

2015

Identifying Successful Online Adult Learners

Lester Wright
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Lester Wright

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Walden University
2015

Abstract

Identifying Successful Online Adult Learners

by

Lester Wright

MEd, Troy University, 2007

BGS, Louisiana Tech University, 1996

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

August 2015

Abstract

This qualitative case study examined the lack of success by and high attrition rates of adult learners enrolled in online higher education courses at a public research university in the southeastern United States. The conceptual framework integrated Knowles' theory of andragogy with a composited model that combined elements of Tinto's persistence model with Bean and Metzner's student attrition model. The research questions examined factors and characteristics contributing to the unsuccessful completion of online courses for adult learners. The data were collected in 2 separate phases using a purposeful sample comprised of 152 adult learners who volunteered to participate in the study and had enrolled in an online course at the university between the fall 2013 and spring 2015. The findings revealed that factors such as work-related issues, lack of time management, and personal issues contributed to students' unsuccessful completion of online courses. Additionally, the participants' success depended on their strengths and weaknesses with time management skills, motivation and dedication, technological skills, and communication skills in online learning. The findings were used to create a pre-orientation workshop designed to assist adult learners prior to taking their first online course by assessing student readiness levels for online learning and identifying deficiencies in skills required to be successful. Offering a pre-orientation workshop session to first-time online adult learners will increase their likelihood of success and foster a positive effect on social change in this population by improving retention in an online learning environment.

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Section 1: Problem

Introduction

Internet-based technology has advanced rapidly from 2005 – 2015. The Internet and web-based applications have drastically influenced the way people communicate and access information. As a result, internet-based technology is now a significant factor in the world of education. These changes are forcing institutions to adapt to modern technology. Learning no longer occurs solely in classrooms and lecture halls (Slevin, 2008). New accessible technological advances intended to support more effective communication and interaction between students, instructors, and academic support services are developed almost daily, much more than ever before. As these technologies continue to enhance and develop, many educators from higher education institutions have incorporated them into their pedagogical techniques, thereby enhancing the delivery of classroom instructions (Manlow, Friedman, & Friedman, 2010).

Distance education and online learning expand the range of possibilities in education by supplementing or replacing traditional educational programs (Wang, Sierra, & Folger, 2010). Online instruction for adult learners has become an attractive choice for both teaching and learning due to its offering and the additional benefits it provides to students, instructors, and their institutions (Cercone, 2008; Picciano, 2002).

Postsecondary institutions in the United States have seen an 80% increase in online learning over the past decade (NCES, 2012). According to Projections of Education in Statistics in 2012, 7.1 million students in post-secondary institutions were enrolled in at least one online course, which is a 343.75% increase from 1.6 million in 2002 (Allen &

Seaman, 2014). This change is due to the increasing number of adult learners who require a flexible learning environment to continue meeting their work and family obligations (Naaj, Nachouki, & Ajman, 2012). Despite the growth and popularity of online courses, students who enroll in these courses do not complete online courses successfully at the same rate as students who enroll in face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Layne, Boston & Ice, 2015), leading to dropout rates for students enrolled in online courses at six to seven times higher compared to students enrolled in face-to-face courses (Patterson & McFadden, 2009).

Online courses present many challenges for the first time online learner. Challenges such as lack of preparation and online readiness, adapting to new tools, and, platforms used in online educational environments. Many factors, both external and internal to the college environment, contribute to the success or failure of the online learner (Olesova, Yang, & Richardson, 2011). Previous research has shown that retention was influenced by several factors such as student engagement, motivation, social integration, course design, and faculty teaching interaction (Olesova et al., 2011). All of these factors have the potential to influence the students' ability to succeed in college and, specifically, in the online learning environment. The question of which student characteristics and behaviors have the most potential to impact student success and retention is one that calls for greater study.

This section discusses the problem of retention with first-time online adult learners at a public research university in the southeastern United States hereafter referred to as ABC University. The rationale to conduct the study was based on the review of past

research in areas of online learning, a lack of success among adult learners who were enrolled in higher education online courses, and high attrition rates linked with this lack of success. The findings of the study could impact the way in which higher education institutions affect social change by improving retention in an online learning environment.

Definition of the Problem

With the rapid development of educational technology, online learning has grown significantly, and the flexibility of distance learning is more appealing (Beck & Milligan, 2014). By removing the need for physical presence in classrooms, online learning has the ability to make education accessible to a much larger population while accommodating the demands of a global society. Today, there is increasing pressure for students to take courses online to complete continuing education credits or degree programs (Asunda, Calvin & Johanson, 2104; Yuan & Kim, 2014). Despite the growth in online programs and the national attention placed on college completion (College Board, 2012), student retention and success rates in online courses, remains poor. Many students entering college are unprepared for the challenges of advanced study (Park & Choi, 2009). With an increasing volume of adult students pursuing a degree online, institutions need information to better understand how online learning can be improved. Armed with information about online students' priorities and satisfaction levels, institutions can make adjustments and address issues in problem areas that have the greatest impact on the students' experience, thereby potentially resulting in higher levels of persistence.

Rationale

Due to the affordability, accessibility, convenience, and pervasiveness, online education has grown exponentially over the past decade and will continue to grow at a rapid pace (Carr, 2014). Online learning allows students to access courses when they choose to and to complete their work when they are able to, resulting in a level of flexibility that is necessary for them to succeed in other endeavors while attending college. However, despite the growing attraction for online learning and the dramatic increase in the number of online learners (Nagel, 2009), online learning may not be appropriate for every adult learner since high attrition rates are associated with this educational delivery method.

This study was designed to address a lack of success among adult learners who were enrolled in higher education online courses at a local public research university in the southeastern area of the United States and the high attrition rates linked with this lack of success. Online programs offer adult learners the greatest possible control over their time, location, and pace of study; however, it also competes with work and family priorities. As a result, many of the adult learners at the study site were either failing or withdrawing from online enrollment at a higher rate than those in traditional classes at the time of the study.

The rationale for this study exploring the high attrition rates in online courses was intended to obtain the information needed for creation of a pre-orientation workshop session designed to provide students with insight as to their strengths and weaknesses in an online learning environment. This workshop was designed to benefit students taking it

prior to enrolling in their first online course by determining if additional skills are needed to succeed in an online course. Educational institutes that offer this pre-orientation workshop may increase the likelihood of success of their adult learners seeking to enroll in their first online course.

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

Generally, attrition rates provide the public with a shorthand measurement of an institution's reputation, trustworthiness, and professionalism; therefore, high attrition rates are a cause for concern among institutions (Moody, 2004; Tyler-Smith, 2006). At ABC University, the attrition rates for adult online learners increased over the years. It is imperative that ABC University focuses on the factors associated with high dropout rates in online courses and determines which factors increase adult learners' success in online learning. This study took place at a public research university in the southeastern United States. Offering online and face-to-face courses for a student population of more than 27,000 students, ABC University experienced a greater increase in enrollments for its online programs when compared to its face-to-face programs. However, it also experienced higher-than-expected attrition rates among adult students taking online courses. A specific goal for ABC University is to reduce these high attrition rates for its online courses and to identify the factors that predict adult learners' online success (data based on a 2010 institutional handbook published by ABC University; citation removed for institutional anonymity). Identifying the reasons why students drop their online courses is critical in determining what services and delivery methods ABC University will need to provide in order to ensure successful completion.

Evidence of the Problem From Professional Literature

Researchers found that the growth of online education had a significant impact on faculty, administrators, students, and other members of the college environment (Mitchell, 2009). In the fall of 2009, higher educational institutions recorded a 73% increase in the demand for online courses, although 31% of these institutions reported having difficulty retaining students in those courses (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Similarly, according to the Sloan Consortium (Allen & Seaman, 2011), approximately 6.1 million students, constituting 31% of all students in higher education in the United States, were enrolled in at least one online course during the fall term of 2010. This enrollment includes a 10% increase in online enrollment over the previous year. Despite this growth, dropout rates are consistently 15% or greater in online courses as compared to face-to-face courses (Pittenger & Doering, 2010; Shieh, Gummer, & Niess, 2008; Sutton & Nora, 2009). Considering these statistics and the increase in online enrollments, attrition rates are a problem for everyone involved in the online educational environment.

Researchers also focused on attrition in online learning and sought to understand the phenomenon. Mahoney (2009) found that online undergraduate students experienced frustration, inundation, and isolation while in college compared to non-online undergraduate students. Mahoney stated that students felt that, “in an online environment there was no class and no teacher” and there was a “lack of availability” pertaining to the instructor (p. 78). A common reason for this higher dropout rate is the false assumption that taking online courses is a simple way to earn a college degree (History of Distance Learning, 2006). Beyrer (2010) concluded that if unprepared students experience failure

in the online environment, they might turn away from this option and refuse to take another online class. One goal of this researcher was to understand the factors that contribute to the lack of success in online courses.

According to Ivankova and Stick (2007), determining the factors that influence online adult learners' ability to complete their courses successfully would provide institutions of higher education with valuable information from which to assist those students at risk. Other researchers demonstrated that factors such as GPA, time management skills, age, level of motivation, and self-discipline may also influence online students' rates of success (Cosman-Ross & Hiatt-Michael, 2005; Elvers, Polzella, & Graetz, 2003). In addition, administrative issues, social interaction, financial difficulties, and a lack of prerequisite skills, technical skills, time, and support are barriers associated with online learning and dropout rates (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Park & Choi, 2009). As online instruction becomes more prevalent, understanding the factors that contribute to student retention can lead to improved completion rates.

Key Terms

The following terms and phrases were used throughout this study:

Administrators: At the study site, university employees who were responsible for managing and leading the coursework and programs given to students who are enrolled in online courses (Adas & Shmais, 2011).

Adult learner: For the purposes of this study, an adult learner was considered as a student who was of a minimum age of 19 years' old at the time of the study. Adult learners are usually employed and are motivated to attend college. In addition, adult

learners usually have a family of their own and are often an active part of their local community (Cercone, 2008).

Attrition: A phenomenon in which learners register for a program but withdraw prior to completion (Martinez, 2003).

Distance learning: A type of education in which the instructor and learner are in different locations, and in which instruction and learning may take place at different times (Moore, Dickson-Deane, & Galyen, 2011).

Face-to-face or traditional classroom: A classroom in which the physical, class-based learning is taught synchronously, with the instructor and the students physically present in the classroom at the same time (Johns, 2010).

Online course: An educational course taught asynchronously and at a distance, allowing an innovative approach to both technology and pedagogy (Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009).

Online environment: A type of environment in which instructors and students use technology to interact (Keengwe & Kidd, 2010; Taylor & McQuiggan, 2008). Face-to-face meetings usually do not occur in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Online learning: A subset of distance learning where content, instruction, and supplementary materials are delivered over the Internet (Moore et al., 2011).

Student persistence: A student's commitment to complete a course or program of study (Tello, 2007).

Student retention: The number of students who persist and continue at their universities until and through the time that they graduate. The decrease in student

retention is becoming an increasing concern among many universities, and external stakeholders are often held accountable (Schreiner & Nagarajan, 1998).

Student success: A measure of student achievement, measured by the grade earned upon completion of the course; a favorable or desirable outcome for the student (Cuseo, Fecas, & Thompson, 2010).

Traditional student: For the purposes of this study, a person between the ages of 18 and 24, who attends college full-time, and who is financially dependent (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

ABC University 1101: An undergraduate course intended to assist students in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to maximize their potential for success in a college environment (data based on a 2013 catalog published by ABC University; citation removed for institutional anonymity).

Significance

This study examined the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful online adult learners who have been enrolled in an online course; the study analyzed the factors contributing to high dropout and unsuccessful completion rates in online courses. As online learning continues to increase in popularity, colleges and universities are now focusing on the high attrition rates in online courses (Blees & Rittberger, 2009). Research indicated that the attrition rates are 10% to 20% higher for online courses than they are for traditional classes (Feintuch, 2010). In fact, several colleges in Texas experienced even higher online attrition rates than the aforementioned 10% to 20% (Carr, 2000). According to Carr (2000), this increase was the result of students' feelings of loneliness,

detachment and isolation; such feelings are often the main causes of attrition in online college courses (Stanford-Bowers, 2008). As the online environment in higher education grows and provides needed revenues for institutions offering online courses, it is beneficial for educators and institutions to understand the reasons for dropouts or withdrawals.

Understanding and researching adult learners' challenges and successes with online learning can provide significant insight into the problem of high attrition (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2011). In fact, the results of this current study provided valuable information that aided in the design and development of a pre-orientation workshop to identify the likelihood of success of online courses. The latter reflected a positive outlook for educational institutions and administrators, faculty, adult learners, and society. This study added to the list of methods to improve retention in the online learning environment.

Research Questions

Online learning is an excellent instructional method for the adult learner because it affords flexibility, allowing students to balance education with work and family. However, the distance mode of learning is not without its problems. Many distance-learning programs are overwhelmed with high attrition rates. Thus, online adult learners' attrition and completion rates should receive continuous attention from researchers and the administration because the success of online courses and programs depends on extensive research. Exploration into attrition rates of online courses will help stakeholders develop more relevant student support services that will, in turn, improve

the effectiveness and efficiency of online courses and lead to the students' success.

Therefore, three primary research questions guided this qualitative study:

1. What factors contribute to high dropout rates and unsuccessful completion of online courses for adult learners enrolled in online higher education courses?
2. What are some defining characteristics of successful online adult learners?
3. What are some defining characteristics of unsuccessful online adult learners?

The literature indicated a need for research regarding the lack of success and high attrition rates of adult learners enrolled in online higher education courses. The importance of answering these research questions is evident; research has shown that adult learners are enrolling in online courses without fully understanding the obstacles associated with online learning. To inform this study, the following review presents the related literature, including discussions related to the history, growth, and trends of online distance education. This section concludes with a detailed justification of the theoretical foundation of the dropout rates in distance education: the theoretical foundation is based on Knowles, Holton, and Swanson's (2005) theory of andragogy and a composite model crafted by Rovai (2012).

Review of the Literature

Introduction

With the growth of distance education, educational institutions are employing online courses to deliver course instruction (Mitchell, 2009). Because online distance education courses permit learners to acquire instruction at a time and place convenient to them, adult learners are enrolling in these courses to fit their studies into their busy lives

(Picciano, Seaman, & Allen, 2010). Though this can be beneficial to the adult learner's schedule, universities are being confronted with a 40% to 80% online attrition rate (Tyler-Smith, 2006). At the same time, 21% of adult learners would like richer and more engaging online learning experiences (Kim & Frick, 2011).

This literature review includes studies that led to the current study. The literature affirms the importance of the theoretical rationale and emphasizes the contribution this study may make to the problem of attrition rates in online courses in higher education and to solving the lack of success experienced by adult learners in online courses. I conducted this literature review with online searches using combinations of the following key search terms; online adult college students, online college attrition, dropout rates, online learners, e-learners, college retention, college attrition, distance and or distant education, adult learners, online student success, online adult learners, online adult learners characteristics, distance and or distant learning, e-learning in college, student persistence, and online learning. Saturation in the literature was accomplished by using Boolean search terms such as online college students, online college attrition, e-learners, college retention, college attrition, distance and or distant education, distance and or distant learning, e-learning in college, online student persistence, and online learning.

I gathered literature using the educational databases ERIC, SAGE, ProQuest and Educational Research Complete, as well as Google Scholar and the Walden University online library. I accessed technical reports from federal and state organizations using the Google and Bing search engines. During the review, I focused on information from relevant articles related to the contributing factors for high online dropout rates and

student success in an online learning environment. I formed several subtitles and themes to organize high attrition rates in online learning with factors that researchers believe contribute to unsuccessful completion of online courses. The inclusion criteria in this literature review were publication after 1993, appearance in a peer-reviewed journal, and content regarding dropout or attrition rates in online learning. Exclusion criteria included (a) content unrelated to online dropout or attrition rates and student online success, (b) lack of original data, (c) text not written in English, and (d) content unrelated to online courses. As part of this review, I examined the article bibliographies to identify related literature. The articles identified with these search strategies were then subject to the same inclusion and exclusion criteria previously utilized. As I searched, I reached a point where I was repeatedly finding the same authors and the same articles. Therefore, realizing that saturation had been reached, I ceased searching and reviewed the selected studies and research.

History of distance education and online learning

Distance learning has been utilized for education since the days of the Pony Express, a time when mail was delivered across the country by horseback. Wang, Solan, and Ghods (2010) described the transformation and evolution of distance learning, starting with correspondence courses, developing into courses using audio-video tapes, and conferencing using video, as well as television broadcasts. The mode of choice for delivery of distance learning today is the Internet.

Online learning has flourished so broadly that most institutions of higher learning in the United States currently offer some form of distance learning (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2008). Dating back to 1901, Joliet Junior College is believed to have been among the first educational institutions to adopt distance-learning services and to provide educational services to those who lived far away from educational institutions (Cohen & Brawer, 2008). This form of learning was created to facilitate the delivery of education to different places in the world (Chai & Poh, 2009). Today, many colleges worldwide have expanded their facilities to offer online distance learning.

Distance education is a revolutionary development in the offering of adult learning because it accommodates students' difficulties with regard to time management and location. Early advancements in distance education led to steady efforts to improve its quality and thereby increase enrollment. One of the main developments was the introduction of online instruction that currently carries the bulk of distance learning (Anderson & Simpson, 2012; Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2010; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). As Rovai (2012) explained, online learning is facilitated through, "advanced electronic delivery systems" (p. 1) that can, in some aspects, rival real-time learning because these delivery systems can be accessed anytime, anywhere, and through a wide variety of exciting mediums.

The main difference that can be observed between online and face-to-face instruction is the quality and style of communication between the educator and the student. Online courses typically facilitate communication through techniques such as live or prerecorded video and audio teleconferencing, asynchronous bulletin boards, and synchronous chats (Waits & Lewis, 2009). One must consider these differences in communication when trying to evaluate attrition, retention, and persistence rates for

students studying online when compared with those learning in face-to-face courses. In this context, *persistence* refers to the students' commitment to completion of their studies (Martinez, 2003). A comparison of the percentage of students who successfully completed their degree course with those students who are unsuccessful can allow retention rates to be measured. These rates are useful for measuring the quality of different types of academic courses: any study investigating the efficacy of online courses should consider these rates.

Online Course Statistics and Expected Growth in Higher Education

The college experience is shifting into the online arena as adult students seek out alternative sources for their educational experience. The National Center for Education Statistics (Lewis, Snow, Farris, & Levin, 1999) concluded that an estimated 1,363,670 students enrolled in programs that were providing online courses at the college-level in 1997 and 1998; of this number, 1,082,380 were undergraduate students. From 2000 to 2001, the number of online students enrolled in online college-level courses increased to almost 2.9 million students, of which 80% were undergraduate enrollments (Lewis et al., 1999). These numbers represent an increase of 110% in 3 years (Waits & Lewis, 2009). As of the fall of 2009, more than 5.6 million students (30% of all college students) had taken at least one online course (Nora & Plazas Snyder, 2008). Allen (2011) reported that during the fall of 2010, more than 6.1 million students pursued online courses, producing an increase of 560,000 students within 1 year. As per the National Center for Education Statistics (2012), the largest online campus, the University of Phoenix, was comprised of 300,000 online students.

