

2023

## Adult Learners with Learning Disabilities' Motivation to Succeed in Higher Education Online Learning During COVID19

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# Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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2023

Abstract

Adult Learners with Learning Disabilities' Motivation to Succeed in Higher Education

Online Learning During COVID19

by

Sara M. Rodriguez

MA, Walden University 2019

BS, Western New Mexico University, 2015

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Developmental Psychology

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## Abstract

Many students had to transition to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic while other students were already enrolled in online education. Online study may hold additional struggles for students with learning disabilities. The problem addressed in this qualitative, phenomenological study was the motivating factors of online higher education students who have a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The theoretical foundation was Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Data were gathered through 10 semistructured interviews and then analyzed through the thematic analysis yielding five themes: (a) lack of professional support, (b) resources, (c) support system, (d) consistent motivation, and (e) low motivation. These findings showed that students needed support within families and educational institutions to continue to be successful in their schooling and motivated. Additionally, it showed that students needed resources to better help them succeed in their assignments. Implications for positive social change include better understanding of how students are motivated when doing online school despite the different challenges they may be experiencing. Additionally, this study may also contribute to social change by informing other students that they are not alone during the process of their education and that there are ways to continue to be motivated.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this doctoral study to all three of my parents, Kimberly, Alle, and Jill, who all encouraged me since I was little to continue with school. I also dedicate this to my husband, Robert and my daughter Morrene, who has only known her mom as having to do homework and the both of them who have continued to support me and help do my stuff when I did not want to. I couldn't be where I am without all of their support.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

There are many students who attend higher education through colleges or universities. However, there are some students who experience challenges when attending school, such as those who have a learning disability. Motivation is a major variable for students with a learning disability in higher education because many students want to be successful (Dryer et al., 2016). There was a 1.91% increase of students attending higher education who have a learning disorder or disability in 2001-2012 (Dryer et al., 2016). Based on these trends, it is likely that this population has continued to increase steadily over the last decade.

Learning disabilities can be experienced in a variety of ways. There are many students around the world who experience learning disabilities, including language processing skills, cognitive processing skills, fine motor, and nonverbal learning disabilities to name a few (Learnings Disabilities Association of America, n.d.). Some students may struggle with the ability to understand the material being taught within the classroom, especially in an online setting. Students may experience learning disorders or related disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia, and executive functioning (Learning Disabilities Association of America, n.d.). These challenges can pose a threat to students' motivation, particularly in collegiate settings.

Students sometimes experience problems with their motivation due to their learning disability, especially during the recent changes within the world. In late 2019 and early 2020, the world changed drastically due to the onset of SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19). This virus caused a world-wide lockdown resulting in the closure of many schools

and colleges globally (Malizar, 2020). Due to these closures, many students lacked the resources (internet, laptops, technological support) required for them to continue their educational journey (Assarah & Bidohkt, 2011; Pelgrum, 2001). Though it has been 2 years since the onset of COVID-19 there is little phenomenological research surrounding motivation of students in higher education who have a learning disorder during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Chapter 1, a brief overview of background literature is presented. This information is influential to the present research study. The problem statement is introduced and explains how the relationships of the variable's lead to the problem statement. Additionally, I explain the theoretical framework, the nature of the study, definition, scope and delimitations, significance, and finally, the conclusion.

### **Background**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were multiple ways a student could attend school. Various forms of schooling include in-person, online, blended, hybrid, or flipped. However, because of COVID-19, many students transitioned to online learning (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Mailizar et al., 2020). The transition to online learning occurred for multiple reasons, such as work, family, or learning styles (Stack, 2015). For example, some students had to work to be able to go to college and did not have the flexibility to attend classes at a university. Therefore, their best option was to attend classes online. Another example is family. A student who is a full-time stay-at-home parent may not have the resources available for childcare and must attend classes online to allow the flexibility of completing assignments at night or when the parent has free

time. Online learning allows for more freedom, including scheduling or flexibility of completing homework assignments.

Though there is more flexibility with online learning, students may experience differences in their outcomes, such as grades and academic success (Stack, 2015). Multiple studies examined student grades (see Bettlinger et al., 2008; Parsons-Pollard et al., 2008; Stack, 2015) in online learning environments, resulting in conflicting findings. For example, one study found that within the past 10 years, grades have been higher in online learning environments (Stack, 2015) as compared to the early and mid-2000's (Bettlinger et al., 2008; Parson's-Pollard et al., 2008). Students who have a learning disability are less likely to be successful in higher education because they are not getting their needs addressed or receiving proper accommodations (Dryer et al., 2016; Pittman & Heiselt, 2014).

Through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), it is by law that schools are not able to discriminate against students who have a disability (Disability Rights SC, 2021). Students can get accommodations made even if they are in the online learning environment. Some accommodations include extended time on exams or accessibility to notes during an exam. However, many students are unaware that they have access to these services or lack proper documentation to help them get services (Banks, 2014). There are multiple ways a student with a learning disability may get accommodations within the online learning environment, such as accessibility and layout within the online platform. Accessibility refers to a simple way for students to access the online schooling platform. Layout refers to course content that

is easily understood and operable with multiple ways to access information, such as through text, audio, or visual content (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). Although these accommodations can be made, students with a learning disability continue to have challenges, which could result in them dropping out of school.

It is important to consider the perspective of students with a learning disability. Some educators believe students who have a learning disability maintain motivation versus those who do not have a learning disorder (Morina, 2019) or have easier access to learning tools (Martenev & Bernadowski, 2016). However, students continue to experience many different challenges when participating in higher education, such as not being able to spend time with family, fatigue, and increased stress (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). There are additional barriers students face such as weak Wi-Fi, outdated computer hardware, video software, finances, lacking the space needed to conduct their studies, less social connectedness, and exhaustion (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Vaillancourt et al., 2022). Wi-Fi is a major resource when it comes to online learning. Students need to be able to access the internet; a barrier could be Wi-Fi that is weak, inhibiting connection and making it difficult to submit or access assignments. The other barrier, hardware, is also a major factor as some students do not have the resources to purchase a laptop or desktop computer, which is a requirement for online learning, and in many instances is the main tool used to access course content and to communicate with professors and peers.

When students transition to online learning, especially during the pandemic, it is important that they have cognitive problem-solving skills and motivation. A student



needs to be able to make effective decisions in the online learning environment; when information is retained, motivation increases (Munir et al., 2021). Students also are motivated when they feel they matter within the learning environment (Vaillancourt et al., 2022). This can be done through social presence of peers and educators via email, discussion boards or other types of interactions (Munir et al., 2021).

As mentioned, motivation is important for students, especially for students with a learning disability and in higher education. However, it is important to note that more students without a learning disability attend higher education than those with a learning disability (Daley & Zeidan, 2021). Even when students attend higher education and have a learning disability, they are less likely to complete their educational journey compared to students who do not have a learning disability (Daley & Zeidan, 2020). Motivation is important for students and students have reported that the required amount of time and effort to complete their schoolwork online has been a determining factor for motivation (Dryer et al., 2016). When a student is more engaged in the material being taught, there is more motivation (Chukwuedo et al., 2021). Though the topic has been frequently researched, it is still unclear how students in higher education who have a learning disability remain motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a global problem. Not only was the pandemic causing physical health problems for people, but it impacted the educational system too. World-wide schools were forced to transition to online learning overnight (Dhwan, 2020). This was a problem for some schools because they may not have had the technology to implement online courses or were hesitant to change their approach to

education. Some schools were closed temporarily due to the pandemic (Dhwan, 2020). Though it varied by location, general requirements during the pandemic were social distancing and quarantining. People were advised to stay 6 feet away from one another, hold no large gatherings, wear masks, and stay home as much as possible within the United States of America (World Health Organization, 2023). Because of these recommendations, schools had no choice but to make the change to online learning. This could have posed a problem for many students due to the previous barriers described.

### **Problem Statement and Purpose**

The situation that prompted me to search the literature was the COVID-19 pandemic. The social problem being examined was motivation to succeed in online higher education during COVID-19 examining adult learners with a learning disability. During the pandemic, many people needed to attend classes online rather than in a traditional setting due to the rapid onset of a deadly virus and inability to have in-person contact (Dwhan, 2022). This could have posed a problem for students as there are barriers (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Vaillancourt et al., 2022) and some students may be more comfortable having their education in a face-to-face setting rather than in an online virtual setting. Students who have a learning disorder may face additional barriers with their education and require additional services.

The Learning Disabilities Association of America (n.d.) described students who have a learning disability as experiencing problems with cognition and language processing skills, fine motor skills, or other nonverbal disabilities. Students who have a learning disability and attend classes on campus have more access to services than those

who are in the online learning environment (Dryer et al., 2016). When transitioning to online schooling, students who have a learning disability may have heightened stressors, which may impact their motivation to continue with online learning due having to adapt to a different learning environment because of the pandemic (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). It is true the pandemic has caused stressors for all students regardless of a learning disability; however, it is unknown how the pandemic and the transition to online learning has affected motivation for students with a learning disability. It is possible they are facing additional challenges. Some additional challenges include not having as much access to educators when help is needed, different type of classroom environment, teaching themselves, and lack of in-person interaction or guidance as what could have been received within the classroom. The specific research problem that is addressed through this study is to better understand what motivates adult higher education learners with a learning disability to succeed in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Research Theory**

The conceptual framework I used in this study was the theory of human motivation (Maslow, 1943). This framework was meaningful to consider for the nature of the study because it relies on motivation which is a paramount variable within the study. There are five basic needs a person strives for including physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). If a person does not have a basic need met in a lower level, such as physiological needs (food, water, sleep, sex), they are unable to have satisfaction in the above level, safety (having a home, financial resources) (Block, 2011). The idea around the theory of human motivation is that people are going to strive

for the top level of self-actualization. Self-actualization means the person has met all previous levels, all needs are met, and have reached the limit of their potential and are their ideal self (Maslow, 1943). Notably, when a person is motivated, they are being driven by unconscious behavior to achieve their goals; but when a person is more aware of their goals, their behavior can be controlled more easily for them to work toward attainment of self-actualization (Maslow & Mittelman, 1958). Students in online learning, especially those with a learning disability, have needs that are required to be met to be successful such as accommodations, support, and resources (computers, Wi-Fi, etc.).

The theory of human motivation was used to better understand motivating factors for higher education students with a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The logical connections between the framework presented and my study approach include how students get their basic needs met during the COVID-19 pandemic and what motivates them to work toward self-actualization. Students have faced many barriers during the pandemic, and those barriers may not be ones that were previously listed. These barriers may also impact their motivation to continue to work toward their educational goals, especially for students who have a learning disability. Through the theory of motivation, people work toward having their basic needs met, such as food, shelter, sleep, then work toward the next level including safety and finances. However, during the pandemic, it may have been difficult for many students to have the lowest level of needs met which may have impacted their motivation to continue with their education. Understanding the conscious behaviors of students with a learning disability in

higher education to maintain motivation during the pandemic may allow for further understanding of what can help future students found in a similar position or current students.

## **Nature of the Study**

### **Research Question**

The research question I asked was *What are the experiences of adults with learning disabilities regarding motivation to succeed in online higher education programs during the COVID-19 pandemic?*

### **Design**

To address the research question in this qualitative study, the specific research design included a phenomenological interview. The phenomenological interviews are informal to gain better understanding of the lived experiences of a small sample of participants (Cypress, 2018). Broad ranged questions are asked through the interviews to allow for participants to include their information without having predetermined responses (Cypress, 2018).

### **Definitions**

The following defined terms were used throughout my study.

*COVID-19*: The virus SARS-CoV-2 which consists of pneumonia like symptoms consisting of cough, fever, and fatigue (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020).

*Higher education*: Any schooling at the university level (Galluzzi et al., 2021).

*In-person learning*: Education that involves a student an educational facility getting direct instruction from an educator and can have physical contact or conversation

that is not required through media use and little digital content is used for instruction (Anastasiades & Caner, 2012).

*Learning disability/disability:* A variety of disorders that may impact a person's ability to understand, preserve, or expend information that is verbally or non-verbally presented (Al-Mahrezi et al., 2016). Examples of a learning disability include dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, nonverbal learning disabilities, and oral/written language disorder (Learning Disabilities Association of America, n.d.).

*Motivation:* "The willingness to attend and learn material in a development program" (Cole et al., 2004, p. 67). For example, a student, despite challenges, will be able to continue to work on school tasks.

*Online schooling* (also known as *e-learning* or *asynchronous learning*): Refers to attending classes online where technology is being used to deliver education and communication is done through e-mail, phone, discussion boards etc., (Sangra et al., 2013).

### **Assumptions**

There are a few assumptions associated with the current study. I assumed that undergraduate students who participated in this study were traditional students, ages 22 and younger, as opposed to nontraditional students, which may have an impact on the generalizability of study results. I assumed that participants with a learning disability have equitable experiences during their online schooling, such as ways to manage any problems, time management, supports, and types of disorders. For example, it is possible that some students experience more difficulties with their learning compared to others

and this could potentially have an impact on the study. Additionally, In this study, I did not control for whether students receive disability support services , how much resources they have access to, and/or what accommodations they receive. Essentially, I assumed that these experiences are equitable. Another assumption was that students who have a learning disability have a diagnosis and are receiving support services through their college or university rather than thinking they have a learning disability without proper documentation. I also assumed that participants responded with honesty and integrity when answering the questions in this study. Despite the assumptions, I sought to address a topic that has received limited attention in the literature.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Next, it is important to discuss the scope and delimitations of the current study. The scope of the study subsumed students with a learning disability who are in college at any level. An example of the delimitation of a learning disability is a disorder that impacts a student's learning. Students had to be 18 or older to participate in the study. These participants had to identify as having a learning disability and be currently enrolled in an institution of higher, online education. Semistructured interviews were used to collect data. The use of semistructured interviews allows participants to answer structured questions but also allows follow-up questions to get a better explanation of answers if needed (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The following are questions that help gather information around motivation, higher education, the pandemic, and a learning disability: How does having a learning disability impact your learning? What keeps you motivated despite having a learning disability to further your education? The study consisted of 10

participants who were willing to complete a Zoom interview. Interviews took about 30-45 minutes to complete. According to Bonde (2013), 12 interviews would be an adequate number of participants, considering the targeted sample is homogenous. Bonde further explained when the target population is broader a larger sample is needed to be able to experience data saturation.

### **Significance**

Students have experienced a lot of change within the past 2 years. This study allowed students to express how they were motivated during the pandemic while having a learning disability. More research is needed to support students in online education during the pandemic. Additionally, more information is needed to continue to support students who have a learning disability. These variables need to be studied concurrently, as going to college and getting a degree can be helpful for one's personal and professional well-being due to them working toward a goal (Maslow & Mittelman, 1958). This study can produce positive social change by providing a better understanding of the motivation of students during a pandemic in an online setting. These results can provide insight to how students may have persevered during the pandemic, which can be used to support students with learning disabilities in undergraduate settings during times of stress. Technology is more advanced than it used to be and because of technological advancements, the world was able to transition educational services to online during the pandemic (Dwhan, 2022). This study contributes to the field of developmental psychology by better understanding motivating factors for students who have a learning disability and how they remained motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Students who have a learning disability may already experience some form of hardship, maybe even more within the online learning environment during COVID-19. The learning environment in an online setting is different than a face-to-face setting it and brings up additional challenges, especially when having to convert to remote learning unexpectedly. Learning online requires a different learning skill set that some students may not have independently and converting to online learning due to the pandemic may have hindered the learning experience for these students (Lemay et al., 2021). Further understanding motivating factors of online students who have a learning disability during the pandemic will enrich the field of psychology by identifying societal barriers that inhibit adult learners with a learning disability. This study can also help identify ways to address these barriers to promote these students' success.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of the present study was to better understand motivations of online higher education students with a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the pandemic has been within the past 2 years, there are many students who could be facing problems with motivation. The pandemic has placed a plethora of stressors on many people, despite age, and education is one of them. This study is important to explore due to the transition from traditional in-person learning to online learning when the pandemic hit. Better understanding of student's motivation to continue their educational experience, especially with a learning disorder, in higher education could provide insight for future students on how to help themselves remain motivated.

