2018

Exploring Value of Perceived Problem Resolution in Success of Online Doctoral Students

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Abstract

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Vanessa S. O'Neal

MA, Savannah State University, 1996

BS, Armstrong State University, 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

March 2018

Abstract

How doctoral students view their institution's ability to resolve problems may be directly related to their overall satisfaction of the institution. Challenges such as barriers to communication could have a negative effect on the students’ ability to be retained by the institution. Policies to address issues relating to retention; high default rates on student loans and student services are increasing and more constraining. While the literature indicates the formation of federal policies to monitor recruitment practices of for-profit online institutions, it is not known to what extent these policies have influenced the quality of postrecruitment services. Using the theoretical framework of Vincent Tinto’s model of student retention, this qualitative phenomenological study analyzes the quality of these postrecruitment policies related to enrollment, financial, and problem resolution from the perspective of students. Data were collected from 20 current and former doctoral students of online programs at for-profit institutions through inteviews. These interview data were transcribed, and then subjected to open coding and thematic analysis. Findings indicate that participants perceive that their institutions were prepared to resolve problems; however, communication issues were prevalent largely because of the asynchronous nature of email communication or differences in time zones. Based on these findings, the recommendation is for institutions to consider reevaluating methods of communication with students. Social change can be obtained by utilizing the students’ experiences to facilitate improvements in the for-profit sector to minimize the opportunity for snowball effects such as retention challenges.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my parents Otis and Lillian McAllister, my brother Christopher M. McAllister, and my Aunt Linda Ford.

Acknowledgments

I thank God for giving me the strength to complete this journey, my family for being supportive, and everyone that had a positive influence in helping me to achieve my goals and academic success.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Introduction

I designed this study to explore the enrollment experiences of online doctoral students and their perceptions about the role the support structure of their institution plays in the success of their program. The conceptual framework of this research is developed around the literature regarding problem resolution as it relates to student retention and proposed legislation such as the Proprietary Education Oversight Coordination Improvement Act (PEOCIA) and the Students Before Profits Act (SBPA).

In 2010, the U.S. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, under the leadership of Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, launched an investigation of for-profit institutions of higher education, which covers most online universities (Harkin, 2010). The investigation was conducted by the U.S. Government Accounting Office (USGAO). Although the focus of the investigation was on financial oversight, the issues relating to retention were heavily noted. According to the results of the investigation, the retention issues were critical, as the overall withdrawal rate in for-profit schools was between 35% and 54% (Harkin, 2010). Additionally, “many for-profit colleges fail to make the necessary investments in student support services that have been shown to help students succeed in school and afterwards, a deficiency that undoubtedly contributes to high withdrawal rates” (Scott, 2010. p. 1). The downside of this finding is that the type of student support services and reasons for the withdrawals were not indicated. The focus of previous studies was on student services, not student complaints or the resolution of problems as it relates to retention, which left a huge void in recent research literature (Ahmed et al., 2010; Pullan, 2011; Raphael, 2006).

As a result of the investigation by the USGAO and subsequent report (Harkin, 2010), a plethora of bills have been developed in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. The focus of the various bills is on methods to hold institutions of higher education, particularly the for-profit institutions, more accountable for their actions pertaining to recruitment techniques, enrollment guidelines, student services, academic success, retention, and graduate employability. Specifically, the for-profit educational institutions that offer online education have been the subject of scrutiny. According to the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), a proprietary institution is defined as an educational institution that is not a public educational institution, is in a state, and is legally authorized to offer a program of education in the state where the educational institution is physically located (CFR 38:21.4200(z)(1-3). For this study, the focus is on for-profit educational institutions offering online doctoral programs. For-profit institutions were selected as the focal point because of the increasing number of lawsuits and expressed discontent about their operations. These issues have been raised for discussion at a congressional level and have resulted in several proposed legislations.

Two of the more noted proposed pieces of legislations that relate to this study are the PEOCIA and the SBPA. The SBPA directed the Secretary of Education to establish an Institutional Risk-Sharing Commission to study and make recommendations for the implementation of a new risk-sharing system that holds institutions of higher education participating in the federal loan program, financially accountable for poor student outcomes. The focus of the PEOCIA is on establishing a bipartisan committee of members of Congress and increasing efforts between federal and state agencies to ensure that students who attend proprietary institutions are protected from practices that are deemed unfair or unrealistic as defined by the proposed committee. Both pieces of proposed legislation are still being reviewed in their respective committees and awaiting further action.

In addition, each year the U.S. Department of Education's (USDOE) Office of Postsecondary Education actively engages in a process called negotiated rulemaking. This process involves the USDOE developing proposed regulations to develop policy in collaboration with representatives of the parties who will be affected by the regulations. The issues to be negotiated come from three sources: newly enacted laws, the USDOE, and the public. The objective was to provide input into the policies that are sometimes submitted as legislation. In 2009, the USDOE solicited the National Academy of Public Administration and the American Society for Public Administration to conduct a study on the impact of student loan debt on public service (Higher Education Opportunity Act, P.L. 110-315, §1115). The results of the study would have been used to identify links between student loan debt and public service; however, in succeeding years, reports such as the one provided by the USGAO (2010) have linked an increase in student loan debt to student retention at for-profit online institutions.

By all early accounts of various researchers, distance education began in the United States in 1873 (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005). The first mode of delivery was the mail and titled correspondence courses; however, the mode of delivery for distance education changed with advances in technology. According to Shelton and Saltsman (2005), the various modes of delivery included correspondence courses, video and audio tapings of classes, and satellite campuses, which were all accepted as viable instructional methods. Since the early 2000s, the mode of delivery that has the most momentum is online instruction, which has become the most popular. Online instruction is defined by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, also known as IPEDS, as "education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously" (p. 1). In 2017, online instruction is still the fastest growing means towards degree completion and the use of the computer and the Internet is still defined as distance education (USDOE, 2017).

As each instructional delivery mode was introduced, the goal of institutions' higher learning was to provide a service that would render a degree by providing a flexible educational environment for people who could not attend school in a traditional manner. According to Shelton and Saltsman (2005) the lack of time has always been at the forefront of reasons why most people did not attend college. According to Tinto (2005), financial constraints are the second highest stated reason followed by academic capability. In 2013, the rationale regarding time constraints was the number one reason why people did not attend college, but changed to the number one reason why people were enrolling in online degree programs (Britto & Rush, 2013).

Bawa (2016) stated that the number of students enrolled in distance education courses globally had topped 6 million in 2014. According to data retrieved from the six regional accrediting agencies for universities (2014), of the 6 million students enrolled in distance education courses, approximately 3 million attended virtual/online universities such as Phoenix University Online, Cappella University, Webster University, and Walden University. Keeping with the trend, in 2015 the number of students who were enrolled in at least one distance education course increased significantly to over 5.8 million according to Allen & Seaman (2017). As reported by Clark (2009), close to $1 billion dollars was spent by online universities to upgrade their technology, libraries, and concierge services. The measure of a student's success appears to be primarily focused on academic achievement; the end result of their classroom experience. However, Shelton and Saltsman (2005) stated, "student success is directly affected by administrative actions and policy" (p. 107) for which there is very limited research on the correlation between administrative actions and student success.

Little research exists regarding student complaints or problem resolution and their relationship to retention. There are, however, a plethora of stories that can be obtained through social media and Websites that were specifically set up to degrade the name and reputation of online universities. Seeking to identify whether there is a connection between problem resolution and retention is what makes this study necessary. Ali and Leeds (2009) explained that the retention rate for online students is 20% lower than traditional face-to-face courses (p. 1). In 2016, the rates, as stated by Ali and Leeds (2009) is still the norm and according to Haynie (2015), the accepted percentage rate for an institutions survival. Tinto (2005) believed that non completion of programs and delays in graduations ultimately has a negative impact on tuition revenue. Although both sets of researchers have differing views on retention, they agree that there could be additional factors as to why retention is an issue and problem resolution could very well be one of them.