Over the last 10 years, enrollment in online courses at colleges and universities around the nation grew at a greater rate than traditional higher education enrollment. Although the higher education student population is only growing at an annual rate of less than 2%, online course enrollments are growing at a rate of 21% (Allen & Seaman, 2010). In fact, Allen and Seaman (2011) estimated that approximately 30% of adult undergraduates are enrolled in fully or predominantly (80%) online programs, and this statistic is expected to increase to 50% by 2015. Taken together, the data confirm the growing demand for online education and the increasing demand by adult students for fully or predominantly online degree programs.

Reasons Adult Learners Choose Distance Education

Learners' reasons for choosing distance education have remained unchanged following its beginning (Gibson, 2000). According to Qureshi, Morton, and Antosz (2002), distance education removes some of the barriers (i.e., work, family obligations, lack of time, and lack of self-confidence) that keep students from pursuing higher education. To nurture student success, institutions of learning must create effective interactive learning environments for adult online courses and programs while making higher education available to students who cannot take courses through traditional means. Adult learners choose online courses for several reasons. They choose courses that are accessible from homes and offices, they choose courses that are quicker to access because of the negation of travel and lengthy classroom lectures, and they choose a method that has extensive online information, affording them the sense of autonomy that they have

come to expect as adults (Folinsbee, 2008; Hachey, Conway, & Wladis, 2013; Radocic-Markovic, 2010).

Adult learners have varied perceptions regarding online learning. Generally, those who enroll in online courses have positive perceptions. Adult learners consider online learning to be a sensible alternative to attending face-to-face classes because they have many other commitments to balance, including work, family, and personal engagements (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). The fact that some adult learners cannot fully commit their time and energy to schoolwork and class attendance, makes online learning the most feasible option for acquiring an education (Folinsbee, 2008). However, research reveals that some adult learners feel that, compared to face-to-face learning, online courses offer insufficient support, less faculty-led instruction, and less efficiency (Dixon, Dixon, & Siragusa, 2007).

Since the arrival of online learning, people have questioned whether an online degree is as credible as a traditionally earned degree. A number of researchers determined that an online education can be, and often is, as worthy of a learning experience as the courses delivered traditionally. For example, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a meta-analysis of 1,000 studies and established that, on average, students participating in online learning performed modestly better than the students who received face-to-face instruction (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010). Based on this evidence, online learning actually leads to significant academic success for many students. Therefore, the method of online delivery appears to be a critical factor in student retention. With so much growth in the online arena and the potential for

additional expansion, researchers recognized the necessity of examining online students' retention rates (Means et al., 2010). However, they remain unsure of the instructional design that will best serve online adult learners. The issue is further exacerbated by the fact that adult learners often face additional barriers to student success.

Online Attrition and Dropout Rates in Higher Education Institutions

The problem of online attrition is widespread, affecting all levels of higher education. For example, Patterson and McFadden (2009) reported that online Masters of Business Administration students were six times more likely to drop out than their on-campus peers were, and attrition rates for online students in other graduate degree programs were up to seven times greater than in traditional classes. The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) noted that the current trend indicates a steady rise in the number of enrollments to online campuses by 2020. However, the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) also reported an increase in attrition. Angelino, Williams, and Natwig (2007) substantiated this finding, stating that the attrition rates of online instruction are 10% to 20% greater than face-to-face instruction. Boston, Ice, and Gibson (2011) further highlighted the concern by examining the attrition rates at the American Public University. The results showed that this institution grew quickly, marking a 72% rise in the overall percentage of students enrolled in online courses from 2006 to 2007. Out of those who enrolled, 23.8% dropped out of their online courses (Boston et al., 2011). Additionally, Frydenberg (2007) found similar results when conducting a study between 2004 and 2006 at the University of California, Irvine; Frydenberg reported an online attrition rate of 21%.

Attrition differences may also depend on factors other than the method of study, such as the topic of study and individual differences. For example, in a study at West Texas A&M University, Terry (2001) compared the attrition rates of traditional and online courses. The online courses had a maximum attrition rate of 48%. This was much higher than the traditional courses showing an attrition rate of only 23%. Terry (2001) then evaluated a series of courses at Western Texas A&M University and found that students studying business-related topics such as accounting, marketing, and management displayed similar attrition rates, regardless of the mode of study (online or traditional). However, those studying courses in finance or statistics displayed radically different attrition rates depending upon the method of study; online students displayed attrition rates of between 33% and 48%, whereas traditional students displayed attrition rates ranging from 13% to 23% (Terry, 2001). These findings would suggest that certain topics may be more suited to a specific style of teaching, and students studying specific fields may require more assistance to complete their online courses. From these findings, one could infer that institutions of higher learning should offer online distance courses only for a limited and select number of subject areas.

Nash (2005) found several causes of online attrition rates. One of the predominant reasons students were failing to complete online courses was lack of time management. Often, online courses are not structured in the same way as traditional courses, and the onus is frequently on the students to work through the material at a pace of their own choosing. It is harder to implement the same type of rigorous structure, progression, and formative assessment in an online course than in the traditional setting. This may help

explain why attrition rates for online courses are higher than traditional courses. Nash also found that, according to students, online courses lacked clear direction, provided difficult assignments, and offered limited resources.

Patterson and McFadden (2009) addressed other potential factors, such as ethnicity, and found that African Americans recorded higher attrition rates than Caucasians and other racial group. Patterson and McFadden also assessed the role of gender as another variable, but gender was not a significant factor in dropout rates.

Research abounds with additional explanations for online student attrition. According to Martinez (2003), students frequently cited numerous personal reasons for attrition, such as “family problems, finances, childcare, distractions, and job needs and demands as the cause of withdrawal from a course” (p. 3). Moody (2004) observed that courses might have been harder than the students had initially thought, or students might not have had all the essential prerequisites. Hara and Kling (2011) stated, “students reported confusion, anxiety, and frustration due to [a] perceived lack of prompt or clear feedback from the instructor and from ambiguous instructions on the course website and in email messages from the instructor” (p. 68). In addition, findings from several studies pointed to a lack of student engagement and integration; the lack of these key elements eventually leads to feelings of isolation, physical separation, disconnectedness, and neglect (Angelino et al., 2007; Carr, 2000; Hara & Kling, 2011; Nash, 2005). In these studies, college students were not fully equipped with the academic skills needed to overcome online challenges.

Critical Review of Online Student Success

Success in online learning depends on multiple independent factors. For example, Nedelko (2008) surveyed 155 undergraduates and concluded that students' potential for success in online learning can be evaluated. Students who demonstrated a positive attitude toward the use of technology and were knowledgeable about computers were found to be solid candidates for taking online courses. A high level of motivation for studying was another positive indicator of success. Students with a low need for social interaction in the online learning environment were also more likely to be successful (Nedelko, 2008). In Nedelko's study, participants indicated that a low level of self-discipline was a major obstacle in the online learning process. In online environments, students are responsible for their own performance and must be able to act independently. Without a high level of self-discipline, students may experience difficulty balancing school and other obligations (Nedelko, 2008).

Wojciechowski and Palmer (2009) evaluated individual characteristics of successful online students from a community college setting. Participants included 179 students enrolled in an online business course, who met the following requirements: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) previous courses completed online, (d) GPA, (e) previous withdrawal from other courses, and (f) length of the course (Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2009). Similar to results in other research studies, first-time online learners did not have the independence and time management skills required for success. This study by Wojciechowski and Palmer (2009) supports the idea of establishing guidelines or prerequisites, thus enhancing a student's likelihood of success.

Additionally, Doherty (2006) investigated several factors related to online students' success such as learning styles, demographics, personal factors, and the degree of communication within a course. Extracting demographic data from 10,466 students, Doherty reported that 64.5% of females and 59.5% of males passed their online course. Students who completed more credit hours were more likely to complete their online course and older students had a higher chance of finishing and completing their online course. Concerning learning style, Doherty gathered information from 215 online students and 211 students enrolled in face-to-face courses. No significant difference was noted between the learning styles of students who passed their online course and those who did not pass the online course. In addition, 52 students responded to a survey regarding their reasons for failing or dropping the previously mentioned online course. The primary reason for non-completion was procrastination, followed by time management and learning motivation. When asked to identify the disadvantages of online courses, 23% stated that it was easy to procrastinate, 25% noted difficulties communicating with the instructor and 18% reported an inability to have questions answered promptly (Doherty, 2006). Online courses are convenient but may include a more demanding workload than traditional face-to-face courses for adult learners who live busy lifestyles. Adult learners who make well-informed decisions to enroll in online courses may experience time management issues.

Theoretical Base and Conceptual Framework

In an effort to understand why online students drop out, many researchers have relied on Tinto's (1975) student integration model as a theoretical framework to study

attrition (Karp, Hughes, & O’Gara, 2008; Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009). Tinto (1975) concluded that students who were less committed to the goal of graduating or were less committed to their institution were more likely to drop out of college before completing their degree. As such, students’ backgrounds and academic and social integration into their learning environment directly affected their commitment levels.

Tinto (1993) theorized that students’ failure to succeed in a college environment was a result of prior college experiences and individual characteristics. Although he argued that students’ experiences before they entered college could not be changed, Tinto suggested that students break away from their past to become integrated into their college environment. He also asserted that students’ experiences after admission were a reflection of the institution’s policies, practices, and environment. According to Tinto, the effectiveness of an institution’s faculty and staff, as well as its resources, facilities and organizational structure, were institutional factors that could affect students’ academic and social integration and, therefore, have an effect on attrition.

Tinto’s model of student retention labels the major determinants of student retention as social and academic integration (Draper, 2008). The two areas of integration evolve over time to interact with commitment; social and academic integration eventually determine retention and dropout tendencies. The model includes several components that form academic integration, including performance, individual development, self-esteem, enjoyment, conversance with student roles and conversance with academic values and norms (Draper, 2008). The more developed these areas are, the more likely a student is to complete a course. Social integration, on the other hand, includes friendships, enjoyment

at the university and personal contact with staff members. The absence of these aspects is likely to lead to a reduced rate of retention (Draper, 2008; Weng, Cheong, & Cheong, 2009).

The limited scope in Tinto's (1993) model led theorists Bean and Metzner (1985) to expand it to include the characteristics of non-traditional students. In their theoretical model, they based dropout decisions for online students on four variables; environmental issues, defining and background, intent to quit and academic performance. Environmental variables are comprised of factors such as employment, family responsibilities, finances, opportunities to transfer, and outside encouragement, all of which may directly or indirectly influence attrition. In their theoretical model, Bean and Metzner suggested that certain background variables, including educational goals, may influence an individual to drop out of college directly or may indirectly influence an individual via the impact on academic variables (variables internal to the environment of the college) and environmental variables (variables outside the environment of the college) (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

In Bean and Metzner's (1985) model, academic variables, such as hours of study, have a direct impact on academic outcomes. A poor academic outcome could result in involuntary academic dismissal. On the other hand, academic variables could also contribute to a voluntary departure decision. Therefore, academic variables may either lead directly to students' decisions to drop out of the online educational program or lead indirectly, through negative psychological issues, to students' decision to drop out (Bean & Metzner, 1985). This theoretical model clearly justifies the investigation of attrition

because it helps to show that institutions can decrease their attrition rates if they understand the student characteristics that lead to course withdrawal.

Although these models are grounded in theory, they do not adequately address student retention in online courses. For this study, I used the theoretical framework created by Rovai (2003) and an andragogy theory from Knowles (1980). Rovai combined the models of Tinto (1975) and Bean and Metzner (1985) to develop a composite model of persistence that addresses the characteristics unique to adult learners who study online. This composite persistence model combines aspects of Tinto's persistence model with Bean and Metzner's student attrition model to create a retention model aimed at explaining the retention rates of students in online learning programs (Rovai, 2012). One of the most important aspects of Rovai's (2012) model is its emphasis on internal factors and their impact on academic success. The model blends the characteristics of adult students prior to attending college with external and internal factors that affect them after their enrollment. In particular, Rovai's model considers two variables prior to enrollment: student characteristics and student skills. Student characteristics associated with dropout are age, ethnicity, gender, employment status and socio-economic status. Following enrollment, two additional elements are taken into account: external factors (e.g., finances, employment, and support) and internal factors (e.g., academic and social integration, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships and study habits). The most significant external factors are time conflicts, family issues, employment hours, and financial problems (Rovai, 2012). External factors, which are difficult for institutions to

control, are interrelated with internal factors, making it necessary for researchers to consider both sets of factors when discussing student attrition and retention rates.

Successful online learners show characteristics and preferences that coincide with andragogy, a theory of adult learning. In 1968, Malcolm Knowles proposed his theory of andragogy, a learner-directed approach, in contrast to pedagogy, that is, an instructor-directed approach. Subsequently, Knowles (1980, p. 43, as cited in Merriam, 2001, p. 5) identified six principles of adult learning: (1) adults are internally motivated and self-directed, (2) adults bring life experiences and knowledge to learning experiences, (3) adults are goal oriented, (4) adults are relevancy oriented, (5) adults are practical, and (6) adults learners like to be respected. At the very core of online learning is the concept of autonomous learning in which the individual chooses when and where to study and to interact with the course.

The current economy is knowledge-based and technology-driven. The rising use of knowledge and technology has prompted adults to seek additional knowledge and skills from online learning to participate effectively in society (Bughin et al., 2009). As higher education institutions continued to develop their online learning programs, these institutions have been increasingly attracting different kinds of students who have different demographics. More than 50% of postsecondary students are adults over 26 years of age. This group of adult learners constitutes the fastest growing market segment of online learning. Adult learners with busy schedules choose online learning because of its convenience (Cercone, 2008). Although advanced learning technologies, particularly online learning, are consistently decreasing the need for traditional classes, adult learners

continue to have trouble in the online learning environment. As a result, many adult learners have dropped out, withdrawn, or failed to complete online learning courses (Park & Choi, 2009; Tyler-Smith, 2006).

Implications

Many factors contribute to online attrition and dropout rates. According to Heyman (2010), these factors stem from poor quality of interactions, student support, and self-discipline. Jaggars (2011) reported low online retention rates because of a feeling of isolation, a relative lack of structure, and an overall lack of support in the online forum. Jaggars (2011) also found withdrawal rates with online courses to be 10% to 15% higher than with face-to-face classes. In addition, he stated that, due to either failure or withdrawal, these students were less likely to enroll in another online class. This evidence indicates a further need for researchers to determine a method by which universities can reduce high attrition rates and increase persistence in online classes.

This study sought to identify the reason for high attrition rates among online adult learners. Furthermore, it sought to determine specific characteristics that identified capable online learners. The data collected allowed for the creation of a workshop to identify students who would be more likely to experience success with online learning; the workshop would identify these attributes in the online learner prior to them taking their first online course. In effect, this study can possibly encourage a beneficial change in society by providing data to university administrators, instructors, and students about methods to reduce high attrition rates among online adult students.

Summary

Distance education, or online learning, is not a new phenomenon. In fact, it dates back to the advent of correspondence courses as a viable form of education. The beginning and pervasiveness of the Internet has made the availability of distance education significantly easier; many institutions, both nationwide and at a global level, have started to offer online courses and programs to college students. The information presented in this section highlighted the problem of high attrition rates in online courses experienced by ABC University and many other institutions of higher learning.

After introducing the problem, this first section discussed the rationale with evidence both from the local level and from professional literature. The significance of the study was explained and the research questions were presented. This information was followed by a literature review that provided a detailed report about the current state of knowledge about distance education and online learning. It also included the theoretical framework on which this study was based. Finally, the implications of the study were explained.

Section 2 includes a discussion of the research methodology, design, setting, sample, data collection, data analysis and validation, and the rights of the participants. Section 3 will follow with a presentation of the project, as well as related subsections concerning project description, literature review, implementation, and implications for positive social change. Section 4 includes the author's reflections, as well as conclusions about the project, including its strengths, limitations, scholarship, potential for leadership and change, self-analysis, and impact of change that resulted from the project.

Section 2: The Methodology

Introduction

In this study, I examined the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful online adult learners who had taken an online course, and explored factors contributing to high dropout rates and low completion rates in online courses. I chose a case study qualitative research approach because it provided a framework that can be applied to the experiences of either an individual or a group. The qualitative approach allowed me to examine online experiences of adult learners, and it enabled me to seek a better understanding of what is required of adult distance learners to achieve success. In addition, through this approach, I acquired information that may enable the development of more appropriate student support services, the improvement of online course delivery with regard to effectiveness and efficiency, and the promotion of student success. With qualitative methods, I addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What factors contribute to high dropout rates and unsuccessful completion of online courses for adult learners who are enrolled in online higher education programs?

RQ2: What are some defining characteristics of successful online adult learners?

RQ3: What are some defining characteristics of unsuccessful online adult learners?

Survey and interview questions were used to gather information from the participants. The answers provided allowed me to capture data and report on the students' experiences with online learning. According to Lichtman (2010, p. 88), the purpose of

qualitative research is to tell a story using the written or spoken word. Rubin & Rubin (2005, p. 245) believed that these types of conversations could present vivid, understandable descriptions while providing convincing evidence and support the theoretical conclusion.

Description of the Research Design and Approach

The research design suitable for this kind of study is a case study qualitative methods design. Researchers use qualitative methods to obtain a detailed understanding of a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2008). In Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the current study, the phenomenon that was examined was the lack of success of adult learners who are enrolled in online courses. The purpose of qualitative research is to describe, decode, translate, and explain the meaning of naturally occurring phenomena in the social world. Aborisade (2013) stated that one benefit of qualitative research is that researchers' could conduct an in-depth investigation into their subject of inquiry. Selecting the right interview questions can be vital when gathering the specific data needed by the researcher. Conducting qualitative research enables a researcher to generate a rich description by contributing interview quotes, formal documents, and statements about online learning to add to the findings of the study (Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtle, 2006). Simply stated, researchers use qualitative approaches to make sense of the way people perceive the world and the way people understand and rationalize their experiences (Berenson, Boyles, & Weaver, 2008).

A case study qualitative research design was used to obtain and examine the overall experiences of adult learners who are operating in an online environment. Case

studies employ a particular style of qualitative research by examining an existing phenomenon within certain limits (Hatch, 2009). I used a case study approach to gather information from a small purposeful sample of adult learners who had taken at least one online course: a case study was the most suitable choice because the study was intended to study factors and characteristics of an online learning environment that could be bounded by time and activity, and such factors and characteristics can only be sought by using a case study. The case study method is the best way to understand a phenomenon in the context of a real life setting because this method bounds the activity, event, or process for research purposes (Creswell, 2012). Merriam (2009) noted that if the phenomenon you are interested in studying is not intrinsically bounded, then it is not a case study. The participants in the project study were bounded by the mandatory requirement of taking the ABC University1101 course.

Before choosing qualitative methods research for current study, I investigated other research methodologies, such as the ethnography research model. Both, Creswell (2007) and Merriam (2002) defined ethnography as a study focused upon cultural or social systems. According to Moustakas (1994), ethnographies are ideal for describing cultural behaviors and influences of the population under study, even when the subjects are unaware of those influences. If the current study were to focus on learners as a unique culture, or if the pilot study were to focus on education as a social system where a detailed observation would be required, then an ethnographic study might be quite feasible. Although one could argue that online students have their own unique cultures, the focus of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the project study was to determine the factors that

contribute to high dropout rates in online courses and the characteristics that deem an online adult learner successful or unsuccessful in an online course. The focus was not to understand the culture of an online learning environment and, thus, this approach was not selected.

