, "the bigger issue is for low income people who they, their only technology they have is a cell phone." Depending on the professor's course design, students could have a difficult time accessing materials and completing assignments from their cell phones. Likewise, Participant B considered the lack of internet access as well as, "and there's some areas still in [redacted] county that do not have even, that they're even lucky to just have cell phone service." Therefore, nearly every student attending SSC's baccalaureate classes faces challenges in their lives outside of school before even considering the challenges that are inherent in online learning.

Most of the participants in the study did not take online courses as a student when they were completing their degree programs. However, as teachers, they could acknowledge the challenges of taking courses online in contrast to the traditional face-to-face courses. A recurring pattern in the data was the idea that students do not see the professors in person to get reminders about the work. Participant B captured this when she said, “So you have to keep a calendar of what’s due when. There’s not a teacher there in front of you saying, ‘Bring this to class tomorrow.’ You have to do that yourself.” Participant D, considered the increased work that students have when enrolled in online courses. She said students need to be ready for, “the increased workload that comes from an online course. I think a lot of students think online courses are easier. As a matter of fact, I think it’s the opposite.” All of the participants echoed this perception that online classes are more difficult, and therefore students need more positive behaviors to promote making progress.

All of the participants thought that grit, mindset, and other positive behaviors were key for overcoming the challenges of online baccalaureate learning instead of IQ. About half of the participants knew Duckworth’s (2014) educational psychology definition for grit, but even those who didn’t know it as an educational term could articulate that they saw it as an ability to persist or as participant B said, “keep showing up every day.” While most participants, other than Participant C as mentioned earlier, didn’t see a high IQ as a detriment to making progress, they all agreed that grit and other related positive behaviors like motivation, time management, organization, and dedication were the most important factors in overcoming both the challenges of being an

Appalachian college student and a baccalaureate online learner. Therefore, according to professors, the role of grit in online baccalaureate education was that grit was a catalyst for overcoming challenges.

Theme Two: Defining Goals and Making Progress

The second theme that emerged from the categories was *defining goals and making progress.* This theme combined the following categories: *positive behaviors that promote progress, negative behaviors that impede progress, and student progress.* The second major question guiding this study was SRQ1. SRQ1 states, what are professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate student progress? The major theme that emerged showed that professors considered that grit's role was like a glue holding together positive behaviors, subverting negative behaviors, and allowing students to define and make progress toward goals. Conducting interviews allowed me to understand both professors' perceptions of what defines student progress as well as how grit plays into making progress. Participants considered setting goals and working towards those goals to be an important piece of online baccalaureate education and making student progress. All of the participants said that students will need grit to reach those goals and make progress. Participant D summed this up when she stated, "For students, I think grit and dedication are both necessary to reach goals."

In this study, participants considered progress on a most basic level to be students passing their courses. However, several participants expanded on progress and goal setting. To a few participants, making progress didn't only encompass passing the course, but mastering the content and being able to apply it to real-world situations. Most

participants also considered graduation to be an ultimate goal for online baccalaureate students. Others also thought about the possibility of students pursuing further education at the graduate level to be a part of student goals and progress. All in all, the data from the interviews expanded my definition and understanding of student progress.

After defining goals as student progress, professors considered behaviors that either impeded or promoted that progress. Generally, participants said that students who did not have skills to organize themselves, manage their time, and turn assignments in would not be able to make progress in online baccalaureate courses. However, students who had good time management skills and were driven to reach those goals could make progress. Among the skills that promoted student progress, grit stood out as a trait that could make the difference in a student failing, barely getting by, passing, or excelling in an online course. Professors see the gritty, or goal-oriented students as excited to begin their classwork. Participant B, when describing a gritty student, said,

> And you may even email the teachers beforehand, 'Hey, I'm enrolled in your history class. I'm so excited! Can you tell me about upcoming assignments we're going to do?'…You can like, look at her grades in the gradebook and kinda know, yeah, she's gonna have the A... She's not going to drop out that first semester.

All of the participants shared personal experiences with students whom they taught online and stood out as particularly gritty, which then contributed to the students making progress. Participant A, when asked if she had any gritty students who stood out to her answered,

> Absolutely! She was married and had kids and was working in our education program. She actually had a written learning disability that made assignments really difficult. She was so tenacious! Inf act, she was tenacious to a point that she turned some people off. I appreciate her tenacity though. She has close to a 4.0! She may not be the most academically gifted student, but she knows how to work. She also has to take all of her classes online.