The gaps in the study include not understanding self-regulation, self-determination, or motivation of students who have a learning disorder, especially during a pandemic. Gonzalez-Ramirez et al. (2021) studied students at the collegiate level and found students to be more exhausted and lacking healthy behaviors (such as exercise, healthy eating) during the pandemic. However, they did not examine students who have a learning disorder. There has also been research about educators' beliefs about students with a learning disability and they believe that students with a learning disability have more motivation (Morina, 2019). Consequently, there is not research about students who have learning disability describing their ability to remain motivated in higher education. Furthermore, research on motivation of students in higher education during the pandemic has been researched (Munir, et al., 2021) but it was a quantitative study and did not include students who had a learning disability. It remains unclear how students with a learning disorder remain motivated to learning in higher, online educational settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand the gap in the literature, qualitative interviews are used to explore the experiences of students with a learning disability who participated in online higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews allow there to be a personal insight of students with a learning disability that is lacking from the field of research to better understand their motivation in higher education during the pandemic.

Chapter 2 further introduces the study while delving further into the gap of the literature. From here, the theoretical framework is explained including how it relates to the present study. The literature is presented with an exhaustive explanation of the

literature that is relevant to the research topic of motivation, students with a learning disability, higher education, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Chapter 3 contains information about the research design, how the purpose aligns with the study design, research questions, role as observers and participants, biases, ethical consideration, population, sampling, instrumentation, content validity and culturally specific issues to the population. Chapter four will discuss the data analysis, setting, demographics, and how data related to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Finally, Chapter 5 will include the discussion, conclusion, and recommendations.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

During the final months of 2019 and early 2020, COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) affected people worldwide. The spread of COVID-19 quickly turned into a pandemic and caused world-wide lockdowns making access to some resources, such as in-person education, nearly impossible (Mailizar et al., 2020). However, the world could not stop functioning because of COVID-19, and people needed to continue their education and other obligations. Many students, regardless of age or education level, had to transition to online learning (Lemay et al., 2021). Though online learning is not a new concept, transitioning to an online format was challenging for many students (Lemay et al., 2021), as not all people participated in online learning before the pandemic. Subsequently, there are many reasons students do not choose to participate in online learning.

Many students attend school, especially those who have a learning disability. The number of students with a learning disability in higher education has increased from 2001 to 2012 by 1.91% (Dryer et al., 2016). From 2006-2007, many students were participating in online learning and among those students, the National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) data illustrated that 26% of students had mobility disabilities, 21% had sensory disabilities, and 20% had cognitive disabilities or other long-lasting conditions (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). Many people globally experience a learning disorder. A learning disorder, as described by The Learning Disabilities Associations of America (n.d.) is either due to genetics or neurobiological factors which impacts the cognitive process. These effects may cause deficits in the ability to think abstractly, memory, attention, organization, or time management (Learning Disabilities

Association of America, n.d.). Some common learning disorders include dyscalculia (difficulty understanding numbers), dysgraphia (fine motor skills), dyslexia (language-based processing skills), nonverbal learning disabilities, and oral/written language disorders. There are other disorders that are related to learning disorders including ADHD (difficulty paying attention and hyperactivity), dyspraxia (movement and coordination) and executive functioning (planning/organizing; Learning Disabilities Association of America, n.d.). Currently, it is unclear how students with a learning disability remain motivated in their education based on changing education formats (to online learning) as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal for this dissertation is to better understand the motivating factors of online higher education learners who have a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

To achieve this goal, it is important to contextualize the pandemic for online learning. In March of 2020, more than 40 countries closed schools (Mailizar et al., 2020). From this point on, many schools transitioned to electronic learning (e-learning) to help stop the spread of COVID-19. There are different barriers students face in the e-learning context. Access to technological support is a barrier (Pelgrum, 2001). Access to technological support has been identified as access to computers, laptops, Wi-Fi/internet, or other supplies needed to be able to successfully attend a class online. Research has studied other barriers that students face in online learning. identified There are six barriers students face when they are in an asynchronous learning environment: (a) technological confidence and expertise, (b) access to technology, (c) maintaining equipment, (d) attitude toward computer use, (e) instruction, and (f) curriculum (Assarah

& Bidohkt, 2011). Some students may choose to learn in synchronous learning environments to avoid these challenges. Some resources that can help online learners include access to library computers and the ability to speak to an educator directly to discuss concerns or questions. Yet, during the pandemic, many students had to attend asynchronous learning to continue their education. Though many students wanted to make the transition to or were already used to asynchronous learning, some students faced the barriers mentioned by Assarah and Bidohkt (2011). Despite this information, it is still unknown how students who have a learning disability remain motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to address this issue, the purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the motivating factors of online higher education learners who have a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to elaborate on how this study will achieve this purpose, I organized Chapter 2 in multiple sections. First, I address the gap in the literature and how this study addresses the deficits in the literature. Second, I address the theoretical foundation used for this study and how it relates to what is being studied using examples. Then the literature review is thoroughly discussed and finally the conclusion is presented, which summarizes what was discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

To access scholarly literature, the Walden Library was used to access different databases of peer reviewed articles. The different databases accessed were APA Psycarticles, APA PsycBooks, APA PsycExtra, APA PsycInfo, and Education Source. These journal articles were peer reviewed. The topic of the study is motivation of online

higher education students who have a learning disability during the Covid-19 pandemic. To be able to find journal articles that related to the topic the following key words were searched: *college, higher education, college, university, secondary, postsecondary, undergraduate, online learning, asynchronous learning, e-learning, distance learning, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, learning difficulties, common learning disorders, learning disorder, special education, motivation, systemic review, COVID-19, pandemic, Corona virus, and motivating factors*. When looking in the databases provided t I found 88 articles. To discuss the different articles found I divided the literature review into sections including online learning, online learning for those with learning disabilities, online learning during COVID, and motivations to succeed in higher education.

### **Gap in Literature**

Though there has been a lot of research regarding motivation, there is little research covering motivation of students during a pandemic who are in a higher education online learning setting and who have a learning disability. During the transitional phase from in-person to online learning during the pandemic, it was found that students decreased their social connections with peers, professors, the college community, and their healthy habits, such as physical activity and dieting (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). Students were identified as being more exhausted during the pandemic, experiencing higher levels of cynicism, and increasing unhealthy behaviors (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). Students continue to attend school online despite the COVID-19 pandemic and other barriers. Though there have been other studies that

elaborated on the different barriers to online learning, it is unclear how the pandemic has impacted motivations for online learning. Second, it is unclear how motivations have changed for those with a learning disability, who already experienced varying motivations and challenges due to online learning.

Addressing these gaps is important since many students who learn online experience some deficits compared to face-to-face education as a result of online learning. For example, students do not have immediate contact with their instructors in an asynchronous learning environment and must wait for their educator to respond via email or through a discussion board. Immediacy of instructors in online schooling impacts learning, cognition, and motivation (Baker, 2010). Instructor immediacy had no relationship with motivation, but instructor presence did (Baker, 2010). More specifically, when teachers are viewed as being within the online classroom and students feel the instructor has consistent interaction and feedback, students are more motivated to be engaged in the asynchronous learning environment (Baker, 2010). Additionally, it was not found that immediacy was predictive of motivation, cognition, and learning. More research needs to be done to better understand the learning experiences for online learners, particularly those with a learning disability given these limitations in the online classroom.

Although deficits exist in the online learning environment, these deficits may be expounded when a student has a learning disability. Additional research examined faculty members who had relationships with students who have disabilities in a public-school setting (Morina, 2019). They found that educators believe students with a learning



disability are more motivated than their classmates and do not need to take extra steps to be engaged in the learning process (Morina, 2019). Data was collected through a qualitative study; however, the primary focus was on educators and the students with a learning disability were not interviewed to understand how they remain engaged. Morina (2019) identified the gap in literature as not understanding how students who have a learning disability in higher education remain engaged. Conducting interviews to get additional insight from students in higher education programs who have a learning disability in online learning environments could allow for better understanding of motivation, which can be used to design effective strategies to assist disabled students' learning, motivation, and engagement.

Motivation is a major factor for students, whether in person or online. There has been recent research on how students in an online learning environment remain motivated and present within the classroom based on their problem-solving skills due to fear of COVID-19 (Munir et al., 2021). These researchers found that cognitive problem-solving skills is a motivator for students to engage in online learning, which was also correlated to psychological motivation (Munir et al., 2021). Munir et al. (2021) defined cognitive problem-solving skills as the ability to apply analysis. Yet, their study was limited to students in Malaysia and Pakistan and does not maintain generalizability due to the small sample size. Additionally, this study did not obtain personal insight on the experiences of their participants, information that could be learned from a qualitative study, that would allow for further understanding of the motivation to succeed. Munir et al. did give insight on how problem-solving skills help motivate students in online learning during a

pandemic, but further research would benefit the field to understand personal experiences through a qualitative study on how students with a learning disability remain motivated during the pandemic. Additionally, Munir et al. explained that, for students to be successful in online higher education, motivation is a driving factor. Therefore, further research is needed to learn how students in higher online learning who have a learning disability remain motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Overall, there have been many different studies conducted to better understand motivation through social presence/immediacy of instructors (Baker, 2010), teachers' perceptions of student's motivation when having a learning disability (Morina, 2019) and how the problem-solving skills of students helped them remain motivated in an online environment during COVID-19 (Munir et al., 2021). However, it is still not understood how students who have a learning disorder remain motivated to learning in online higher educational settings. I aimed to better understand this gap by using qualitative interviews to elicit personal insight to understand motivation of students who have a learning disability in online, higher education learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants' responses may help close the gap of experience that is missing from the research field and will allow for understanding of personal experiences of students and how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected their motivation.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

To investigate the motivating factors of online higher education learners who have a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic, I grounded my study in Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation. Additionally, Maslow (1970) posited that

a person who has desires already has a preexisting desire of other wants and needs.

Students who attend school already have some form of motivation, which is why I used this theory toward this targeted population to better understand their motivation to succeed in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theory of human motivation, better known as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, has five basic principles that match the basic needs of humans: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Physiological needs include sleep, hunger, shelter, water, and sex (Kurt, 2021). Safety needs include having finances, health, routine, personal security (Kurt, 2021). Love is based on relationships with family, friends, romantic relationships, or the overall feeling of connectedness. Esteem refers to recognition of what the person is doing, having status, freedom, or being respected by others (Kurt, 2021). Finally, self-actualization is a person's ability to be the best they can be (Kurt, 2021). However, it is not believed that many people attain the last level (Kurt, 2021).

Self-actualization is always the goal; however, to achieve self-actualization, all previous levels need to be met, although this does not have to occur linearly. Based on needs being fulfilled to be able to move from one stage in the hierarchy to the other, a person will change their behavior to meet those needs not being met (Maslow, 1943). For example, if a student is hungry and they are in class, the primary focus for that student is going to be satisfying their hunger rather than focusing on what they are learning through reading text, watching an educational video, or through lecture. The second level, safety, consists of security in resources (Kurt, 2021), feelings of safety within family and society

(Block, 2011), and to avoid violence and seek familiarity (Maslow, 1943). A student needs to be in an environment they feel safe in, such as a home that allows for adequate privacy, lacks domestic violence, drugs, and additionally not being in any form of a relationship that is harmful such as physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive (Kurt, 2021). The third level is love (Maslow, 1943). People do not like to be lonely and will seek out others to fulfill that loneliness by gaining friendships or hunting for appreciation (Block, 2011; Maslow, 1958). Students may find this need being achieved through different school organizations, outside clubs or groups, or even family/religious engagement (Kurt, 2021). Esteem, the fourth level, is a person's ability to feel self-confident and to feel that he or she is respected by self or by others (Block, 2011; Kurt, 2021; Maslow, 1958). During this stage, people may look for others to recognize their accomplishments and status (Kurt, 2021). Lastly, self-actualization is the final goal for individuals to meet (Maslow, 1943). Maslow (1943) explains self-actualization as the ability to achieve the ideal self. However, a person is needing to accomplish the goals in the previous levels before self-actualization can be fully met. A person will move from one level to another level at various times in their life. For example, a person who does not have their safety needs met financially in level two, will be unable to achieve level one needs of not being hungry if the person is unable to buy food. If a person does not have their relationship needs met, they could have problems within their physiological needs, such as sleep. Therefore, achieving the different levels within the hierarchy are not always linear.

Self-actualization is believed to be the goal that human beings are striving toward which is the top level within the hierarchy (Block, 2011). For someone to reach self-actualization, they need to have all the previous levels met. In other words, to be motivated to succeed educationally, students need to ensure their basic needs are met. Maslow and Mittelmann (1958) further explained that the needs and goals the person is trying to achieve are from unconscious behavior; but with gained insight, the person will be able to have more conscious behaviors towards their needs and goals.

The theory of human motivation directly relates to my study to better understand motivating factors for higher education students with a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. The logical connections between the framework presented and the current study approach include how Maslow's needs address human behavior during the online higher education experience, furthermore, within the COVID-19 pandemic. People will work diligently to meet their needs and having deprivation in an area can create or inhibit motivation (Maslow, 1943). Online higher education students who have a learning disability may not be getting all their needs met due to the pandemic. These students may experience difficulties being motivated as their basic needs are not being met or even establishing motivation without their basic needs being met. There is a dynamic relationship between conscious and unconscious needs. In order to reach self-actualization, a person must actively work toward making sure their needs are being met in the different levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Motivation is going to be a driving force for a person to work toward self-actualization (Maslow, 1970a). But during a pandemic, a person may have trouble meeting their needs in all the levels of the

hierarchy. For example, during the pandemic students may not be able to meet their needs in love and belonging. They may lack the feeling of social connection due to the public health orders. Additionally, students may experience deficits in their safety needs and may not have the resources available for their home, such as food, which also impacts level one, or access to electronics and/or materials that are needed for them to succeed in their education. In sum, there are many variables during the pandemic that can hinder a student from moving toward self-actualization. Students who are working toward a higher education are working toward their best self or trying to achieve self-actualization, which is relevant to this study of examining the motivating factors of online higher education students with a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Literature Review**

Though there has been a lot of research conducted regarding motivation (Morina, 2019; Munir et al., 2021), there is little research covering motivation of students during a pandemic who are in a higher education online learning setting, and who have a learning disability. To begin to sort through the literature, the first topic that will be discussed is online learning, online learning for those with a learning disability, online learning during COVID, and finally motivations to succeed in higher education.

### **Online Learning**

Two predominant ways a student can attend school is either in person or online. Although there are other ways one can attend school, such as blended, hybrid, or flipped, the current study focuses on the online context. In-person learning is usually done with everyone attending the class, including the instructor, to be in one room during

instruction. Online learning can have an instructor actively present through video or audio platforms. Additionally, online learning can have an instructor not present at all but moderating the classroom through comments on assignments, emails, phone calls, etcetera. Subsequently, many students have moved to online learning versus in-person during the pandemic (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Mailizar et al., 2020). In 2011, Stack (2015) stated that 6,714,792 students took at least one class or more online. A decade has passed since those numbers, and The National Center for Education Statistics (2020) showed about 6,012,936 students have some form of distance learning or online learning at the undergraduate level and postgraduate levels had 1,300,687 students who were enrolled in any distance education courses. Out of the undergraduate students only 2,449,559 students were solely online, and 1,000,566 postgraduates were solely online (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020).

Many students who participate in online learning are choosing to do so based off their current life situations, which include age, maturity, learning style, or other situations (Stack, 2015). Some students look for online courses due to distance between the school and their home because they are working, or it allows them to work on their classwork at their own time (Stack, 2015). In a traditional (in-person) setting, a student often has a schedule that must be adhered to, such as attending classes on specific days of the week between a specific time block. Online learning provides more freedom with attendance due to students having the ability to read material and complete assignments on their time as long it is before the due date of the assignment.

There are differences between online and in-person learning regarding the perceptions of students' experiences and student outcomes (Bettlinger et al., 2017; Parsons-Pollard et al., 2008; Stack, 2015). Some of those differences include testing, grades, and success. Online students have higher grades than traditional students as proctors are not present, which is one way that online learning is different from face-to-face learning (Stack, 2015). However, it should be noted that in online learning, exams can have proctors through third party companies, such as honorlock. Honorlock is a proctoring service that is delivered to online students who are taking exams remotely. Through honorlock, there are clear guidelines that need to be met to take the exam such as webcams, single monitors, reliable internet, quiet location, clean testing area, and a system check on the computer (Honorlock FAQs, 2021). Students who have a proctor or have to utilize honorlock usually have a timed test not as much access to resources, such as textbooks or the internet, to look for the answers. Students in online learning have higher grades than those in a traditional setting, which could be because online course exams can be open book or because students could potentially use other resources to help on exams and assignments.