A quantitative design was not selected because neither experimentation nor hypothesis testing is necessary in this project study. Quantitative data would be less effective due to its constrictive nature and tight control. In addition, insufficient results from current literature and a lack of valuable data would hamper attempts to establish a theory that would provide a statistically meaningful outcome. The use of a quantitative approach to investigate a topic possessing minimal information and data might result in the loss of details that may provide an understanding of the experiences and professional learning needs of online adult learners. Based on these factors, a qualitative case study was chosen for this study to support the data containing details from the participants' points of view.

Participants

Criteria for Selecting Participants

I used a purposeful sampling strategy to select the participants in this study from a predetermined university in the southeastern part of the United States, a university that offers online courses. Purposeful sampling, in which participants are selected due to their possession of a certain characteristic, is a common tactic used in research (Merriam, 2009). The population was comprised of university adult learners, 19 years of age or older, who had taken the ABC University 1101 course online between the fall of 2013 and

the spring of 2015. The 1101 course is an online course designed for first-year student success, and teaches fundamental strategies for achievement such as note-taking, test-taking, and time management; it also explores particular learning styles and emphasizes goal setting and career planning (ABC University catalog, 2013; citation removed for institutional anonymity). I examined this course because it is mandatory for all undergraduate students attending the local university, regardless of the student's academic major.

The study was conducted in two phases with a purposeful sample of 152 adult students who participated in an online survey, and 20 of those participants responded to interview questions. Students meeting the participant profile fulfilled the following requirements: (a) a registered student at the university, (b) minimum age of 19 years, and (c) currently or previously enrolled in ABC University 1101. Each online section of this course can accommodate up to 30 students, and this number is based on the university's registration requirements. During the pilot study, or Phase 1, 122 participants started the survey, but only 74 completed it. Of the 74 participants completing the survey, 12 participants agreed to participate in the interview process. Phase 2 took place following data analysis from the pilot study. I requested of Walden, IRB permission to collect more data to acquire a sample that could be more representative of the targeted population in hopes of strengthening the results. The second phase was comprised of 78 participants completing a revised online survey; eight responded to the revised interview questions. The new sample size for this study became 152.

Justification for the Number of Participants

Approximately 1,236 potential participants took the online ABC University1101 course from the fall of 2013 to the spring of 2015. Creswell (2009) suggested that one effective approach to developing a case study is to identify a scenario that provides multiple perspectives. However, Creswell (2009) warned that including too many participants, can limit the quantity of data collected from each individual; therefore, he suggested limiting the number of participants. The selection criteria led me to initially accept the 74 participants who qualified and completed the survey and to accept the 12 participants who volunteered to respond to the interview questions given during the pilot study. After deploying the initial survey and interview questions to the targeted population, I requested to collect more data to strengthen the results. The second phase comprised of 78 participants completing a revised online survey, and 8 participants responded to the revised interview questions. The new sample size allowed for optimum feedback, and this increased my ability to determine the factors contributing to high attrition rates, enlightened me on new methods to enhance the success rates of online adult learners, and uncovered characteristics that rendered online students successful or unsuccessful (Radocic-Markovic, 2010). In fact, the limited number of interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration that attempted to solve the problems of high attrition and low success in online courses at the local university in this study.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

Once I received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix B and C) and the IRB board at the participating university in this

study (see Appendix D), the dean of first-year student success from the local university in this study approved the e-mail (see Appendix E) intended for the targeted participants, requesting their voluntary participation in the study. The e-mail message explained my role, the purpose of the study, benefits of participating, level of participant involvement, potential risks, a guarantee of confidentiality, and explained the option to end involvement at any time.

If the participants decided to participate in the study, they were asked to click on a survey link provided in the e-mail (see Appendix F), thereby indicating their consent and willingness to participate. After completing the survey questions, participants were asked to elaborate on their online experiences through a series of interview questions. Those who volunteered submitted their e-mail address so that I could schedule a date and time for an interview.

Methods of Establishing a Researcher–Participant Working Relationship

My role as a researcher for both phases of this study comes from a past history steeped in educational experiences and practices. I am a former adjunct faculty member and an employee of the local university in this study; therefore, communicating with the participants was a convenient process. After providing a brief overview of the Walden program and sharing my purpose for conducting the study, rapport was built by encouraging participants to share their stories. My professional role and relationship with the participants may have conveyed the notion that I already know everything about the students' college experiences and that they do not have anything new to tell me. One of the main challenges was to let participants know that I needed to learn from them and

wanted to have the students recount their stories about their online experiences; it was also emphasized that by participating in this study it would help college educators better serve students in the future. It was important to be aware of the possible influence I held as the researcher and allow the participants to guide me through their online experiences.

It was imperative to be aware and sensitive of potential power shifts; being aware of such shifts helped minimize influence during the research process (Hoffmann, 2007). The Walden University IRB guidelines helped to minimize these influences as well. After approval of the current study, the dean of first-year student success from ABC University sent an e-mail to the possible targeted participants, requesting their voluntary participation in the study. The e-mail message explained my role, the purpose of the pilot study, the benefits of participating, the level of participant involvement, potential risks, a guarantee of confidentiality, and offered the option to end involvement at any time.

If the participants decided to participate in the study, they were asked to click on a survey link provided in the e-mail, thereby indicating their consent and willingness to participate. After completing the survey questions, participants were asked to elaborate on their online experiences by completing a series of interview questions. Those who did volunteer submitted their e-mail address so that a date and time for an interview session could be scheduled.

Measures for Ethical Protection of the Participants

Throughout Phases 1 and 2 of the current study, the participants were provided with the utmost ethical protection. During this study, the participants were assured that they were not obligated to contribute to the study if they changed their minds at any

point. In addition, an e-mail was sent to the participants; this e-mail contained a link to the consent form that included all the significant information. A copy of the consent form is provided in Appendix F. The e-mail included a statement declaring that participation in the study was voluntary and that it would not affect the students' current enrollment status or grades if they chose to leave the study. Participants were asked to read the material before designating their consent; the participants clicked on the survey link to finalize their participation and designate their consent. Once the participants' agreement was received, pseudonyms and coding was used in all the written research documentation to assure their confidentiality and anonymity. At that point, the participants were named only by specific codes; thus, every identity remained anonymous. When not in use, all written and electronic records, audio recordings, and other collected documents were locked in a fireproof safe in my home; these items will be maintained for at least five years. At that future time, I will dispose of the research data by erasing audio recordings, shredding written documents, and deleting electronic data. Throughout the study, each participant received proper ethical treatment in accordance with the National Institute of Health guidelines for human research (see Appendix G).

Data Collection Methods

Data collection included both a self-developed survey and interview questions as the instrument of measurement (see Appendix H and I) for the pilot study (Phase 1) and Phase 2. However, prior to collecting any forms of data, I obtained permission from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Upon receiving approval from the IRB, confidentiality measures to ensure anonymity such as obtaining and securing informed consent from

participants and assigning a coded name to each participant during the qualitative data collection phase were employed. After the data had been compiled, I stored the collected data on a laptop, a desktop computer, an external hard drive, and a thumb drive.

After approval of the current study, the dean of first-year student success from ABC University sent an e-mail to the possible targeted participants, requesting their voluntary participation in the study. The e-mail message explained my role, the purpose of the pilot study, the benefits of participating, the level of participant involvement, potential risks, a guarantee of confidentiality, and offered the option to end involvement at any time. If interested, potential participants clicked on a survey link from SurveyMonkey (surveymonkey.com). Clicking on the link indicated their consent and willingness to participate as described in the terms in the e-mail. The participants were asked to complete and submit the survey within 7 to 10 days of receiving the survey link. After the aforementioned amount of time, reminder e-mails were sent to all the non-respondents.

The purpose of the online survey was to identify reasons that may cause an adult learner to drop out of or withdraw from a course and to assess their level of agreement with what poses as characteristics of successful and unsuccessful online adult learners. The survey introduction page included information that explained the purpose of the survey and detailed instructions on how to complete and submit the survey. I also provided contact information on the initial consent email for participants should they encounter any issues or if they had any questions pertaining to the online survey. In

addition, the online survey introduction page instructed participants to select the most appropriate response for each survey question.

For the pilot study and Phase 2, the survey consisted of demographic questions regarding the participants' gender, age, employment status, and GPA. For the pilot study, survey question 6 was used to ask the participants about their reasons for withdrawing or not completing an online course. In Phase 2, survey question 4 was used to ask the participants if they dropped out of or withdrew from an online course, what the major reason was for removing themselves from the online course. There were 27 Likert-scaled items utilized in the pilot study, and 15 Likert-scaled items used in Phase 2, with both Phase 1 and 2 of the survey being rated on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The statement items assessed the participant's level of agreement of their experiences with online courses and the online learning environment.

During the initial pilot study (Phase 1), 122 participants started the survey, but only 74 completed it. Following the initial data analysis from the pilot study, I requested of Walden IRB, permission to collect more data to acquire a sample that would be more representative of the targeted population and, in turn, strengthen the results. The second phase was comprised of 78 participants completing a revised online survey.

After the participants completed the survey questions in the pilot study and Phase 2, they were offered the opportunity to elaborate on their online experiences by responding to interview questions that went into more depth. The participants were asked to submit their e-mail address at the end of the survey if they were interested in

responding to the interview questions of this study. I responded to the interested participants through e-mail, establishing a date and time to conduct the interview session. The purpose of the interview questions was to generate an understanding of the participants' experiences with online learning and to evaluate barriers that are preventing them from successfully completing an online course.

Twelve adult learners participated in the pilot study interview portion of this study, and eight new adult learners participated in the Phase 2 interview portion of the study. From the outset of the interview in the pilot study, the motivations and the purpose of the study were described, and it was explained that pseudonyms would be used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants. The logistics of the interview, including recording procedure and the anticipated time commitment, were also described. The recorded interviews were transcribed into a Microsoft Spreadsheet and Word document and saved as a password-protected file on a personal laptop computer. A copy of the transcript was printed and used to find, refine, and examine common themes and patterns; this printed transcript was stored under lock-and-key in my home.

Although interviews can be the most time-consuming aspect of a research project, they can also be the most informative. Open-ended interview questions for both phases of the study, designed to elicit answers for the following three research questions in this study, were developed:

1. What factors contribute to high dropout rates and unsuccessful completion of online courses for adult learners enrolled in online higher education courses?
2. What are some defining characteristics of successful online adult learners?

3. What are some defining characteristics of unsuccessful online adult learners?

The pilot study interview questions 1, 2, 3, 8, and, 9 and Phase 2 interview questions 1, 2, and 3 were designed to generate an understanding of the participant's experiences with online courses and factors that may contribute to dropouts and unsuccessful completion of online courses with adult learners. Pilot study interview questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 10 along with Phase 2 interview questions 4 and 5 were designed to get further insights on the participants' perceptions on characteristics of successful and unsuccessful online adult learners. Together, both phases yielded the types of data needed to develop an in-depth exploration of the issues that exist at ABC University.

After 3 weeks of collecting data, no new participants who were willing to become participants in either phase of the study were received. Having reached saturation with the survey, the web link was deactivated to prevent unauthorized access. Siegle (2002) stated "qualitative researchers continue to collect data until they reach a point of data saturation. Data saturation occurs when the researcher is no longer hearing or seeing new information."

Systems for keeping track of data

The systems for keeping track of the survey data from Phases 1 and 2 and the findings from the interview sessions included transcribing all audio-recorded data, maintaining a research journal and spreadsheet, and coding. The gathered data were systematically recorded and tracked into research logs. These logs provided a clear record of all the data that had been collected, and the logs offered sufficient information to allow for an examination of possible patterns. The reflective journals, in turn, provided me with

a collection of specific data and non-data details regarding the interview and survey responses. Participants' opinions were also included in the journals, along with factors about the participants' backgrounds that affected their perspectives.

Coding allowed for quick location of similar relationships and themes and examination of them together. A variety of methods exist for coding data, and the process each researcher can use is based predominantly on personal preference (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Instead of using the participants' actual names, letters were used to recognize each participant. For example, online adult learners were coded OAL1, OAL2, and so on. An abbreviation was used when coding for each category. For example, all data referring to factors contributing to unsuccessful completion of an online course from adult learners were coded as F, responses referring to characteristics of successful adult learners taking online courses as S, and those responses referring to characteristics of adult learners who are unsuccessful with online courses as U. The transcripts and reflective field notes were cross-referenced for accuracy of the codes and themes that emerged through the patterns. According to Yin (2009), by searching for patterns and comparing outcomes that are predicted and found (observed patterns), to outcomes that are predicted and not found (expected patterns), it would be possible to determine causal inferences. In other words, when empirically based patterns align with predicted patterns, the validity of data interpretation is supported (Yin, 2009).

Data Availability

All data from both phases of the study is maintained on a secure personal computer, and is password protected. Although my final project paper includes a

thorough presentation of my findings, all data, and analysis for the readers of this study could not be included. All data and analysis will be kept on my computer for at least five years.

Role of the Researcher and Avoiding Researcher Bias

The work from Phase 1 and 2 of the current study was not supervised directly in any capacity; the aim was to minimize potential influence during the research process. According to Merriam (2009), the relationship between the participant and the researcher is essential to the rigor of the qualitative aspect of the study. The role of the researcher is to protect the rights of the participants. Potential factors of influence were noted and preparation was taken to ensure that the necessary steps to minimize these biasing risks were completed. Supportive, trusting, and professional relationships among study participants produced a research atmosphere where thoughtful, honest discussions could provide relevant data (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012) regarding the success or lack thereof of adult students' online learning. To ensure the safety and rights of the participants, I completed the following steps:

1. All necessary paperwork for the IRB from the participating university was completed before the start of the study.
2. Each participant was given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality.
3. Each participant was assigned a number and numeric coding was used instead of the participants' real names during the survey, interview, and member-checking process in both phases of the study. These steps were taken throughout the study to protect each participant's identity. By assigning

participants letters and numbers, there was no direct identification of participants.

4. Only I had access to the records that were obtained from this study, and, therefore, all records remained private.

Data Analysis

The process described by Merriam (2009) guided analysis of the data that came from both Phase 1 and 2 of the current study. Creswell (2012) stated that analyzing the data involves drawing conclusions about the information gathered and explaining the conclusions in a way that answers the research questions. Further analysis consists of editing, removing redundancies, reforming the pieces, and organizing for easy access by order of topics and themes (Merriam, 2009). This section explores the means by which the data from both phases of the study were analyzed.

Survey Data Analysis

The first analysis was conducted on the overall demographics of the survey participants. Spaulding (2008) remarked that demographics gather personal information about the participants and can vary widely based on the target audience. Spaulding (2008) also advised that the demographics section be grouped together and placed at the beginning or the end of a survey. For both phases of the current study, the demographic questions were placed at the beginning of the survey. Seventy-four participants completed the original survey and became the sample participants for the pilot study, or Phase 1. Seventy-eight participants completed the revised survey and became the sample participants for Phase 2 of the study. Part of the data analysis process for both phases of

the study utilized SurveyMonkey, where it was possible to generate and download a data analysis report. The report included the following: (a) a list of the questions included in the survey, (b) the number of participants who answered each question, and (c) pie graphs that showed responses for each question.

The surveys for both phases consisted of demographic questions regarding the participants' gender, age, employment status, and GPA (see Appendix J and L). In the pilot study, survey question 6 was used to ask the participants about their reasons for withdrawing or not completing an online course. In Phase 2, survey question 4 was used to ask the participants what their major reason was for their dropping out of or withdrawing from an online course if they had ever completed this action. There were 27 Likert-scaled items utilized in the pilot study (see Appendix K), and 15 Likert-scaled items were utilized in phase two (see Appendix M) with each phase being rated on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *agree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). The Likert-scale was implemented to gather information about the participant's overall impressions of their experiences with online courses and the online learning environment.

The pilot study survey question 6 was analyzed. In Phase 2, survey question 6 was then revised into survey question 4 to capture the participants' responses to factors that may have caused them to drop out of or withdraw from an online course. The pilot study Likert-scaled questions 10 through 36 and Phase 2 revised survey Likert-scaled questions 6 through 20 were analyzed, rating frequencies and assembling generative discoveries

into a Microsoft spreadsheet and Word document. After categorizing and analyzing the data, the results for both phases of the study were interpreted.

Interview Data Analysis

Data were analyzed from the interviews in both phases by using the qualitative data analysis program (QDAP), a free web-based software funded by trusted national institutions for qualitative research data analysis. An online demonstration preparatory training course in arranging for the use of this software was taken before its use in the pilot study. The software allowed me to change the audio recordings into written text and transcribe the recorded interviews with accuracy. After analyzing the interview responses, all of the data was read and re-read to gather an overall sense of the information and identify common themes. Notations were made in the margins about key ideas, themes, or patterns and then organized into coherent categories. After looking for indicators of categories based on experiences and characteristic traits, a coding system was developed. For example, online adult learners were coded OAL1, OAL2, and so on. When coding for each factor category, the frequency was annotated. For example, data frequency referring to factors for dropping a course, prior opinion of online courses, contributors to success and failure, skills for success, and unsuccessful characteristics were all coded (see Appendix N).

Twelve online adult learners participated in the pilot study interview portion of this study, and 8 new online adult learners participated in the Phase 2 interview portion of the study. In the pilot study, the interview questions aimed to generate an understanding of the 12 online adult learners (see Table 1) perceptions and experience in an online

learning environment. The interview questions were grouped based on the research question that would correspond to it, and this lent to a greater analysis of the data. Interview questions 1, 3, 4, 5, and 8 allowed data to be captured on the participants' experiences that related to factors that may contribute to dropouts and unsuccessful completion of online courses. Interview questions 2, 6, 7, 9, and 10 gave further insights into what makes the participant successful and unsuccessful in an online learning environment.

Table 1

Demographics of Pilot Study Interviewees

Interviewee Code	Gender	Age Range
OAL1	F	30-39
OAL2	F	40-49
OAL3	M	30-39
OAL4	F	30-39
OAL5	F	30-39
OAL6	M	30-39
OAL7	F	40-49
OAL8	F	30-39
OAL9	M	40-49
OAL10	F	19-24
OAL11	M	40-49
OAL12	F	50-59

In Phase 2, the revised interview questions was an attempt to clarify and gain additional information from 8 new online adult learners who volunteered to respond to the interview questions (see Table 2). The interview questions were aligned based on corresponding research questions allowing for greater analysis of the data. Interview questions 1, 2, and 3 allowed for data to be gathered on the participants' experiences that related to factors that may contribute to dropouts and unsuccessful completion of online courses. Interview questions 4 and 5 were created to give further insights on what makes a participant successful or unsuccessful in an online learning environment. The feedback gathered from the interview questions gave a deeper understanding of the participants' learning experience and perceptions about their online courses. After using the coding process, a detailed analysis and interpretation of the data was completed.