Other participants echoed these sentiments when reflecting on gritty students. Therefore, the data suggests that professors see grit a glue holding positive behaviors together and subverting negative behaviors. Grit, to the participants, was also foundational to supporting the development of goals and baccalaureate online students making progress towards those goals.

Theme Three: Scholar-Mentor

The third theme that emerged from the data was *scholar mentor.* This theme combined the following categories: *teacher presence, relationships and communication, and professional practice.* The third theme that emerged from the interview data best captured the participants' feelings about SRQ2. SRQ2 stated, what are professors' perceptions about the role of grit in online teaching practice? The questions in the third section of the interview guide led to the data to answer this question. The two parts of the theme break down to *scholar* and *mentor.* First, professors saw themselves as scholars, and grit was a subject worthy of research and applying those findings through their online course design. Second, professors also saw themselves as mentors, and that their communication and relationships could contribute to students developing grit. Therefore,

the role of grit in online teaching practice was that it served as a subject for research and professional development, as well as an unwritten learning objective for students. Through course design and building relationships, professors believed they could help students reach that objective. Participants first considered how they could structure their classes and assignments to support student passion and persistence. Participants then emphasized the importance of relationships and communication with their online students. Finally, all of the participants expressed interest in further research and professional development to promote including strategies to develop grit in their online students.

Professors considered that they could promote grit and other positive learning behaviors in their online course structures. After considering the challenges that students face at home, Participant B said, "Even if they don't have a support system, they could gain those skills from the class and apply grit." Participant B does teach a college skills course for SSC freshmen who enroll and have to take developmental courses. Participant J, who teaches economics and business courses online, found that McGraw-Hill offered "learn smart" modules where students would interact with the course materials, and if they didn't get the questions about the material correct, it would have them restart. Participant J said,

> And so what happens is I have set it up so that they have unlimited tries…so I'm forcing them to spend time on it…If they go ahead and get the max points from the learn smart modules, and turn in the homework on our learning management

> system on time, and then even if they average 50% across the chapter tests…they're still going to pass by the skin of their teeth.

Participant J's approach encourages students to experience setbacks like not passing a module and overcoming those setbacks by redoing the work again and again until they hit the required score threshold. The very structure of those assignments lends itself to deliberate practice to build grit in students (McClendon et al., 2017). Even if students struggle on major assessments, their effort and persistence is rewarded by passing the class. Most other participants emphasized the importance of clearly communicating assignment and course expectations in order to support student success. Participants also generally said that if an established authority in online course professional development, such as Quality Matters, would incorporate strategies for developing grit in students, the professors would be interested in learning and applying those strategies.

Professors are increasingly aware of the importance of developing relationships with their online students and communicating with them in order to promote positive traits like grit. Participant B said, "and I even broke my own rule and never ever gave out my personal cell phone number, until the summer semester…sometimes you just need to hear that person on the other end of the phone." While it could have been a result of the COVID-19 emergency online learning plans from the Spring of 2020, it may also have been that the professor realized communication benefitted online learners. Many other participants also emphasized that importance of baccalaureate online students being able to, as Participant I said, "put a face to the name" of their professors. This became one of the prevailing categories and subthemes as all of the participants considered how and

when they should be talking to their students. In general, professors believed that developing relationships and regularly communicating with their online baccalaureate students could help them develop grit to reach their short and long-term goals. Participant E captured this by explaining, "I think we can help them develop grit by helping them build confidence in themselves. Professors need to do a lot of encouraging, mentoring, and tutoring."

Participants in the study expressed interest in professional growth through research and professional development in order to learn strategies to promote the development of grit in their students. Participant H when asked about interest about further professional development said,

> Oh absolutely, and actually anytime there is any kind of webinar or something that I get a link to about online best practices relative to how to retain your students…. I do think it's something that faculty have to constantly stay on top of themselves. They have to be the learners.

Other participants also saw themselves not just as professors, but as scholar-mentors who must continue their research in order to stay aware of the best practices for teaching. Participant G also noted the important dynamic between professors approaching their own research interests with enthusiasm but being less excited to complete mandatory professional development. All of the participants expressed interest in getting further professional development on helping their students develop grit. Therefore, professors saw themselves as scholar-mentors. First, they were scholars and grit was one of the subjects they researched through academic literature, professional conferences, and other

professional development opportunities. Professors also saw grit as an unwritten learning objective for the course, and that they could potentially help students develop that skill through course structure and building relationships and communicating with the students.