This research study could assist the administrations of online universities, traditional universities with online programs, and the USDOE, through their Negotiated Rulemaking Forum, to understand the extent to which problem resolution plays a part in the current retention issues plaguing higher education (Liu, 2011). There is a link between public policy, administration, and education. The findings of this research study could be used to provide input from the standpoint of the students, who are the ones the enacted policies will affect. This research could also be a catalyst to encourage the USDOE to consider creating policies or modify existing policies relating to issues that encompass student complaints, problem resolution, and retention as concerns. This chapter will provide the history and interest in the research topic, identify the problem that propels the purpose of this study, as well as state the questions that will guide the research.

Background

The focus of the literature that was reviewed for this research study was on organizational behavior, student services, retention, and policy and legislation in higher education. I explored these topics to understand how student service is defined and how it relates to retention and to what extent. On the surface, it appears that problem resolution, as they relate to academic issues, have a high priority; however, there is no evidence to support that solving nonacademic problems is highly rated.

Public administrators in higher education positions, especially, are stakeholders in understanding the core issues of students' dissatisfaction and identifying whether these issues affect a student's commitment to complete their education. According to the College Board and Advocacy Center's report, *Trends in Student Aid* (2012), government funding dominates higher education's ability to provide service as most educational institutions receive federal funding in the form of grant reimbursement and student loans. According to the NCES (2015), 85% of undergraduate students in for-profit institutions received some form of financial aid during the 2012-2013 academic year; this is an increase from 76% during the 2007-2008 academic year. Based on the trends that are monitored and reported approximately every 3 years, the percentage may be expected to increase; however, the rate of retention is decreasing (Ali & Leeds, 2009). The reasons for the decrease in retention are just as puzzling as the numbers themselves. Some of the reasons for such low retention rates include the curricula being too challenging, socioeconomic differences, evaluation and assessment methods, and financial difficulties for many years. To combat the decrease in retention, universities have had to develop and implement strategic plans for combatting the decrease, which included reviewing the curricula, providing an adequate number of tutors, having departmental retention plans, and other academic student support (Powell, 2003).

According to Prime (2001), none of the plans have helped to identify the real retention issues. Prime contended that single methods of assessments render one-sided results and to gain a more objective and realistic understanding of why retention is an issue, the assessment needs to be multifaceted and inclusive (p. 50). The gap in the knowledge of this topic is understanding how the students and retention rates of online universities and universities with online programs are affected by the processes and procedures for resolving problems. This gap in knowledge also renders the question of whether public management, "a field of practice and study central to public administration that emphasizes internal operations of public agencies and focuses on managerial concerns related to control and direction such as planning organizational maintenance, personnel management, performance evaluation and productivity improvement" (Milakovich & Gordon, 2009, p. 12) can be of use in institutions of higher education that primarily teach students online.

This study is needed because the process in which students' problems are resolved when there are barriers to communication, such as communicating by email, telephone, and having to communicate with multiple people to resolve the complaint could have a negative effect on the students' ability to learn, be successful in the program, or be retained by the institution. The overarching question is how issues with resolving problems affect the student and whether their experiences affect retention.

Statement of Problem

While the literature indicates the need for the formation of federal policies such as the proposed PEOCIA and SBPA to monitor the predatory recruitment practices of for-profit online institutions, it is not known to what extent these policies if enacted will influence the quality of post recruitment educational service experienced by the online doctoral students.

Online universities have been the topic of research since 1970 when the first distance education program began in the United Kingdom at The Open University (Charalambos, Michalinos, & Chamberlain, 2004). Since the introduction of distance education and the vast interest of universities in the United States to provide online programs, there has been a plethora of research conducted that focuses on technology, student services, library upgrades, faculty training, curriculum, and enrollment. However, little has been written about the relationship between retention and how academic and nonacademic problems identified by the students are resolved in online institutions.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore to what extent legislation, such as the PEOCIA and the SBPA, if enacted by Congress would be effective in enhancing the post recruitment quality of educational service experienced by the online doctoral students. Phenomenology was selected as the research design because I focused on how the phenomenon affects the participants being researched. In this case, the phenomenon being the students' experience with problem resolution and complaints. The focus of a similar study performed by Cooper, Fleischer, and Cotton (2012) was on understanding the learning experiences of students conducting qualitative research and was very successful and included similar components. For instance, Cooper et al. sought to understand how students perceived their experience of learning how to conduct qualitative research. They did so to identify how students processed their actions after experiencing the phenomena.

Research Question

According to Helgesen and Neset (2007), “service quality is positively related to student’s satisfaction and student’s loyalty; so, management should pay the most attention to the quality of service offered” (p. 136). For their research, they surveyed bachelor-level students at one university in Norway. They set out to determine whether student satisfaction and student perceptions of a university’s reputation were directly related to student loyalty. Their research concluded that (a) the perception of the reputation of the university college is positively related to student loyalty, (b) student satisfaction is positively related to student loyalty, and (c) student satisfaction is positively related to the perception of the reputation of the university college. Furthermore, all the findings had a direct relationship to retention (Helgesen and Neset, p. 129). Based on these findings, three questions emerge: does the students who attend online universities that have issues that require a resolution having greater less-than-satisfactory outcomes, resolutions and higher levels of frustration than students attending traditional institutions? And if yes is it due to the lack of a face-to-face component in the handling of student complaints? And, if so, can this be partly attributed to the retention rates of online institutions? As discussed in the literature review, problem resolution, quality of service, and retention should be a part of the overall plan and included in the development of a program with a strategy from the beginning making the issues proactive as opposed to reactive (Tinto, 1975). The research question and subquestions are designed to identify the variables that can cause positive or negative responses. The data for this qualitative study was collected by conducting semistructured open-ended interviews.

The following research question guided this study:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of online doctoral students regarding the ability of their institutions to resolve problems?

The theoretical intention of the legislations such as PEOCIA and the SBPA is to encourage an educational environment where the primary intentional focus of the institution is the betterment of students by providing them with a quality education. The questions become, how do institutions comply with this ruling? Do they take the approach of changing the processes that allow them to check some boxes that make them technically compliant, or do they bring a change in the institutional mindset where the wellbeing of students really becomes their top priority? Understanding the lived experiences of students may render a level of perspective that can provide information that can be included in the development of such legislation.

The underlying concept of this research study is that compliance with the PEOCIA and the SBPA would be meaningless if an institution’s efforts toward the betterment of students was not felt by the student body. From this perspective, I explored the lived experiences of students in three specific aspects of their academic experience; enrollment, financial aid and problem resolution. I began by focusing on the time of enrollment, primarily the first interaction between a prospective student and an online institution. At this initial stage, a student may experience a wide array of services ranging from an honest educational guidance to predatory high-pressure sales to confirm their enrollment. To capture students' lived experience for this stage, the focus of the questions was as follows:

- How have the online doctoral students experienced the enrollment process?
- How have online doctoral students experienced the financial aid process? The rationale for this question was to understand the experience of the student relating to financial aid. Did the student experience a change in the level of support, or friendliness, or willingness to help when going through a financial issue?
- What is the perception of online doctoral students about the role their institutions should play in resolving their academic problems? The rationale for this question was to explore their feelings and experiences regarding whether their institution is proactively going out of their way to make the student successful, or do they leave it up to the students to resolve their problems and issues?

Theoretical Foundation for the Study

Theories related to this research study will include Vincent Tinto's model of student retention (Tinto & Cullen, 1973) because Tinto's work provides a foundational basis for understanding the varying rationale behind why students choose to leave school prior to the completion of their respective programs and degrees and what actions were subsequently taken by the student (e.g., transfers to other institutions, completely dropping out, or other options).