Table 2

Demographics of Phase 2 Interviewees

Interviewee Code	Gender	Age Range
OAL1	F	19-24
OAL2	M	40-49
OAL3	F	25-29
OAL4	F	19-24
OAL5	F	50-59
OAL6	M	50-59
OAL7	M	30-39
OAL8	F	40-49

Reliability, Creditability, and Trustworthiness

Merriam (2009) pointed out that one could strengthen the reliability of a study by assuring that the research is conducted in an ethical manner and that the collected data's quality and accuracy is maintained. An anonymous survey was used in both phases of the current study to increase the reliability and validity of the data. The instrument was developed, input was received from education administration personnel who are knowledgeable about creating surveys, the survey was presented to the students, and the data were then gathered and interpreted. The survey for both phases was sent to the participants from the university so that it would be anonymous. Surveys often have lower response rates as compared to face-to-face methods of data collection because participants are responsible for filling out and returning the surveys themselves (Cobanoglu & Cobanoglu, 2003). Because in both phases of this study the survey was initially sent from the university to participants who were anonymous, there was no control over the number of possible participants that could be used for this study.

To address the possibility of a low response rate in both phases of the current study, the participants were asked to complete and submit the surveys within seven to ten days of receiving the survey link. Five days after the survey's initial deployment, a reminder e-mail was sent to all of the non-respondents. Survey Monkey was used to administer the survey and doing so ensured that the data would not be compromised, increasing the validity of the overall study. Using electronic communication, according to Lodico et al. (2006), is very popular as, "The survey can be set up so that the data are automatically entered and tabulated" (p. 170). However, Punch (2005) insisted, "The researcher should stay in control of the data collection procedure, rather than leave it to others or to chance" (p. 100). To further ensure validity in both phases of the current study, additional steps were taken to maintain the data's security by storing the hard copy survey and the raw data in a locked cabinet. Additionally, the electronic materials were captured and stored on an external hard drive of my secure, password-protected computer.

The appropriate procedures in conducting the interviews were followed in both phases, allowing the participants to express their viewpoints with few interruptions or deviations from the research questions (Creswell, 2007). The validity and reliability of the data was confirmed through a member-checking process or by verifying responses with the participants (Creswell, 2007). Both Hatch (2009) and Creswell (2009) recommended that qualitative data analysis should include a member check as a means of insuring study validity. A member check is a validation of the participants' data by the participants themselves. After analyzing, coding, and writing the survey and interview

findings in a draft form, individual member checks were conducted of each participant, and this was completed for both phases of the study. Because the university in the current study could not distribute student e-mail addresses or other personal information, each participant was asked to contact me via the toll-free number listed in the survey and provide me with their contact information. In addition, toward the end of the interview questions, the participants were requested to supply their e-mail addresses so they could review the transcripts. Coded names were created for all participants who submitted their contact information so their identity would remain anonymous. E-mails were sent to the participants, providing them with a copy of their data interpretation; the participants were asked to review their own data relating to the case study, provide input in the form of a typed response, and return their follow-up to the e-mail address provided to them. The participants were also asked to avoid including any identifying information in their typed responses. Additional data was obtained from the member check to verify and, at times, extend the research information. Confirming and amending participant data in this way is a key factor in insuring study validity. Conducting a member check also helped to ensure that the participants were aware of all of their reportable data and research activities, another important ethical consideration in safeguarding participants (Creswell, 2009).

Procedures for Dealing With Discrepant Cases

Discrepant cases are instances that suggest an examination of alternate hypotheses because the cases do not conform to the initial theories and explanations that emerge in most cases (Lodico et al., 2006). According to Maxwell (2006), recognizing and examining discrepant data and negative cases are essential to validity testing in

qualitative research. If discrepant cases were detected in either phase of the current study, a peer review would have examined the data collection. This review would have ensured that the data collection was not subjected to my bias, beliefs, or assumptions.

Qualitative Methods Research Findings

After collecting and analyzing the data from Phase 1 and 2, the results were interpreted and prepared. The survey findings from Phases 1 and 2 are presented first, followed by the findings from the interview responses from Phases 1 and 2. Appropriate tables accompany the research findings. This section ends with a brief discussion about the project as an outcome solution.

Adult learners' experiences in online learning were explored in the current study. Identifying factors that pose as obstacles for adult learners pursuing online courses and recognizing characteristics of successful and unsuccessful online adult learners may assist in making an adult learner achieve the goal of completing an online course in a satisfactory manner. To gather this information, the following three research questions guided the study:

1. What factors contribute to high dropout rates and unsuccessful completion of online courses for adult learners enrolled in online higher education courses?
2. What are some defining characteristics of successful online adult learners?
3. What are some defining characteristics of unsuccessful online adult learners?

Survey Findings

The demographic data collection from the pilot study is presented in Appendix J. Seventy-four participants completed this survey. The survey responses consisted of 57

females (77%) and 17 males (23%). Over 70% of the participants were employed while 27% did not work at all. Many participants were between 25 and 49 years of age (52, 69 %) and had a high GPA ranging from 3.4 to 4.0.

During the pilot study and the collection of the survey data, survey question 6 was used to ask the participants about their reasons for withdrawing or not completing an online course, and Likert-scaled questions 10 through 36 were used to ask the participants to give their level of agreement with the statements as they may or may not have pertained to their overall experiences in an online learning environment. A continuum of positive and negative statements with which the participants would be likely to agree or disagree was used. This helped reduce bias and improve reliability because anyone who answered, “agree” all the time would appear to answer inconsistently. The statements were categorized based on the following areas; time management, learning preference, motivation, computer skills, and communication skills. In the pilot study, Likert-scaled questions 10, 14, 18, 19, and 23 were used to measure the participants’ attitude toward statements that related to motivational factors in their online learning environment. Likert-scaled questions 11 and 12 addressed the participants’ attitude towards learning preference. Likert-scaled questions 13 and 6 captured the participants’ attitude towards online course content and resources. Likert-scaled questions 15, 17, 21, 28, 31, and 34 addressed the participants’ attitude towards the ability to communicate in an online learning environment, and Likert-scaled questions 20, 22, 24, 29, 30, 32, 33, 35 addressed the participants’ time management skills in an online learning environment.

Table 3 shows the frequency and percentage of the participants' responses to survey question 6, "If you are unable to complete this course or have dropped it previously, the major reasons will be/was _____"?

Table 3

Pilot Study: Reasons for Not Completing Online Course

Reason for Not Completing Online Course	<i>f</i>	%
Did not apply	27	36%
Work related	6	8%
Military	11	15%
Course content was difficult	8	11%
Learning preference	8	11%
Poor communication with instructor	8	11%
No financial assistance available	6	8%

Among the 74 participants responding in the pilot study, 36% of the participants stated that the question did not apply to them, leaving a total of 64% of the participants who accounted for the question that asked about the participants' reasons for not completing an online course. The participants indicated that the main reasons for not completing an online course were military duty, work related issues, difficulty of course content, learning preference, poor communication with the instructor, and no financial assistance available. The most noticeable statistic in the data would be that 15% of the participants shared that if they were unable to complete an online course or have dropped it, the major reason would be their military duties while a smaller percentage stated work related issues and no financial assistance available (8%). A third of the participants indicated that difficulty of course content, learning preference, and poor communication with instructor would be their reason for dropping or withdrawing from an online course.

Likert-scaled questions 10, 14, 18, 19, and 23 (see Table 4) were used to measure the participants' attitudes toward statements as those statements related to motivational factors in their online learning environment. The participants agreed that they are motivated, self-disciplined, could work independently, and did not give up easily when it comes to their attitudes towards motivational factors in their online learning. The range was from 35% to 42%, which shows, overall, that the participants were motivated when attempting to complete the online courses. A little less than half of the participants were neutral. Overall, the participants took a personal interest, were motivated, and worked independently, indicating that about half of the participants agreed that motivational factors played a part in their taking an online course.

Table 4

Pilot Study: Participants' Attitude Towards Motivational Factors in Their Online Learning Environment

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My motivation for taking online course has decreased gradually.	22%	28%	18%	23%	9%
Taking online courses will help me to advance in my career.	4%	2%	14%	38%	42%
I am a self-motivated and self-disciplined individual.	1%	11%	12%	41%	35%
I am able to work independently with little direction.	2%	5%	11%	41%	41%
I do not give up easily, even when confronted with obstacles.	2%	4%	10%	49%	35%

Likert-scaled questions 11 and 12 (see Table 5) were used in the pilot study to capture the participants' learning preferences. Twenty-two percent of the participants preferred to take their courses face-to-face instead of online. The strongly disagree responses were at 22% as well, however, the 14% for the neutral participants may be an indication these participants had no preference for the mode of instruction. However, it can be deduced that nearly half of the participants could adapt to the online environment and preferred taking their courses online rather than face-to-face.

Table 5

Pilot Study: Participants' Attitude Towards Learning Preferences

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I wished that I could take this course face-to-face instead of online.	22%	27%	14%	15%	22%
I could not adapt to the distance education system.	47%	28%	11%	8%	6%

For the pilot study, Likert-scaled questions 13 and 16 (see Table 6) addressed online course content and resources. The online course content and resources responses indicated that 37% of the participants found it easy to access the online resources. In addition, 43% responded positively that the online forum has sufficient communication tools for discussion. This suggests that many of the participants had no trouble with accessing online course content and resources.

Table 6

Pilot Study: Participants' Attitude Towards Online Course Content and Resources

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
It is easy to access resources in my online course	2%	9%	11%	41%	37%
I could not sufficiently utilize the communication tools (e. g. discussion list, chat, and e-mail).	43%	41%	7%	8%	1%

In the pilot study, Likert-scaled questions 15, 17, 21, 28, 31, and 34 (see Table 7) addressed the participants' attitude towards communication factors in an online learning

environment. Forty-one percent of the participants indicated that they could communicate any questions or concerns to the instructor. Thirty-six percent of the participants indicated that they received feedback within 48 hours from their online instructor. The results showed the participants were able to communicate effectively in an online learning environment with the instructor and other online students.

Table 7

Pilot Study: Participants' Attitude Towards Communication Factors within Their Online Learning Environment

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Social interaction is important in an online course.	11%	13%	37%	27%	12%
My online course instructor responded to my questions within 48 hours.	11%	14%	11%	28%	36%
I can effectively communicate any questions or concerns to my instructor.	2%	8%	7%	42%	41%
I seldom answer any questions from the instructor or interact much in class at all.	32%	41%	14%	11%	2%
I am not comfortable with the idea of discussing topics with online students I never meet or see.	45%	23%	16%	11%	5%
When I don't understand something, I am hesitant to ask the instructor for help.	32%	41%	8%	12%	7%

In the pilot study, Likert-scaled questions 20, 22, 24, 29, 30, 32, 33, and 35 (see Table 8) addressed the participant's attitude towards time management skills in an online learning environment. Thirty-five percent agreed that they had good time-management skills that allowed them to schedule specific times throughout a week to work on their online course. Thirty-three percent agreed that they were not procrastinators and liked to get things done today and not tomorrow. When asked if they were comfortable spending five or more hours each week on course work, 26 participants (35%) agreed. Fifty-five percent strongly disagreed with the statement regarding turning in late assignment and homework. Thirty-two percent disagreed with the statement regarding the unpredictability of their schedule. Thirty-two percent disagreed with the statement regarding their procrastination. Eighteen participants (24%) agreed that they need to have some set deadlines to get things done and that they were concerned with being successful in an online course. The participants, according to the results, had no problems committing to the online classes and made good use with their time.

Table 8

Pilot Study Results: Participants' Attitudes Towards Time Management Skills in Online Learning Environments

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have good time-management skills that allow me to schedule specific times throughout a week to work on my online course.	4%	14%	15%	35%	32%
I am not a procrastinator. I like to get things done today and not tomorrow.	11%	22%	23%	33%	11%
I am comfortable spending five plus hours each week on a course to review course lectures/videos, complete course assignment, participate in chats and threaded discussions, etc.	4%	11%	17%	35%	33%
I am usually late turning assignments and homework.	55%	27%	7%	7%	4%
My personal and professional schedule is unpredictable: I am seldom sure when I will have free time that I can set aside for my coursework.	16%	32%	20%	16%	16%
I signed up for too many courses and had to cut down on my course load.	41%	31%	12%	9%	7%
I am a procrastinator	16%	32%	16%	25%	11%

I need to have someone set deadlines for me to get things done.	23%	22%	22%	24%	9%
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According to the survey responses for the pilot study, many of the students who successfully completed their online courses agreed they had good time management skills; they developed daily schedules, which they keenly followed, and submitted all the assignments on time. The participants also agreed that they were able to work with little direction and to communicate effectively with their instructors in an online learning environment. Furthermore, the participants agreed that they were self-motivated and disciplined.

The demographic data collection for the survey from Phase 2 of the current study is presented in Appendix K. Seventy-eight new participants completed the survey in Phase 2. The survey responses consisted of 57 females (73%) and 21 males (27%). Ninety percent of the participants were employed while ten percent did not work at all. Many participants were between 40 and 59 years of age (84%) and had a high GPA ranging from 3.4 to 4.0.

In Phase 2, survey question 4 was used to ask the participants that if they had dropped or withdrawn from an online course, what the major reason was. Likert-scaled questions 6 through 20 were used to ask the participants to give their level of agreement with statements as it pertained to their overall experiences in an online learning environment. The statements were categorized based on the following areas; time management, learning preference, motivation, course workload, and communication.

Likert-scaled questions 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, and 20 addressed the participant's time management skills in an online learning environment. Likert-scaled questions 9 and 18 addressed the participants learning preference. Likert-scaled questions 6 and 11 were used to measure the participants' attitudes toward statements as the statements related to motivational factors in the participants' online learning environment. Likert-scaled questions 7, 8, 14, and 16 captured the participants' attitudes towards their experiences with online course workload. Likert-scaled questions 10, 13, and 14 addressed the participants' attitude toward their ability to communicate in an online learning environment.

Table 9 shows reasons and percentages of the participants' responses to survey question 4: "Have you ever dropped/withdrawn from an online course? If yes, what was the reason?"

Table 9

Phase 2: Reason for Dropping or Withdrawing from Online Course

Reason for Dropping or Withdrawing from Online Courses	<i>f</i>	%
Military deployment	2	7%
Issues with course and instructor	6	21%
Work related issues	4	14%
Lack of time to complete course work	9	33%
Personal	7	25%

Among the 78 participants responding in Phase 2, 50 (69%) of the participants stated that the question did not apply to them, leaving 28 (31%) participants. These 28 participants stated their reasons for dropping out of or withdrawing from an online course. The participants cited military deployment, work related issues, issues with the course and instructor, lack of time to complete course work, and personal reasons as their main reason for not completing or for dropping an online course. Of those main reasons, 33% of the participants stated that lack of time to complete course work was the main reason for dropping or withdrawing from an online course.

The Phase 2 Likert-scaled questions 12, 15, 17, 18, 19, and 20 (see Table 10) addressed the participants' attitude towards time management skills in an online learning environment. Seventy-three percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they have good management skills that allow them to complete their assignments on time. The participants agreed that they had no problem in managing time with the online course. Twenty-eight percent of the participants agreed they spent sufficient hours on the course work during the week. However, the most telling results were 26% of the participants

who consider the face-to-face learning environment less of a workload than the online courses.

Table 10

Phase 2: Participants' Attitude Towards Time Management Skills in Their Online Learning Environment

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I have good time-management skills that allow me to complete my class assignments on time.	1%	6%	21%	40%	33%
I spend between 5-10 hours per week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions. I spend between 11-20 hours per week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions.	13%	18%	24%	28%	17%
I am a procrastinator (Why do today what I can put off until tomorrow).	17%	23%	34%	17%	9%
I consider online courses more time consuming than face-to-face courses.	18%	19%	23%	26%	14%
I am usually late turning assignments and homework.	52%	27%	12%	6%	3%
I spend less than 5 hours a week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions.	17%	32%	27%	14%	10%

The Phase 2 Likert-scaled question 9 (see Table 11) addressed the participants' attitude towards their learning preferences. Seventy-eight percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they prefer taking online courses rather than face-to-face courses.

Table 11

Phase 2: Participants' Attitude Towards Their Learning Preference

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I prefer taking online course rather than face-to-face courses.	2%	9%	11%	41%	37%

In Phase 2, Likert-scaled questions six and eleven (see Table 12) were used to measure the participants' attitudes toward statements that related to motivational factors in their online learning environment. The participants, according to the results, were motivated to take the online courses. Fifty-six percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were highly motivated to take an online course. Seventy-seven percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they are self-motivated individuals.

Table 12

*Phase 2: Participants' Attitude Towards Motivational Factors in Their Online Learning**Environment*

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am highly motivated to take an online course.	9%	13%	22%	18%	38%
I am a self-motivated individual (I do not give up easily, even when confronted with obstacles).	1%	3%	19%	33%	44%

In Phase 2, Likert-scaled questions 6, 8, and 16 (see Table 13) captured the participants' attitudes towards their experiences with online course workloads and resources. The participants, according to the results, managed their time very well, and turned in the work on time. Sixty-nine percent managed their time with no problems during their online course. According to the data, 55% of the participants turned in their work on time.

Table 13

Phase 2: Participants' Attitude Towards Course Workload

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My personal schedule is unpredictable, which affects my ability to complete coursework.	22%	27%	14%	15%	22%
My professional schedule is unpredictable, which affects my ability to complete coursework.	47%	28%	11%	8%	6%
I have difficulty handling the coursework for the courses I am enrolled in	29%	38%	22%	10%	1%
I am usually late turning assignments and homework.	55%	27%	7%	7%	4%

In Phase 2, Likert-scaled questions 10, 13, and 14 (see Table 14) addressed the participants' ability to communicate in an online learning environment. Positive results could be extrapolated concerning the participants' level of agreement with how they communicate in an online learning environment. Eighty percent of the participants had no problem with utilizing the communication tools from the online course. The majority of the participants agreed that they effectively communicate with their instructor as well as their fellow classmates in an online course. The overall results could be seen as indicating that the participants are able to communicate effectively in an online learning environment with the instructor and other online students.

Table 14

*Phase 2: Participants' Attitude Towards Communicating in Their Online Learning**Environment*

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I can easily utilize the communication tools (e.g. discussion list, chat, and email) in my online course.	4%	2%	14%	38%	42%
I can effectively communicate questions or concerns to my instructor.	3%	1%	13%	44%	40%
I can effectively communicate with my classmates through discussion forums.	3%	9%	26%	32%	30%

Interview Findings

To build and expand on the survey data findings found in both phases, data was analyzed from the interview responses of 12 online adult learners in the pilot study and 8 new online adult learners in Phase 2. The interview questions from the pilot study focused on generating an understanding of the participant's perspectives regarding their experiences in the online learning environment. In Phase 2, the questions were revised and narrowed to generate a better understanding of the participants' perspectives regarding their experiences in an online learning environment. The qualitative data was analyzed, and the results are presented below in a descriptive format. In the pilot study, 10 questions were used in Phase 2, 5 revised questions from the pilot interview questions

were presented to participants in order to gain a focused result that is closely related to the current research questions. The qualitative research was completed in two phases so that a focus could be given to the target population and be based on the analysis of the first interview questions' answers.