However, Stack's (2015) results are inconsistent with other studies. Parsons-Pollard and colleagues (2008) found that students in synchronous in-person learning had higher grades, B average, than those in an online learning settings, C average, which is different from Stack (2015). Though Stack (2015) identifies students as having higher grades online, Parsons-Pollard et al. (2008) and Bettlinger et al.'s (2017) research opposes Stack's (2015) findings. Success for college students is important, based on students'



ideas for the future. It is stated that students who take courses online are less likely to have the same amount of progression and success as compared to in-person learners (Bettinger, et al., 2017). Bettinger et al. (2017) examined undergraduate students in a for profit university and found lower GPAs, which could pose a problem for students who do not have good time management, due to classes and work being done on one's own free time, and less participation and/or communication with the professor (Bettinger et al., 2017). There is inconsistency of results from research examining students grades in an online setting versus in-person setting. However, it is clear to see that a student's ability to participate in the course is important for success in completing courses, especially in the online learning setting.

There are limitations from the studies discussed. One limitation is that both Stack (2015) and Bettinger et al. (2017) did not examine motivation of students who chose to do online learning. Nor were these studies done with the population of students who have a learning disorder; if participants did have a learning disorder, it was not identified within the studies. The grades of online students have been explored through Pollard et al. (2008) and Stack (2015); however, it is not clear what motivated these students to get high grades. Students transition to online learning for many reasons, as students who have a learning disability may have more motivation to do their schooling online because of their life situation, but further research is needed to understand their motivations to continue schooling online.

## **Online Learning with a Learning Disability in Higher Education**

It is important to understand learning disabilities in collegiate learning, particularly the impact learning disabilities have on students' learning experiences. Some of the research around this topic of learning disabilities and higher education has examined accessibility (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014), barriers (Banks, 2014; Dryer et al., 2016; & Morina, 2019), the quality of life (Lambert & Dryer, 2018), and teacher perceptions of students with a learning disability (Martenev & Bernadowski, 2016; & Morina, 2019). There are many variables a student may encounter when moving to online learning. To help students throughout the education system, there have been acts put into place to protect students' rights, especially those who have a learning disability.

First, schools are unable to discriminate against students, regardless of disability, due to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Disability Rights SC, 2021). Many students have used online learning in higher education due to accessibility. It is a student's right to have accommodations made by the university or college if they have a disability or learning disorder. The accommodations provided are based off the disabilities the student is facing, which could include advanced accessibility to notes or extended due dates. For a student to get accommodations, the student must disclose the disability to the university or college and get approval (Disability Rights SC, 2021). When a student is applying to a college or university, it is important for them to contact the Center for Disability Services or Office of Student Disability Services (name varies by school) to be able to gain assistance for accommodations (Disability Rights SC, 2021). Though these services are available, many

students fail to utilize them due to not knowing their rights as students or not having the proper documentation needed to back up their disability when using the services (Banks, 2014). Overall, many students have the ability to get accommodations through the respective offices to help them be more successful in higher education through a variety of different resources and services.

Many students have made the transition to online learning over the years and accessibility to materials and technology is important for students. There has been research that explains the different ways that students with disabilities can have increased accessibility to what is needed to be successful in online learning (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). Increased accessibility should come from course design, subject matter should be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust. Additionally, the online course needs to be simple, using a variety of learning materials including visual and audible material (Pittman and Heiselt, 2014). There are some challenges that continue, such as course design and making sure students with disabilities (mobility, hearing, visual, and cognitive) are able to access and understand the information being provided (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). For example, if a student has a challenging time understanding the reading material alone, it may be beneficial for them to have access to a video with a person talking about the same reading material as the student may be able to retain the information better.

Among the different disability classes, there are more students with a cognitive disability than other disabilities (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). It is also noted that students with a learning disability are often more likely to fail an online course due to not having

their problems addressed through accommodations such as having extended time to take exams or proper tools, such as audio/visual accommodations for learning materials (Dryer et al., 2016; Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). Not only are students likely to fail courses, but also to drop out of school when their needs are not being met (Denhart, 2008; Dryer et al., 2016).

Many schools, though having academic counseling and disability services, rely on the students to access the sources that are available, and some students have challenges in accessing these programs due to various factors including mobility, environmental, cultural, or needing help accessing these services (Dryer et al., 2016). Students need to be able to have accommodations within the learning environment and there needs to be a way to make the learning environment in an online setting more accessible to the students. Addressing these needs, as highlighted in these studies, would help better understand the motivations that higher education learners with a learning disability have with online learning.”

To help mitigate the problems students have with online learning, there are universal design principles and applications. The universal design is to help students, despite limitations, to have easier accessibility within the classroom (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). The purpose of universal design is for students to have equal access to course materials and other technological services. Not only is access to materials important but it is equally as important for educators to design courses to be organized and to have clear guidelines (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). Multimedia use and different formations are important as well, such as using text and audio when available. By having a universal

design there may be higher retention rates of students, because of the accessibility, and higher levels of success. In other words, universal design is likely to play a role in learning motivations for higher education learners with a learning disability.

Students want to be successful, and as mentioned, students with a learning disability can get equal access to course material and have modifications (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). Yet, students experience barriers when they have a learning disorder. A primary barrier may be based on the characteristics of the educators. For example, educators have their opinions on how students with learning disorders are impacted within the classroom (Morina, 2019). Instructors played a major role within the classroom to ensure there is inclusion of students who have a learning disability. By including students of all abilities, the feeling of inclusion enhanced the feelings of belonging (Morina, 2019) and belongingness is a crucial stage in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943). Educators believe students with a learning disability are more motivated than their classmates and do not need to take extra steps to be engaged in the learning process (Morina, 2019). Additionally, students feel more supported and are ready to learn when educators give clear examples of what they are teaching and have active/engaging learning techniques (Morina, 2019). In conclusion, students like to be involved within their learning environments. It is important for instructors to make a concerted effort in creating an environment where students feel they belong and where they feel like they are able to learn what is being taught.

In addition to Morina (2019), Marteney and Bernadowski (2016) examined the perceptions of teachers regarding online learning and the benefits for students with

special educational needs within the public school system. Many teachers believe students who have a learning disability or are in a special education program have easier access to learning tools and activities in a virtual setting, as well as better grades (Martene & Bernadowski, 2016). Additionally, teachers see students having more success with self-paced work, motivation, and personalized support (Martene & Bernadowski, 2016). From online learning, students can work at their own pace, which allows for some students to get more help in their areas where they are experiencing a deficit. Therefore, this leaves the question of how students in higher online education with a learning disability experience motivation to learn, which is important to the current study.

Many students from all over the world attend school despite having learning disabilities. Research has been done to better understand the quality of life of students with a learning disability in online higher education (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). The study was done through a qualitative analysis with a total of eight participants from the ages of 21 to 43. Of the eight participants, two of them were not taking online courses but had experience taking online courses. Many students found themselves putting a lot of their time into their schoolwork, but experienced fatigue, stress, and less availability to spend time with their family and loved ones (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). This information aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943; Maslow, 1958; Maslow & Mittleman, 1958). The barriers the students experienced due to their learning disabilities impacted the quality of life in some ways, such as with self-esteem, finances, and relationships. Students did report that being able to have schooling online in higher education increased

their quality of life through enhanced support within the family, being able to be in the same room and study with the family, and inflated self-esteem due to overcoming challenges of learning through their learning disability (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). Yet, some students did report lower self-esteem and heightened stress with finances and support systems. The barriers are important to consider as students may be facing many additional hardships during the pandemic but may feel motivated due to their ability to participate in online schooling, which may increase their quality of life.

There are many different types of barriers student may face when having a learning disability. An additional study used a case study design with three African American males who have a learning disorder and were transitioning to higher education after high school (Banks, 2014). Of the students transitioning to secondary schooling, it is noted that of the students who have a learning disability, only 9% of the population is made up of African American students during freshman year (Banks, 2014). Negative perceptions from staff toward students with a learning disorder can decrease students' motivation to attend school, sense of lack of self-worth, decreased relationships, and decreased academic progress (Banks, 2014). There were three common themes identified: "...(a) students perceived that teachers' deficit-ideologies undermined access to appropriate high school course content; (b) students' limited knowledge of their learning characteristics influenced their willingness to access disability support services; and (c) the confluence of competing identities thwarted their desire to request accommodations" (Banks, 2014, p. 32). The students in the studies identified how their perceptions in high school affected access to services in secondary education, how their disability effected

their learning experience, and reliance on stigmas or others perception of them (Banks, 2014). This information is important to understand because many students who have a learning disability who transition to secondary schooling need support services. How students are perceived in their high school years by staff and other students may impact their decision to go to college or to seek out adequate accommodations. In the current qualitative study, students will be able to expand on their motivation and will be able to discuss variables that impacted their motivation to pursue higher education.

There are deficits from the studies mentioned. Morina (2019) focused on educators and how they engaged students who had a learning disability and did not focus on how students with a learning disability are motivated. In other words, it remains unclear how students with a learning disability are motivated and/or remain motivated in higher education learning. The students' insights were not noted; having this information could allow for a stronger understanding of how students with a learning disability remain motivated. Additionally, Marteney and Bernadowski (2016) looked at teacher perceptions and did not focus on the social implications of having an online education, which could be a variable for motivation. Based on the research explored, it is unclear what motivates adult online learners in higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lambert and Dryer (2018) examined quality of life and identified students with a learning disorder put more time and effort into their schoolwork but did not study motivation. Additionally, this study was not conducted during the pandemic, which not only can impact quality of life, but the motivation to continue with schooling. Banks (2014) had a small sample size and had a narrow focus on African American males' transition to



secondary education with a learning disability. Therefore, from the deficits in the previous studies, more research needs to be conducted to better understand the motivating factors of higher online education students who have a learning disability.

### **Online Learning During COVID-19**

Online learning, as mentioned by Mailizar et al. (2020), has been more prevalent since the beginning of the pandemic due to school closures. The pandemic was a worldwide crisis that affected many people and prompted a transition to online learning for many students due to university closures (Gonzalez-Ramierz et al., 2021; Malizar et al., 2020). Online learning is meant to be more easily accessible and less costly and has become a necessity amidst the COVID-19 pandemic (Dhwan, 2020). Many students made the transition to online learning and there has been research on the transition to online learning (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021), students' perceptions of them mattering (Vaillancourt et al., 2022), social presence (Munir et al., 2021), and adaptation to online learning (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021).

Recent research has focused on the transition from synchronous learning to asynchronous learning (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). The target population was students in an undergraduate program at a private college. Researchers focused on emotions/well-being, burnout, and changes/problems students experienced because of the COVID-19 pandemic and remote learning (Gonzalez-Ramirez, et al., 2021). Barriers were identified during the online transition in the spring of 2020. The barriers were Wi-Fi quality, hardware, video software, other software, quiet space, and finances (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). Many students were found to have less connections socially and

professionally, and experienced exhaustion. Having connections with peers decreased by 87% and 11% of students stated it remained the same from before the pandemic, whereas 2% stated it increased (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). Essentially, these findings reflect that motivation for students to succeed may have been lowered for students due to the pandemic.

Students want to matter within the classroom. The importance of mattering, as allows students to have higher levels of motivation to interact with peers and have a better perspective of the school atmosphere (Vaillancourt et al., 2022). Though the population being studied are adolescents, students who transition to higher education are still considered adolescents or in emerging adulthood from ages 18-25 (Arnett, 2000). Within in-person classroom settings, students can be shown they matter through interactions by discussion or smiling, assuming these are behaviors enacted by professors. In the online environment there is little availability for students to feel they matter because of the lack of informal conversation or interactions (Vaillancourt et al., 2022). Students were more likely to report they feel as if they mattered. Students in an online environment do not get a physical notion, such as smiling, to let them know they matter (Vaillancourt et al., 2022). Students may base much of their interactions through responses in the classroom discussion boards, emails, or other types of responses from their professors. Students are already facing lack of connection with peers (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021) and may be feeling a lack of connection with their professors as well. This lack of connection may negatively impact student motivations.

There are many factors to consider when transitioning to asynchronous learning, including cognitive problem-solving skills and motivation. Munir et al. (2021) focused on fear of COVID-19 and the social presence of students in online learning as well as how psychological motivation and cognitive problem-solving skills are a mediating factor to fear. Munir et al (2021) study is based on the constructivist theory. The constructivist theory is built on the premise of personal experience, and perception is what develops knowledge (Munir et al., 2021). There is an emphasis on psychological motivation being a determining factor in success for students who are studying online. A quantitative descriptive correlational research design was utilized and focused on students in online higher education in two different countries: Pakistan and Malaysia. The students in Malaysia were predominantly female and students in Pakistan were predominantly male. Students in Malaysia were more fearful of COVID-19 than compared to students in Pakistan. However, when students in Pakistan were exposed to social media that related to COVID-19, they were more fearful. They also found that cognitive problem-solving skills helps students make effective decisions in the online learning environment. When a student can reflect on the knowledge being gained, they are more motivated because of their presence in the online classroom and they have good quality interactions with their instructors and peers (Munir et al., 2021). Essentially, students who are in asynchronous learning are more successful and motivated in their learning when they are actively learning in real time and have quality interactions with instructors and peers (Munir et al., 2021).

Many students do not have access to the technology needed to participate in asynchronous learning (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Vaillancourt et al., 2022). In many societies, especially South Africa, students were having trouble adapting and accessing technology due to the digital divide, being that some people have access to technology and others do not (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021). This transition has proven to be difficult for people who have a lower income, which leads to educational inequalities (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021). Due to this difficulty, Azionya and Nhedzi (2021) wanted to better understand the challenges of university students as they made the transition to online learning due to the pandemic and these socioeconomic disparities. Tweets from Twitter were collected and coded. Common themes emerged through the research identifying the following barriers for students who were transitioning to online learning: lack of devices such as laptops, Wi-Fi, data, study environments, too many distractions, difficulty attending live online classes due to internet connectivity, submission of assignments, and technical difficulties (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021). Students' lack of resources for online learning connect to Gonzalez-Ramirez et al.'s (2021) findings that students did not have adequate access to Wi-Fi and hardware. This proves to be a problem for many students according to other studies aforementioned (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; & Vaillancourt et al., 2022).

From the studies discussed, there are some notable limitations that this current study could potentially address. Munir et al.'s, (2021) study does not address learning disabilities, nor did it focus on motivation. These are two areas that would continue to advance knowledge about motivation of online higher education students with a learning

disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. Munir et al. (2021) only looked at two countries and did not examine students who have a learning disability and are participating in asynchronous learning. Gonzalez-Ramirez et al (2021) found female students were more likely to experience less motivation than compared to male students as well as connection to other students within the college. Yet, it is important to note that this study had more female participants than male participants and cannot be generalized to the population, nor was there personal explanation of why females experienced less motivation. Vaillancourt et al (2022) examined adolescents and elementary students but did not assess if a learning disability correlated to the feeling of mattering with online, blended, or in-person settings. Additionally, Azionya and Nhedzi (2021) did not explore motivation or how the lack of proper electronics impacted the motivation of students in asynchronous learning.

The current study seeks to address the limitations of previous studies. Students' motivation to succeed may be impacted by the feeling of mattering (Vaillancourt et al., 2022), technological problems (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021;), and social presence (Munir et al., 2021). By using a qualitative approach, participants can comment on any of these elements when discussing their motivation for learning in higher education during the pandemic. The current study focuses solely on students in higher education who have a learning disability, and it is possible students find motivation when their needs are being met across multiple domains.

### **Motivation to Succeed in Higher Education**

Motivation has been studied in many ways (Dryer et al., 2016; Chuckwuedo et al., 2021; Daley & Zeidan, 2021) and it is still a topic to be explored. Many students attend college annually, however, a majority of the students that attend college do not have a learning disability (Daley & Zeidan, 2020). Students who do have a learning disability are less likely to complete college successfully (Daley & Zeidan, 2020). Reasons for lack of success to complete higher education for students with a learning disability is due to affordability (22%), change of schools (14%), need to work (10%), family reasons (10%), low grades (7%), lack of enjoyment in school (6%) and lack of services needed due to the learning disability (4%) (Cortiella & Harrowitz, 2014). Daley and Zeidan (2020) wanted to better understand how students are motivated and what happens in their life to mold that motivation. The model they based their research on is the expectancy-value theory. The expectancy-value theory focuses on the choices an individual makes and their expectancies and values in those choices (Daley & Zeidan, 2020). Many students choose/want to attend school but there are factors that contribute to their choice and increase motivation based on the things they value in their life and their future. The researchers examined six different undergraduate students who had a learning disability and were participating as mentors to high school students who had similar learning disabilities. These students attended a private college and were undergraduates. Most students had ADHD, language processing, dysgraphia, dyslexia, slow processing, and difficulty with eyesight tracking (Daley & Zeidan, 2020). They found that when these students were given the opportunity to have access to higher learning in high school, they

were motivated for a 4-year college, families had more resources to help students, students had support from learning disability community groups, and students had emotionally supportive parents (Daley & Zeidan, 2020).