Tinto's model of student retention concluded that a student's ability to be successful and be retained by a university is achieved by providing proper integration methods into formal and informal academics and social systems (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Tinto believed that all of these methods must be met in order for a student to have a level field for success. Although Tinto's Model of Student Retention primarily addressed the overall classroom success, it is his viewpoint on the incongruence and isolation of students that aligns with this research. According to Tinto, it is quality interaction between the students and members of the institution that is important—not just the faculty. Students of online institutions by their very nature start with a level of perceived isolation. This study encompassed current and former doctoral students in online proprietary institutions.

As a follow-up to Tinto's model of student retention, he developed the dimensions of institutional action that consisted of three principles: (a) institutional commitment to students, (b) educational commitment, and (c) social and intellectual community to provide an opportunity for the student and the institution to be engaged in the retention of students (Tinto, 1987). In this model, these principles are the essence of what is needed to successfully retain students and provide implementation practices that Tinto deemed as success (Tinto, 1987).

Tinto believed that students leave universities for varying reasons, not all being financial hardship or academic (1987, p. 2). In his opinion, universities should expand their assessment of their retention characteristics to include a student's ability to adjust to the academic and social environment offered by the university and the level of commitment to each individual’s goals relating to education, incongruence, and isolation. In other words, would students perceive Tinto’s principles as present and effective in their perspective institutions?

Although there is a plethora of studies relating to retention (Bosco, 2012; Prime, 2001; Sutton, 2014), Tinto’s is one of a few that provided a successful model for exploring the issue and his views incorporated the ideas that there is not one single challenge, nor are all challenges related to finance and academic preparedness, which is a traditional argument. This theory directly relates to the research question for this study because it proposes that problem resolution and student services may also be challenges for student retention, which would support or disprove Tinto’s theory. I examine this theory in more depth in Chapter 2.

Nature of the Study

The focus of the research was to capture the essence of problem resolution and its association with retention when students render complaints and must participate in an online process for a resolution. The qualitative methodology for this study was guided by Eisner’s six features of a qualitative study as it was field focused, employed the self as an instrument, had an interpretive character, made use of expressive language, paid attention to details and the experiences were believable. The field focus was obtained by conducting face-to-face interviews by Skype, Facetime and Facebook Video using Klein and Meyers’s seven principles of interpretive research (1999) as its foundation. The focus of the questions was on human experiences as stated by the students’ answers to the questions. Because, I, as the researcher of this study, am a student of an online institution and have experience with student services, it was palpable for me to use my experiences to guide this study. According to Eisner (1991), there are two levels of interpretation that are viable to any qualitative study; accountability and expressive language. Accountability details how an action takes place, understanding the meaning of the experience and how it ultimately makes one feel, which will be particularly helpful in this study as the experience is the focus of the research. The use of expressive language—paying attention to and making the study believable are also formidable characteristics of this study as it is the student's voice that is driving the research and every detail played a part in the outcome or theory. These methods were chosen because they have the characteristics needed to capture the information and describe the data.

The key concept of the research was to study the relationship between student complaints and problem resolution and identify if there is a relationship to retention. The study was conducted with the following parameters:

- Students (former and current) of online proprietary institutions were invited to participate in the study.
- Participants were engaged in a live interview for approximately 25-30 minutes. A research question and three subquestions were used to keep consistency among all interviews. The questions allowed the participants to respond in a descriptive manner providing insightful information to their experiences relating to the research.

The responses from the participants were downloaded into NVivo a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis program for content analysis specifically deductive coding and thematic analysis. In a phenomenological study, interviewing the participants in some form is the practice that is mostly used to obtain the information needed about the phenomena (Pringle, Hendry, & McLafferty, 2011).

The study consisted of two phases of questions: the demographics of the participants (which determined their academic status, gender, and familiarization with proposed legislations PECOIA and SBPA) and the core questions (which addressed the overall research question and subquestions). The research study was open to current and former students who attended an online proprietary institution while working towards a doctoral degree. A more in-depth description of the process can be found in Chapter 3.

Definition of Terms

The following key terms were used in this study and the literature that was reviewed to support the research:

Complaint: An expression of discontent, regret, resentment, grief, or faultfinding relating to issues in online institutions (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2013).

Distance Education/Online: Education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are in remote locations and distanced from the instructor. This method of education supports regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously. Technologies used for instruction may include the Internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcasts; closed circuit; cable; microwave; broadband lines; fiber optics; satellite; or wireless communication devices, audio conferencing, and video cassette, DVDs, and CD-ROMs (if the cassettes, DVDs, and CD-ROMs are used in a course in conjunction with the technologies listed above (NCES, 2013).

Distance Education/Online Course: A course in which the instructional content is delivered by other means than in person. Requirements for coming to campus for orientation, testing, or academic support services do not exclude a course from being classified as distance education (NCES, 2013).

Distance Education/Online Program: A program for which all the required coursework for program completion is able to be completed via distance education courses (NCES, 2013).

Proprietary Institution: Proprietary educational institution (including a proprietary profit or proprietary nonprofit educational institution) means an educational institution that is not a public educational institution, is in a state, and is legally authorized to offer a program of education in the state where the educational institution is physically located. (CFR 38:21.4200(z)(1-3).

Retention: Understanding the students' process regarding whether their student experience with student services and problem resolution motivated them to be retained by their university. This information will be helpful in understanding whether a student continued their studies or not and why (NCES, 2013).

Student Services: Supporting departments in institutions of higher learning that focuses on the overall well-being of a student as it relates to academic growth and development, as well as their physical and mental growth and enhancement (NCES, 2013).

Student Services: An operational expense category that includes the cost associated with admissions, registrar activities, and activities whose primary purpose is to contribute to students' emotional and physical well-being and to their intellectual, cultural, and social development outside the context of the formal instructional program. Examples include, but are not limited to, student activities, cultural events, student newspapers, intramural athletics, student organizations, supplemental instruction outside the normal administration, and student records. Intercollegiate athletics and student health services may also be included except when operated as self-supporting auxiliary enterprises. The fees for student services may also include information technology expenses related to student service activities if the institution separately budgets and expenses information technology resources (otherwise these expenses are included in institutional support.) The Governmental Accounting Standards Board (GASB) institutions include actual or allocated costs for operation and maintenance of plant and depreciation (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Assumptions

The following assumptions were made: (a) all higher educational institutions have policies and procedures relating to student complaints, concerns, or perceived challenges, (b) participants will answer the interview questions honestly and provide the requested information, and (c) participants understand the purpose of the interviews.

According to Brennen (2008) "implications for higher education arise from the expectations that higher education should be more visibly useful for economy and society and be more efficient and effective" (p. 384). The problem identified by Brennen is the swinging pendulum of negation of expectation and viewpoints. On one hand, he stated that,

> "detailed public bureaucratic control of higher education has reduced but on the other hand higher education is increasingly exposed to strong external expectations to be more visibly useful for economy and society to create stronger incentive-based internal regulation, to identify and meet the needs of perceived market forces." (2008. p. 384)

Neither of the sentiments can be effective at changing the social context of higher education if there is a perceived issue with retention.

This study may fill in the gap of the present literature by providing a view of the issues that students who attend online universities identify as challenges. As a public administrator who works in higher education, I find this to be beneficial because success is defined by the students. The institution is the overall factor, and if there are challenges (academic and nonacademic) that need to be identified and addressed, understanding the challenges is pivotal. Additionally, because education policy is developed based on the outcome of research, information such as research like this one can provide additional views of varying identified challenges. It is imperative that when policy affecting students and educational institutions is developed, having as much information as possible is key. Beyond the confines of public administration and public policy, this study can help higher education administrators of online institutions to review their current processes to identify issues and make changes where necessary. Policies create change whether they are positively or negatively effective. In a study by Lewis (2007) that examined how government policy can solicit change by focusing on personal responsibility concluded that in order for change to be effective, all factions involved must take responsibility and be present. The focus of Lewis's study was primarily on how the government and policy makers implemented change; however, the concept can transcend to other topics and entities, such as higher education, public administration, educational administration policy, and social change on a broad scale, because the implementation tactics are generally stated and flexible. However, the effects of the changes when implemented can also transcend more specific areas of concern such as retention and its effect on federal student aid, encourage positive outcomes in the negotiated rulemaking process as it relates to online institutions and student loan debt.