From the pilot study, the interview questions were grouped based on the research questions in order to provide answers. Interview questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9 allowed for a gathering of data on the participants' experiences relating to factors that may contribute to dropouts and unsuccessful completion of online courses. Interview questions 6, 7, and 10 gave further insights on what makes the participants' successful and unsuccessful in an online learning environment. The purpose of interview questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, and 9 was to solicit participant responses regarding reasons that may contribute to dropping online courses; these reasons could be preconceived ideas about online courses, bad experiences with online courses, lack of time, lack of available resources, or overall general factors. The purpose of interview questions 6, 7, and 10 was to solicit the participants' responses regarding what they think makes an adult learner successful or not successful with online courses.

From the pilot study, interview question 1 asked the following: What were your general thoughts about online learning prior to enrolling in your online course(s)? The purpose of this interview question was to gain insight regarding the participants' initial preconceived ideas and their expectations about online courses. The question was aligned to the pilot study's research question 1, which is as follows: What factors contribute to high dropout rates and unsuccessful completion of online courses for adult learners

enrolled in online higher education courses? The belief is that the participants may have some preconceived ideas about what an online course should be and how it will work, and this may be a factor in the participants' decision to drop or withdraw from a course. Some important themes emerged regarding the participants' initial perceptions, such as misconceptions about the ease of learning the online course material and the lack of knowledge. Only one participant noted that expectations were matched by the course. Some of the participants said they expected courses to be less challenging while others stated that they were not sure what to expect. The results mean that available information regarding online courses before the start of the course is an important aspect of success.

From the pilot study, interview question 2 asked the following: What do/did you enjoy about your online learning experience/class? This question was aligned to research question 1 as originally thought; however, the question was constructed in an attempt to indicate why some online students would have negative experiences and how the courses could be improved to reduce dropout rates. The purpose of this interview question in the pilot study was to gain insight regarding the participants' positive aspects about online courses. The general theme identified was that flexibility of the courses and completing classes was one of the most enjoyable features of online learning. All participants from the interview reported that the flexibility of online education programs was a major draw and continued to be a significant advantage of online education. For example, Online Adult Learners (OAL) 1 and 2 both stated that they enjoyed the flexibility of the online learning program with regard to having the ability to adjust the online course schedule to match with their daily personal schedules, meaning they could avoid conflicting

situations between their studies and personal activities. In the case of OAL 3, 4, and 7, the online course program offered a flexible interaction platform such as using the discussion board or e-mail.

From the pilot study, interview question 3 asked the following: What do/did you dislike about your online learning experience/class? This interview question was aligned to research question 1 as described above. The purpose of this interview question was to gain insight into the participants' bad experiences with online courses, ones that may cause them to drop or withdraw from an online course. Themes that emerged from the participants' reasons for disliking their experience in online learning includes not receiving adequate support or not understanding the requirements before enrolling. The participants reported that more interaction with their instructors and classmates would have made them more successful, and this theme should be considered in the future when attempting to improve online courses and reduce dropout rates. One participant stated that the instructors were unorganized, and the system was hard to follow.

From the pilot study, interview question 4 asked the following: By taking an online course, do you think that it had an effect on your time management during the term and, if so, explain your response. The question was related to research question one. The purpose of this interview question was to find out if lack of time management was a factor when taking online courses. Time management is likely to be one of the success factors needed when completing online courses. As learners have increased flexibility in online-based education, the learners are responsible for keeping deadlines and managing their online learning activities. The above assumption was confirmed by the majority of

participants, and one respondent clearly stated that, “It has made me better at time management.” Two of the participants believed that time management is a big factor in being successful in online learning. These two participants discovered that allowing themselves enough time to read, research, and understand the course material proved to be beneficial in their online courses. Many participants indicated that their online studies had forced them to improve their skills in time management. One participant explained that taking a course overload (three or four instead of two per term) challenged previous time management skills that helped for past successful completion of online courses. Two other participants similarly noted that by taking online courses, they became better managers of time, did not procrastinate as much, and began to balance school with work. Out of the twelve participants, only three participants said that their online learning experience did not impact their time management skills.

From the pilot study, interview question 5 asked the following: What factors do you believe contributed most to your success (passing) or failure in your online course? Focusing on research question 1, this interview question was used to define what makes online learners successful or unsuccessful. The purpose of this interview question was to gain insight into what factors contributed to the participants’ success or failure with online courses. One identified main theme was the importance of motivation. Although two participants stated that success or failure mainly depended on their skills and attitude, the rest of the participants indicated that motivation had an impact on their success. Nine of the participants explicitly cited motivation, dedication, or both as essential qualities for online learning. One of the participants believed that dedication and motivation are

factors that contribute most to success in online courses. OAL11 reported, “You have to be self-motivated,” and “You have to want it for yourself.” OAL3 similarly opined, “I think that online learners must be self-motivated and self-disciplined to be successful.” Likewise, OAL8 stated, “Being a self-starter and not needing supervision is the best thing an online student can be. No one will be there to tell you what you have to do. You have to do it on your own.” OAL4 cited, “Being motivated to accomplish what you are seeking from online learning” as being a quality essential to educational success.

From the pilot study, interview question 8 asked the following: Were you aware of any resources or support services at the local university in this study that would have assisted you to know what you needed to take an online class? This question was aligned to the pilot study’s research question 1, which stated the following: “What factors contribute to high dropout rates and unsuccessful completion of online courses for adult learners enrolled in online higher education courses?” It was assumed that support provided to students would have a positive impact on completion rates. The findings indicated that those participants who were not aware of the orientation and support tools available on the website when enrolling in the course were more likely to fail at one point. When asked about knowledge of supportive on-campus resources, OAL1 stated, “Not really, I only accesses [*sic*] online resources at that time.” Several others indicated that they had been unaware of these resources when they had begun their educational programs. OAL2 reported, “I am aware of the support services today, but I cannot say that I was aware of it when I began online classes.” OAL4 expressed a similar experience, stating, “I did not have any prior knowledge [of online resources] before

beginning online classes.” The participants who stated that they were aware of the tools and utilized them were successful.

From the pilot study, interview question 9 asked the following: What motivated you to take an online course(s)? The purpose of this interview question was to gain insight regarding the participants’ motivation for taking online courses. This question was aligned to research question 1 because it indicated how seriously students took the course initially. Family, self-development, and career advancement were the primary motivating factors. Those participants who had a strong purpose, such as career progression or self-development (OAL 9 and OAL 11) did not fail while those who chose online learning as a more comfortable option over face-to-face courses were more likely to fail. Participants elaborated on the concept of motivation, providing several factors as the sources of their motivation to succeed in online education. Four participants cited their family as the impetus for beginning online education. OAL2 stated, “I have three children who are currently enrolled in college. I want to be a good example for them.” Three participants pointed to self-development as their driving motivators. OAL11 expressed this position, reporting, “I am going to school because I want to better myself.” Two participants cited the advancement of their careers as their source of motivation.

From the pilot study, interview question 6 asked the following: Have you ever been unsuccessful (failed) in an online course, and if so, can you explain the reason why you did not successfully complete the course? Aligned to research questions 2 and 3, interview question 6 intended to focus on the reasons that most contributes toward dropout and failure. The purpose of this interview question was to gain insight into the

reasons why the participants' were unsuccessful in their online courses. Eight out of the twelve participants said that they never failed at an online course while four indicated having some kind of difficulties completing assignments, achieving high grades on tests, or understanding the requirements. Participant OAL8 stated that the importance of the course was not fully grasped, and the reason for failure was a lack of motivation and focus.

From the pilot study, interview question 7 asked the following: If you had the chance to tell someone else in your age group that was thinking about taking an online course, what would you feel would be important for them to know? The interview question was aligned to research questions 2 and 3 and provided a comparison basis regarding interview question one, assessing the initial perceptions of participants about online education before enrollment. The purpose of interview question 7 was to gain an understanding of what the participants think is important to their fellow adult learners for their fellow adult learners to be successful with online courses. The importance of this question is to reveal how the initial assumptions compare with students' experiences. One interesting emerging theme was identified: motivation. The participants who had already enrolled in online learning said that being interested in the topic and motivating one's self can help completing the assignments and the tests. Time management was also found to be important for success, according to current or previous students.

From the pilot study, interview question 10 asked the following: What skills (academic and technical) do you believe online learners need to have to be successful in an online classroom? The purpose of this interview question was to gain insight regarding

the participants' thoughts on what is needed to be successful when taking online courses. This question was aligned to research questions 2 and 3, and the most commonly mentioned skill was found to be technological skills and communication skills. Online learning essentially operates on a technological platform, therefore, for a student to undertake any online learning course, the student must have an understanding of computer and technology basics. Eleven of the twelve participants identified technological skill as a vital characteristic for online learners. OAL10 reported, "Online learners need to have knowledge of the [*sic*] how to use the Internet, e-mail, Blackboard, or a similar site and library databases effectively." OAL4 commented, "I believe basic Internet and computer skills [are] crucial to an online learner." OAL7 also made this point, stating, "I think that basic understanding of a computer, e-mailing, and surfing the web are important." Specifically, various participants cited router and modem setup, knowledge of Microsoft Office products, and Internet skills as the skills that would most benefit students engaged in online education.

Successful online adult learners, as indicated by the pilot study, must demonstrate the ability to effectively communicate with their instructors or fellow online learners. Although communication can be verbal through video chat, a large portion of the communication used in an online learning class is in written form. Three participants highlighted communication-related skills as a vital component in online learning. OAL7 stated, "Reading and comprehending are huge factors in online learning." OAL5 cited "writing skills" as an essential characteristic. OAL12 supported this argument, listing

“good communication skills” as a necessary quality for students in an online educational program.

From Phase 2, the interview questions were aligned based on the research questions to provide answers. Interview questions 1 through 3 allowed for a greater gathering of data on the participants’ experiences that relate to factors that may contribute to dropouts and unsuccessful completion of online courses. Interview questions 4 through 5 gave further insights into what makes participants successful or unsuccessful in an online learning environment. The feedback gathered from the interview questions helped develop a deeper understanding of the participants’ learning experience and perceptions with their online courses.

The first interview question from Phase 2 asked the following: Describe your opinion about online learning prior to enrolling in online course(s). The purpose of the first interview question was to generate an understanding of the participants’ preconceived notions of online learning. This first interview question was aligned to research question 1 because initial perceptions of online education are likely to determine the success rate. Relevant knowledge about the requirements is setting the right expectations, however, misinformation can lead to disappointment and ultimately failure. Two participants stated they had misconceptions, and one said that online education was inferior to campus-based training (OAL1). It is important to note that participants who had initial misconceptions about online learning, such as “less time consuming than traditional classes” (OAL4) and inferior (OAL1) were more likely to struggle or fail with assignments.

The second interview question of Phase 2 asked the following: What factors contribute most to your success (passing) in an online course? The purpose of this interview question was to gain insight into factors the participants attributed to their success when taking online courses. This second interview question was aligned to research questions 2 and 3: the determinants of success and failure. Out of the 8 participants, 4 mentioned time management and scheduling. Other participants put emphasis on hard work and planning ahead of time. Two participants (OAL1 and OAL 6) stated that drive and motivation was the main determinant of success.

The third question of Phase 2 asked the following: Have you ever failed an online course? If so, what were the contributing factors? The intent of this interview question was to solicit participants' responses regarding factors that may have contributed to their reasons for failing an online course. This third interview question was aligned to research question 1 which was related to high dropout rates. Success was assumed to be a main motivator for participants who wished to continue with learning online while, naturally, failure or struggling with assignments would discourage individuals. Of the 8 interviewees, one reported failing at an assessment due to not fully understanding the requirements. Two other participants stated that they struggled with particular assessments but for different reasons. OAL8 stated the main reason for dropping out was being "burned out," which can be translated to a lack of motivation. The answer can be seen as indicating that how interesting and encouraging the course material is determines success rate; therefore, online education courses need to focus on not only the quality of resources, but also the communication and presentation of the subject as well. OAL1 said

that there was a struggle with some particular assignments, and could not cope without personal instruction. The above answer can be seen as indicating that providing support for students can increase success rate. Delivering the learning materials online is not enough: checking the understanding of students about the subject is also important.

The fourth question of Phase 2 asked the following: Which skills (academic and technical) are important for successful online learning? The purpose of this question was to gain an understanding of what skills the participants' view as important in order to be successful in online learning. Attempting to answer research questions 2 and 3, out of the 8 participants, 4 mentioned computer skills as a main success factor. Two participants mentioned time management, while 2 other participants highlighted the importance of academic and comprehension skills. The above answers could also be seen as indicating that online campuses could increase student satisfaction and retention rates by providing orientation and learning skills courses outside of the curriculum, ones that could be available for all students who feel like they are needed.

The final question of Phase 2 asked the following: What characteristics do you think one must possess in order to be unsuccessful in an online environment? The purpose of the interview question was to capture characteristics that the participants believe would cause one to be unsuccessful in an online learning environment. The final interview question of Phase 2 was aligned to research question 2 and 3. Four participants clearly stated that laziness (lack of motivation) was responsible for failure. The above respondents, therefore, looked at online learning as an opportunity available for everyone, and this opportunity allowed people to make their own choices. The main emerging

theme is personal qualities related to success. Three participants noted poor time management and planning skills, and two blamed failure on the lack of written communication skills. The above answers indicate that there is a need for online education to be encouraging and motivating, while providing students with the necessary writing and learning skills to reduce dropout rates.

Discussion of Findings

With the enrollment of potential new students to the online learning environment increasing, multiple crucial factors of this opportunity need to be addressed. One of the important aspects of online learning is student success. This critical aspect affects online student dropout and retention rates. The current study, both Phase 1 and 2, were constructed to use qualitative methods to explore the factors that contribute to student attrition and non-completion of online degree programs and to examine the traits that characterize successful and unsuccessful adult online learners. Additionally, the current study was an attempt to explore lived experiences of online adult learners from their perspectives so as to gain further insight into this phenomenon. The research questions were developed to address factors contributing to withdrawal or dropouts in online courses and to address some defining characteristics of online adult learners.

The study was conducted in two phases with a purposeful sample of 152 adult students who participated in an online survey: 20 of those participants responded to interview questions. During the pilot study, or Phase 1, 122 participants started the survey, but only 74 completed it. Of the 74 participants completing the survey, 12 participants agreed to participate in the interview process. Phase 2 took place following

analysis of data from the pilot study. I requested of Walden IRB permission to collect more data to acquire a sample more representative of the targeted population in hopes of strengthening the results. The second phase was comprised of 78 participants completing a revised online survey: 8 responded to the revised interview questions. The new sample size for this study became 152. The participants indicated a number of factors that contributed to their unsuccessful completion of online courses; work related issues, difficulty of course content, lack of time management, and personal issues. Additionally, the participants' success depends on their strengths and weaknesses with time management skills, motivation and dedication, technological skills, and communication skills in online learning. A deficiency in any of these areas was perceived as a reason for a student not being successful in the online environment.

Conclusion

As education evolves within a changing society, technology is an increasing necessity for students attending universities. Unfortunately, online classes have proven to be challenging for adult learners who face issues such as low technological skills, insufficient access to applicable technologies, and difficulty for students in engaging with faculty in the online environment (Ke & Kwak, 2013). High attrition rates of online adult learners have focused the attention of the faculty and administration on approaches to improve student success in online classes. Different studies have examined a similar problem, thereby providing accumulated data that intends to discover the common problems and issues faced by online adult learners. By using survey and interview techniques to discover the perspectives of online adult learners, it was possible to form a

conclusion regarding the support currently available to students, as well as the support that may help them achieve success in the future. The data collected and analyzed prompted the need for a pre-orientation workshop that can assist ABC University with the ability to identify students' potential success level prior to taking their first online course. Developing and then implementing a pre-orientation session designed for first time online learners may enhance social change by preparing these potential students before they take their first online course. To ensure that students are successful in online courses, ABC University must offer support options that may help the students reach their maximum potential.

Section 3 contains the proposed project with the related sections on the project description, literature review, implementation, and implications for social change. Section 4, the final section, focuses on the reflections and conclusions of the project, including the strengths, limitations, scholarship, leadership and change, self-analysis, and impact of change resulting from the study.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

This study examined online adult learners at ABC University located in the southeastern United States. Higher education institutions in the U.S. such as ABC University have been struggling with increasing attrition rates for online adult learners and declining student success in online courses (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Several factors were found to contribute to an adult learner's decision to drop out of or withdraw from an online course. Some of these factors are typically addressed within the scope of universities' piloting retention programs and workshops, new and introductory courses, and institutional support services for online programs (Bridges, 2008). In Section 2, the results from the data collected demonstrated several factors that contributed to adult learners' decision to drop out of or withdraw from an online course.

In this section, I describe a project requiring adult learners to participate in a pre-orientation workshop designed to provide adult learners with guided support in obtaining the knowledge, guidance, and training prior to enrollment in the students' first online course. This workshop was designed to assist university administrators with improving attrition rates and increasing the success rate of online study. It includes the goals of the project, a review of the literature addressing the project, a description of the project's implementation, a discussion of the project's evaluation plan, and a discussion of the project's implications for social change. This section specifically explains the means by which I developed the project-created assessment tool as a solution for university officials to employ.

Description and Goals

Online learning is not advantageous for everyone. For example, learning through an online class requires skills and abilities that differ from those needed in a face-to-face class. It is therefore important for online students to manage their expectations and to understand the kind of commitment necessary for success in online learning. Reeves and Osho (2010) stressed that, “students may perceive distance education courses as less demanding and easier...but find it very hard to keep up and often become confused and fall behind” (p. 2). Although ABC University and similar institutions offer online orientation courses prior to students enrolling in an online course, taking an online course may still be difficult for students as this may be their first online course. The online environment for the new online learner can be difficult if the correct approach is not adopted. This led to development of this project as a means to assess potential readiness gaps.

The final project developed as part of this study, was a pre-orientation workshop session designed to assist adult learners in obtaining the knowledge, guidance, and training support needed to be successful in an online learning environment. The workshop is intended to enable learners to assess their readiness level for online learning, identify whether or not they have the skills required to be successful in this environment, and create an individual learning plan. This project is intended to identify both the strengths and weaknesses of online learners, which are the greatest predictors of success in online education (SmarterMeasure, 2013). Educational institutes that offer this pre-

orientation workshop are expected to increase the likelihood of success of their adult learners seeking to enroll in their first online course.

The pre-orientation workshop session will be focused on adult learners seeking to take their first online course. This half-day session will be offered online and will cover module topics that introduce students to online learning, its technology, and available resources. Participating learners will be orientated on online readiness assessments and complete self-assessments. The workshop will conclude with a module discussing online services and resources and will then create individual learning plans for online success. Upon completion, an evaluation survey will be distributed for learners' feedback. The pre-orientation workshop is expected to function as a valuable assessor for gauging potential online learners' readiness, which prepares them to effectively expand upon their knowledge and skills and obtain a college degree.

Rationale

The general problem addressed by this study is a lack of success and higher than expected attrition rates of adult learners enrolled in online higher education courses. Efforts to improve the success of students enrolled in online classes are becoming widespread (Jessup-Anger, 2011; Kuh, 2007). Researchers have suggested identifying and offering support services as effective retention strategies for higher education institutions (Brock, 2010; Drake, 2011). Noel-Levitz's (2011) study of 2-year and 4-year institutions found that 99% of responding 4-year institutions identified academic support programs or services as one of the top three most effective retention strategies; however, only 30% of the responding private institutions reported using retention programs

targeting adult and or nontraditional learners. Many of these students are hypothesized to have enrolled in online courses without fully understanding the challenges of online learning.