Another study that examined motivation is by Dryer et al. (2016). Dryer et al. (2016) examined “the non-academic constructs of psychological well-being, motivation to learn, and quality of life explained the variance on the academic achievement” (p.422) of students with a disability. The self-determination theory was used as the theoretical framework, which implies that motivation incorporates three different key components: competency (ability to know or do something), autonomy (independence) and relatedness (connection) (Dryer et al., 2016). The population Dryer et al. (2016) used were students with a disability. Disability was a broad term used, which identified students as having mental health disorders and/or non-mental health disorders such as medical, physical, sensory, or learning disorders (Dryer et al., 2016). The population consisted of 83 students from Australia, 27 females and 5 males who had a mental health disorder and 41 females and 13 males who had a non-mental health disorder. From the population sample, 63% of the students were registered with the Disability Services department at the university.

Data was collected through self-reporting scales. It was found that social relationship and self-efficacy were indicators of variance of academic achievement. For instance, those with poorer social relationships had higher academic achievement (Dryer, et al., 2016). Having poorer social relationships allowed more time spent on academic work rather than social obligations. Students also reported challenges to learning with a

disability because of the amount of time and effort that is required to learn and to complete assignments. It was also found that students who had higher self-efficacy had higher GPA scores (Dryer et al., 2016).

When students had the learning support, they are better able to hurdle over their learning challenges. Additionally, the differences between students with a mental health disability versus those with a non-mental health disorder was monumental. Students who had a mental health disability had higher levels of distress, lower quality of satisfaction within social relationships, and isolation (Dryer et al., 2016). However, motivation between the two groups and academic achievement measures did not differ. Students attend school whether they have a learning disability or other disability, and it should be noted that there are supports that students can access to help them through their academic journey. Students have different problems they face which may impact motivation, but support seems to be a main factor in self-efficacy.

Students attend college because of motivation to work toward their educational goals. Students are self-motivated to learn but also need to be engaged to study the material presented. Self-directed learning influences study engagement and life-long learning (Chukwuedo et al., 2021). They found that self-directed interventions can impact study engagement, lifelong learning, motivation, self-regulation, and perseverance. Students are either intrinsically or extrinsically motivated and this allows the students to be present in their course work. The online learning environment is different than the traditional classroom and may account for additional needs for self-directed learning. Chukwuedo et al. (2021) explored the self-directed learning model which indicates the



student must be involved in the coursework to further develop themselves professionally or personally. Constructivism theory is another theory rooted in learning which Chuckwuedo et al. (2021) utilized. Learning is constant and requires the student to be active to gain knowledge and build new learning patterns, ideas, and expand knowledge. The 243 postgraduate students (113 male and 125 female) in this study (Chuckwuedo et al, 2021) are from Nigeria and were involved in vocational and adult education. It was found that self-directed learning and study engagement was higher in the intervention group versus the control group (Chuckwuedo et al., 2021). This study points out that students who are actively engaged in their academics have a more positive experience with self-directed learning than those who do not. Additionally, motivation is also a key source to being engaged in self-directed learning as well as perseverance, self-regulation, and growth.

Limitations to the literature include sample size, disabilities, and learning modes. Daley and Zeidan (2020) report a limitation within their study due to demographics of participants not being diverse enough, which causes there to be little information on motivational beliefs and perceptions of more students with a learning disability. The participants in the study were not online learners and had access to in-person resources, which may not be readily available to those who are in online learning environments. In Dryer et al.'s (2016) study, a limitation is the sample size. The population cannot be generalized. Additionally, the term disability was broad so the scope of study was not as narrow as it could have been. The learning context of the participants was not directly identified to on-campus or distance learning, nor was it considered with the levels of

motivation. Dryer et al. (2016) state that future research needs to examine quality of life and motivation to learn in students with a learning disability and to understand how quality of life and motivation impact learning outcomes. Another limitation is from Chuckwuedo et al.'s (2021) study, which consisted of a small sample size, a homogenous population, participants did not have a learning disability, and the data was based on self-report, which could be biased.

The current study seeks to address these limitations and gaps to better understand how students with a learning disability remain motivated, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Gaining information around this topic allows for further examination of motivation and how it continues to be an important aspect to students who are learning in the online learning environment. This allows for the ability to understand additional variables that help students increase their motivations.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The goal for this dissertation is to better understand the motivating factors of online higher education learners who have a learning disability during the pandemic. The pandemic began in March of 2020 due to the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) virus. Many schools during this time had to stop in-person schooling and make the transition to online learning (Lemay et al., 2021). Online learning is being looked at as attending classes online where technology is the main source of delivering education (Sangra et al., 2013). Students globally made the transition to online learning, and there are many students who attend higher education despite having a learning disability. Learning disabilities include dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyslexia, non-verbal learning disability, and oral/written

language disorder or related disabilities covered by the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) such as ADHD, dyspraxia, and executive functioning (Learning Disability Association of America, n.d.).

During the pandemic many students have experienced decreased social connections (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021), lack of resources (Mailizar et al., 2020), barriers (Assarah & Bidohkt, 2011; Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Lemay et al., 2021; Mailizar et al., 2020; Pelgrum, 2001; Vaillancourt et al., 2022), immediacy of instructors (Baker, 2010), perceptions of motivation of students with a learning disability (Morina, 2019), and how problem-solving skills are a motivator of students with a learning disorder in higher education. However, there is no research gaining a personal perspective through qualitative interviews to identify the motivation of higher, online education students who have a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theoretical framework being used for this study is the theory of human motivation by Maslow (1943). This theory is based on the idea that people have wants and needs that need to be met to reach self-actualization. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs is as followed: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Through this hierarchy, people actively work toward self-actualization and getting their needs met.

Through the literature, different topics were explored including online learning, online learning for those with a learning disability, online learning during COVID, and motivation to succeed in higher education. Online learning is chosen for many different

reasons, including freedom of time, work, family, age, etc. (Stack, 2015). Students in the online environment have been seen to have higher grades than in-person (Stack, 2015), but other research shows students having higher grades in-person compared to online learning (Bettinger et al., 2017; Parson-Pollard et al., 2008). Students with a learning disability are impacted due to accessibility to resources or course design (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014), barriers (Banks, 2014; Dryer et al., 2016; Morina, 2019), life quality (Lambert & Dryer, 2018), and perceptions teachers have about students with learning disabilities (Martenev & Bernadowski, 2016; Morina, 2019). Students who have disabilities are able to receive support through the American with Disabilities Act and Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Disabilities Rights SC, 2021). Students are to address the disability services offices to get approval and accommodations as needed, however, there are many students who do not access these services (Banks, 2014). Online learning during the pandemic has been helpful to many students. However, it has been found that barriers of connectedness (Gonzalez-Ramirez, 2021) impact motivation and the feeling of mattering (Vaillancourt et al., 2022). Cognitive problem-solving skills help students make decisions when it comes to their learning environment (Munier et al., 2021) and COVID-19 has impacted students ability to problem solve. Students also face barriers with technology and having appropriate access to Wi-Fi or other computer hardware (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Vaillancourt et al., 2022). Students want to succeed when they go to school, especially in higher education. However, students who have a learning disability have less success in completing college than those who do not have a learning disability (Dailey & Zeidan, 2020). Students are motivated and have

self-determination, but it has also been found that students who do not have as much of an active social life are more motivated to work toward their schooling than those who do (Dryer et al., 2016) and are more self-directed (Chuckwuedo et al., 2021).

The present study addresses some of the limitations identified. The pandemic has affected many students' lives in a variety of ways, and it is possible many students are experiencing barriers that are impacting their ability to get an education. It is also possible that students are receiving support from their families and loved ones that is helping them remain motivated during the pandemic. Through qualitative interviews, students in higher, online education who have a learning disability are able to describe what continues to motivate them through the pandemic.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

Many students with a learning disability attend higher education, whether it is in-person or in an online environment. Although, research studies have been conducted to study motivation of students who have a learning disability, there is limited research on personal perspectives of students with a learning disability regarding their motivation in higher, online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, there are barriers students have experienced such as exhaustion, lack of social connectedness, lack of exercise, lack of devices such as laptops, Wi-Fi, data, poor study environments, too many distractions, difficulty attending live online classes due to internet connectivity, submission of assignments, and technical difficulties (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). Morina (2019) identified the gap in literature as not understanding how students who have a learning disability in higher education remain engaged. Additionally, there have been studies that examine students in online education and motivation but do not examine students with a learning disability (see Baker, 2010; Cole et al., 2004; Daley et al., 2020; Dryer, 2016). In this study, I aimed to better understand how higher education online college students are motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are many components that are discussed in Chapter 3. First, I discuss the research design, followed by rationale for the research, and the role of the researcher. Additionally, the method of data collection is presented with how participants were selected, the instruments that were used to collect data, and ethics associated with the implementation of this study.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

This qualitative study provides a better understanding of online higher education students who have a learning disability and how they have remained motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research consisted of college-level students, ages 18 and older who have a learning disability. This research helps better understand motivation in higher education, learning disabilities, and COVID-19 through a qualitative research study with a phenomenological design. The purpose of using a qualitative study is to understand the lived experiences of the participants. The study is inductive, meaning results gained from specific populations may be generalized. Additionally, lived experiences are difficult to quantify and by using a phenomenological approach, the data is rich in experience and lack any preconceived ideas. Throughout the interviews and research process, a field journal was kept documenting any thoughts or ideas that come up for the researcher.

This research is important to the field of developmental psychology and to educational track within Walden University. Developmental psychology is used to understand changes a person experiences throughout the lifespan. The COVID-19 pandemic has been a monumental event that may have impacted students social, emotional, and cognitive processes. Moreover, understanding students' experience with a learning disability and motivation during the pandemic directly relates to my specialization in online learning with the educational track.

### **Research Question**

The research question selected was designed to capture the gaps within the literature: motivation, COVID-19, and students with a learning disability. Many students have experienced difficulties during the pandemic (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Baker 2010; Cole et al., 2004; Daley et al., 2020, Dryer, 2016; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; & Morina, 2019). The research question is identified below:

RQ: What are the experiences of adults with learning disabilities regarding motivation to succeed in online higher education programs during the COVID-19 pandemic?

The goal of this research was to expand social change to help provide information for current or future students on how others have remained motivated during difficult times. Additionally, this can provide students with insights to current resources and supports that may be available to them.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher in a qualitative study is complex. The researcher is trying to elicit the different emotions and thoughts that the participants experienced during a particular period (Sutton & Austin, 2015). For instance, in this study, my role was to understand how higher education students with a learning disability were motivated in online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout this study my roles are to be an observer and to participate. I directly participated while interviewing participants and observing how they respond verbally, emotionally, and physically.



As a researcher, it is important to be conscientious of dual relationships or biases that may be present (American Psychological Association, 2017). The relationship I have with my participants was strictly professional. I do not have power, nor do I have a supervisory role over the participants. It is also important for me to know of any biases I may have. Some biases include knowing what the research questions are before conducting the interviews. Another bias is that I might analyze the responses from participants when hearing them, and I must refrain from doing so before the conclusion of the interview. Lastly, a bias that may exist is the perception of how students with a learning disorder approach their school workload because I might be expecting different answers from students than what is presented. During this process keeping a field journal as mentioned allowed there to be documentation of anything I was experiencing or thinking.

An additional concern, as the researcher, is ethics. Ethics are a critical component to research and includes the rights, responsibilities, and moral decisions of the researcher (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 2008). It is important to follow the American Psychological Association's (2017) code of ethics, especially under Section 8: Research and Publication (. Researchers need to take precaution and ensure that informed consent is received, there is institutional approval, assuring there is no excessive offerings for participation, lack of deception, accurate representation of research results, integrity of work, and debriefing (American Psychological Association, 2017). Minors are not interviewed for the purpose of protecting a vulnerable population. Additionally, the identity of participants is confidential.

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

After approval from the institutional review board (IRB; 09-09-22-067237) participants were recruited. The participants selected for this study were 18 years and older, attending graduate or undergraduate courses online during the COVID-19 pandemic, and have a learning disability. The pandemic began in late 2019 November/December and continued until Spring of 2021. Learning disability/disabilities are a variety of disorders that may impact a person's ability to understand, preserve, or expend information that is verbally or non-verbally presented (Al-Mahrezi et al., 2016).

A variety of methods were used to recruit participants for this study. One of the methods was convenient sampling. This method was done by posting in Facebook groups to recruit participants. Another way of recruiting participants was posting on my personal Facebook page or Instagram page, which is snowball sampling. And finally, participants were recruited using purposive sampling through colleges or universities to access a large group of people with random selection. This was done through having the research topic posted in a participant pool. From those who responded to the email, a random selection of students was recruited to participate if they met criteria. The email included information about the goal of the study, requirements to meet criteria for the study, how information will be gathered, confidentiality, how to follow-up with questions with myself or my committee, as well as the participants rights within the study. Using Walden University students allowed me to do one IRB application instead of multiple IRB applications. I knew students met inclusion criteria because when emailing to

participate in the study, the following information was confirmed: age, the time they were taking online graduate or undergraduate courses, and if they have a learning disability before scheduling an interview. If they did not have a learning disability or did not fit any of the other inclusion criteria, they were not considered for participation.

### **Procedures**

After recruiting participants, the next step was to communicate with them. The main form of communication was email. The informed consent ensured that the participant had a clear idea of how their information was used for this study. Through email, the participant was given a copy of the consent form they went over before the interview, then responded with, 'I consent', and then was sent a link to the zoom interview. Additionally, in the email it stated any questions the participant may have about the informed consent can be answered during the Zoom call before the interview. At that time, key components to the consent form were reviewed. Next, the recording of the interview began. After the end of the interview, the participant was debriefed, thanked, and reminded that if they have any questions or concerns, to let me know or reach out to the contacts listed in the consent form.

To organize the data after the interviews, the interviews were transcribed. However, to have the data transcribed, I sent it through a transcribing service through Zoom Pro. Then, I watched the video to make sure that everything transcribed was done so appropriately. By transcribing the data, information was organized to form major themes and subthemes. This organization was done through a Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet.

## **Instrumentation**

For this study, semistructured interviews were used, which are open-ended questions geared to address the research question of this study. A semistructured interview is done when the researcher is looking to gain specific information about a topic and has some predetermined questions to ask participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Subsequently, the researcher uses follow-up questions to gain any other necessary information (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). There are five questions that were curated for this study that are expected to have follow-up questions. These questions include the following:

1. What motivated you to begin online higher education?
2. Describe what a typical school day online looks like for you and how you get yourself motivated to complete assignments.
3. How has your motivation to succeed in online higher education been impacted since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. How has your learning disability impacted your level of motivation during COVID-19?
5. What resources were available to help you succeed and did you use these resources? Why or why not?

Though these are the structured questions to be asked, the ability to ask follow-up questions was available, depending on the answers the participants give to deepen the dialogue, and used. Through the video interview, verbal cues, facial expressions, and partial body language, additional probing was done to gather further information about

what they are experiencing currently or have experienced.

It is important that the interviews be conducted in a place that both parties have comfortability (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Comfort is not the only consideration; privacy is also important when finding interview venues. This type of environment is important for the interview and being able to establish rapport with the participants, as rapport is a significant aspect to the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I anticipated that 10-12 interviews would be an adequate number of participants considering the targeted sample is homogenous. Sample size is determined by saturation and many researchers debate on an appropriate number of interviews for qualitative research (Marshall et al., 2015). Data saturation is achieved through the repeated codes and themes throughout the interviews and when no new information is presenting itself (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The actual number of interviews in the present study included 10 interviews via online platform. Interviews ranged from 20-60 minutes ( $M = 37.7$  minutes,  $SD = 13.1$  minutes).