Scope and Delimitations

Throughout the study, I looked closely at students' perception of the process provided for resolving issues and considered whether there was value in face-to-face resolutions as opposed to nontraditional methods. Although the face-to face component is not an option for students attending online universities, the question is whether there is something else needed to provide the same type of service and, if so, what? This aspect of the research was chosen because it will help to identify what students really need or want from their administration relating to problem resolution and complaint resolution.

Because this study is focused on the experience of the student, the participant population included current and former students who were enrolled in doctorate programs through online proprietary institutions of higher learning. The participants need not to have obtained a degree or completed their education. The study did not include students who have attended 2-year colleges or traditional brick and mortar institutions.

Limitations

The study was originally thought to be subject to several limitations. The first being the ability to acquire 20 participants who identified problems that needed a resolution. Second, I assumed that the participation from one institution would be dominate. More details are provided in Chapter 3.

To address the limitations; the advertising of the study was widespread among social media such as Facebook, Twitter, University Participant Pool sites for research, Google groups, and other list serves that were identified in preparation for the study. Submitting the information to various types of social media sparked a good blend of participants as each outlet used was specifically known for social science researchers, students, and faculty.

Significance of the Study

This research provided insight into the lived experiences of online doctoral students, particularly about any gaps existing between their expected and lived experience of the doctoral process. The gap between the expected and actual experience of going through the doctoral program may be one possible cause of communication disconnect between the online students and the program administration. The research provided insight into the perceptions and understanding of students about the role of their institution in facilitating their success, and their own role and responsibilities as students.

Significance to practice. This research may also add insight into the perspectives of online doctoral students regarding the effectiveness of the institutional policies. Administrators of the online doctoral programs may find students' perspective helpful in fine-tuning their communications and clarifying any misunderstood or ignored concepts. Collectively, the findings from this research may provide online program administrators practical insight to improve the student experience.

Significance to social change. The focus also included identifying how problem resolution, conflict resolution, attention to details, and the ending resolution impacted students' abilities to perform and be retained as a student and to identify their feelings and/or issues with the overall process. The results of the study include identifying the process for which complaints are resolved and noting the practices that were successful and unsuccessful. Findings from this focus area may be helpful in improving the problem resolution process by providing a better understanding of the policy guidelines to the online doctoral students. If the students understand the policies that bind their institutions, and if the institutions can maximize their capabilities to resolve students' problems within the binds of policies, a better student experience may be achieved. The social change connected with student satisfaction of their online doctoral learning process can be seen as a better acceptance level for online higher educations provided by for-profit universities. The researcher has observed that much of the bad press about online higher education on social media refers to unsolved disputes and unresolved issues. The social media discussions about any topic are strong agents to create public opinion.

Significance to theory. For public administrators who work in higher education or create policy for higher education, this information can be a link to understanding the need for better processing and to develop and execute ways in which to accomplish greater satisfaction among students, which could possibly lead to improvement in retention. According to the report by Harkin (2012), “For-profit colleges have an important role to play in higher education. The existing capacity of nonprofit and public higher education is insufficient to satisfy the growing demand for higher education” (p. 12). This statement is resounding to the roles and responsibilities that online universities have to effect social change. Changing the perception of online universities by changing the feelings of the students who attend them will foster a more positive perception and has the opportunity to have a snowball effect. Theoretically, when public policies are passed for educational institutions, there seems to be an underlying assumption that the customers of services (students) will benefit through the institution’s ability to implement the policies. From this perspective, efforts are made in terms of policy publications and seminars targeted to institutions. The results from this research revealed that there is a need to include measures to help develop students’ perceptions and understanding of the policy matters.

Summary

Is there a relationship between problem resolution and student retention in proprietary online institutions of higher learning that award PhD programs and degrees? Chapter 1 introduced the evolution of distance education and its various delivery modes, identified the current most popular mode of delivery as online education, identified the problem as how little is known about the correlation between problem resolution relating to retention, and described the purpose of the qualitative study—to delve into the process of student complaints, problem resolution, and the impact on retention. Chapter 1 also included the research of theorist Vincent Tinto as foundational support for student retention and institutional actions. The literature reviews in Chapter 2 include relevant literature and related studies that will provide research conducted on retention, student services, academic policy, and organizational behavior.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore to what extent federal legislation such as the proposed PEOCIA and SBPA are effective in enhancing the post-recruitment quality of educational service experienced by the online doctoral students. The quality of an educational experience is not only limited to the transaction between a teacher and a student, but also includes the overall experience that a student perceives of being associated with an institution. Saba (2003) stated "if distance education is to be the educational paradigm, distance education theory must explain the whole of education and not only when teacher and learner are separated in space and time" (p. 17). Saba had the right idea to identify the need for a holistic approach to distance education; however, as we will see in the chosen literature, developing an approach for distance education as a holistic entity is difficult. One reason being the lack of identity of some services and understanding how processes can relate to other actions. From the perspective of treating an educational experience as a holistic entity, this study will not only inquire about the mechanics of student services, but also the behavioral implications of the processes on students' lived experiences.

I will discuss varying research, the focus of which was on organizational behavior, student services, academic policies, and retention in this chapter. Organizational behavior starts the review with the identification of the theorist accredited with organizational behavior and discusses the various theories that are attributed to the concept. Understanding the foundation of organizational behavior is a key element in understanding how and why institutions implement and execute as they do. Student services discuss how institutions categorize students and the issues the categorizations cause. I also identified, in the literature, the way institutions of higher learning prioritize the needs of an institution and how the needs were supported. Lastly, the section on retention identifies and discusses the reasons retention is an issue in distance education.

Literature Search Strategy

The evolution and focus of distance education has been on making the course work easily accessible, implementing teaching methods that support the course work, delivery mode, curriculum, library, technology, and enrollment since its inception (Beaver, 2017). Very little has been researched or written about regarding how problem resolution issues affect the student and whether their experiences affect retention.

The primary goal of this literature search was to identify work where the focus was on distance education, retention, and problem resolution. There is very little research in these areas as well; therefore, the research obtained for the purpose of this study focused on each topic individually. I did not negate works that were older than 5 years to the current year as there is an abundance of information in the older literature that can be used. Additionally, as a result of there not being a lot of information on the topic, all of the search terms were used in each of the databases.

I conducted the literature search strategy for this research primarily using the Walden University Library databases: Business Source Complete, Sage Premier (previously Management and Organizational Studies; both were searched), ProQuest

Central, Academia Search Complete, Lexis Nexis Academic, Eric, ABI/Inform Complete, WorldCat, Org, and Google

Key search terms included *for-profit, policy, education policy, education, enrollment, distance education, student retention, student services, problem resolution, higher education and distance education, distance education and student retention, distance education and student services, distance education and problem resolution, distance education and student complaints, distance education and government policies, distance education and financial aid, distance education and for-profit colleges, for-profit colleges and financial aid, for-profit colleges and student retention, for-profit colleges and student services, for-profit colleges and public policy, for-profit colleges and educational policy and retention, for-profit colleges and retention and student services, student retention and financial aid, student retention and financial aid* and *student services*.