This doctoral study found that student success in online courses has been linked to time management, self-directed learning, computer and technical skills, and online communication skills. Developing and implementing a required pre-orientation workshop session will address these findings by providing the adult learners with, knowledge of online learning and an awareness of its challenges. The workshop will also assess their readiness for online learning and help the online learners understand the skills required to be successful in an online learning environment. Institutions that incorporate these types of orientation programs and workshops not only provide students with additional support in increasing their persistence in online courses, but also gives them the opportunity to address the needs of the student (Palmer, Bonner, & Garland, 2008). Offering this workshop will also align with Camutu's (2012) estimate that 72% of the higher educational institutions in the United States have required orientation programs or workshops that aid in student retention. This doctoral study's findings supported the need for implementing a required pre-orientation workshop session for adult learners seeking to take their first online course. This workshop was designed to provide the institution with information on adult learners who are more likely to succeed in an online learning environment.

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review was to gather data to support the use of orientation programs or similar pre-entry success intervention programs or workshops, such as the proposed pre-orientation workshop for this project, as a means for addressing attrition rates in online courses. I used scholarly books, journals, and the Walden University online library databases to locate related research. Most of the online research originated from Education Research Complete, ProQuest, Academic Research Complete, Google Scholar, academic journals, and periodicals. Boolean terms and the phrases used for searching academic and scholarly peer-reviewed journals included: orientation program, orientation planning, orientation workshops, new student orientation, and orientation seminars.

A failure to assess one's own abilities to function in the online environment is a key issue that needs to be addressed. The ability to provide support to the new online adult learner is also important. Multiple studies have shown that orientation programs are effective in helping students get off to a good start, as well as increasing retention and graduation rates. Orientation programs help students understand the requirements of the program, the tools needed to be successful in the program, and often introduce students to the faculty and support services the students will be working with (Gilmore & Lyons, 2012). Without a proper online orientation before enrolling in an online course, adult learners are likely to experience apprehension regarding expectations, time commitment, skill needed to be successful, and many other factors involved in a technological environment. In an online program, students may require additional support to be

successful, and an orientation program is one way to provide that additional support (Adkins & Bryant, 2011; Allen & Seaman, 2013; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Hunte, 2012). Having an orientation program can assist adult learners with transitioning from anxiety to confidence in the online learning environment (Carruth et al., 2010, p. 687).

Studies have shown that colleges and universities in the United States are struggling with student retention and attrition issues (Derby & Smith, 2004; Jacobs & Archie, 2008). Early or pre-entry success programs and orientation seminars can help address these issues. These orientation seminars are very important for retaining first-year students, and additionally hold the potential for improving students' persistence in college (Hossler, Ziskin, Moore III, & Wakhungu, 2008). The program's design, format, timing, and delivery all contribute to making an effective and valuable agenda for addressing college attrition. Designing a program using experiential education as the focus is an effective technique in increasing retention (Jacobs & Archie, 2008) and when planned correctly, the program can aid new students, parents, faculty, staff, administration, and current students (Lee, 2012).

Pre-entry courses have repeatedly proven to be a key factor in the students' success in college and maintaining high college retention rates. Even at the local college where this project was completed, online students must complete an online orientation before they can access their online course. Duggan and Williams (2011) reiterated that, "community colleges...should design better orientation courses, hopefully leading to even higher rates of persistence" (p. 133). The focus on the study's problem of online persistence called for a pre-entry success program designed to reduce attrition.

Adding to the literature on student success, pre-entry programs are gaining popularity in colleges and universities. Thomas (2011) reiterated that there is a need for pre-entry initiatives to prepare students for new academic experiences that contribute to improved retention rates and students' success in higher education. Thomas conducted a study on a pre-entry program called Aimhigher to evaluate its impact on student retention and success in higher education. Without adequate preparation, college students may enter a higher education institution without the proper skills to remain enrolled in the, oftentimes, more challenging courses. The objective for Aimhigher was to shape students' expectation of higher education life, so they were equipped for a new and successful academic experience (Thomas, 2011). Thomas found that pre-entry activities such as Aimhigher impacted choices and decisions prior to entry in college and thus have a positive impact on student retention.

During orientation, students should be fully aware of the issues and challenges that deter integration in college. Institutions that are aware of these issues are now introducing students to college by offering a seminar as part of the first year experience. Abrams and Lunsford (2011) studied a freshman program called the Longwood Seminar. The Longwood Seminar was designed by the school to meet institutional needs and was regarded as important for retaining first year students. The objectives of the seminar were to provide lessons on study skills, time management, personal responsibility, critical thinking, and active citizenship. Although no quantitative data were collected, Abrams and Lunsford (2011) stated that the seminar "Introduced first year students to college life and gives them tools to succeed in college" (p. 274). The objectives strengthened the

student's educational abilities, and this fostered academic success and college completion. Lee (2012) agreed that orientation programs serve as a foundation for success and even strengthens the students' persistence in college.

Implementation

This section includes a discussion of the needed resources, existing supports, and potential barriers for implementing the project. In addition, it presents a proposal for implementing the project, and provides a timetable. Lastly, I discuss the roles and responsibilities of the participants involved in the project.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

To implement a pre-orientation workshop for adult learners prior to enrolling in their first online course, ABC University must allocate the resources needed. The plan would be to recruit experienced student services advisors and/or online instructors as facilitators who would conduct the workshop sessions. The institution must ensure that fixed dates prior to the start of each term are set. A virtual platform would be needed for conducting the online session. The virtual platform must be equipped with technology to support a PowerPoint presentation, be able to allow for file transfers and downloads, audio and video, and be able to conduct online surveys. Lastly, a financial budget must allocate cost for these resources, materials, and technology requirements.

Potential Barriers

Whenever there is an implementation of a project, the project developer yearns for success and full support; however, it is not always a realistic expectation. Potential barriers may arise if budget increases are predicted because of implementing any or all

aspects of the project. Although majority of the recommended resources do not appear to involve large amounts of funding, ABC University may assess the recommendation differently and determine the budget impact is too great, especially in economically challenging times.

Proposal for Implementation and Timetable

According to Roper, Hall, and White (2011), an implementation plan describes important steps that guide a project and unearths any challenges during the early stages of development. In addition, an implementation plan should offer timelines for various activities. The recommended plan is to offer the pre-orientation workshop prior to the fall 2015 term. The development of this proposed project would begin in the summer term of 2015. The suggested timeline has been provided in Appendix A. The findings from this study and recommendations will be presented to the dean of first-year student success. After the findings have been submitted, the dean will solicit the supportive representatives from student services and faculty. This action should take no longer than one week. Once the representatives have been identified, an initial preparation meeting will take place.

During the first initial meeting, the study's findings will be presented, the purpose and goals of the pre-orientation workshop will be evaluated and key stakeholders who will be responsible for ensuring that follow-up meetings occur will have a chance to review the data. After the follow-up meeting occurs, discussions should be budget focused and inspect any possible impacts to current programs and student services. The final meeting should be established to discuss any additional resources needed. Appendix

A provides suggested topics for each meeting held. After the representatives have conducted the final meeting, the dean of first-year student success will collaborate with the institution's information technology department to make the necessary technology requests and arrangements before the first pre-orientation workshop.

Roles and Responsibilities

If the institution decides to implement the pre-orientation workshop as a part of its online enrollment process, the department representatives, dean, and prospective online adult learners must continuously fulfill their roles. The dean of first-year student success will be responsible for implementing the pre-orientation workshop and collecting, analyzing, and reporting the evaluation results. The department representatives will be responsible for verifying the accuracy of the information provided in the workshop's PowerPoint presentation each time a session is conducted. The workshop facilitators will ensure that they are familiar and knowledgeable of the content materials in the PowerPoint presentation. The prospective online students will be responsible for attending the pre-orientation workshop prior to enrolling in their first online course.

Project Evaluation

Program evaluation refers to carefully collecting information about a program to determine its worth and to make recommendations for programmatic refinement and success (Spaulding, 2008). Spaulding (2008) stated that when programs are being implemented for the first time, feedback is especially important to the developers and staff. A summative survey will be used to gather information on the perceptions and reactions to the pre-orientation workshop from the prospective online learners. The

results from the summative evaluation will determine if changes are needed to enhance the effectiveness of the pre-orientation workshop.

The evaluation will take place at the end of the final module of the workshop session. Adult learners who participate in the pre-orientation workshop will receive an invitation from the presentation facilitator to take part in an online evaluation. The evaluation will ask the adult learners whether the pre-orientation session objectives were met, whether or not the presenters were knowledgeable of the content, and how valuable the session was to them. Results from the evaluations will be analyzed and changes made, where possible, to enhance proposed outcomes. A final report, including a list of those key stakeholders who participated in the workshop, evaluation results, and recommendations, should be submitted to the dean of first-year student success.

Implications Including Social Change

The rate at which institutions of higher education are offering online courses has been growing steadily for several years (Allen & Seaman, 2011) with the proportion of fully online programs growing even faster. Indeed, online programs offered by traditional public and private nonprofit institutions will soon match those from solely online institutions. However, unless ABC University and others like it make a concerted effort to improve students' online experience and ensure success in an affordable manner, institutions that rely on online learners may well begin to lose their primary student base.

Local Community

The pre-orientation workshop objective is to supply adult learners with the information needed to be successful in an online learning environment prior to the adult

learners enrolling in their first online course. Adult learners attending the pre-orientation workshop could positively impact the local community by addressing retention rates with online courses. By addressing online adult learners' retention via a required pre-orientation workshop, university officials may potentially increase the amount of revenue for the institution while decreasing the amount of lost funds due to adult learners dropping out of or withdrawing from online courses. Additional benefits will include (a) students' ability to identify areas of weaknesses and strengths, (b) university administrations' awareness of students' areas of difficulty, (c) institutions' implementation of other support services to help these students, and (d) the ability of online instructional designers to update their online instructional course portals.

Far-Reaching Implications

This study has even greater implications for social change. Institutions like ABC University serve a nontraditional student base, often comprised of adult learners who would not otherwise be able to obtain a higher education degree. Without the support such students need, they risk attrition from school: even worse, they risk the likelihood of never receiving a degree at all. This project offers such students the comprehensive support that they need to succeed. This study contributes to the discussion of high attrition rates among adult online learners and provides a possible solution by offering new students a pre-orientation workshop for online learning prior to their first online course. The project may provide another step toward identifying success with first-time online adult learners and, overall, improving the retention rate.

Conclusion

Getting a college education is a dream of many adult learners. Entering and, most importantly, staying in college and completing an educational program, however, can be a challenge. The findings of this study resulted in recommending a pre-orientation workshop to online learners prior to taking their first online and orientation course. The workshop session will provide online students with information on their strengths and weaknesses in online learning and provide the learners with an understanding of the challenges they must overcome to increase their chances of academic success. Success means overcoming obstacles and completing an online college course with a passing grade. Hopefully these online students would then be ready to incorporate their newly acquired educational skills with future online courses and help lower online student attrition rates.

Section 4 of this study reflects on the project's strengths and limitations and includes recommendations for addressing the problem in a different manner. It also presents my insights about scholarship, project development, and leadership, as well as my personal reflections about being a scholar, a practitioner, and a project developer. The section ends with an overall reflection and a summary of the study's implications, applications, and directions for future research. Section 4 concludes this scholarly project.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

Section 4 contains a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the readiness assessment tool designed to give the adult learner insight into the likelihood of success with online courses. This section also lists my recommendations for strategies to address the problem in a different manner. In addition, I discuss scholarship, project development and evaluation, leadership and change, and my own personal insights. Furthermore, I present a general overview and reflection on the importance of the study and its implications for future research.

Project Strengths

The strength of this project is its message to the administration of ABC University: Adult learners' level of online readiness affects their GPA, retention, time-to-degree completion, and overall online success. This project will bring needed attention to the problem of online attrition and may heighten the likelihood of incorporating the pre-orientation workshop into student enrollment practices.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

In terms of addressing the problem, the project is in its initial phase. It would need to be accepted by the university's administration before the plan could actually address the problem of online students' success. Obviously, the fact that the project is just a proposal limits the extent to which it addresses the problem. If the program is not adopted, then the problem of low online success levels and the accompanying high attrition rates will persist at the university under study.

New and piloted workshops are developed often, however, there are challenges that occur when developing and implementing such workshops. One limitation of the pre-orientation workshop is that it requires all incoming prospective online students to participate in the face-to-face workshop if they plan to enroll in an online course at ABC University. Due to the many external factors that adult learners typically manage outside of getting an education, they could potentially be discouraged by this restriction and choose not to attend the university. A recommendation to remedy this limitation would be to create an online resource center that would house all recorded workshop sessions. The on-demand recorded workshop sessions would potentially give the adult learners flexibility in getting the information needed prior to enrolling in their first online course.

Another limitation that may be associated with the project study would be the possibility of additional duties that the facilitators and representatives from the targeted department areas would have to assume for each pre-orientation workshop. All stakeholders will be required to adjust their schedules and workload to attend the meetings revolving around, prepare for, and participate in the pre-orientation sessions. A recommendation would be to adjust the stakeholder's job description to reflect the additional duties required for continuous implementation of this project.

Scholarship

Over the course of the project study, I have learned a great deal regarding scholarly research. The need for patience was certainly the most challenging lesson during the research process. As a researcher, I understand that strict processes are in place so that degree attainment means more than simply completing the requirements of the

program. It means understanding that the scientific process can be unpredictable and that planning is crucial to ensure that, when obstacles arise, the research itself is not affected.

I learned that scholarship involves an inquisitive nature, investigative skills, and perseverance. The knowledge that I acquired from this study has led me to realize that research is a never-ending journey; there is always more to know. When researching one topic, I discovered links to other ideas, concepts, and theories. The more I researched, the more I noticed a narrative developing among the links. I began my study by addressing the problem of higher education institutions with a strong online learning presence and had problems with retention rates in their online courses. I then wanted to know what was being done about the high attrition rates throughout the higher education online learning community and, more importantly, what could be done to alleviate this problem at the local school in this study. Through this exploration, I discovered a sense of community among researchers. When reading a peer-reviewed article by one author, I was introduced to other key researchers in the field. These scholarly inquiries led to my presentation of the literature reviews.

Not only did I demonstrate scholarship through extensive research, but I also exhibited scholarship when analyzing the data and presenting the findings. I learned how to perform inductive data analysis by searching for patterns of meaning in data. I also learned how to use open coding to segment the data into categories to identify themes.

Furthermore, I learned that the process of data analysis in qualitative research must be thorough enough to ensure that accurate findings are presented. Creswell (2007) suggested analyzing various sources of data; therefore, I demonstrated scholarship by

analyzing interviews, questionnaires, observations, and field notes. Moreover, I learned the importance of triangulation and member-checking procedures to address threats to validity.

The review of the literature was a valuable element of the research process as well. The literature guided my steps and supported my efforts toward designing a solution. The scholarship involved in designing and creating this project study provided support that will ultimately affect online adult learners, university administration, and faculty.

Project Development and Evaluation

The idea for this study emerged from many years of working in higher education administration with a student base that consisted mostly of online adult learners. I learned that, in developing a project, there must be a clearly defined purpose, clearly stated goals, a project plan, a detailed timeline, and an evaluation plan. I remained excited about the possible project that might arise from my findings and subsequent project literature review. Conducting the literature review was the least complicated step in developing the project.

The next hurdle in the process was collecting and analyzing the data to develop themes that may aid in finding a solution to the problem. The most challenging part of this research was trying to obtain enough responses to the survey and interview questions and then deciding upon the information that should be included and the method for displaying the findings accurately. Reflecting on the process of completing the project

presented another level of difficulty as I strove to choose particular information that would constitute evidence of my growth as an online adult learner.

The evaluation of the study will determine how well the assessment tool serves as a predictor of online success with first-time online students. The results from the assessment will provide some insights into the impact and effectiveness of the instrument by tracking outcomes of student attrition and retention rates, changes in the course and program development, and changes in the support services in correlation with the survey results. Because of this study, educational professionals will continue their efforts to improve instructional practices in the online learning environment.

Leadership and Change

I demonstrated leadership in my role by addressing an issue in the online community that has affected many higher education institutions. This project is all encompassing for me because I believe strongly in its ability to improve not just retention rates but overall experiences for students at ABC University: students who stand on a frontier of higher education. I have learned, though, that even in online-based settings, where educational changes are often driven more by cost-per-student or return on investment than on pedagogy, the process of change is slow. No matter who the stakeholders are—students, staff, faculty, or administrators—without the support of a network of leadership, programs will not improve.

Often, the word change is met with resistance. Indeed, change is frequently viewed as a negative aspect; however, without change, there can be no growth. Change will occur because new knowledge and skills will be obtained. As such, organizational

learning may occur when this new readiness assessment tool is incorporated into the new online student's enrollment process. Institutional and educational changes may also occur as new online adult learners persist in their online courses. From this study, I learned that, through change, individuals can achieve positive results when they are willing to step out of their comfort zones and try something new and bold. The key to effective change is having passion, conviction, determination, drive, and resilience.

Analysis of Self as a Scholar

Through my work on this doctoral study and through the research I conducted, I remained aware of the current trends in education through scholarly educational texts, journal articles, and websites. I learned that I am driven to acquire new information and knowledge and truly enjoy the research process. On several occasions, I spent hours researching information then, before I realized it, the entire day had passed. I believe that my years as a school administrator provided me with a unique perspective into the study. In the future, I hope that my insight will assist in bringing to light information that will facilitate positive social change in the focus areas of this study. Overall, I learned that I could now consider myself a scholar.

Analysis of Self as a Practitioner

As a practitioner, I learned that being a higher education administrator and online instructor means being a lifelong learner. I must be open to learning new instructional strategies, best practices, and the latest trends in education, so I can be a valued contributor to the online community. Engaging in research that targets online student improvement is very satisfying. The research conducted for this project enabled me to

learn and implement multiple approaches, data collection methods, and data analysis tools. My role as a practitioner in the online learning community has become quite significant, as I have continued to evolve and grow in my new role as a researcher. It is my desire to continue to grow in practice, so I may be viewed as a researcher who will develop and pursue other projects that promote the field of online education.

Analysis of Self as a Project Developer

The skills I acquired through my experience as a higher education administrator and online instructor enabled me to develop the study. The study's findings prompted me to develop a pre-orientation workshop that would assist students in obtaining the knowledge, guidance, and training support needed to be successful in an online learning environment. The development of the pre-orientation workshop for online learners may help to reduce the attrition and dropout rates commonly seen in the online learning environment. This study gave me confidence as a researcher, showing me that I can make recommendations to improve professional practice in higher education. This is no small accomplishment for any student or professional in higher education. As my confidence increases along with my emerging competence as a researcher, I can become an even better, more productive project developer.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

As I reflect on my journey to obtaining this doctoral degree, I appreciate my Walden instructors and project chairs who have been instrumental in assisting with this study. As I reflect on what I have learned throughout this experience, I realize that the greatest lesson is that those who work in higher education and online learning, acquire an

enriching professional development experience when they are allowed to generate their own professional development. This critical process called for patience, diligence and persistence.