Summary

In this chapter, I analyzed the interview data and provided an overview of the results. The purpose of this study was to better understand faculty perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, particularly the role of grit in student progress and if grit had any role in teaching practice. The main research question and two subquestions were directly rooted in the purpose of the study. After analyzing interview data, many initial codes, nine categories, and three themes emerged. The themes, overcoming challenges, defining goals and making progress, and scholar-mentor truly captured the essence of the interview data. Generally, professors stated that grit was an important aspect of online baccalaureate education, particularly in students' ability to overcome challenges and make progress towards their goals. Likewise, the participants were all open to including strategies for developing grit in students into their online teaching practices.

In chapter 5, I will place the study findings alongside the relevant bodies of literature from chapter 2 and explain how the findings relate to the study's conceptual framework. I will also consider the study's limitations and consider implications for further research. Lastly, I will explain the study's social change implications, and how the findings could possibly spur positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to better understand professors' perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, particularly grit's role in student progress and if it had any role in teaching practice. The study centered on a single central research question and two subquestions. Ten participants from SSC were recruited via email and participated in semi-structured interviews. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, interviews were conducted using Zoom conferencing software. The software produced an automatic transcription, which I checked against the audio recordings of the interviews. I then hand-coded the data using Microsoft Word. After generating first cycle codes, I then conducted thematic analysis to generate categories and themes.

Participants in this study believed that grit served as a catalyst in students overcoming challenges in online baccalaureate education. Professors also saw grit as a glue that held positive behaviors together in order for students to make progress in their online courses. Participants felt that development of grit in students was worthy of attention in online teaching practice, and that professors should act as both scholars researching best practices for teaching online, as well as mentors who can motivate students to reach their goals through developing relationships and communicating regularly.

All of the participants thought that grit played an important role in online baccalaureate education. Most of them had learned about grit through professional development or their own research. All of the participants could share stories of online

students that they found particularly gritty. When asked about the role of grit in student progress, all of the participants thought that Small State College students would need grit to overcome the challenges of their everyday lives and online learning. No participants had been formally trained in strategies to develop grit in online baccalaureate students. Nevertheless, all of the participants were interested in further training on teaching strategies that could foster grit in their students.

Interpretation of the Findings

Interpretation of the Findings in Relation to the Literature

The findings of this study aligned with, diverged from, and extended knowledge from previous literature in the field. Participants all agreed with, and seemed to experience, the major premises of authors who wrote about the challenging nature of online baccalaureate coursework and students failing or dropping out. Overall, the data from this study suggested that professors at SSC perceived that grit would be linked to student progress and retention, unlike some of the quantitative studies. Finally, because this study was a basic qualitative study, findings extended the knowledge of the current body of literature on grit in online baccalaureate education.

Like many of the authors in the field, professors in this study acknowledged the unique challenges that online baccalaureate students face. One of the major themes of the study, *overcoming challenges* aligns with the challenges of balancing school and life demands as suggested by Allen and Seaman (2014). Likewise, Muljana and Luo (2019) noted that online coursework can be isolating and lead to higher dropout rates. Professors also agreed with Muljana and Luo's (2019) assertions that noncognitive factors can

contribute to students making progress through their online courses. As a result of those challenges, the data in this study also suggests that professors also see the need to incorporate building non-cognitive skills and behaviors into their online teaching practice, which supported the findings of Hochanadel and Finamore (2015), McClendon et al., (2017), and Stevens (2015). Of course, the data from this study was qualitative, not quantitative, so there was no way to be sure if SSC students with higher grit scores actually have better GPAs or retention rates. Nevertheless, it is still worth noting that the professors, in recounting their experiences, opinions, and perceptions, observed much of the same challenges for online students. They also felt that developing noncognitive skills in those students would help them to overcome those challenges.

It was also fair to note that some of the findings of this study diverged with some of the literature on grit in online baccalaureate education, as the body of literature itself has conflicting findings. Not all of the authors who conducted quantitative research on grit and its relation to GPA and student retention found a significant or positive relationship between the two (Cross, 2014; Bowman, 2015; Saunders-Scott et al., 2017). All of the participants in this study at least perceived that grit would benefit students and have a significant impact on student outcomes and GPA. While it was not within the scope of this study to settle the debate about the relationship between grit and student GPA, the findings contributed to understanding how professors see the role of grit in online baccalaureate education.