Theoretical Foundation

Tinto's model of student retention is the theory guiding the research. Tinto's theory concluded that a student's ability to be successful and retained by a university is achieved by providing proper integration methods into formal, informal academic, and social systems (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). The development of the theory began in 1973 when Tinto conducted research to determine how the dropout rates in 1973 related to an individual's ability to succeed in higher education, impending social status, if there was a change/difference in the dropout rate from 1965 to 1973, and to identify factors involved with the process of a student dropping out. One of the major challenges to his study included how the term “dropout” was defined in higher education. According to Tinto, the term *dropout* was not truly reflective of the actions of students leaving college after an active admission (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Tinto’s study identified two types of students exiting colleges: one group that leaves and transfers to a different institution and the second group that leaves and does not participate in an institutional transfer. However, both groups were being identified as dropouts and there was a negative connotation attached to the term. So, the question became, if a student withdraws from one institution but enrolls into another one, are they still considered a dropout? The inadvertent question became, regardless of whether the post activity of the student led to enrolling in a different institution or not, what were the reasons behind the institution not being able to retain the student? Tinto found that the lack of a true definition of a college dropout, understanding how a student’s ability and social status affects learning, and understanding that the process of dropping out involves the individual and institution were all factors that contributed to student retention in higher education (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). This was different than the popular and generally stated beliefs of the administration that Tinto worked with that believed students withdrew because they were not supported financially or did not have the capability to be successful, meaning that they were inferior when it came to learning (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Tinto’s research summated that in order to effectively deal with the dropout issues, the term dropout must first be succinctly defined (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). This was done by identifying the characteristics of a dropout using several variables but culminating in a definition that states that a dropout is a student who withdrew from an institution of higher learning but did not transfer to a different institution. For the purposes of Tinto's research, the definition would suffice. However, by the end of the research he concluded that more research was needed to understand the reasons why students dropped out; he was not convinced that finances and unsuitability were the only major factors (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Tinto's original research was the catalyst for many theories and educational models regarding the treatment of students, student retention, academic modeling, and student services (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). His research has been analyzed by researchers such as Figueira (2015) whose purpose for research was to understand if Tinto's model would be applicable to retaining students in distance education environments. This research posed an interest because of the parallel interest regarding retention and online learning environments. Figueira (2015) concluded that although Tinto's model would need revision due to the dated information and the evolution of distance education and how it works, its foundational objectives would be viable and beneficial as a model for distance education. The model has been implemented in many educational systems throughout the United States and abroad; adding it to distance education would be another characteristic of how education is evolving.

Tinto's model of student retention is very much parallel in nature and reflective of this proposed research. Like Tinto, one of the underlying factors in understanding the challenges with online institutions is defining the various roles, specifically for this research: student services (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). The second underlying factor that is parallel to Tinto's theory is that of retention (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). The focus of his research was on understanding the reasons that students could not be retained or, in essence, why they withdrew. This research seeks the same information, however, focusing on how much problem resolution plays a role. Tinto found that the way dropouts were being defined was an issue, which is the same with the current research relating to how students are defined (i.e. as customers), and the role of student services. Tinto also found that financial hardships and inadequate preparation or inferiority were not the only reasons students withdrew which challenged previous assumptions. This research specifically focuses on identifying retention issues that stem from characteristics other than financial and academic competitiveness. Although Tinto's research did not thoroughly identify an exhaustive listing of reasons to justify his theory, the fact that there were other characteristics motivating retention challenges provides insight for current research (Tinto & Cullen, 1973).

Students' experience with problem resolution and complaints is the phenomenon driving the research. There is not a lot of relevant research on the topic; therefore, the theories and models of Tinto were used as the foundation for the theory (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). According to Tinto,

> "student retention or the lack thereof was seen as the reflection of individual attributes, skills and motivation. Students who did not stay were less able, less motivated, and less willing to defer the benefits that college graduation was believed to bestow" (2006-2007, p. 2).

This mentality does not attribute the institution with any responsibility relating to a student's departure. The belief that "students failed not institutions" (Tinto, 2006-2007, p. 2) was accepted.

The current research benefits from Tinto's research because 43 years later, although there has been an evolution in the mentality and thinking of retention, it is still a huge challenge for higher education (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). Also, because with the explosiveness of institutions that provide distance education solely, the issue is even more of a challenge for them according to Shelton and Saltsman (2005).

According to Moore and Anderson, traditional American pragmatism as it relates to distance education "is evident in the search for best practices and the establishment of methodological benchmarks and indicates that there is a quest for practical solutions and a neglect of theory" (2003, p. 3). Distance education was founded on the principles of placing the learner at the center of the education process, identifying how the organization functions, and structural issues that identify how issues in the process of communication will affect the learner (Saba, 2003).

Research regarding how distance education should be structured, students' interaction with faculty and classroom models, and technique is abundant; however, research that encompasses foolproof methods for successful resolutions or offers guidelines as to how student complaints and problem resolution in online learning environments can be successful with 100% satisfaction is not as widespread.

Therefore, the literature for this study encompasses three themes: organizational behavior, student services, and retention. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to provide a deeper understanding as to how student complaints, if not properly handled, may negatively affect the university's retention. In this case, the phenomenon being the students' experience with problem resolution and complaints.

Although organizational behavior, student services, and retention have different objectives, the foundation of all three as it relates to online institutions is students. The term *student service* in an online institution is a catchall phrase to mean any service that is student related. The most popular of the student services are academic enrollment, financial services, and career development.

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Organizational Behavior

In order to understand organizational behavior, it is imperative that there is an understanding of the foundational theories that shaped the concept. Theorist Frederick Taylor (1917) believed that the behavior of an organization would determine its success. Taylor is credited with reintroducing the concepts of organizational theory and behavior by identifying and comparing the characteristics of classical organization theory, neoclassical organization theory, systems theory, and organizational structure. Each theory attributed differently to the development and behavior of organizations. According to Walonick (1993), the classical organization theory focused on the best way to get the work done. The underlying behavior for organizations that followed this concept was to place an emphasis on completing the task; everything else was insignificant including human needs. Walonick (1993) stressed that although this behavior, which was widely accepted when it was first introduced, was one that promoted the belief that authority and control was the key to having a productive organization, productivity decreased and the behavior of the organization, to include morale, was diminished. In an age where the demand for distance education is increasing but the retention rates are decreasing Walonick's understanding and support of Taylor's (1917) theory can encourage one to think about whether its practices as it relates to problem resolution and retention is effective.

Senge (2013) argued that institutions of higher education have taken on a different persona than the traditional train of thought about students, learning environments and student success, in which he terms new institutionalism. This concept infers that the basic foundation of educational systems is changing, but not necessarily evolving. The changes according to him are economically driven and analytically complex. The new institutionalism separates varying types of organizations that are similar in nature (e.g., online institutions) and creates environments that are consistent with the interest and values of the institution. This could be money, academic success, or failure. Yeoman (2011) supported this notion to an extent as he points out that prior to the Obama presidency, there were policy loopholes designed specifically for online institutions that benefitted the culture of the institution as opposed to the academic success of students. One of the practices involved recruitment, which she pointed out, also led to the problems with retention.

In contrast to Senge (2013), who supported the concept of new institutionalism, Gravois (2011) provided an inside look at Western Governors University (WGU), a nonprofit institution of higher learning, which provides licensure programs for teachers, as well as other bachelor and master's degrees. Gravois contended that it is the basic and fundamental approach to education that makes his university successful. The concept, as he explained, is to provide an education based on need as opposed to available time at an affordable cost. Gravois thoroughly described the history of WGU, as well as identified various reasons for the school's success and student satisfaction, to include the low affordable tuition, the low retention rate, the retention model, and the low student loan default rate, simply stated this can be viewed as an institution that is evolving.

Ferlie, Muselin, and Andresani (2008) discussed how the systematic approaches of public management can be used to guide higher education systems more efficiently. According to the authors, several nations such as Israel, Germany, and Switzerland sought to have their educational systems align with national policies; they believed it would provide stronger management in the public and educational sectors.