Regarding the importance of research data, I knew it was vital to collect data to support the study's research questions. During this important phase, I learned to collect and analyze data while maintaining an unbiased attitude. These skills helped me to understand the different perspectives of online student participants and to be open to criticisms and critiques. I recognized a current issue in education, verified the existence of a problem, and found a solution. The solution was a readiness assessment tool designed to be a predictor of online success with adult learners prior to them enrolling in their first online course. This work is essential to higher education institutions and their administrators: it will allow them to better understand and meet the needs of their online students, and help them increase the retention rates of online courses.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Online courses in higher education institutions have grown tremendously: in the fall of 2010, more than 6 million students enrolled in at least one online course in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Higher education institutions and administrators should ensure that institutional support is available for online students. Research and statistics have shown that students taking online courses are more likely to drop out or fail, which accounts for distance learners' higher attrition rates when compared to their counterparts enrolled in traditional courses (Allen & Seaman, 2011). A pre-orientation workshop for first-time online students prior to enrollment in online courses would

provide those students with information regarding their likelihood of success with online learning. The implication is that, without this institutional support, online attrition rates would increase. Allowing online students to know their strengths and weaknesses regarding online learning before enrolling in a course, could lead to positive results and an increase in online retention, not only for the local university in this study, but for other higher education institutions as well. Implementing the readiness assessment tool successfully will help administrators, parents, educators, students, and society.

Future Research

This project was initiated due to the problem of high attrition rates in online courses among higher education institutions. As a solution, I proposed the development and implementation of a pre-orientation workshop for first-time online students prior to them enrolling in their initial online course. The study targeted factors and characteristics that deter online retention in the hope that the institution would identify those students likely to achieve success in an online environment and help them reach their goals of success.

For further research, I recommend conducting a longitudinal study to consider factors that influence the persistence and retention of students. This study was a three-term snapshot of students in online courses. Through a longitudinal approach, a study could be replicated for at least a year and could obtain data over a longer period of time. The data collected would provide valuable information regarding patterns or consistent attributes observed from time to time in the online setting. Those findings could

supplement or add credence to this study, further promoting educational awareness of online attrition rates.

Another recommendation for further research would be to conduct an expanded study to include the entire online population at the local university in this study. This project had a limited online population, selected from only one online course. With a wider scope and greater participation, the research would cover all departments and all online courses. The data collected would include a wider variety of courses. Broadening the database in the study would increase the representation, and thus the sample results could be generalized to the population with greater confidence. Such research could then be applied not only to online educational institutions, but also to primary, secondary and postsecondary environments, as well as to the professional development and training fields.

Conclusion

The final section of this study reflected on the project's strengths and limitations and discussed recommendations for addressing the problem in a different manner. Also included was a discussion and analysis regarding what I, the primary researcher learned about scholarship, project development, and leadership. Additionally, I learned about being a scholar, practitioner and project developer. The reflection section ended with an overall consideration, assessment and a summary of the study's implications, applications, and directions for future research. Section 4 concludes this scholarly project.

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Appendix A: The Project

Title of Workshop Session: Online Readiness and Pre-Student Orientation (ORSO)

Purpose: The purpose of this project is to provide a pre-orientation workshop session that incorporates a readiness assessment tool for online learning as a part of its presentation. The pre-orientation online workshop session will be offered before potential students take their first online course.

Goals: The goal of the project is to assist students in obtaining the knowledge, guidance, and training support needed to be successful in an online learning environment.

Desired Outcomes: The desired outcome is the workshop session will aid the students in assessing their readiness level for online learning and identifying the skills required to be successful.

Target Audience: The target audience is adult learners seeking to take their first online course.

Length of workshop: A half-day session

Session Activities: Specific activities include the session materials, readiness assessment tool, and evaluation processes.

Implementation Plan: The first step in implementation the pre-orientation workshop is getting the support. The dean of first-year student success will host a meeting, soliciting representatives from the following department areas: academic advising and student services, registration services, faculty services, and information technology services. Once representatives have been identified, implementation meetings will take place. Suggested implantation meeting time and content is listed below:

Week 1: Dean of first-year student success solicits representatives from key department areas.

Week 2: Initial implementation meeting takes place.

- Present project study findings
- Discuss objectives of the pre-orientation workshop
- Discuss spending the next two weeks gathering information based on the topics to be covered in the pre-orientation workshop modules
- Schedule follow-up meetings
- Answer questions

Week 4: Follow-up meeting takes place.

- Review notes from initial meeting
- Present information that will serve as content for the workshop PowerPoint modules
- Discuss if additional resources are needed
- Schedule meeting with information technology (IT) department to discuss workshop technology requirements
- Schedule final meeting
- Answer questions

Week 5: Final meeting

- Review notes from previous meeting
- Discuss any additional resources needed
- Discuss IT requirements for workshop

- Schedule pre-orientation workshop date
- Answer questions

Week 7: Pre-Orientation Workshop is offered

Workshop Session Plan: The session plan provides an outline and roadmap for the workshop.

Session Objectives: At the end of the workshop, the students will be able to do the following:

1. Gain an increase in knowledge and awareness of online learning and its challenges
2. Assess their readiness level for online learning
3. Understand the skills that are needed to be successful in an online learning environment
4. Create an individual learning plan for success

Objective	Content	Time	Methodology	Resources
Welcome	Opening remarks			
Students Login		8:00 am		
10 minutes	Statement/discussion		Facilitator	
Introductions	Introduction of facilitators and guest presenters	8:10 am		
15 minutes	Statement/discussion		Facilitator and guest presenters	
Housekeeping	Establish ground rules for the online session	8:25 am		
5 minutes	Discussion/Questions		Facilitator	
Workshop Objectives	Discuss Objectives	8:30 am		
5 minutes	Discussion		Facilitator	
Agenda Overview	Workshop agenda for the half-day session is covered			8:35 am
10 minutes	Statement/discussion		Facilitator	
Break		8:45 am		
15 minutes				
Module 1	Cover Module 1: Introduction to Online Learning	9:00 am		
30 minutes	Online module lecture		Facilitator/guest presenter	
Module 2	Cover Module 2: Online Learning Technology and Tools	9:30 am		
30 minutes	Online module lecture		Facilitator/guest presenter	
Module 3	Cover Module 3: Online Readiness Assessment	10:00 am		
30 minutes	Online module lecture and assessment questionnaire		Facilitator/guest presenter	
Break		10:30 am		
15 minutes				
Module 4	Cover Module 4: Online Services and Resources	11:00 am		
30 minutes	Online module lecture		Facilitator/guest presenter	
Module 5	Cover Module 5: Individual Learning Plan for Online Success	11:30 am		
30 minutes	Online module lecture		Facilitator/guest presenter	
Module 6				
Session	Cover Module 6: Summarize session, answer questions, and distribute online evaluation survey	12:00 pm		
45 minutes – 1 hour	Session discussion			
Employ and collect online evaluation surveys				Facilitator/guest presenter
Session Concludes		1:00 pm		

The following is the PowerPoint presentation for the workshop

Welcome to Online Readiness and Pre-Student Orientation Workshop

Welcome

- ▶ Welcome
- ▶ Introductions
- ▶ Housekeeping Rules for Online Workshop

Workshop Objectives

At the end of the workshop, the students will be able to:

- ▶ Gain an increase in knowledge and awareness of online learning
- ▶ Understand the skills that are needed to be successful in an online learning environment
- ▶ Assess their readiness level for online learning
- ▶ Create an individual learning plan for online success

Workshop Agenda

- Module 1: Introduction to Online Learning
- Module 2: Online Learning Technology and Tools
- Module 3: Online Readiness Assessment
- Module 4: Online Services and Resources
- Module 5: Individual Learning Plan for Online Success
- Module 6: Evaluation and Feedback

Break

15 minute break

Module 1: Introduction to Online Learning

- ▶ The emergence of online learning in higher education
- ▶ Online delivery of concepts essential to students' success
- ▶ Benefits
 - ▶ Convenience
 - ▶ Cost Effective
 - ▶ Consistency
- ▶ Characteristics of successful online students
 - ▶ Self-directed/Self-discipline
 - ▶ Self-motivated
 - ▶ Communicate effectively
 - ▶ Proficient in navigating with online technology

Discuss the research and data to support the increase in adult students taking online courses in higher education. Then, discuss characteristics of successful online learners with examples of each characteristic.

Module 1: Introduction to Online Learning

- ▶ Characteristics of unsuccessful online students
 - ▶ Procrastinations
 - ▶ Do not set goals for themselves
 - ▶ Do not take responsibility for the learning process
 - ▶ Weak online/computer skills
 - ▶ Poor communication skills

To better understand how to become successful, let's take a look at five characteristics of the unsuccessful student.

Module 1: Introduction to Online Learning

- ▶ An Online Student is Expected to:
 - ▶ Participate in online class 5-7 days a week
 - ▶ Be able to work with others in completing projects
 - ▶ Be able to use the technology
 - ▶ Be able to meet the minimum standards as set forth by the college
 - ▶ Be able to complete assignments on time
 - ▶ Enjoy communicating in writing

Module 2: Online Learning Technology and Tools

- ▶ Students taking online courses will utilize Blackboard E-Learning Platform.
- ▶ Online courses are taught using a combination of instructional technologies which will vary for each course: PowerPoint presentations, video tutorials, learning activities on the Web, discussion board, and research using the Library or the Web.
- ▶ Online learning is not for everyone and only you can make the right decision for yourself. Please use the following tools to help you identify the chances of having a successful online learning experience (Place tool link here).

Module 3: Online Readiness Assessment

- ▶ **Assessment:** Complete a 30-min online assessment to determine their readiness level for online learning
- ▶ **Assessment Analysis:** After completing the assessment, take a look of your assessment result and analysis of your strong and weak areas for improvements. Some reflection questions will be given.
- ▶ The questionnaire is for your benefit only. To find out whether online learning is right for you, please respond to these questions honestly. You **must** make a selection for each question to proceed with results! When you are finished, click on "submit" (Place assessment tool link here).

Before enrolling in an online course, you should first assess your readiness for stepping into the online learning environment. Your answers to the following questions will help you determine what you need to do to succeed at online learning. Post-assessment feedback will also provide you with information on what you can expect from an online course.

Break

15 minute break

Module 4: Online Services and Resources

- ▶ Types of online services support
 - ▶ Technical support
 - ▶ Self-help
 - ▶ Online maintenance information
 - ▶ Help desk
 - ▶ Virtual support
 - ▶ Online inquiry
 - ▶ Live chat

Students need to know and understand that they are not alone in the online classroom. Help is available, and the college offers similar resources to a campus class. For example, links to help desk and live chat can turn a potential dropout student into a passing grade student. Many online students are not aware of these resources. Computer technical support is also available.

Module 4: Online Services and Resources

- ▶ Type so of resources:
 - ▶ System resources - Download computer resources like internet explorer, Acrobat Reader, and flash Player
 - ▶ Institutional resources – Information on advising, bookstore, counseling, financial aid, library, student records, testing centers, tutoring, and career service are available (Provide link below).

Module 5: Individual Learning Plan for Online Success

- ▶ Students will write a learning plan on how they will improve their online study readiness level based on the assessment results in order to succeed in their future online courses
 - ▶ List 5 top priorities in order to access success in your online course
 - ▶ Strategy to accomplish them
 - ▶ Establish a timeline

Learning Plan Outline: Students will be requested to draft an action oriented learning plan outline to improve their online learning readiness level based on the assessment results. The outline should contain at least five top priorities, strategy to accomplish them, and a timeline.

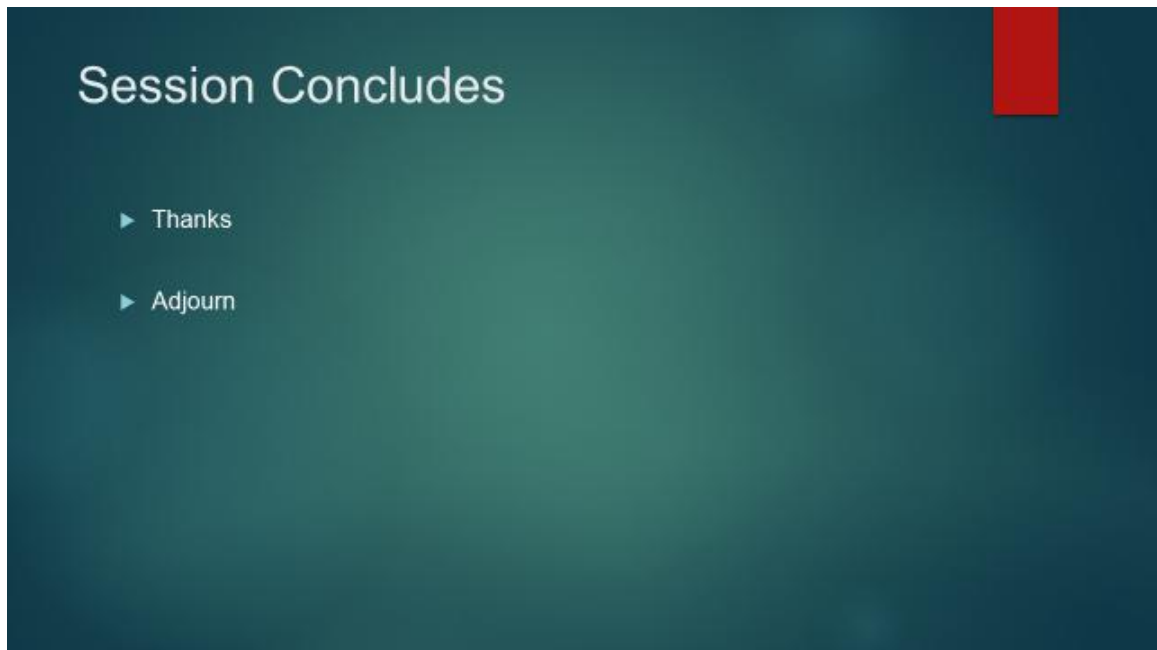
Module 6: Session Wrap-up

- ▶ Closing Comments
- ▶ Question and Answer
- ▶ Closing remarks

Workshop Evaluations

- ▶ Evaluation
 - ▶ Give instruction on completing the evaluation
 - ▶ Submit the survey
 - ▶ Collect survey responses
 - ▶ Store survey for analysis

The survey questions that the students answer are related to the effectiveness of the program. They are collected and stored for analysis and future recommendations on the program.



Evaluation: This evaluation will be conducted at the end of the pre-orientation workshop session. The facilitator will provide adult learners with the short evaluation survey.

Based upon the responses to the summative evaluations, presenters will be able to identify necessary changes needed in order for workshop session to be effective in the future. A suggested summative evaluation instrument has been provided below:

INSTRUCTIONS: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

Ratings on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree)

1. The workshop objectives were clearly stated and met.
2. The workshop was well organized.
3. I will be able to use what I have learned in this workshop.
4. The facilitator was well prepared.

Additional questions:

5. What did you like most about this workshop?
6. What did you like least about this workshop?

Appendix B: Walden University IRB Approval E-mail

Dear Mr. Wright,

This e-mail is to notify you that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) has approved your application for the study entitled, "Identifying Successful Online Adult Learners," conditional upon the approval of the community research partner, as documented in the IRB notification of approval or exemption. Walden's IRB approval only goes into effect once the Walden IRB confirms receipt of that IRB notification.

Your approval # is 04-07-14-0135219. You will need to reference this number in your doctoral study and in any future funding or publication submissions. Also attached to this e-mail is the IRB approved consent form. Please note, if this is already in an on-line format, you will need to update that consent document to include the IRB approval number and expiration date.

Your IRB approval expires on April 6, 2015. One month before this expiration date, you will be sent a Continuing Review Form, which must be submitted if you wish to collect data beyond the approval expiration date.

Please note that this letter indicates that the IRB has approved your research. You may NOT begin the research phase of your doctoral study, however, until you have received the **Notification of Approval to Conduct Research** e-mail. Once you have received this notification by e-mail, you may begin your data collection. Your IRB approval is contingent upon your adherence to the exact procedures described in the final version of the IRB application materials that have been submitted as of this date. This includes maintaining your current status with the university. Your IRB approval is only valid while you are an actively enrolled student at Walden University. If you need to take a leave of absence or are otherwise unable to remain actively enrolled, your IRB approval is suspended. Absolutely NO participant recruitment or data collection may occur while a student is not actively enrolled.

If you need to make any changes to your research staff or procedures, you must obtain IRB approval by submitting the IRB Request for Change in Procedures Form. You will receive confirmation with a status update of the request within 1 week of submitting the change request form and are not permitted to implement changes prior to receiving approval. Please note that Walden University does not accept responsibility or liability for research activities conducted without the IRB's approval, and the University will not accept or grant credit for student work that fails to comply with the policies and procedures related to ethical standards in research.

When you submitted your IRB application, you made a commitment to communicate both discrete adverse events and general problems to the IRB within 1 week of their occurrence/realization. Failure to do so may result in invalidation of data, loss of academic credit, and/or loss of legal protections otherwise available to the researcher.

Both the Adverse Event Reporting form and Request for Change in Procedures form can be obtained at the IRB section of the Walden web site or by e-mailing irb@waldenu.edu: http://inside.waldenu.edu/c/Student_Faculty/StudentFaculty_4274.htm

Researchers are expected to keep detailed records of their research activities (i.e., participant log sheets, completed consent forms, etc.) for the same period of time they retain the original data. If, in the future, you require copies of the originally submitted IRB materials, you may request them from Institutional Review Board.

Both students and faculty are invited to provide feedback on this IRB experience at the link below:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=qHBJzkJMUx43pZegKlmdiQ_3d_3d

Sincerely,

Jenny Sherer, M.Ed., CIP

Associate Director

Office of Research Ethics and Compliance

irb@waldenu.edu

Phone: [612-312-1341](tel:612-312-1341)

Fax: [626-605-0472](tel:626-605-0472)

Office address for Walden University:

100 Washington Avenue South

Suite 900

Minneapolis, MN 55401

Appendix C: Walden IRB Extension Approval E-mail

Dear Mr. Wright,

This e-mail serves to inform you that your request to have an extension for the study # 04-07-14-0135219 has been approved. You thus have one year to gather the data for your study and your new expiration date is March 18, 2016. One month before this expiration date, you will be sent a Continuing Review Form, which must be submitted if you need to collect data beyond the new approval expiration date. Also attached to this e-mail is the revised consent form which contains the new IRB expiration date. If this consent form is already in an on-line format it will need to be revised to reflect the new expiration date.

Both students and faculty are invited to provide feedback on this IRB experience at the link below:

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=qHBJzkJMUx43pZegKlmdiQ_3d_3d

**Sincerely,
Libby Munson
Research Ethics Support Specialist
Office of Research Ethics and Compliance
irb@waldenu.edu
Fax: [626-605-0472](tel:626-605-0472)
Phone: [612-312-1283](tel:612-312-1283)**

**Office address for Walden University:
100 Washington Avenue South, Suite 900
Minneapolis, MN 55401**

Information about the Walden University Institutional Review Board, including instructions for application, may be found at this link:

<http://academicguides.waldenu.edu/researchcenter/orec>

Appendix D: ABC University's IRB Approval

Institutional Review Board

[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
[Redacted]

May 1, 2014

Mr. Les Wright
Doctoral Student
Waldon University

Outside Research Approval

Dear Mr. Wright,

The [Redacted] Institutional Review Board has finished an Administrative Review your of your application to conduct outside research at [Redacted] for: Identifying Successful Online Adult Learners (Protocol #201404008OR) and has approved your request.