Finally, this study extended the knowledge of the current body of literature and invites further research. Some authors, like Michael Crede (2018), discussed the

limitations of grit as a construct and the inconsistencies of quantitative findings on the subject. This study was one of the first qualitative studies on grit, and therefore helped to establish a foundation for understanding how professors see grit in student progress. While all of the participants agreed that girt was not singularly responsible for students passing courses and making progress in their degree programs, they did all say that it was helpful in overcoming challenges and setting goals. Though many of the teachers were not familiar with deliberate practice models for developing grit in students, they did note that they were interested in further professional development to foster positive behaviors in their online students (McClendon et al., 2017).

Interpretation of the Findings in Relation to the Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study rested on Dewey's (1938) theories of pragmatism and constructivism, Garrison et al.'s (2010) CoI framework, and Roger's (2003) diffusion of innovations theory. The framework was a lens for creating research questions, designing an interview guide, and analyzing the data within the study. The findings related to all three theories.

Dewey's Pragmatism

Dewey (1938), in his theories of pragmatism and constructivism in education, advocated for students to set individualized goals and work to reach them. The professors in this study considered grit to be foundational to students setting goals and maintaining the motivation to reach them. Dewey (1938) also emphasized the importance of teachers relying on real-world examples in their lessons rather than requiring rote memorization. The participants in this study also emphasized the importance of engaging lessons and

tied those lessons to their abilities to help students to develop non-cognitive factors like grit. Participant I captured this best when she said, “I think students have to be opened up to what’s available to them and they need to learn in a way that’s interactive so they can see how this would actually be out in the real world.” Therefore, experiential learning and goal-setting as described by Dewey (1938) formed underpinnings for interpreting the data in this study.

Garrison et al.’s CoI

The findings from this study directly related to the presences from the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2010). The professors considered the importance of their teaching presence in supporting grit in students as well as their eventual success in online courses. Participants in this study thought that through developing clear course expectations and engaging assignments, students would be more likely to persist through the course and make progress. The interview data also suggested that professors valued social presence, particularly the relationships between students and professors as a possible way for developing grit in those students. Participant C said of student-professor relationships, “It is a dialectic that normally takes place in an in-class course, but online courses are done in words. It’s done by writing, which…requires not only you, but the student, to articulate their thoughts in a rational manner.” According to Wang and Shan (2018), greater student motivation could result in greater cognitive presence. Interviews reinforced these findings and suggested that professors perceive the importance of relationships fostering motivation, and in turn, fostering greater cognitive presence and student progress.

Roger's Diffusion of Innovations

Rogers' (2003) diffusion theory was included in the conceptual framework for this study because I had expected that the participants had all taken part in professional development related to grit in online baccalaureate students. However, during the interviews I discovered that about half of the participants had no formal training on grit. Therefore, some of the organizational aspects of Rogers' (2003) theory did not directly apply to this study. The participants were all in different stages of the diffusion process, from knowledge all the way to implementation (Rogers, 2003). Professors learned about grit as an innovation through multiple channels—some through media, other colleagues, or their own research. As Rogers (2003) suggested, it was likely that the participants in the study had a positive outlook on grit due to the nature of the ways that they learned about it as a noncognitive factor supporting online student progress. All of the participants in this study were eager to learn new and innovative online teaching methods. Rogers (2003) would have considered them innovators or early adopters. Participant A, who described herself as a "research nerd" was always looking to discover ways to innovate in her online classes. It was clear from the interview data that all of the participants were looking to innovate in their classrooms in order to support online students reaching their goals.

Limitations of the Study

For this study, the first limitation was that it was a basic qualitative interview study that included participants from only one study site. Nine full time professors and one part time professor who taught online courses for SSC participated in the study. The

experiences of these professors are unique to teaching online in rural Appalachia. Therefore, these professors' experiences, opinions, and perceptions could not reflect those who teach in more urban, affluent, or educated regions of the country. As in most qualitative research, the findings from this study should not be generalized to reflect the experiences of all online baccalaureate professors.

Students, administrators, and other staff members on campus did not participate. SSC employs various college counselors, student support staff, and a retention specialist who likely could've offered additional insight to the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. However, the research questions for this study were limited to the experiences and opinions of full and part-time professors, and therefore it was unnecessary to include other college staff members. The findings from this study could not be generalized to the perceptions, experiences, and opinions of college administrators, counselors, or other staff members.