Kelderman (2011) identified the growing concern regarding the need for the proper accrediting of institutions of higher learning. According to him, accrediting agencies are under attack as the expectation is for tighter restrictions and reform as it relates to financial stability, academic performance, fraud, and abuse. However, Kelderman stated that there is a misconception as to what accreditation does and represents, which in turn supports the need for an overhaul. Accreditation is conducted by volunteers and has no legal authority to conduct investigation, which is why online institutions have been under fire; they use the accreditation as a way to tout legitimacy (Kelderman). The leading issue regarding accreditation is the purpose and objective, which is to evaluate process and regulations. To Kelderman's (2011) point, he identified accrediting agencies such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges' Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities that are requiring institutions to continually assess their student retention and completion rates and encourages them to provide more protection to the student as opposed to the institution.

Levy (2003) identified six factors to be considered when developing distance education programs. Although the majority of the list includes instruction, staff support, educational materials, training, and intellectual property, student services played a huge role in the research. This is due in part to the author identifying that organizational structure needs more attention than what is perceived as given at the time of the article and the need to identify and totally define student services is necessary. She contends that student services whether in online or traditional campuses the results should be the same.

Wertheim (2008) reiterated the importance of understanding the history and background of organizational behavior, citing the effects of the Scientific Management model approach to business. This model broke down each task into minute units with one best way to complete the task. It was because of this model departmentalization was created and implemented and still has an impact on business today. However, one key factor that is missing from this model as the author pointed out is the need for communication.

Organizational behavior's core elements started out as the study of using the basic concepts of what makes industrial machinery productive and applying the same concepts to workers (Wertheim, 2008). The concept, although productive, left a lot to be desired because unlike humans, machines do not need social interactions. This information led to what is known as the human relations movement, a concept that widely influences various types of business entities to include higher education. But what happens with the business entity such as that of higher education that grows beyond the capabilities of providing the type of interactions deemed as needed? Based on Howell, Williams, and Lindsay's (2003) viewpoint, they believed distant education should be embraced as it is needed in the current academic climates because the traditional way of providing education cannot accommodate the vastly growing enrollment and population of college-bound students. In fact, they stated, "Much of distance education programs' success or failure can be attributed to how it is organized" (p. 7).

Theories of Aczel, Peake, and Hardy (2008) coincide with that of Oblinger and Kidwell (2000) in that internal and external factors are considerably important in the organizational design of online institutions and what the authors consider e-learning. However, to expand on the concept, Aczel et al. (2008) included communication components: factors that would encourage interaction with each unit that is used by the student; production capacity, which identifies all things necessary for a student to be successful; and community building: connections made between technology and knowledge management to further enhance the notion that the success of an organization must have a lot of moving parts that interact and ultimately communication is the key. After all, as believed by Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) the online experience for most students is "steeped in emotion" (p. 282) due to there not being a face-to-face presence and the students desire to achieve their academic goals.

Through their research, Hew, Liu, Martinez, Bonk, and Lee (2004) encouraged the need for online institutions to conduct macro level evaluations, which consisted of supporting the investment of resources, conducting a plan for strategic decision making, planning, assessing and measuring progress toward institutional goals and objectives and executing improvement objectives efficiently from a baseline goal. Although these suggestions are general and can be used broadly, the researchers specifically questioned whether resources were being appropriately allocated to student retention and support.

"Organization design emanates from an overall vision embodied in a strategic plan with a clear set of strategic objectives" (Nadler & Tushman 1998, p. 12). The key theory of the authors is based on the understanding that as an organization grows and decisions regarding the growth, which will ultimately render change, are identified there needs to be a balance between the perceived design for change and after implementation, the effectiveness and impact on those affected must be identified. This is a typical issue with the growth of many organizations, as they sometimes grow larger and faster than expected. When this happens, there is not a fully developed plan in place to properly address the issues; therefore, service, communication, and production suffer.

Although some of the literature is outdated, there is a foundational and historical benefit to understanding the characteristics of organizational development and theory. There are also recurring themes throughout the literature: growth rates in organizations, communication, human relations, interactions, dehumanization, and service. It can be concluded from the literature that the elements that are needed for students whether in online universities or in traditional universities may be the same. However, because the online university environment is virtual, the absence of these elements can lead to issues, which can result in retention issues and challenges.

Student Services

Unlike organizational theory, which is thoroughly defined and widely understood, student support services have been defined very ambiguously and vaguely throughout the literature that was reviewed for this research. However, LaPadula (2003) defined student support as "the assistance and guidance that students are offered above and beyond the learning material (p. 119)." Liu (2011) grouped student services with support services that are similar to counseling and advising, and Martinez-Argüelles, Castan, and Juan (2015) identified administrative processes—although not thoroughly stated—as a basis for measuring service quality in online learning methods. Based on the current literature, it can be argued that all aspects of student services should be designed and developed before any implementation of services. Each author and study have identified needs pertaining to student issues in online institutions; however, none of them addressed issues that would create a need for the enhancement of student services or how complaints are addressed in their perceived or proposed plans. The current literature lends itself to addressing the needs of students with academic, funding, technology, or social issues. Although some of the research in this section acknowledges that there are other issues that need to be addressed, specific instances or situations are not identified or discussed with the exception of the suggestions from an article titled, *Four Principles of Effective Online Student Services* (“Four Principles,” 2006) should include services that are student centered, high-quality online interaction, timely service, and communication by timely response (p. 8). To support this notion; Cain, Marrara, Pitre, and Armour (2003) and LaPadula, (2003) agreed that student services should be included in the organizational framework from the onset and should extend beyond the classroom and was adamant that the quality of a student’s nonacademic experience is paramount to their success.

Bolliger and Inan (2012) developed and facilitated a survey that was used to determine the level of connectedness students in online institutions felt with their university. There were 146 participants and the survey consisted of 25 questions relating to community, comfort, facilitation, and interaction, and collaboration. The purpose of the research was to gather information to assist in the development of the instrument. The belief of the researchers from the onset was the correlation between students’ feelings of being disconnected from the institutions environment and retention. Stating that students that feel disconnected will eventually drop out of school, the researchers concluded that the instrument that they developed would be an asset to online institutions as it would provide the type of information needed to develop programs to address students' feelings of disconnection and isolation. According to the researchers, identifying these issues could enhance an institution's progress towards retaining students.

McCulloch (2009) addressed the belief that students of higher education regardless of the type of institution should be classified or named as co-producers as opposed to consumers or customers. He argued that providing a title such as consumer or customer adds the belief that there is a role stipulation that is metaphoric and it does not provide a conduit to decrease the compartmentalization of the educational experience. According to the author the title or classification can aid in the increased or decreased level of service and behavior that is provided by the servicing institution. Referring to students as co-producers however, provides the perception of a joint venture between the student and the institution. The term *co-producer* was first identified as the proper vernacular for joint ventures by authors of Public Administration curriculum in the 1980s. The enhancement of effective service delivery was the focus of the creation of the concept and helps to downgrade the inflated perception that is attached to the terminology students as consumers or customers because it does not provide an emphasis on a student's role and it shows collaboration towards an end goal regardless of the level of involvement.

Cain et al.'s (2003) study indicated that the need for traditional student services for graduate students was not as needed or utilized as predicted by most online learning environments. However, the need for support services was greater and needed around the clock. According to the study, communication is one of the reasons for this issue and they concluded that institutions should develop a needs assessment plan before creating and/or implementing any support services. To coincide with this, in a more recent case study conducted by Taylor and Holley (2009) in which they set out to “consider how student affairs practice influence the experiences of undergraduate students enrolled in an online curriculum” (p. 90), their findings included understanding that programs that focused on and ensured that there was a true communicative connection between the student and the administration were more successful in keeping students enrolled and engaged. The communication with real people made the distance factor a lot smaller and more personal. To delve further into the human aspect of the discussion, Ahmed et al. (2010) strongly believed that there is a likely association between how a student perceives the treatment and service that they receive in school and the student’s performance.