### **Field Test or Expert Panel**

In research, it is important to be able to validate testing protocols, especially in qualitative research. There are different ways a researcher can approach validation of questions used (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Through validation, researchers are able to gain credibility and to ensure lack of bias. Additionally, the researcher needs to make sure saturation occurs from the narratives. Through a postpositivist or systematic paradigm, validity can be done through triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000). This is done to find common themes presented from the participants. Lastly, to help with content

validity the research questions go through an expert panel or a field test. Having the field test or expert panel allows minimization to threats of external and internal validity.

To conduct a field test or expert panel, the questions were emailed to different professors in the developmental psychology field with an interest in learning disabilities. It was asked that the questions be viewed for any biases. Changes in the questions were documented from round one to round three in the expert panel. Only one professor responded to the expert panel and there were no corrections to be made. After going through an expert panel, questions were conducted in a field test. To conduct a field test, a person was interviewed as if the actual interview for the research were happening. Then the participant was asked for feedback. This also allowed the opportunity to understand what additional questions may need to be asked to ensure that the topic being studied is being explored within the questions and answers before sending to the IRB.

### **Data Analysis**

The type of research being used is a phenomenological research design. The phenomenological interviews are informal to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of a small sample of participants (Cypress, 2018). To analyze the data from phenomenological interviews there is a sequence of steps to be able to identify common themes and categories. Rubin and Rubin (2012) provide a seven-step model to analyze responsive interviews.

The first step of analyzing interviews is to transcribe the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Through Zoom, there is a feature that allows for the transcription of audio.

This step was conducted then the video was watched again to ensure that there are no errors within the audio transcript. If there errors, they were corrected.

Secondly, the researcher immerses oneself in the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To do this, the transcripts are read multiple times to be able to code the data. This is to find “excerpts from the transcript that have specific concepts, them, events, examples, places, or dates” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, 190). These passages contain meaning that relate to the concepts being studied.

Thirdly, the researcher sorts through the codes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). There are many codes identified within each transcript. Sorting the codes from each transcript that relate to one another is done to organize the data. Each code that is similar was then grouped together. From these codes, they were sorted into different files or groups, and then were summarized.

Fourthly, each group or file was then sorted again to form subgroups (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). These subgroups were used to be able to compare the different codes within the group. After comparison and assortment, a summary of the file was then completed.

The fifth step is integration of codes (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The codes from every file were integrated to have a better understanding of the descriptions from the different interviews. Creswell and Poth (2016) describe this step as textural description of the participants experiences with precise examples to create themes.

The sixth step includes the combination of themes to deduce what has happened with the participants' experiences. This step is important as it allows a better understanding of how the concepts answer the research questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Lastly, the understanding of concepts was used to understand generalizability to the larger population. To do this, reflections of what was found in this study and observations were further speculated to see how these findings can be applied in other situations or conditions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility was achieved through prolonged contact throughout this study. Prolonged contact refers to the ability to have adequate time spent with participants (Krefting, 1991). The benefits of prolonged contact include the closeness of the relationship between researcher and participants to increase truth value. It is possible through prolonged contact that the comradery of the relationship can cause there to be difficulty of interpretation of results. Therefore, reflexive analysis or reflexivity is used (Krefting, 1991).

Reflexivity refers to the researcher's background and biases and how they influence the qualitative research (Krefting, 1991). To have reflexivity, there are multiple times that self-inventory is done to analyze oneself and the context of the research (Krefting, 1991). Additionally, noting personal biases was be done to help increase credibility, which a filed journal helped note biases.



Another strategy to confirm credibility was through saturation. Fusch and Ness (2015) explain data saturation as the ability for other researchers to replicate the study based on the amount data collected. To achieve data saturation throughout this study, there was a minimum of ten interviews. This number of interviews allows there to be rich data to identify common themes and codes of the selected population, however it is important to note that some studies may not need as many participants interviewed (Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Transferability**

The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative design is to understand how students in higher, online education with a learning disability remained motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The information gathered is in hopes to have applicability, which is the ability to generalize findings to a larger population (Krefting, 1991). Additionally, transferability is an important concept, as well. The research findings allow there to be transferability of the data to outside the selected population in the original study (Krefting, 1991).

### **Dependability**

To have dependability in this research study, the exact research methods were described and how data was analyzed and interpreted. Krefting (1991) described this being essential to qualitative research to allow the opportunity for the study to be replicable by other researchers. By having the steps of this research study listed and explained, it enhances dependability due to the decrease of interpretation of meaning.

### **Confirmability**

To allow for confirmability within this research study there is neutrality in interpretation of data (Krefting, 1991). Personal biases and pre-conceived judgements were identified before conducting the research to be able to interpret data. Field notes help identify any ideas or thoughts that occur during the research process and can be audited. Additionally, having step-by-step procedures allows the ability for other researchers to understand how conclusions were deduced and decisions were made (Krefting, 1991).

### **Ethical Procedures**

To ensure the research is ethical, a post on a Facebook group, personal Facebook or Instagram was used stating the purpose of the study asking for participant's who have a learning disorder to participate who were also taking online courses in higher education during the pandemic. To maintain confidentiality interviews were conducted in a private setting. It was reiterated to participants that their confidentiality could only be maintained if both parties were in a private location without any interruptions. The video files were kept in a locked file on a password protected computer. Throughout the research and after, participants were treated with respect. All participants were given the informed consent before the research study and told if they choose to not participate in the study they can stop at any point without any repercussions. Additionally, consent was asked again before recording the video. Participants were offered the option of reviewing transcripts. Having participants view the interview transcripts and make changes is referred to as member checks (Krefting, 1991).

**Institutional Review Board (IRB)**

The purpose of the IRB is to make sure the research being conducted is ethical within university standards as well as the United States federal regulations. To receive IRB approval it is required to go through the University Research Review (URR) for approval. Upon approval, having the participants have a copy of the approved IRB form further explains their rights as participants within the study. Participants were often checked-in with to ensure if they have any questions about the research, the questions could be answered. When consenting to participate in the research study, all participants were informed of the purpose of the study, how it can contribute to social change, and the findings.

**Summary**

The purpose of chapter three was to cover methodology and procedures of this study. A qualitative phenomenological design was used to understand the lived experiences of students with a learning disability and how they remained motivated in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were used to capture the experiences of the interviewees. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed to identify common themes. This information is important to social change as it allows for better understanding of challenges students may have faced and possible solutions that can help future students with motivation who are taking online courses, have a learning disability, or for students in the future who may go through schooling during a pandemic.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the motivation to succeed in higher education among online students with a learning disability during the COVID19 pandemic. The motivation of students with a learning disability in higher education was investigated to better understand how students adapted during a difficult time in their life, such as a pandemic, and to understand the motivations of students who have a learning disability with online learning in higher education. There are many studies that examine motivation in a variety of contexts; however, there are not many studies that examine students' motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic, nor are there qualitative studies that examine students in higher education who have a learning disability and their motivation to succeed.

I aimed to understand motivating factors for students with a learning disability to succeed in higher online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question for this study focused on the lived experiences of adults with a learning disability regarding their motivation to succeed in online higher education programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students who have a learning disability and were enrolled in higher education classes during the pandemic were interviewed. Students with a learning disability explained their life experiences during the pandemic and their motivation to succeed while adapting to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were able to explain their lived experience and motivating factors for success during their interview. Participants were given the opportunity to review the interview transcripts, and then through data collection, various themes and categories were

identified. Chapter 4 is organized to describe the results of this study, such as the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

### **Setting**

To obtain participants for this study, an online post was shared with various Facebook groups and on my personal Facebook page. Additionally, I placed a post on Instagram trying to recruit participants. In the beginning, many potential participants responded via email wanting to participate in the study, but they did not meet inclusion criteria. Many of these individuals reported they had autism but did not have a learning disability. Recruitment began in September 2022 and went into November 2022 when the last participant volunteered. Participants were enrolled in various colleges throughout the United States and one participant was from New Zealand. All participants were prepared for the interview; however, there were some students that were more open to sharing their life experiences than others.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom. All interviews were recorded, and field notes were taken during the interviews. Some students were quick to express their experiences in school presently and in the past. Other students required more prompting. Interaction with the participants was successful, and most students were eager to express how they felt. Recruitment was slow over the span of 2.5 months. Steady recruitment was in October 2022. Tools used to conduct research included the field note journal, semistructured interviews, and Zoom Pro to help with transcription. Interviews ranged from 20-60 minutes ( $M = 37.7$  minutes,  $SD = 13.1$  minutes).

### **Demographics**

There were 10 participants in this study. Participants average age was 40, ranging from age 18 to 64. The location of students was diverse, with eight participants in the United States, one from New Zealand, and one in an unknown location. Students attended the following universities or colleges: Arizona State University (1) Liberty University, (1) Radford University (1), Walden University (1), New Mexico State University (1), Western New Mexico University (1), Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell (2), Massey University (1) and there is one unknown college. Some colleges were being attended by multiple participants, such as Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell (2 participants) and University of New Mexico (2 participants). Participants were enrolled in college during the pandemic working on their associates, bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree. Please reference Table 1 for demographic information. Table 2 shows the learning disorders of participants.

**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

Participant	Location	Age	Gender	Program Type
P1	Michigan	48	Female	Doctoral
P2	New Mexico	58	Male	Doctoral
P3	Virginia	59	Male	Doctoral
P4	New Zealand	23	Female	Master's
P5	New Mexico	18	Male	Associates
P6	Virginia	30	Female	Doctoral
P7	New Mexico	20	Male	Bachelors
P8	New Mexico	25	Female	Master's
P9	California	53	Female	Master's
P10	Hawaii	64	Female	Doctoral

*Note. The average age of participants was 40.9 years old (SD = 17.9).*

**Table 2***Learning Disability Types*

Participant	Learning Disability
P1	Reading Comprehension Disorder: Dyslexia
P2	Learning Disorder with Written Expression; Dyslexia
P3	Attention Deficit Disorder
P4	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
P5	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
P6	Specific Learning Disorder with Writing Impairments
P7	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
P8	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
P9	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; Asperger's; Dyslexia
P10	Dyslexia

The participants were able to share their personal experiences with their learning disability and motivation to succeed in online higher education during the pandemic. The data collection followed the methods that were presented in Chapter 3. Students' names were hidden and were given pseudonyms to help protect their identity and protect confidentiality. Participants gave consent via email before the interview. Each participant completed one interview and were offered the transcript and copy of the dissertation when approved.

### **Semistructured Interviews**

The participants were informed there were set questions to be asked but follow-up questions would be asked, if necessary. Probing had to be done in some instances to achieve the answer to the question due to the question not being answered. There were three participants that did not provide a lot of information about their experiences of motivation in online school with having a learning disability. The following questions were asked of all students in the same order:

1. What motivated you to begin online higher education?
2. Described what a typical school day online looks like for you and how you get yourself motivated to complete assignments.
3. How has your motivation to succeed in online higher education been impacted since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?
4. How has your learning disability impacted your level of motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic?



5. What resources were available to help you succeed and did you use these resources? Why or why not?

When asking these questions, some participants would describe their experiences but would not fully answer the question, and the question would have to be asked again. Such as what a typical school day would look like or them. Some probing had to be done to better understand the resources that were available to them such as personal, professional, and institutional. Additional questions were asked to get a better understanding of challenges the student faced such as obligations they had outside of school. Example follow-up questions were, “did you have support from family or friends?” Or “Were you able to get help from professors or peers?”

### **Field Notes**

Field notes were used throughout the interviews on a notepad to help pull out key words, experiences, or ideas the participants were sharing. I would have the notepad with me while I was conducting the interview and would also jot down the thoughts I was having throughout the interview. This proved to be beneficial when interviewing other participants to pull collective ideas together. Before hitting record on the interview, I was able to talk to the participants briefly to help them know what to expect throughout the interview and to help ease them into the recording. For example, I would explain that I would record the interview and have a series of five questions to ask them, would be asking follow-up questions if needed, and let them know they could go into as much detail as they would feel comfortable.

### **Data Analysis**

To conduct the data analysis with a phenomenological research design, I used the seven-step model from Rubin and Rubin (2012). To conduct data analysis, the first step was to transcribe the interviews, and all questions were asked in the same order, and notes were taken during the interviews. These notes are considered field notes. The interviews were audio recorded through Zoom. Second, I would listen to the video again and read the transcriptions. This step was important to the process to be able to understand the different types of codes that were being used. Many participants would say similar statements which allowed there to be identifications of codes. Codes were done through each interview and then were organized in a Word document. After coding, the third step was to sort through the codes. I sorted through the codes by grouping like-type codes. In the Word document I was able to group similar codes together, for instance the codes peer support and coworker support were able to be grouped together. Then these codes were sorted into different groups. Through sorting the groups, I was able to identify five themes. Fourth, these groups were broken down into subgroups which resulted in a total of 14 subgroups. After making subgroups, in Step 5, I was able to integrate the codes together to make meaning of the subgroups. The sixth step was to combine like themes or groups to get a clearer meaning, and finally, in Step 7, I was able to describe what the concepts of the groups mean and reflect on findings.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

To guarantee evidence of trustworthiness I made sure to remove my personal biases through keeping a field journal. This allowed me to write down my thoughts as the

interview went on. Additionally, I was able to maintain credibility, confirmability, transferability, and dependability, which will be detailed next.

### **Credibility and Member Checking**

To ensure credibility, there were three different methods. Emails were exchanged with the participants to extend time spent with them. Having a preconversation before the interview with the participants allowed there also to be a check for credibility in terms of age, schooling, and diagnosis. Additionally, having pre-conversations allowed there to be understanding that the participants knew what was being asked of them. Another way credibility was used was through paying attention to the responses of participants. Many participants expressed very similar experiences as others. This allowed there to be credibility of information gathered.

Reflexivity was also used to have credibility by inventorying personal biases, such as through the field journal. Saturation was also used by having a minimum of ten interviews which allowed there to be rich data with repetitive data represented (see Fusch & Ness, 2015).

### **Transferability**

Transferability is used to apply data to outside sources (Krefting, 1991). Data collected was from participants from different universities, states, countries, diagnoses, and ages. This allows there to be applicability to other students who have a learning disability who took online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Dependability**

To help with dependability throughout this research, steps through the Rubin and Rubin (2012) model were followed. This allowed there to be proper data analyzation and interpretation. This allows other researchers in the future to replicate my study.

**Confirmability**

I allowed there to be neutrality when interpreting the data. This allows there to be confirmable results and the ability to replicate data. Before conducting my research, I discussed biases with my chair and noted them in the beginning of the dissertation. For example, a bias that may exist is the perception of how students with a learning disorder approach their school workload because I might be expecting different answers from students than what is presented. Field notes were also taken during the interviews and can be audited. Additionally, I followed step-by-step procedures to allow for others to repeat the process and allow an understanding of how conclusions were deduced from the codes.

**Results**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the motivation of higher education students with a learning disability who took online college courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were recruited from the social media platform Facebook through various Facebook groups. The posts on Facebook consisted of my research topic and the criterion, additionally it included my email for participants to contact me if they felt they met criteria or the study. Once the participants reached out via email, and confirmed they met eligibility requirements, they were sent the consent form, responded "I consent" then an online interview via Zoom was scheduled. No interviews

took place in person due to the location of participants and the researcher. Semistructured interviews were done to gather information about the lived experiences of students who took online courses, who had a learning disability during the pandemic to better understand their academic motivation. There was a total of 10 participants interviewed for this study. A total of 15 people had reached out but five did not complete an interview. Of those five participants who indicated interest but did not participate, four did not meet the requirements, and one had to reschedule the interview multiple times then stopped responding, delaying the data collection process.

Due to the nature of the study being semi-structured interviews, all participants were asked the same five questions (see Appendix C). However, follow-up questions were asked to gain a better understanding of participant experiences based on the answers participants provided. Some participants were eager to share their experiences and would start telling stories at the beginning of the interview when asked about their diagnosis. To not disrupt the rapport-building process, I would let them tell their story then go back and ask the semistructured questions, even if the questions were already answered in their stories. After using Rubin and Rubin's (2012) thematic analysis plan on the data I gathered from the semistructured interviews, five themes emerged (Table 3). All participants will be referenced based on Table 2, which shows their learning disability, when going through the results.