This study had ten participants. While the number of participants was enough to achieve saturation of the interview data, it was not a large enough number of participants to generalize the findings to all online baccalaureate college professors (Patton, 2015). There were three male participants and seven female participants. The participants also taught in different schools of the college, and taught students of all grade levels.

Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to better understand professor perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate learning, their perceptions of the role of grit in student progress, and if there were any implications for online teaching practice. There were 10

professors from SSC who participated in the study. There are a few recommendations for further study considering the findings and scope of this study.

First, there is a need for additional qualitative research on grit in online higher education. Authors have called for qualitative research to inform the body of literature surrounding grit in education (Dumke, et al., 2017; Almeida, 2017; Gonzales, 2017; Pryiomka, 2018). This study does provide data on the perceptions of online baccalaureate professors, but only in the context of SSC. Therefore, it could be beneficial to conduct additional research with professors at different colleges and universities. Likewise, future researchers could expand the body of literature through collecting qualitative data from students, college administrators, counselors, and other support staff.

This study examined professor perceptions of grit through the lens of Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations theory. The professors in this study had not all been introduced to grit as a concept at the organizational level. Therefore, it could be wise to conduct a study using this lens at an institution where professors have received professional development on developing grit in online learners.

Finally, this study included professor participants who taught all levels of students in a variety of subjects. Future researchers could single-out professors who taught freshman students. They could also limit the study to a single major or subject area to see if that made a difference in the role of grit in online baccalaureate education.

Implications

This study explored professor perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, particularly its role in student progress, and if it had any

implications for teaching practice. This study's findings can support college administrators as they seek ways to improve online teaching practice and student retention. This study's findings can also help spur further research into strategies for developing grit in online baccalaureate students.

Positive Social Change

SSC is located and serves students primarily in rural Appalachia. Students in this area struggle with poverty, addiction, and lack of access to a variety of supports. Professors in this study believed that students could overcome their everyday struggles and obtain baccalaureate degrees with grit. The findings from this study can contribute to the body of literature surrounding supporting struggling online students.

This was one of the first studies on grit in online baccalaureate education using a qualitative framework with an emphasis on professor perceptions and experiences. While the study sample size was too small to generalize to all online baccalaureate professors, hopefully the design of the study can be replicated in order to gather further data from diverse settings. The findings again could contribute to best practices for online teaching to support developing grit in students and promoting timely graduation. Administrators can use data from this study and others like it to support professional development for teachers to learn ways to promote grit in online students.

Interview data in this study emphasized the importance of student-professor communication and relationships in the online setting. This calls for further research on student-professor relationships and how they might help students develop positive behaviors such as grit in pursuit of their degrees. All students enrolled in online

baccalaureate classes face challenges in addition to their coursework that can make it difficult to complete a class or program. Supporting teaching practices that could help students develop grit, such as weekly check-ins, video communication, and engaging assignments, could be a key strategy to improving retention and graduation rates.

Conclusion

Students were enrolling in online baccalaureate courses and degree programs every day. Despite the increased access to education around the clock, students struggled to pass their courses and graduate in a timely manner (Allen & Seaman, 2014). In rural Appalachia, SSC expanded online course offerings. Students in this region struggled with poverty, addiction, and lack of access to the supports that many students in more affluent areas of the country enjoy while attending college. Like many other online undergraduate students, SSC learners at times failed their courses and dropped out of their degree programs.

Researchers, administrators, staff, and faculty alike have labored to find keys to online student progress. Some of the most recent research focused on noncognitive factors, or behaviors that promoted student progress. The findings of this study revealed that some online professors at SSC thought that grit was an integral piece of online baccalaureate education. They stated that it may not have been the deciding factor in determining baccalaureate student progress, it served as a glue holding positive behaviors together to promote that progress.

This study's scope was too limited to generalize the findings to all online baccalaureate professors. Nevertheless, the data supports further research into

noncognitive factors like grit that support student success. The results also call for further research into online teaching practices that promote students developing grit. Further research will be needed to understand professor perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education at other institutions. It will also be helpful to continue conducting quantitative research to determine if there is a significant relationship between student grit and measures of academic success such as GPA.

Though today's students have unparalleled access to education, they face challenges and obstacles along their journeys to graduation. Online professors strive to support student learning and success. This study suggests that professors continue to support students through thoughtful course design, communication, and developing relationships. Through these positive interactions, professors can possibly help their students develop grit and other positive behaviors. These behaviors can not only propel students towards graduation, but on to fulfilling careers. We must never give up on our quest to improve the quality of learning and support students in achieving their dreams.