This is also evident in Britto and Rush’s (2013) research where they documented the efforts of Lone Star College-Online. The college identified that they had a need to improve their student retention rates and attributed a large part of the issue to student services so they set out to make changes. According to the researchers, the first step towards the institution making the necessary changes started with hiring a manager that began her tenure with developing a strategic plan for increasing student services. This is in line with that of Nadiri, Kandampully, and Hussain (2009), as they believed that in order to measure service quality the expectations of the students must be identified, as well as the perceptions of the service that is being provided. These two elements must be identified in order to actually assess the need and desires, and to evaluate the services and performance overall.

Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard, and Smith (2013) supported the belief that retention is directly related to student support. In their study, they define student support as academic questions, financial assistance (bursar's office), and counseling. However, they argued that student support for distance learners needs to be developed with the specific needs unique to distance learners that are different than the more common beliefs such as faculty relations, academic success, and student support as it is traditionally stated. The conclusion states that there is a serious disconnect between students and services especially relating to first-time distance learners. The goal of Brown et al.'s (2013) research was to identify the issues that are currently stated as student support services challenges but to also identify the gaps in the literature.

Pullan (2011) set out to identify what student services were currently offered to students who were completing their education as distance education students and to identify the gaps and what services needed to be provided. To do this, she developed a survey that was distributed to students at Farmingdale State College. The survey included questions that would provide insight to topics such as library services, career services, online services, general advising, and administration. The outcome of the research concluded that service accessibility beyond the hours of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. was necessary, as well as having student services defined properly. These changes could be the catalyst to meeting the expectations of the students enhancing the service to online institutions and their students. White (2010) supported this theory and broadened the spectrum of service delivery to include aligning distance education and the effectiveness of the service delivery to the same process libraries use to assess their performance. Visually this would look like a very effective business with a clear strategy, plan of execution, and evaluation methods.

In the article *Four Principles of Effective Online Student Services* (Four Principles, 2006), the focus was on the expectations of students in online institutions. The premise being that in traditional institutions student services coupled with academics make up the whole student experience. The question is whether this is the same or true for students in online institutions; according to the article the answer is yes. Because of this sentiment, the article provided best practices for the enhancement of student services to online institutions, which include understanding and garnering services that are student centered by providing one-stop shops and combining services and efforts as opposed to silos infrastructure, enhancing the interaction capabilities to include the type of technology platforms are used, providing up-to-date information regarding the happenings of the institution on the Website, and 24/7 response to issues and concerns concerning academic and nonacademic.

Scott (2011) presented a report to Congress that was conducted in conjunction with the USGAO at the request of the Department of Education to identify the characteristics of online institutions as well as explore the quality of education and oversight. The majority of the concerns from the onset were related to demographics (i.e., type of students, income, geographical locations, and classification). However, among the concerns were also the assessment and evaluation of distance education, how quality is defined and how it all relates to stewardship and governance relating to financial aid.

To address this concern, Scott (2011) interviewed accrediting agencies that examine the quality of online institutions. The findings revealed that accrediting agencies do not have one set of standards or procedures for the assessment of online institutions. They are not required to have separate standards and, because of this, the same standard in each individual agency is used to assess online institutions, as well as brick-and-mortar institutions. Therefore, the assessments typically include student achievement, curricula, student support services, and faculty; however, how each of these is defined differs from one agency to another. One thing that stands out in the report is the use of student retention rates being used to determine the effectiveness of a program and their association to each other. There was also one accrediting agency identified that used student retention and placement as a measure for effectiveness.

Howard (2014) conducted an audit of the management of risks, Title IV Higher Education Programs specifically, regarding online institutions and distance education. The focus of the audit was to identify whether the guidance provided the accrediting agencies provided the types of risk management appropriate for distance education environments. The issues that the guidance included related to student identity, attendance, and fraud. According to Howard (2014), one of the challenges to providing any guidance to accrediting agencies is the perceived level of responsibility that the agency has to monitor an institution's level of compliance regarding Title IV. The flipside argument is from the states that argue that their responsibility is to license and authorize institutions, thus leaving the monitoring and assessment caught in the middle. The audit was conducted because over $150B provided to online institutions yearly in federal grants, loans, and work-study programs and the level of fraud and abuse of Title IV funds is increasing Howard (2014).

Mayadas, Bourne, and Bacsich (2009) delved into providing a historical basis for online education's place in mainstream higher education. They contended that online education is growing and will continue to grow; the lines between traditional face-to-face education and online education are becoming blurred and the U.S. Government's acknowledgement of the need for online universities. According to the authors not acknowledging the contributions of online institutions is a withdrawal from reality as this is a worldwide venture that is creating less borders and more opportunity for quality education.

Taylor and Holley (2009) set out to determine how student services affect the experiences of students who attend online institutions and identify their experiences. They were specifically interested in the relationship between student affairs (student services) and the student. Because student services are so loosely defined, Taylor and Holley included technology and nonacademic issues in their definition and their findings led them to believe that the approach to student services for online institutions is the same as traditional brick-and-mortar institutions, but the needs and expectations of students are unique. They argued that student services should be developed with the students in mind as opposed to taking a more cookie-cutter, one-size-fits-all approach. According to the authors having a connection to the institution and the ability to access people in real time is the key to a satisfied student and equivalency should be a foregone notion for online institutions as it relates to student services; effectiveness however should be the standard.

Britto and Rush (2013) pursued the notion of student retention being a critical focus in online institutions and its direct correlation to student services and support. The goal of the study was to follow the progression on a traditional brick-and-mortar university as they attempted to offer fully online programs to their students. The goal for the online student support services office was to provide services to their students who were parallel to those of traditional enrollment and increase the number of online students who completed their degree requirements (retention). The research concluded that in order to be successful there was a need to increase the number of staff affiliated with the office so that the workload could be evenly distributed. They increased the number of academic advisors and modified the office hours from a 40-hour 5-day week, which is compatible with traditional students to a 7-day week with extended service hours.

Cain and Lockee (2002) argued that there is a need to explore patterns involving student retention and nonacademic issues and how the two correlates to each other. They believe that dissatisfaction of student services can lead to the increase of student dropouts. However, the focus of the study was on services such as advising, library resources, and mentoring concluding that there is a direct correlation, but to what extent was not explained or supported by hard evidence. Eleven years later in 2013, the same issue regarding student services is a topic of research and discussion but with more intensity and fervor as indicated by a Britto and Rush (2013) study that identified faulty student services as being a reason for decreasing retention rates. Although the study identified student support services as a possible major reason for the decline, the focus of student services included technical support advising, student orientation, and tutoring, which is what is seen as the norm of student support services but continues to exclude other factors such as problem resolution and complaints.

As previously stated, there could be a plethora of factors included in the catchall phrase of student services or student support services. SchWeber (2008) believed that there are definitive policy issues relating to student learning and student services and, although communication in policy development is essential, she did not include who the communication should be focused on and how it should be incorporated as it relates to student services. She simply stated that given the need the communication should be speedy and accurate.

On the flipside of the argument, we find studies on student services such as the one completed by Mayadas et al. (2009), which focused on online institutions and their impact on traditional institutions, students, faculty, and finance, but does not include student services as a factor nor identify any needs relating to student services as a factor.

However, Taylor and Holley (2009) included student services in their research but define it as support services and align it with holistic approaches to student development in regard to social and peer networks and relationships. This concept renders student services to be intrinsically steeped in face-to-face relationships and extracurricular activities. Lastly, Hardy and Griffith (2012) identified the special requirements of accrediting agencies of online institutions to provide student services that are equivalent to traditional institutions; however, the extent to which this is defined is not thoroughly stated.

The bottom line is properly defining student services and identifying the difference between the expectations of the students and the service provided to them (Nadiri, Kandampully, & Hussain, 2009, p. 525) will greatly enhance the chances of identifying the challenges in retention if there is in fact a link, which with further research and assessment could also be identified.