This approval is good from May 1, 2014 until May 1, 2015. If you wish to continue your research after this date, you must complete and submit a request to continue. You are also responsible for immediately informing the Institutional Review Board of any changes to your protocol, or of any previously unforeseen risks to the research participants.

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Appendix E: Institution's E-mail to Participants

Dear Online [REDACTED] Student:

You are invited to take part in a doctoral dissertation study titled, "Identifying Successful Online Adult Learners." The researcher for this study is a doctoral student in the EdD (Higher Education & Adult Learning) program at Walden University. He is seeking online adult learners who are 19 years of age and older and who have or had enrolled in the [REDACTED] 1101 course from fall 2013 to present. This study is voluntary. If you decide to join the study now, you may opt out at any point.

The purpose of this study is to explore the factors and characteristics contributing to high attrition with adult learners in online education courses and identify methods and services that may improve student success. The study results will be used to design pre-orientation workshop that would identify the likelihood of success with adult learners in online learning. This information may give educators and administrators of online programs a better understanding of the resources online adult learners need and determine the most effective ways to increase success in an online environment.

Participants who choose to be in the study you will be asked to:

1. Complete and submit a confidential online 5-7 minute survey via a link provided in the consent form that is attached.
2. Participate in a 45-60 minute audio-recorded interview. The interviews will be conducted via conference telephone call during a time convenient for both the researcher and participant.
3. Review their data for accuracy and completeness prior to publication.

If you are interested participating in the study, please review the attached consent form and click on the survey link to begin.

Thanks for your support!

Appendix F: Revised Participant Consent Form/E-mail Attachment

Dear Online [REDACTED] Student:

You are invited to take part in a doctoral dissertation study titled, “Identifying Successful Online Adult Learners.” This study is being conducted by a researcher named Lester Wright, who is a doctoral student in the EdD (Higher Education & Adult Learning) program at Walden University. Lester Wright is an alum and former adjunct instructor of [REDACTED]. He is seeking online adult learners who are 19 years of age and older and who have or had enrolled in the [REDACTED] 1101 course from fall 2013 to present.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to explore the factors contributing to high attrition rates with adult learners in online education courses and identify methods and services that may improve student success. This project study will focus on the characteristics of successful levels of online adult learners who have taken an online course. Study results will be used to create a pre-orientation workshop that would identify the likelihood of success with adult learners in online learning. This information may give educators and administrators of online programs a better understanding of the resources online adult learners need and determine the most effective ways to increase success in an online environment.

Participants who choose to be in the study you will be asked to:

1. Complete and submit a confidential online 5 to 7 minute survey via a link provided at the end of this consent form.
2. Participate in a 45-60 minute interview session. The interviews will be conducted via conference telephone call during a time convenient for both the researcher and participant.
3. Review their data for accuracy and completeness prior to publication.

Here are some sample survey and interview questions:

1. Do you strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree that online adult students need to be provided with guidance or counseling to improve self-discipline, including time-management skills?
2. As an online adult student, have you ever dropped/withdrew from an online course?
3. Do you strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree that social interaction is important in an online course?

Voluntary Nature of the Study: This study is voluntary. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind during or after the study. You may stop at any time with no penalty.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study: Being in this type of study involves little risk and only the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as the extra work and time needed to complete the survey and be a part of the interview, possibly leading to added fatigue and stress. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or well-being.

This study may benefit you and your institution by improving student success in online learning environments. Data from the research will provide you with intimate knowledge of online learning because you will be a part of the study and its findings. You and/or your institution may benefit from the identification of best practices, lessons learned, obstacles, pitfalls, and recommendations for future implementation.

Payment: There will be no payments or reimbursements for your participation in this study.

Privacy: Any information you provide in the study will be confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. All electronic data will be secured on the researcher's password-protected computer and external backup hard drive. All written data and audio recordings will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years.

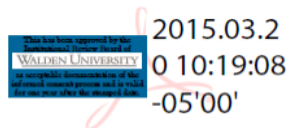
Contacts and Questions: For general questions about the study, you can contact the researcher at [REDACTED]. Questions about individual and participant's rights, you can contact Dr. Leilani Endicott at Walden University, **612-312-1210**. Walden University's approval number for this study is 04-07-14-0135219 and it expires on March 16, 2016.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By clicking on the link below, I am indicating, "I consent" and understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Please click on the link below to accept this invitation to participate in research:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/onlineAdultSurvey>



Appendix G: Survey and Interview Questions Pilot Study

Online Adult Student Survey and Interview Questions

Survey Questions

A doctoral student in the EdD (Higher Education & Adult Learning) program at Walden University is conducting a study exploring factors and characteristics contributing to high attrition rates with adult learners in online education courses. Study results will be used to create a readiness assessment tool designed to identify the likelihood of success with adult learners in online learning. This information may give educators and administrators of online programs a better understanding of the resources online adult learners need and determine the most effective ways to increase success in an online environment.

This survey will only take 15 to 20 minutes to complete and all responses to the survey will remain confidential. I do ask that you complete and submit the survey questions within 10 days of receipt of this request.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

NEXT Page starts questions

1. Please select one:

Gender:

Male	Female
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2. Please select your age group:

19-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 - and up

3. Please select your employment status:

Not Employed	Full-time	Part-time	Self-Employed		

4. Is TROY 1101 your first online course? Please select one:

Yes	No
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If no, approximately how many online courses have you taken?

5. Have you ever dropped/withdrawn from an online course? Please select one:
select one:

Yes	No

If yes, approximately how many online courses have you dropped or withdrew from?

6. If you are unable to complete this course or have dropped it previously, the major reasons will be/was ____? Please select one:

- a. No support from family, friends, and/or employer
- b. Course content was difficult
- c. Unable to effectively communicate/interact with fellow students
- d. Poor communication/interaction with the instructor
- e. Learning style preference (rather face-to-face classes)
- f. Not familiar with technical/structural class requirements
- g. No financial assistance available
- h. Other; please list _____

7. My skills are weak when it comes to completing the following Internet tasks:

- a. Navigating the Internet,
- b. Using e-mail----including attaching a file to an e-mail message

- c. Downloading a program from the Internet and installing it
 - d. Doing a search on the Web
 - e. All the above
 - f. None of the above, my internet skills are strong
8. Your major falls under which of the following academic college at the local university in the study? Please select one:

Sorrell College of Business	College of Arts & Sciences	College of Education	College of Communication & Fine Arts	College of Health & Human Services
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9. What is your current cumulative GPA range with the local university in this study?

4.0-3.5	3.4-3.0	2.9-2.5	2.4-2.0	1.9-1.5	1.5- and below
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INSTRUCTIONS: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

Ratings on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree)

- 10. My motivation for taking online course has decreased gradually.
- 11. I wished that I could take this course face-to-face instead of online.
- 12. I could not adapt to the distance education system.
- 13. It is easy to access resources in my online course.
- 14. Taking online courses will help me to advance in my career.
- 15. Social interaction is important in an online course.
- 16. I could not sufficiently utilize the communication tools (e.g. discussion list, chat, and e-mail).
- 17. My online course instructor responded to my questions within 48 hours.
- 18. I am a self-motivated and self-disciplined individual.
- 19. I am able to work independently with little direction.
- 20. I have good time-management skills that allow me to schedule specific times throughout a week to work on my online course.
- 21. I can effectively communicate any questions or concerns to my instructor.
- 22. I am not a procrastinator. I like to get things done today and not tomorrow.
- 23. I do not give up easily, even when confronted with obstacles.

24. I am comfortable spending five plus hours each week on a course to review course lectures/videos, complete course assignment, participate in chats and threaded discussions, etc.
25. I have basic computer skills and can use word processing software, download software, install software, use a web browser, etc.
26. I have access to a computer that is connected to the Internet and have a backup plan if something happens to my computer.
27. I am comfortable in a "virtual environment" – e-mail, sending attachments, threaded discussions, chat rooms, etc.
28. I seldom answer any questions from the instructor or interact much in class at all.
29. I am usually late turning assignments and homework.
30. My personal and professional schedule is unpredictable: I am seldom sure when I will have free time that I can set aside for my coursework.
31. I am not comfortable with the idea of discussing topics with online students I never meet or see.
32. I signed up for too many courses and had to cut down on my course load.
33. I am a procrastinator.
34. When I don't understand something, I am hesitant to ask the instructor for help.
35. I need to have someone set deadlines for me to get things done.
36. I am concerned with being successful in an online course.

If you would like to participate in a 10-questioned, 45-60 minute interview session, please select one:

Yes	No
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If yes, please call the toll-free number 1-877-222-9420 to set up a date and time for your interview.

Interview Questions

1. What were your general thoughts about online learning *prior* to enrolling in your online course(s)?
2. What do/did you enjoy about your online learning experience/class?
3. What do/did you dislike about your online learning experience/class?
4. By taking an online course, do you think that it had an effect on your time management during the term? If so, explain your response.
5. What factors you believe contributed most to your success (passing) or failure in your online course?
6. Have you ever been unsuccessful (failed) in an online course? If so, can you explain the reason why you did not successfully complete the course?
7. If you had the chance to tell someone else in your age group that was thinking about taking an online course, what would you feel would be important for them to know?

8. Were you aware of any resources or support services at the local university in this study that would have assisted you to know what you needed to take an online class?
9. What motivated you to take an online course(s)?
10. What skills (academic and technical) do you believe online learners need to have to be successful in an online classroom?

Appendix H: Survey and Interview Questions Phase Two

Online Adult Student Survey and Interview Questions Phase 2

Survey Questions

A doctoral student in the EdD (Higher Education & Adult Learning) program at Walden University is conducting a study exploring factors and characteristics contributing to high attrition rates with adult learners in online education courses. Study results may give educators and administrators of online programs a better understanding of the resources online adult learners need and determine the most effective ways to increase success in an online environment.

This survey will only take 5-7 minutes to complete and all responses to the survey will remain confidential. Please complete this survey within 1 week of receipt of this request.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

NEXT Page starts questions

1. Please select one:

Gender:

Male	Female
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2. Please select your age group:

19-24	25-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60 - and up

3. Please select your employment status:

Not Employed	Full-time	Part-time	Self-Employed		

4. Have you ever dropped/withdrawn from an online course? Please select one:

Yes	No

If yes, the major reason is/was_____?

5. What is your current cumulative GPA range?

4.0-3.5	3.4-3.0	2.9-2.5	2.4-2.0	1.9-1.5	1.5- and below
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INSTRUCTIONS: Please rate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements:

Ratings on a five-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree)

6. I am highly motivated to take an online course.
7. My personal schedule is unpredictable, which effects my ability to complete coursework.
8. My professional schedule is unpredictable, which effects my ability to complete coursework.
9. I prefer taking online course rather than face-to-face courses.
10. I can easily utilize the communication tools (e.g. discussion list, chat, and e-mail) in my online course.
11. I am a self-motivated individual (I do not give up easily, even when confronted with obstacles).
12. I have good time-management skills that allow me to complete my class assignments on time.
13. I can effectively communicate questions or concerns to my instructor.
14. I can effectively communicate with my classmates through discussion forums.
15. I spend between 5-10 hours per week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions. I spend between 11-20 hours per week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions.
16. I have difficulty handling the coursework for the courses I am enrolled in
17. I am a procrastinator (Why do today what I can put off until tomorrow).

18. I consider online courses more time consuming than face-to-face courses.
19. I am usually late turning assignments and homework.
20. I spend less than 5 hours a week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions.

If you would like to participate in a one-on-one interview, please provide your e-mail address to set up a date and time.

Interview Questions

1. Describe your opinion about online learning prior to enrolling in online course(s)?
2. What factors contribute most to your success (passing) in an online course?
3. Have you ever failed an online course? If so, what were the contributing factors?
4. Which skills (academic and technical) are important for successful online learning?
5. What characteristics do you think one must possess in order to be unsuccessful in an online environment?

Appendix I: Demographic Data for Survey Pilot Study

Demographic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	17	23
Female	57	77
Age		
19–24	9	12
25–29	17	23
30–39	20	27
40–49	15	20
50–59	10	14
60 and up	3	4
Employment status		
Not employed	20	27
Full-time	44	60
Part-time	8	11
Self-employed	2	2
GPA		
4.0 – 3.5	27	40
3.4 – 3.0	26	38
2.9 – 2.5	12	18
2.4 – 2.0	3	4
1.9 – 1.5	0	0
1.5 or below	6	8

Appendix J: Pilot Study Likert-scaled Questions 10–36

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
My motivation for taking online course has decreased gradually.	22% (16)	28% (21)	18% (13)	23% (17)	9% (7)
I wished that I could take this course face-to-face instead of online.	22% (16)	27% (20)	14% (10)	15% (12)	22% (16)
I could not adapt to the distance education system.	47% (35)	28% (21)	11% (8)	8% (6)	6% (4)
It is easy to access resources in my online course	2% (2)	9% (7)	11% (8)	41% (30)	37% (27)
Taking online courses will help me to advance in my career.	4% (3)	2% (2)	14% (10)	38% (28)	42% (31)
Social interaction is important in an online course.	11% (8)	13% (10)	37% (27)	27% (20)	12% (9)
I could not sufficiently utilize the communication tools (e. g. discussion list, chat, and e-mail).	43% (32)	41% (30)	7% (5)	8% (6)	1% (1)

My online course instructor responded to my questions within 48 hours. 11% (8) 14% (10) 11% (8) 28% (21) 36% (27)

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am a self-motivated and self-disciplined individual.	1% (1)	11% (8)	12% (9)	41% (30)	35% (26)
I am able to work independently with little direction.	2% (2)	5% (4)	11% (8)	41% (30)	41% (30)
I have good time-management skills that allow me to schedule specific times throughout a week to work on my online course.	4% (3)	14% (10)	15% (11)	35% (26)	32% (24)
I can effectively communicate any questions or concerns to my instructor.	2% (2)	8% (6)	7% (5)	42% (31)	41% (30)
I am not a procrastinator. I like to get things done today and not tomorrow.	11% (8)	22% (16)	23% (17)	33% (25)	11% (8)
I do not give up easily, even when confronted with obstacles.	2% (2)	4% (3)	10% (7)	49% (36)	35% (26)
I am comfortable spending five plus hours each week on a course to review course lectures/videos, complete course assignment, participate in chats and threaded discussions, etc	4% (3)	11% (8)	17% (12)	35% (26)	33% (25)

I have basic computer skills and can use word processing software, download software, install software, use a web browser, etc.	1% (1)	4% (3)	1% (1)	32% (23)	62% (46)
I have access to a computer that is connected to the Internet and have a backup plan if something happens to my computer.	1% (1)	7% (5)	4% (3)	33% (25)	55% (40)
I am comfortable in a "virtual environment" – e-mail, sending attachments, threaded discussions, chat rooms, etc.	2% (2)	4% (3)	4% (3)	39% (28)	51% (38)
I seldom answer any questions from the instructor or interact much in class at all.	32% (24)	41% (30)	14% (10)	11% (8)	2% (2)
I am usually late turning assignments and homework.	55% (41)	27% (20)	7% (5)	7% (5)	4% (3)
My personal and professional schedule is unpredictable: I am seldom sure when I will have free time that I can set aside for my coursework.	16% (12)	32% (24)	20% (14)	16% (12)	16% (12)
I am not comfortable with the idea of discussing topics with online students I never meet or see.	45% (33)	23% (17)	16% (12)	11% (8)	5% (4)
I signed up for too many courses and had to cut down on my course load.	41% (30)	31% (23)	12% (9)	9% (7)	7% (5)
I am a procrastinator	16% (12)	32% (24)	16% (12)	25% (18)	11% (8)

When I don't understand something, I am hesitant to ask the instructor for help.	32% (24)	41% (30)	8% (6)	12% (9)	7% (5)
I need to have someone set deadlines for me to get things done.	23% (17)	22% (16)	22% (16)	24% (18)	9% (7)
I am concerned with being successful in an online course.	18% (13)	15% (11)	18% (13)	24% (18)	25% (19)

Appendix K: Demographic Data for Survey Phase Two

Demographic	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	21	27
Female	57	73
Age		
19–24	13	17
25–29	6	8
30–39	9	11
40–49	24	31
50–59	19	24
60 and up	7	9
Employment status		
Not employed	8	10
Full-time	49	63
Part-time	12	16
Self-employed	9	11
GPA		
4.0 – 3.5	38	49
3.4 – 3.0	28	36
2.9 – 2.5	7	9
2.4 – 2.0	4	5
1.9 – 1.5	0	0
1.5 or below	1	1

Appendix L: Phase Two Likert-scaled Questions 11–20

Survey Question	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I am a self-motivated individual (I do not give up easily, even when confronted with obstacles).	1% (1)	3% (2)	19% (15)	33% (26)	44% (34)
I have good time-management skills that allow me to complete my class assignments on time.	1% (1)	6% (4)	21% (16)	40% (31)	33% (26)
I can effectively communicate questions or concerns to my instructor.	3% (2)	1% (1)	13% (10)	44% (34)	40% (31)
I can effectively communicate with my classmates through discussion forums.	3% (2)	9% (7)	26% (20)	32% (25)	30% (24)
I spend between 5-10 hours per week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions. I spend between 11-20 hours per week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions.	13% (10)	18% (14)	24% (19)	28% (22)	17% (13)
I have difficulty handling the coursework for the courses I am enrolled in	29% (22)	38% (30)	22% (17)	10% (8)	1% (1)
I am a procrastinator (Why do today what I can put off until tomorrow).	17% (13)	23% (18)	34% (27)	17% (13)	9% (7)
I consider online courses more time consuming than face-to-face courses.	18% (14)	19% (15)	23% (18)	26% (20)	14% (11)

I am usually late turning assignments and homework.	52% (41)	27% (21)	12% (9)	6% (5)	3% (2)
I spend less than 5 hours a week reviewing course lectures/videos, completing course assignment, participating in chats and threaded discussions.	17% (13)	32% (25)	27% (21)	14% (11)	10% (8)

Appendix M: Phase Two Interview Factor Response Frequency

Factor	Frequency
<u>If you dropped a course, why?</u>	
- Personal Issues	9
- Time Management	9
- Online-Learning Style	8
- Course Workload	6
- Motivation	4
<u>Prior Opinion of Online Courses</u>	
- Flexible	5
- Easy	3
- Lack of Support	1
<u>Contributors to Success</u>	
- Time Management	5
- Motivation	4
- Support	1
- I'm a Good Test Taker	1
<u>Contributors to Failure</u>	
- Technical Problems	1
- Lack of Support	1
- Did Not Understand	1
<u>Requirements</u>	
<u>Skills for Success</u>	
- Motivation	6
- Time Management	5
- Ability to Learn Independently	4
- Computer Skills	4
<u>Unsuccessful Characteristics</u>	
- Motivation	5
- Time Management	3
- Written Communication	2
- Aptitude for Learning	1
- Computer Skills	1