**Table 3***Themes*

Themes	Number of Interviews Referenced
Theme 1: Lack of Professional Support	7
Subtheme 1.2: Lack of Clarity	4
Subtheme 1.3: Unaware of Accommodations	4
Theme 2: Resources	8
Subtheme 2.2: Outside School Resources	8
Subtheme 2.3: School Resources	7
Subtheme 2.4: Additional Time	7
Theme 3: Support System	10
Subtheme 3.2: Family Support	6
Subtheme 3.3: Peer Support	5
Subtheme 3.4: Professional Support	5
Theme 4: Consistent Motivation	9
Subtheme 4.2: Future	6
Subtheme 4.3: Availability of Time	7
Subtheme 4.4: Perseverance	5
Theme 5: Low Motivation	10
Subtheme 5.2: Difficulty with Assignments	6
Subtheme 5.3: Online Courses	6
Subtheme 5.4: Life Obligations	7

**Theme 1: Lack of Professional Support**

Participants discussed their experiences when reaching out to disability services and describe themselves as not getting the proper help due to lack of resources the disability offices have, lack of helpful accommodations, and lack of acceptance of past diagnoses without updated paperwork. There were five participants who described having lack of available resources in their higher education journey. The lack of

accommodations for students leaves them feeling they must find their own ways to get proper accommodations or support to help them move through their schooling. Participant 4 (ADHD) reached out to disability services and was denied any support because of their lack of provided supports for ADHD:

I tried. I even, I spoke to the accessibilities people, and unfortunately here in New Zealand we're lacking on support for ADHD. So, at my University, I said, "Hey, I've got this, I've now got a diagnosis, what can you offer me to help?" and they said, "Oh, we can offer you an extra, I think half hour per hour during tests." That wouldn't work. I don't have tests so not particularly helpful. They said, "I will, lectures will be able to give you more extensions." And I said again, "Not super helpful, because I thrived on the panic of the last-minute assignment."

Some students had to find their own support to help them with their learning disability and when they found a support that helped, they felt the university was unable to offer any financial help to accommodate the students who found audio books to be easier to follow along than reading a textbook. Participant 6 (specific learning disorder with writing impairments) stated, "So it is unfortunate for people who have learning disorders like your Accessibility Office doesn't pay for any of those tools."-These students all reached out for help, but it can be noted they were not successful in getting accommodations met for their needs, though it shows in some instances the disability services did offer accommodations to most, but these accommodations were not helpful to these students.

### ***Subtheme 1.2: Lack of Clarity***

Participants expressed professors did not have clarity about learning disabilities and felt that accommodations given to them from professors were not helpful.

Participants expressed how they felt and what it was like when communicating with

professors about their learning disabilities and feeling that professors were not trained in understanding learning disabilities or how to help them. Participant 1 (reading comprehension disorder; dyslexia) stated:

“Oh, well, sometimes I would cry. Okay, right now it was very, it was very hard, because I would talk to my professors, and they didn't understand. It would talk to my, of course I have my chair, and at first, he didn't understand.”

Participant 2 (learning disorder with written expression; dyslexia) stated, “and most instructors don't understand learning disorders”. This was not helpful to the participant when he was doing his work and made it more challenging for him. Another student reached out to her professor asking for support and explained her diagnosis, Participant 4 (ADHD) stated “The semester I contacted my lectures, and said, ‘Hey, this is what I've got. Is there anything that you can do to help me?’ And they went, ‘Not really so.’” Professors were unable to help her with accommodations due to lack of understanding how or what accommodations would benefit her. This makes it challenging for students to reach out for help, but educators are unaware of the support they could provide.

### ***Subtheme 1.3: Unaware of Accommodations***

Some participants felt professors were not helpful with understanding diagnosis or the disability services lacked the available resources to help students; however, out of the ten participants some of them were unaware that they were able to get accommodations because of their learning disability. Participant 3 (attention deficit disorder) stated, “You know, the, the piece that I didn't understand is there was help out there, and reason I didn't understand it, I never had it before. I did not even know was available.”



Participants, and possibly even other students are unaware of what they have available to them due to lack of advertisement for help. Participant 8 (ADHD) stated, “Having ADHD you know I'm sure that they're there. But, but, I don't really know about any of them I feel like especially in higher education schools.” It was also expressed by Participant 8 (ADHD) that advertisement of help is not something students see often in graduate work for accommodations. Participant 8 (ADHD):

“They don't really advertise what kind of resources are available for people who are struggling. I feel like whenever I was doing my undergraduate work. I was in person, so it was a lot easier to just go down to the disability office, and like I had an interview, and then I got the accommodations that she thought I needed. I don't really know how it would work with my current school because I'm an online student.”

Students do not appear to have clarity about how accommodations could be used in the online environment nor were they aware of how to access accommodations. This poses as a problem for students because they are wanting help or needed help because they would then be at a disadvantage.

## **Theme 2: Resources**

Many students experienced some problems with their learning disabilities and doing the schoolwork online. Through their hardships they were able to find accommodations that helped them or different types of resources that were not provided by the school. Some students found support through audible books, editors, school resources, and having extra time to accomplish assignments which made up the subthemes of outside school resources, school resources, and additional time.

***Subtheme 2.2: Outside School Resources***

Five of the participants relied on audiobooks to help them read the materials for class. The participants that described using the audio books described an easier time understanding the material being read out to them, being able to finish the readings faster, and was able to incorporate it into their daily routine, such as when commuting to and from work. Participant 3 (attention deficit disorder) stated:

“Now, whenever I have electronic versions of books it's a little bit different. I can even, I can even put their speed at a what you know? You can set the audio where it will actually read faster. And I can actually follow along with that really, really well and actually comprehend, regardless of the speed.”

Even though this participant was able to read he would have a challenging time comprehending what it was he was actually reading. Participant 10 (dyslexia) also expressed how audio books helped her:

“I was with him a little bit, and he really helped me learn, learn how I learn. And you know, Okay, are you having trouble reading the textbooks? Yes. But why are you buying them? Because everybody buys textbooks, right? Well, he said, not You don't necessarily maybe look into audible books, or maybe look into, and it he just in a few sessions. I worked with him, he opened up my world, and a whole new, different direction that I had never thought of before.”

She found a way to help her learn through the help of others. After finding that audio books helped her based on her needs, she was able do her reding in a nontraditional way, but still gain the material needed to be successful.

Other participants also expressed how audio books helped them in their daily life.

Participant three stated:

“So, having 2 children instead of like reading, I would get audio subscriptions to like textbooks like vital sources, something I found an undergrad, and I just thought like, Oh, this is great for everyone because everyone can just listen to a

book when they're driving or they can listen to a book faster than they can read it, and so I tried to share it with my peers.”

Participant 9 (ADHD; dyslexia; asperger's) stated, “Yeah and then I got a pdf reader on my phone. So when I'm doing that drive, I've got my phone reading to me in a horrible robotic voice all of my research articles on 1.5 speed, because it makes it a little easier to understand if I can speed up the robot.” Audible books or PDF readers were so helpful to students because they were offered a different way to understand the information which allowed them to be more motivated to do their readings and assignments.

### ***Subtheme 2.3: School Resources***

Some participants expressed the need for resources to help them succeed while doing their schoolwork. There were many different types of school resources participants used including an editor, library workers, tutoring services, and online videos the school had provided. These resources were described by participants as services they found helpful and needed to be able to move forward in their schooling. Some of these students described having trouble with writing and by having the additional support it helped them succeed.

Participant 1 (reading comprehension disorder; dyslexia) expressed, “They require you to have had an editor, so I will be using an editor.” Another participant, participant 4 (ADHD), also described the need of a consult to help with her writing:

“And then what else I think I get I get penalized a lot for I mean a lot of it is honestly just probably poor writing structure that I've just never been taught better. It's a lot of like run on sentences. So, I try my best to limit my sentences to a normal, a normal amount. But because I've got so much information to provide about that one thing. It, it goes on and on and on, and on, and it's, it's hard to break it up in a way that's so makes a lot of sense so, I spend a lot of time with writing consults, trying to still have the same mountain information.”

Participant 9 (ADHD; dyslexia; asperger's) stated:

“I burned through like 3 different proofreaders’, people who are working with me on writing after I've got my paper. I give it to them to proof reading and we'd have to go back and forth. You know, 6 or 7 times before the paper was ready to get turned in.”

Having proofreaders, or editor, was helpful because of the need for additional writing support. Many of these participants struggled with their writing and needed someone to help them as they moved forward, despite the differences in diagnoses.

In addition to using the school editor, Participant one was able to utilize the school library workers to aid her in her work. Participant 1 (reading comprehension disorder; dyslexia):

“I reached out to the media specialist research specialist at in the library, and most people don't even talk to him. I talked to him 4 times for an hour a piece, and he actually built a search term for me.”

This participant found use in the library to get help with research due to struggles, and this was helpful. Another student utilized a tutoring service to help while taking college courses in addition to high school courses. Participant 5 (ADHD) stated, “They also had a tutoring, a free tutoring thing in one of the buildings.” This participant stated that this support is something he was able to utilize if needed and had utilized a few times while taking online courses. Another student reports having used videos that were posted online in the school dashboard to help them better understand materials. This participant expressed struggles with writing, and Participant 10 (dyslexia) stated:

“I need to write in order to get it. So yeah. So, Walden also has in the student portal is chopped full of podcasts videos. All sorts of amazing resources. We also have the CAEX classes, the CAEX classes I took probably, well, at 1 point in time I took I had taken every single one of them that was available. Now there's some new ones available that I haven't taken but those classes help me a lot with

just honing my academic skills, particularly that more so with writing than anything else. But there's a lot of things back there in the portal that you don't even necessarily know that they're there unless you go looking for them.”

Many students may not know about this resource that can benefit them with their writing skills. This student was motivated to go further in her education and utilize these sources to help her better her skills.

***Subtheme 2.4: Additional Time***

In addition to tutoring, editor, library resources, or available videos, three students were able to utilize additional time on their assignments that was given by their professors to help them complete their assignments or tests and one student felt that the additional time was not helpful. Participant 5 (ADHD) stated:

“I was given, what is it called, I forgot the name, it’s where they, accommodations. I was given accommodations for my ADHD. Extra time. I was given extra time”, “...I used it a lot for tests because it's a, a while to complete tests.”

Additional time allows for students to make sure they get their assignments completed.

Sometimes students have life stressors or roles that take precedence over their schooling, and they need additional support. Participant 8 (ADHD: dyslexia; asperger’s) stated:

“I've done it a couple of times most of them have given it to me. I try my best to turn things in on time. Sometimes I really struggle with it. but especially if I have extra stressors in life.”

All these students would require the extra time to help them if they were struggling in some type of way, whether it be due to life stressors, their learning disability, or simply just needing the extra time to complete their schoolwork.

### **Theme 3: Support System**

Many participants expressed having support throughout their educational journey. These participants had different types of support systems including family, peers, and professional supports. Many of the participants found their support systems to impact them heavily throughout their schooling.

#### ***Subtheme 3.2: Family Support***

Five out of ten participants discussed family support. Some participants relied on their family to be able to persevere through school. Participant 3 (attention deficit disorder) stated:

“So, but believe in it yourself, having a support system. I've been blessed in this life to have two, two wives that believed in me lot more than I believe in myself. Trust. They believed in my ability. They urged me to push me along. And they, they, they let me follow my dream. They, they knew the, the passion and the dream and placed at my heart, and in each occasion, and, and they encourage me to go for it. So, I think, for someone that doesn't have that, it's gonna be a lot bigger struggle because then you got to rely solely on you on you.”

Some participants also expressed having difficulty to push through assignments and schoolwork because of their family obligations and needing to have time to themselves.

Participant 6 (specific learning disorder with writing impairments) stated:

“My husband was also really supportive. You know we have two children, so, him being able to say like, take the night to just like go work on stuff.... So having like a, a spouse that could be like, Go, take that time that you need it was motivating to have that I don't think I would have been able to.”

Spousal support was major for this participant because of the roles she has in her life.

Finally, Participant 9 (ADHD; dyslexia; asperger's) stated:

“...and they're being really supportive, then are trying to help me make sure that I stay on track support system in place, and I would not be able to do it without the support even with them it's a giant.”

Family support helps participants who have other life obligations other than schoolwork. Without these supports, these participants would have had more difficulty completing their schoolwork.

### ***Subtheme 3.3: Peer Support***

In addition to family, some participants also found their jobs, coworkers, or peers to be supportive while they were going through school. Many participants had multiple roles they participated in and relied heavily on the people around them. Some people needed to get help from their peers to complete their schooling. Participant 2 (learning disorder with written expression; dyslexia) stated, “And I had a lot of really smart people at my fingertips to ask questions about over the years to help me.” Having access to people who were educated in a similar field to what he was studying was useful to gain additional support when needed. Participant 9 (ADHD; dyslexia; asperger’s), described her coworker who is on the Board of Directors helping her throughout her schooling, “But you know we, we would sometimes spend hours sending the paper back and forth, you know, working on it.” She would need someone else to read her papers when she would write them, and her coworker was able to assist her in her writing skills.

Participant 10 (dyslexia) stated while working as a nurse under the COVID response team:

“It was locked down here, here in Hawaii people we have more of a collectivist environment. So, people tend to behave. They stayed home and they did what there was supposed to do. So, if people came in, and all the night they were usually pretty sick. As a result, I was able to get a lot of, I took my, my books with me. I took articles. I actually got some reading done at work had never happened when I was working up an ICU because we were too busy.”

Having a job that was slower pace allowed this participant to have additional time to work on her schooling when she otherwise would not have been able to.

Many participants relied heavily on their peers for support during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some students were unable to see their peers in person due to distance between them, COVID-19 restrictions and because they were in online courses. However, Participant 4 (ADHD) stated, there were online meetings with peers “you know, you've got an assignment during a couple of weeks we'll have a quick chat about where everyone is at and what help you guys need.” Participant 5 (ADHD) stated, “I could always ask the other students for help” and that online video classes were required for some of the college classes but would not keep the video on all the time. Participant 6 (specific learning disorder with writing impairments) stated, “I think also, it helped I, I'm really close with all my cohort members.” Participants found a sense of community and support with their peers. Having peers' participants could communicate with allowed there to be a sense of connection and support with schoolwork.

#### ***Subtheme 3.4: Professional Support***

Participants not only relied on peers for support but were able to rely on professional supports such as therapists and professors. There were six participants who described their experiences with professional supports. Two participants stated having a therapist was helpful for them during their time doing online schooling. Participant 1 (reading comprehension disorder; dyslexia) stated:

“I had the cognitive therapist for about a year and a half, and she helped me do some different tricks, and how to put my mind back together again. So, I didn't have to take so much time with organizing in my mind and putting things on paper.”



She was able to utilize her therapist to help her not feel as scattered and learned how to organize the thoughts she was having to better succeed. Participant 5 (ADHD) stated they were experiencing depression on top of their ADHD and had therapy to help before COVID, “I did go to therapy to get help for it, and I wasn’t feeling depressed anymore.” But with COVID, he did begin to feel depressed again and was struggling with not being able to see others than his family. “But going into COVID and being locked in my room and not being able to go and see anybody other than my family, it did through me back into that depression that I struggled with.” Not only was this participant having difficulty with his learning disorder, but the impact that COVID-19 had on him was impacting his mental health.

Other students found support from their professors through communication and time extensions. Professors are often the main source of contact students have when taking classes. There were four participants who found that the support they received from their professors helped them succeed. Participant 4 (ADHD) stated, “So they understood. They gave me quite a bit of leeway, because they knew that we were very, very busy doing vaccinations and helping sick people.” Additionally Participant 4 (ADHD) stated:

“as soon as you get it [being sick with COVID]. You just let them know, and then they kind of adjust all of your learning for you, cause they kinda learned by now what it looks like for a student to have covid. Yeah, which is cool.”

Professionals understood how the pandemic was impacting students and were lenient with some of them based on their field of work. Participant 8 (ADHD) stated:

“But overall, I think that I have understanding professors that were willing to kind of work with me whenever I was struggling. That’s helped me a lot. So, I

think that in general, if professors have an understanding of what these disorders and learning disability is doing to people, and the way that they learn and taken information and are just kind of gracious with them.”

She felt that professors were really understanding of her struggles and were able to accommodate. Additionally Participant 8 (ADHD) discussed how professors would interact with the students:

“I’ve had a few that are really proactive in sending us messages every week saying like what we need to do, sending optional supplementary materials that we can review if we need help you know reminding us of their office hours.”

Interaction was helpful for her during her schooling because it allowed there to be presence within the classroom, and to be reminded there is a professor there, even though it is online schooling.