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Appendix A: Participant Invitation Email

Hello,

I hope you are having a safe summer so far. I am currently conducting research as part of my PhD at Walden University. For this qualitative study, I am seeking participants for interviews. The purpose of my study is to explore professor knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education. As a professor who teaches online, you are a good candidate to share your perceptions and experiences with grit in baccalaureate e-learning.

If you're interested, we can complete the interview over Zoom video conferencing, and that should take between 30-60 minutes. I am the sole researcher for this project. Your responses will be kept confidential and private. Though there is no compensation for participating, sharing your knowledge and experiences might help us to improve our understanding of retention and success in the online classroom.

Would you be willing to participate? If so, please respond to this message and I will provide you with the electronic informed consent paperwork. After that, I'll also reach out to schedule a time for our interview!

Thanks!

Erica Aiken

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study. I am inviting full time and adjunct professors who teach online at Small State College. I was given your name and contact information by an administrator at the college. This form is part of the research process known as informed consent so that you understand the study before you decide to participate.

I, Erica Aiken, am conducting this study. I'm a doctoral candidate at Walden University. You may know me as a former student or adjunct professor at SSC, but this research is separate from that role.

Background:

The purpose of this study is to better understand professor knowledge and perceptions of the role of grit in online baccalaureate education, and if that has any impact on student progress or teaching practice.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, I will schedule a time to conduct an interview with you via Zoom. The interview should take between 30-60 minutes. I will ask you questions about your knowledge of grit and your experiences of working with students in online baccalaureate classes. After our interview, I'll invite you to review my transcripts and preliminary themes in an informal follow-up interview. The follow-up interview will also take less than an hour and offer you the opportunity to ensure that I have accurately recorded and analyzed your thoughts and perceptions.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is completely voluntary. You can accept or decline the invitation. No one in your workplace will treat you differently if you decide not to participate in the study. If you agree to participate, you're still free to change your mind or exit the study at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Participating:

Participating in this study will not pose a risk to your personal safety or welfare. This study may have some risk of minor discomforts such as tiredness and stress.

Participating in this study could benefit our understanding of the role of noncognitive factors in online student success. It could help spur new research into best practices for promoting student success in online baccalaureate courses.

Compensation:

There is no payment or compensation for participating in this study.

Privacy:

Any publications from this study will not have names or other identifying information of the participants. I will keep all data safe through password-encryption and using pseudonyms in the transcripts. Walden University requires keeping the data for five years, and then I will destroy all of the records.

Contact and Questions:

If you have any questions, you can ask me via phone (276) 970-6249 or erica.aiken@waldenu.edu. If you would like to learn more about your rights as a participant, you can call the Research Participant Advocate at Walden University by

phone at (612) 312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 06-24-20-0598908 and it expires on 06-24-2021.

Please print or save this form for your records.

Your Consent

If you understand the study well enough to make a decision, please indicate your consent by replying "I consent" to this email.

Appendix C: Invitation Letter to Provost

Dear Provost of Small State College,

I am Erica Aiken and I am a student in the Ph.D. in Education program at Walden University. I am conducting a study on professor perceptions of the role of grit in baccalaureate online education. I will be interviewing professors to explore their perceptions regarding the role of grit in online baccalaureate student progress and teaching practice. With your permission, I'd like to conduct my study with professors from SSC. Though I work for the school as an online history adjunct, this study is completely independent of my employment with SSC.

For my study, all that I ask is that you provide a spreadsheet of the names and email contact information for full and part-time professors who teach online at SSC. From this spreadsheet, I will conduct purposeful sampling and invite potential participants via email. For those interested in participating, I will obtain proper informed consent via email before scheduling interviews. Because of the recent COVID-19 global pandemic, I will be conducting all interviews using Zoom conference software. Therefore, I will not need access to campus facilities for any part of my study. Participation in the study is not compensated and entirely voluntary. Professors may choose to exit the study at any point.

I will be under the close supervision of my professors and Walden's IRB for the duration of the study. I also understand that if you agree for me to conduct my study at your site, you will present my study to SSC's IRB. I am attaching my proposal for your review. If you have any questions, please feel free to email me or call me. Like the participants, you are under no obligation to help me with my study and you may choose to approve or deny my request.

If you agree to present my proposal to your IRB, please reply to this email.

Thank you for your consideration,

Erica Aiken