#### **Theme 4: Consistent Motivation**

Participants began school because of a drive they have. They are all working toward a particular goal and want to achieve that goal, and the only way to do that is to attend school. These participants were so open and willing to share their motivation to continue with their schooling and among the ten participants, there were three subthemes of motivation that emerged such as wanting to advance their profession, the availability of time they had, and perseverance because of their learning disability.

##### ***Subtheme 4.2: Future***

There were seven participants who described a motivating factor for them was advancing their career. All participants are working toward a helping profession which provides them with passion. These participants are wanting to succeed for various reasons. Participant 3 (attention deficit disorder) stated:

“Well, my initial motivation was to take a graduate certificate and pastoral counseling program... It's when I really decided to go full blast with the Masters' degree. And I, I did that for personal reason. I felt like I want I wanted to enhance my writing skills because I didn't. I had authored one book, but I need my writing skills needed to improve.”

He was already doing what he wanted in his life but wanted to further succeed in his writing to continue to write novels. Participant 8 (ADHD) stated, “It really just comes down to me wanting to meet the goals that I've made for myself. I know that I need my master's degree to pursue being a therapist, which is ultimately what I want to do.” She does not want to be in school, but her motivation requires a degree. Her motivation is the driving force. Participant 2 (learning disorder with written expression; dyslexia) stated, “I've been doing online largely for a while because of my licensure.” He feels comfortable with online learning because of his career and the requirement of having continuing education which is often done on the computers. These participants have a passion they are working toward and want to continue to work in their same profession or work toward something new.

#### ***Subtheme 4.3: Availability of Time***

Online schooling is such a convenience for people, especially when they are engaged in many different life roles. Of the ten participants, seven of them had stated that the availability of time the pandemic had created allowed them to continue with school or because it was flexible to fit their daily routine. Students were able to turn a terrifying world event into something resourceful. They were also able to be creative and find ways to incorporate school within their daily life tasks. Participant 10 (dyslexia) stated, “I go to the gym, and I work out. I listen to audible books.” She has a routine and is able to add

her schooling to her daily routine. Participant 2 (learning disorder with written expression; dyslexia) stated:

“more motivated to do online learning because I was struggling to find things to do keep myself busy and not get, not feel isolated” and “So a typical school day look like getting off at work at 5 o'clock, coming straight home at 5 30. Get it out my books and working on stuff until 7:30-8 o'clock, and then and then getting up and do the next day again. Saturdays usually started about 9:30 or 10, and I would go until 5 or 6, and then Sundays were, was usually started about 9 or 10, and would go to about 3 or.”

During the pandemic he did not have a lot of things to fill with his free time, therefore he attended school and was able to create a routine that worked for him. Participant 9 (ADHD; dyslexia; asperger's) stated, “I sneak out of work early a lot of times, and when I do sneak out of work early, I'll do more schoolwork and then weekends I'm probably putting in 6 to 7 hours on the weekends.” Sometimes she feels she does not have enough time to complete her schooling and will have to find ways to add more time, which sometimes cuts into her work hours. These participants found what was going to work for them in their daily life and were able to continue their schoolwork and their life obligations.

#### ***Subtheme 4.4: Perseverance***

The purpose of this study was to understand how students with a learning disability remained motivated, of the ten participants, five of them did not want to be labeled with their learning disability and feel that they could not accomplish a degree because they have a learning disability. Having a learning disability is a part of who you are but is not who you are. These participants did not want to be treated differently by professional staff or peers because of their disability. Participant 10 (dyslexia), “but I

don't want anybody to think that I got my degree handed to me. I would want them to know that I earned it just like everybody else.” This really bothered this participant, and she began crying during the interview. She wants to show she is capable of doing the hard work just like others who do not have a learning disability. Participant 1 (reading comprehension disorder; dyslexia) stated:

“This is my purpose. This is what I want to do this is where I’m going to go with this and I don't care if I have a disability. I'm going to do it anyway, and barely anyone even knows that I have this.”

Participant 6 (specific learning disorder with writing impairments) stated:

“I think, with a learning disorder you're just so used to kind of pushing through. So, everything I'd figured out, and school was kind of my own trial and error, and I was so used to just kind of pushing myself to the next goal that when things started to get hard.”

This participant learned to be their own driving force. These participants have struggled with their learning disability, but they did not let it stop them from working toward their goals. participants have struggled with their learning disability, but they did not let it stop them from working toward their goals.

### **Theme 5: Low Motivation**

Many people struggle with motivation and these participants were no different. Of the ten participants, all ten students expressed low motivation at one point during their online schooling. Each person’s level of motivation was different and had different experiences, however, they all had some difficulties. Some participants struggled with their ability to write having online courses in general. Other participants struggled with paying attention due to distractions in their environment. And others had struggled with their motivation due to have jobs and other life obligations.

### ***Subtheme 5.2: Difficulty with Assignments***

Participants often explained one of the biggest challenges for them was writing and the amount of time it would take them to complete assignments. Writing would cause some frustration due to the amount of time of having to make corrections, feelings of inadequacy, and feeling like they do not have support. Participant one stated when talking to an instructor about her papers she had written, “I don't know your sentence structure, is not good you know they would be very degrading, and then they would start understanding.” This would cause frustration and hurt due to not being able to get the help from professors. Participant 2 (learning disorder with written expression; dyslexia) stated, “just being after work harder takes me longer to write things out.” He felt that with his learning disability it would take him longer to complete assignments. Participant 4 (ADHD) stated:

“Personally, I run it whole a lot with my information. So, I get really deep into this really like cool, nugget information. And then, all of a sudden, it just stops and it's the next paragraph, the next idea, and so it's, it's quite rough, I think, for the reader because it's not it's not as nicely set out, maybe, as other people just find the information still being there, and despite it, still hitting the marks, it's not as easy to read.”

This participant describes herself as being distracted by the information she finds which causes her to lose track of what she is supposed to be writing and difficulty pulling all her ideas together. Many students had struggled with completing their assignments or struggled with the writing portion.

### ***Subtheme 5.3: Online Courses***

Many participants chose to do online courses; however, six participants had a difficult time paying attention to their schoolwork. Various reasons occurred to cause low

motivation to do their work, but some it had to do with distractions in their environment, or anything and everything sounded better than doing the actual work. Participant 10 (dyslexia), “Yeah sometimes those, those uninteresting topics do make the wall painting sound very nice, nice, real good.” Often it is difficult to be motivated to do assignments that lack supple interest. And Participant 4 (ADHD) stated, “And then having somebody flat mates as soon as you hear someone in the whole way, you're like, ‘Oh, that's something better to do.’ And so hop off and go do that.” Sometimes anything was more interesting than doing schoolwork but having roommates or people around doing other things was often a distraction. In addition to distraction, three participants expressed the lack of structure in online courses made it difficult for them to remain motivated.

Participant 8 (ADHD) stated:

“I feel like I'm both grateful and kind of I don't know if apprehensive is the right word of online coursework, because it is self, self-driven, and you get to make your own schedule but at the same time I don't really have like in person lectures to keep me engaged. I don't actually have to go to a class and so sometimes they can be kind of hard to find that self-motivation for me.”

Having a guiding force was helpful for students because without it, they felt they were not as motivated to continue their educational journey, because it was self-driven and lack engagement with professors or peers.

#### ***Subtheme 5.4: Life Obligations***

There are six participants who described themselves as having families and jobs while doing online courses during the pandemic. These are two areas of life that many people were unable to escape from. Because of these obligations and the amount of time each role took, some participants expressed a difficult time being able to stay motivated

to do their schoolwork. Participant 4 (ADHD) stated, “yeah, and, and sometimes also, you get to the end of the workday, and you sit there and you got I don't really want to sit down for two and a half. hours and write. Or, you know, read lots and lots of articles and all that.” After having a long day at work, this participant was spent, and did not have the extra energy to devote to schoolwork. Participant 6 (specific learning disorder with writing impairments) stated:

“I have two kids at home, and even though my family like made it to where I had my space to myself, it's really hard to stay focused when you know work is already draining it already takes you twice as long to do everything, and then, you know your kids are downstairs.”

The different life roles she has and the space she has to do her schoolwork, it was difficult for her to have the extra energy to put into her work. Participant 10 (dyslexia) stated:

“I probably could have finished a lot sooner if I could a ticket. Well, I know I could if I could take 2 class at a time, but I knew that I would fail if I took 2 classes and especially when I was still working full time. This is no way I could have done it.”

Participants experienced a series of life roles that made it challenging for them to want to continue to do their schoolwork. Their energy is being pulled in many different directions that make it difficult to just put energy toward their assignments.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand how students in online higher education, who have a learning disability, remained motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants were recruited from social media via Facebook. Potential participants would email me and upon confirmation of meeting inclusion



criteria, they were sent the consent form and a Zoom interview was scheduled. Semi-structured interviews were held with a total of 10 participants to better understand their lived experiences. All interviews were recorded. After the interviews, the interviews were transcribed. Through the data analysis there were five themes that emerged and 15 subthemes. The five themes were: lack of professional support, resources, support system, consistent motivation and low motivation.

Chapter 5 will further discuss the interpretation of data. This will be don't by examining each theme and explaining how. It connects to past research and future research. Then discussion of limitations and strengths will be addressed. Social change will also be explored and how this research impacts social change. Lastly, Chapter 5 will explore the impact of how this research can further help students who have a learning disability.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendation

The purpose of this qualitative thematic study was to better understand the motivating factors of online higher education students who have a learning disability during the COVID-19 pandemic. To better understand how students remained motivated, I conducted 10 semistructured interviews with participants who were enrolled in online higher education during the pandemic and had a diagnosed learning disability. These interviews were done to answer the following research question: what are the experiences of adults with learning disabilities regarding motivation to succeed in online higher education programs during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Through data analysis, there were five themes identified with a total of 14 subthemes. The five main themes were (a) lack of professional support, (b) sources, (c) support system, (d) consistent motivation, and (e) low motivations. These five themes and 14 subthemes were discussed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I discuss the interpretations of the findings in Chapter 4 and how the findings relate to the previous literature that was reviewed in Chapter 2. Additionally, discussion of the conceptual framework, limitations, recommendations, social change, and the conclusion are covered.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

The literature review discussed in Chapter 2 focused primarily on online learning in higher education, motivation, students who have a learning disability, and COVID-19. A review of Maslow's hierarchy of needs was also completed. There have been studies that focused on online learning during the pandemic (see Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; Dhwan, 2020; Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021; Mailizar et al., 2020; Munir et al., 2021;

Vaillancourt et al., 2022) and other studies that focused on online learning and learning disabilities (see Banks, 2014; Dryer et al., 2016; Lambert & Dryer, 2018; Morina 2019; Pittman & Heiselt, 2014) but few researchers have looked at motivation and online learning of higher education students who have a learning disability. The findings of this study will aid current literature by providing a better understanding of how these students remained motivated in their online learning endeavors with a learning disability during a pandemic.

### **Theme 1: Lack of Support**

Many students need additional support when in a higher education setting, but especially those who have a learning disability. Students who do not have the proper support through accommodations are more likely to fail a class (Dryer et al., 2016; Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). Many participants in this study expressed they were unable to get the proper accommodations due to lack of support from the school through the disability office, professors, or lack of knowledge that they had access to supports. Many professors believe students with a learning disability do not need extra support or are more motivated than their counterparts (Mornina, 2019). This current study shows that students needed support from their professors and institution.

Students want to succeed in their classes and feel like they matter. Vaillancourt et al. (2022) addressed how mattering helps the students feel more motivated in the classroom setting. Many students addressed the lack of professional support they would receive. Sometimes student would receive support, but the support provided did not coincide with their learning disability.

Participants also noted they did not know they had the ability to get services. Banks (2014) had mentioned in their study that students often fail at using disability services due to lack of knowledge that they have rights to not be discriminated against because of their disability and have the right to have appropriate accommodations within the classroom based on their disability through the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and ADA (Disability Rights SC, 2021). Many students from the study would often not get the help they needed because they felt if there was help it would not be helpful to them. Some participants had the perception that educators would not understand the needs of the students because they were in an online course environment. Research has been done regarding the perceptions of educators and students who have special educational needs, and it has been found that educators believe students who have a learning disability have easier access to tools to succeed (Martene & Bernadowski, 2016). Per participants perceptions, my study aligns with the past research in regard that the educators may not have known how they could effectively help the participants. However, these students would often go on without using much support because for them it was easier to use resources, they found on their own than to use professional support at the university.

## **Theme 2: Resources**

Resources are tools that participants were able to use to help them succeed in their educational journey. Many students reached out to the university for support but did not gain it. By not having support, it led participants to feel they had to find their own resources for support, while other students were able to get some support from different areas such as out of school resources and other resources that were not a part of disability

services. Many students have a difficult time accessing services (Dryer et al., 2016), which is consistent to the struggles participants experienced in this study. Participants would reach out to the school for help and would be denied resources that they felt were suitable for their needs, such as wanting access to audio books but having to pay for it themselves. Participants need resources to succeed, and many felt they had to find their own resources to be successful.

When students were denied support, they found their own way to help them. One of the problems students experienced was difficulty reading the course material. Through course design, the course needs to be accessible, operable, and understandable (Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). To help aid students who are requiring additional sources or help reading or understanding material, having multimedia such as having an audio or video option might be helpful for some students. Some students have difficulty only reading the text and need additional support. Some participants struggled with understanding the course reading as well. To succeed and persevere, these students were able to use other resources to help with the reading through the use of PDF readers or Audible. Having an electronic e-reader allowed the students to listen to the material faster than what they could read and to digest the information more easily. Some participants would experience frustration because they would read the material, but it would take too long, or they had a difficult time understanding what it was they read and would have to spend more time trying to understand the material. Additionally, with the use of audible books or PDF readers they were able to do their schoolwork while working on other tasks.

In Maslow's hierarchy of needs, one of the basic needs is finances (Kurt, 2021). Many of these participants were able to listen to their schoolbooks during their commute to work and back. Other students were getting their physical health needs met while listening to their schoolwork, which is on tier one of the hierarchies. Many of these participants have families they took care of and by having audible books, they were able to save time to allow them to put more time into their families. Many participants juggled different roles such as family, work, school, or extracurriculars. If something were to come up within the family unit, the participant would have to give up time studying to help their family; by using the readers it allowed them to not have to spend as much time doing their schoolwork.

Some participants were able to use school resources to aid them in the educational process. One source used was an editor. Many participants expressed the difficulty they had while writing their papers for their courses and had difficulty getting support from their professors. Therefore, participants accessed an editor to help manage their writing. They identified having an editor as a huge support for them. Other participants were able to use the school librarians to help them with their research, which allowed them to get a better result when looking up literature on a topic. Another participant was able to access writing videos that were accessible by the university to help her better her skills. These participants were very resourceful in finding other ways to maneuver around their challenges. Pittman and Heiselt (2014) explained that students who have accessibility to resources are more successful and more motivated, which is consistent with the participants use of outside resources than from disability services. Having resources is

especially critical for these participants because they were doing their schooling online and did not have the accessibility to resources as they would if they were on campus.

Some participants required extended time on their schoolwork because of their learning disability or due to life challenges, such as multiple roles. Many participants found themselves devoting time to their families or jobs during the pandemic. Other students found it challenging to complete work on time due to their mental health. Students need self-determination and some students who experience a psychological problem have higher levels of distress (Dryer et al., 2016). Higher levels of distress correlated with participants from the study because they would struggle to be able to work on their assignments or it would take them longer to complete the assignments based on their mental health. Students are going to move toward self-actualization; however, they are going to satisfy their needs in other areas before focusing on school which is consistent with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs.

### **Theme 3: Supports**

One study found that students experienced barriers because of their learning disabilities and quality of life (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). However, quality of life increases for those who have support. Students were able to increase their self-esteem through overcoming their challenges and spending time with their family (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). Participants in the current study expressed having support from their family members and often relied on them to move forward in their schooling. The participants relied on their spouses to help them take care of daily tasks or children to have the time to focus on their schoolwork, but also experienced some stress because of wanting to be

involved in family activities. Other students expressed getting support from their peers through their cohorts or through their work. Having peer support allowed them to better understand what they were learning and to have a sense of connection and someone who was understanding.

Many participants also expressed professional help through a therapist and some professors. Some participants struggled with mental health problems alongside their learning disability and are needing extra support and to have the proper tools to succeed (Dryer et al., 2016; Pittman & Heiselt, 2014). When students have a good quality of connection and feel they are understanding what they are learning, they are more likely to be successful and motivated (Munir et al., 2021). Students need quality interaction with instructors and peers (Munir et al., 2021) and they want to matter within the classroom (Vaillancourt et al., 2022). Quality interaction allows student to feel they continuing to get interaction and are not left without support.

#### **Theme 4: Consistent Motivation**

Motivation is the driving force for students when they are in school and have a goal that is being worked toward. Many participants expressed their motivation and designated their motivation to their future, availability of time, and their perseverance. Participants noted their career success and wanting to continue the momentum. Advancement in careers can be done through advancing levels of education for these participants. Students need to have support, and the participants expressed high value of the support they were receiving and the resources available for them to meet their educational expectations. Daley and Zeidan (2020) expressed that students who have



resources, support, and access to higher education, are more likely to be more motivated. These participants had access to these supports which helped them continue to succeed and work toward their goals.

Having courses online made it more accessible for many participants (Dhwan, 2020). When the pandemic hit, some students did not have a choice about their type of schooling because they lacked other options (Mailizar et al., 2020). Other participants chose online schooling because of their daily life obligations such as family and work. Online schooling allowed for these students to have flexibility of their schedule and to adjust their schoolwork to fit that schedule. Many participants would work diligently on their homework in the mornings before work or after work. Other participants found that they could multitask and do their work while they were working or doing other daily activities such as going to the gym.

Participants also noted that they did not want to let their disabilities hold them back and wanted to be treated fairly. Many participants expressed not wanting to be stigmatized because of their disability and wanted to prove they were able to succeed despite having a limitation. Some participants described themselves as not telling people or the university that they had a disability because they did not want others to think of them differently. Other participants grew up being told not share their diagnosis because of stigma. Banks (2014) explained that students' perception of the stigma, how they feel people will think about them because of their learning disability, also may show their personal perception of themselves. And other participants wanted to prove they are just like others who do not have a learning disability. Many students want to feel that they

belong (Morina, 2019), which is crucial to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Participants were determined to find their own support if needed and were innovative with tools to help them succeed in their courses. Again, these students have been successful and continued to attend school for their personal reasons. Many students who have a learning disability, as by Daley and Zeidan (2020), are less likely to complete college successfully. However, many of the participants have completed doctoral and master level courses. Students who have the right support can exceed their limitations (Dryer et al., 2016) For example, a student who has difficulty writing, if they have access to the writing center or an editor, they are still able to have a high-quality paper. Many of these participants are intrinsically and extrinsically motivated and continue to work hard every day. Chuckwuedo et al. (2021) explained that students who are in self-directed learning models have different engagement skills and life-long learning. Some participants are actively engaged in their learning and are having a positive experience, which correlates with previous research (Chuckwuedo et al., 2021). In conclusion, participants just want to show they are like other students without a learning disability – that they have the same capabilities as nondisabled students and are able to accomplish their goals through hard work.

#### **Theme 5: Low Motivation**

All participants expressed having low motivation at some point during their online schooling during the pandemic. This lack of motivation was not contributed to wanting to quit school, but difficulties with their writing, distractions, and life obligations outside of school. Participants chose to go to school because it aligned with their values

and expectancies (Daley & Zeidan, 2020). However, there were reported struggles with writing, which caused some participants to feel like they were not understood when they would write their assignments and felt that their professors were not comprehending what the student was trying to express. Lack of understanding continues to increase the feeling of lack of connection, which Gonzales-Ramirez et al., (2021) described as an important factor in online schooling—because students want to feel connected. The participants expressed lack of support or having to work harder than other students who do not have a learning disability. Participants would express having to take 6-8 hours to do an assignment because it would take them longer to process what they need to do and to be able to write their assignment. Many students with a learning disability experience barriers to their learning (Morina, 2019). Many participants expressed having barriers such as support, resources, or life responsibilities in addition to distraction when doing their schoolwork. Participants wanted to have that sense of connection with peers and professional staff, although it was reported by some participants, they lacked that connection.

Some participants expressed that they would be easily distracted when doing their course work online. Many times, in online schooling, the course work is self-directed and takes self-motivation and dedication to complete assignments. Cognitive problem-solving skills are required in online schooling and students who are learning in real time are more motivated to complete their schoolwork (Munir et al., 2021). With assignments that were a lot of work or difficult to manage, often times students would find themselves

distracted. However, many students were able to get their work done when the time came.

Many participants also expressed having life obligations, such as work that would make them feel tired at the end of the day or have families that they needed to turn their attention to. Sometimes after a long day of work, participants would not have the mental energy to focus on a task such as writing a paper or doing other assignments. Some students expressed that because of their work, it took them longer to move through their coursework because of outside obligations. Many students with a learning disability who are taking online course are fatigued (Lambert & Dryer, 2018). Other students expressed difficulty with their online schooling because of distractions and not having a quiet space to be able to concentrate on their schoolwork. They would express hearing their family members or roommates and wanting to be a part of what they are doing. Barriers to learning are a real thing, even something as simple as not having a quiet space to do schoolwork (Gonzalez-Ramirez et al., 2021). This would lead to them having to work longer hours on their assignments or continuing to have difficulty to stay motivated to do their assignments.

### **Thematic Synthesis**

Through the research there were five themes identified, lack of support, resources, supports, consistent motivation and low motivation, and all these themes related to one another, especially with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs (1943). Having needs met is important to be able to move towards self-actualization, which many individuals are, especially those who are in school. They are trying to achieve their best self.

Looking at the connection of the themes, I identified that having support from the educational institution and within the family is important for students to be successful in their online learning. Many participants expressed the importance of having support and feeling that professors understood the struggles they are experiencing. In Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs one of the basic needs is having esteem and another is love and belonging. These two tiers go together and if one is not being met, it is possible that the other need is not being met either. When these needs are not being met it makes it difficult for participants to work on their schooling. Support does not stop with family and institutions, but also goes into support with educational supplies.

Many participants expressed not having their needs met with materials for their schooling and had difficulty understanding reading and had to problem solve. Their safety needs were not being met and that made it difficult for them to work on other areas of their life, until they were able to find other tools to help them. This allowed for students to work on their physiological needs, safety needs, and love and esteem. This one area they were able to problem solve in allowed them to be successful in other areas.

Though all participants discussed having periods of time of low motivation, they were still working toward self-actualization and did not give up. Many participants felt they needed to prove they were capable and continued to move toward building their esteem and self-actualization. Some participants were able to do this because of support and getting their love and belonging needs met at the same time as working on their esteem. Many participants had many of their levels of hierarchy met, but when one was not being met, they focused on their needs and were able to problem solve.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Maslow's Hierarchy of need has five basic principles to match the needs humans have: physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization. These needs are all important aspects to human motivation. Many people move up from one tier and down to the next depending on what needs are being met and what needs are lacking.

Throughout this study, participants explained how their needs were or were not being met, though they did not use the exact language through Maslow's Hierarchy, they used their experiences in their homes, work, relationships and school in a similar way to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). These different areas of the Hierarchy (Maslow, 1943) will be explained through the experiences of the participants.

Many participants at times expressed their physiological needs as being tired after contributing to other areas of their lives then having to come home and do their schoolwork. However, their tiredness was from performing in the second tier of safety (Kurt, 2021). People have to work to have food, shelter, clothes, schooling, etc. Many of the participants had dual roles that required them to pull their energy in different directions. Idealistically, students would not have to work while going to school, however this is not the case. Many participants expressed their schedules being molded to fit other domains of life.

Some participants expressed exercise as being an important factor for them, which falls under the second tier of the hierarchy as safety (Kurt, 2021). They would devote their time to making sure they were eating well and exercising because they know how

important their health is. Other participants also discussed their daily routine. They would have work therefore they would wake up early and do some schoolwork, go to work, then come home and work on their assignments again. Other students would work diligently on the weekends. They were getting their needs met but may not have been doing it like everyone else.

Having a supportive network was important to many participants. They would describe how their families, work, or other professional would continue to help them succeed throughout their education journey because they had families or needed extra support. During this time, they are working under the third tier, love (Kurt, 2021). Many participants were eager to talk about how much their families were there for them and provided support. They needed their family to give them the time, space, and motivation to continue to do their schooling. This support the participants discussed with family, peers, and professionals allowed them to feel connected and feel that they were able to accomplish their goals. However, sometimes participants would express not being able to get their school needs met because they were not getting their love needs met. They would be doing schoolwork but could hear their families or friends and want to be a part of what was happening and would have trouble focusing.

Esteem is the fourth tier (Kurt, 2021). This tier is the ability to feel confident (Kurt, 2021; Maslow, 1958). Many times, participants expressed not feeling confident in their schooling, especially when acknowledging their writing skills. Many students expressed frustration of not being understood when they would write or have difficulty being able to stay on track with their writing. Participants wanted their professors to

acknowledge they were writing what was expected. Often too, participants would have low self-esteem because of their diagnoses. They did not want to feel inferior to others. They wanted to be respected for their ability to get their degree and not feel that they were not treated the same because they have a learning disability.

The fifth tier is self-actualization (Kurt, 2021). All participants actively work toward self-actualization, but often have to move between tiers to make sure all their needs are being met. Self-actualization is believed to be what humans are striving for, which is the ability to achieve the ideal self (Maslow, 1943). It is believed that there are very few people who actually meet self-actualization.

All participants were working toward their ideal self but continue to try to get their needs met in other areas of their life. Though not all tiers of the hierarchy were met consecutively, all participants were working toward self-actualization. Many participants expressed their experiences in a way that they could be compared to physiological, safety, love, esteem, and self-esteem from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). However, it is safe to say that students were more motivated when they had support from their peers, professionals, and families as well as being able to have the appropriate accommodations to help them while they navigate the different roles they have.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Every study contains limitations to some degree, and this study is no different. Limitations of this study will be discussed such as generalizability, recruitment, number of participants, interview times, and Zoom meetings. This qualitative study consisted of 10 participants that were sampled through snowball and convenient sampling. Compared



to a quantitative study, 10 participants who were interviewed separately, does not allow for generalizability to the population, despite these students being from different backgrounds, diagnoses, age, and location. Although there was a limited sample size, there was data saturation, which allowed there to be trustworthiness. Many participants had different learning disorders which is both an advantage and disadvantage. It is an advantage because of the diversity of learning disorders to see how each person with different learning disabilities were able to remain motivated. But it is a disadvantage because of the inability to compare how these motivations based on learning disabilities may be similar or different. Having future research to address this limitation would be beneficial to the research community.

Recruiting participants was a limitation due to the inability to get more participants. Though people reached out and were interested in participating, there were lack of diagnoses that met criteria for a learning disability. This made it time consuming to collect participants and took almost two months. Using one social media platform and waiting for responses from the group creators made it challenging to recruit participants because it delayed the recruitment process. In addition to recruitment, there were probably many students who qualified for my study but did not respond to my post. There may have also been many students who have a learning disability but were not diagnosed which caused them to not reach out.

Having interviews over Zoom was a disadvantage because I missed out on many different cues that could have aided my research, such as body language. Having interviews in person may also have built more rapport which could have eased any

nervousness participants may have experienced or allowed them to speak more openly about what they experience. Participants may not have spoken a lot about how they experienced their learning disability and motivation because the potential that others they are close too were around. Another limitation to the Zoom interviews was the amount of time per interview. Some interviews were shorter which did not allow for as much rich data to come through. However, again, this could have been due to nervousness for some participants. Although Zoom interviews could cause limitations, it was also helpful to gain access to people across the globe that I otherwise would not have been able to interview.

### **Recommendations**

Many participants motivation was enhanced through support, self-efficacy, and determination of future goals. Motivation was a driving force for these participants and helped them continue with their education despite having a learning disability. However, further research could:

- Examine the differences of students' motivation based on their learning disability.
- Explore a greater variety of locations and how the difference of location impacted the participants based on COVID-19 restrictions
- Explore how college professors feel they are contributing to the quality of support for students who have a learning disability through online courses.

- To explore how disability services can continue to help provide support to students based on what is needed, such as financial support for certain tools, like Audible.

Additional analyses are needed to further understand how these gaps impact higher education college students who have a learning disability and did higher education online. Some examples of how these studies could be done, could be through the counterpart to qualitative research—quantitative research. Quantitative research could aid this study by providing the numbers of how many students felt motivated or unmotivated during the pandemic and the percentages or averages of how many people felt certain variable affected their motivation such as family, friends, professional supports, disability services, etc. By expanding the information around these topics, it can help students with a learning disability to feel more supported throughout their educational experiences and can help broaden the accessibility of resources. Students who had more support found themselves as being more successful in their experience than without it.

### **Social Change**

This research study offers implications for social change. All participants were asked what resources they received to help them through their education. Many of the participants would state that they did not get much help from the disabilities services because they lacked the knowledge of how to support them based on their diagnosis, or they did not offer the support the participants were looking for. Disability services need to understand that not all students learn the same and need some additional help, such as having access to books via audio than only having access to books or required texts via

paper or digital. Students also need to feel they have the support from their professors. Professors that did offer support, did not offer the support the participants were needing. Many students want to succeed in their education but need the right resources to be able to do so.

Another implication of social change is that other students can learn through these interviews the tools that were beneficial for others that could help them, such as editors, PDF readers, and Audible. Additionally, reading these testimonies of participants allows other students to not feel alone. To have a better understanding that others with learning disabilities have struggles could allow students to not feel that they are stigmatized and that with support and perseverance they can be successful.

This research shows that many people who are in school have goals and aspirations they are working toward which help drive their motivation. While participants were asked about their motivation, they all were experiencing lack of motivation at one point but were able to continue to be motivated because of what they want to achieve and to prove that despite having a learning disability they can achieve their goals.

Lastly, this study shows that despite having a world crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, people are still motivated to work toward their goals. Other students can see that despite challenges, people are still able to persevere depending on their perceptions of themselves about their learning disability (Banks, 2014). If someone has the support and resources (Daley & Zeidan, 2020; Pittman & Heiselt, 2014) and their needs being met (Maslow, 1943), they can and will find a way to achieve their goal based on their motivation (Chuckwuedo et al., 2021). Some recommendations for higher education for

students with learning disabilities is for the disabilities department to get funding for audible books for students who better learn with audio than traditional reading. If the department is unable to get funding, having the reading material for every class available with an audio version would be helpful on a blackboard or canvas. Having this resource will take a financial burden off of students and offer a way for them to be successful. Another recommendation is for further training for staff to better understand how learning disabilities can impact students and offering resources to the educators to have in preparation for students who have a learning disability. This could be used as a guide for educators so they know how they can help meet the needs of their students.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to research how higher education students who have a learning disability remained motivated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis was used for this qualitative study and interviews allowed to explore the experiences of participants. There have been studies that examine motivation of students in higher education but limited research about students who have a learning disability. Through the thematic analysis there were five main themes that emerged: lack of professional support, resources, support system, consistent motivation and low motivation. These themes, as mentioned can aid in social change by further researching the gaps that are in these areas. This will aid in a better understanding about how these gaps can help students get the proper support they need to be successful in their educational journey.

Higher education students with a learning disability is an important topic to explore because students are going to continue to go to school and continue to take online courses despite them having a learning disability or not or a pandemic or not. Students need to feel they have their needs met in every aspect of their life to continue to be successful and to move toward self-actualization. Many students have many different challenges they experience, and it makes it difficult for them to move forward if one area of their life being physiological, safety, love, esteem, or self-actualization needs are not being met.

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### Appendix A: Facebook Post Example for Convenient Sampling

“I am a developmental psychology doctoral student who is currently working on the dissertation. I am looking for participants who were enrolled in online higher education courses during the pandemic and who have a formally diagnosed learning disability. If you are interested and meet the criteria, please email me at for further evaluation to see if you would be suitable to be part of my research group.”

## Appendix B: Snowball Sampling: Personal Facebook

“I am a doctorate student in the developmental psychology program at Walden University. I am completing my dissertation and am needing participants 18 years or older who have a formally diagnosed learning disability who took online undergraduate or graduate courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you feel you meet this criterion, and are willing to participate in my study, please email me at [ ].”

## Appendix C: Semistructured Interview Questions

- 1) What motivated you to begin online higher education?
- 2) Described what a typical school day online looks like for you and how you get yourself motivated to complete assignments.
- 3) How has your motivation to succeed in online higher education been impacted since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 4) How has your learning disability impacted your level of motivation during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- 5) What resources were available to help you succeed and did you use these resources? Why or why not?