Retention

The literature for this research in retention inadvertently revealed three distinct themes. Retention challenges were a result of enrollment; financial issues, whether by the student or the institution; and governance. Cellini (2010) thoroughly identified that one of the major reasons people enroll in higher education is because they can fund at least a portion of the tuition with the assistance of financial aid. However, the question is, if financial aid is enticing enough to enroll what is the enticing element to keep them retained?

Shelton and Saltsman (2005) contended that the retention rates in online institutions were low due to the lack of planning and assessment of student needs from the onset. They argued, “student success is directly affected by administrative actions and policy” (p. 107). However, the focus of administrative actions and policy for most institutions are more on classes, grades, and what student services is comprised of, while problem resolution and student satisfaction appear to be neglected. Although 7 years passed and the concept of online education has evolved, Kirschner (2012) in contrast expressed his belief that the enrollment in online universities had increased 236% over the span of 10 years, which warrants giving innovation and changes a significant consideration. However, the changes due to the evolution are in the format and presentation of coursework, technology, and the overall online experience, but it does not address the rate of retention. Ali and Leeds (2009) supported the same notion of Shelton and Saltsman (2005) by stating that retention rates were lower in online education as opposed to traditional during this time. Thus, supporting the decline in retention and identifying that lower retention rates negatively impact institutions by way of tuition and reputation. They also boldly stated that a major challenge for online institutions in retaining students is the lack of physical interaction.

This perceived concept of neglecting student satisfaction relating to problem resolution is contrary to the viewpoints of Helgesen and Nesset (2007), whose study found that the reputation of a university could be severely damaged even if the institution is satisfaction-driven in theory, but the students feel that their voices are not heard and the actions of the institution are not consistent with their needs as customers. They also concluded that the institution will retain students who feel their needs are being met and their issues and concerns are being addressed appropriately as this is deemed as being loyal. This loyalty by students is also attached to the way students are financing their education. It appears that students may be more likely to be retained by an institution if there is significant financing and incentives by the institution, despite the fact that they are not satisfied with their overall treatment regarding matters of concern.

Thomas (2011) agreed with the findings of Helgesen and Nesset (2007), as he also believed that student retention is a basis of student loyalty. However, he contended that retaining students provides a competitive advantage to institutions that is only evident when students perceive themselves as being satisfied with how they are serviced as customers. The connection between student retention and student satisfaction as he stated can have long-term effects if not positive. If positive, the long-term effect is being a student who continues the program until the end. If negative, the long-term effect can be a damaged reputation, declining retention and to an extreme point a mass exodus. Thomas (2011) directly linked the need for institutions to have administrators and those that provide support in an academic environment to have excellent administrative skills, develop an environment where the students feel that there is genuine transparency, and the students are treated as customers that have the options. This theory is in direct correlation to Bosco (2012), who discussed the need for retention plans based on the call to action as outlined by President Obama in 2012. As part of President Obama's education agenda, he encouraged higher educational institutions to graduate 8 million additional college graduates to meet the needs of the growing workforce and to help restore the economy. Bosco (2012), contended that this is a large feat as the need for college-trained individuals is increasing and the retention rates in traditional and online institutions is decreasing. He further contended that the overall reasons for the decline relate to enrollment and financial issues; however, it is also noted that there are many nonacademic factors to include lack of student support. If we were to entertain the belief of O'Malley (2012) who suggested that for-profit universities spend less money per student than traditional universities and the students that choose for-profit universities, lack of funding from the standpoint of the institution would be of concern. However, Packham, Jones, Miller, and Thomas (2004) identified various reasons for students' withdrawal from online institutions as time, money, difficulties of course work, lack of IT experience, the feeling of isolation, and personal issues. This study did not identify what the personal issues were, but personal issues were number 5 out of 13 withdrawal factors.

One theme that is resonating in the literature is the need to make students in online institutions more comfortable. Sutton (2014) sought to identify ways in which the faculty, student, and the institution could benefit from the student being retained. He proposed that the traditional aspect of education (i.e., students attend class, complete coursework, take tests, and pass or fail) be revised. Instead, he suggested adding writing assessments in which the student individually selects the method of writing that they are comfortable with to demonstrate how well they are grasping the content and are learning. The assessments would include various writing components such as essays, journaling, critical thinking, portfolios, and problem solving.

Finance and financial issues have historically been one of the more popular reasons for student retention issues. Blumenstyk and Richards (2011) contended that the default rate of student loans is higher in online universities, but because of the methods used to mask the true rates (i.e., forbearances), the tracking of the ill rates are pushed out a year past the required 2-year tracking rate of traditional universities. The actions deeply coincide with the research of Webster and Showers (2011). They have identified the correlation between student enrollment and the impact of an institution's fiscal decline in U.S. based schools. According to their research, the decline in funding has created such an alarm that 114 private colleges were unable to pass the USDOE's financial responsibility test. Their research set out to identify determinants that worked in favor as well as opposition to retention. What they found mostly related to financial aid and tuition; however, as a minor finding the correlation between student services, personal attention, and identifying with student needs were also identified as factors that lead to the decline in retention. Both theories are in direct contrast to Gravois (2011) who conducted a study on WGU, and identified the reasons the school's retention rate is 77%, which is higher than the average of online institutions and most traditional institutions of higher learning. He concluded that while the tuition is extremely low, almost half of that of a for-profit institution at $6,000, the university's success stems from their being a nonprofit organization and they have a model that is more student oriented.

While conducting the research of literature for this study has provided a plethora of viewpoints to support or delineate the research questions governance seemed to have an overarching presence. Governance of for-profit institutions is a huge factor in the belief that retention challenges are much greater in online institutions. There are varying beliefs in why this may be the case and how to properly address the challenges. Kelderman (2011) credited accreditation issues as the challenges that foster flaws in the characteristics and make-up of for-profit institutions. He stated that the expectations of accrediting agencies to govern how institutions retain students, service students, and educate students are far beyond their reach and because there is no true incentive for them to do more, they do not. However, he identified the Western Association of

Schools and College's Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities as one accrediting agency that is trustworthy with clear objectives and that is making changes, such as setting benchmarks for student retention and completion rates to better service the student and hold for-profit institutions more accountable. However, Liu (2011) supported the notion that for-profit institutions "provide the counseling and support services that are really needed to help the students succeed," but additional, more organized, and structured governance relating to student loans, academics, and accreditation is needed, and lastly, Packham et al. (2004) identified various reasons for students' withdrawal from online institutions as time, money, difficulties of course work, lack of IT experience, the feeling of isolation, and personnel issues. This study did not identify what the personnel issues were but it was number 5 out of 13 withdrawal factors. Another viewpoint that is relevant, but not necessarily popular, was stated by Park and Choi (2009), who believed that the lack of support from family members and friends is a big reason that students enrolled in online universities drop out.

Each researcher's view on the reasons why retention is such an issue with online institutions is warranted, and to some—evident. The question then becomes what steps should be taken by the institutions to address the issues. Chait (2011) believed that the for-profit educational industry could work if there were "regulatory incentives to improve its students' career prospects, rather than just shanghai as many warm bodies as possible (p. 244)". Based on the research of Liu (2011), various state legislators passed laws the will provide stricter governance to for-profit institutions and Yeoman (2011) contended that for-profit institutions of higher learning are being regulated more as time passes by the federal government. Yeoman contended that the reasons are due to unsavory recruitment practices, low graduation rates, and high debt load that have been identified and scrutinized by the U.S. Congress. Blumenstyk's (2011) research supported that of Yeoman (2011) as he discussed some of the changes that the University of Phoenix had to make as a result of a federal lawsuit and the impending legislation. The lawsuit was driven by what the U.S. Congress found to be unethical practices that cost the United States millions in tax dollars to fund financial aid for an online institution (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Based on the literature the underlying factor that should be noted is identifying the student as a customer and treating them accordingly as stated by Pârvo and Ipate (2011) who yielded to the notion that the customers of higher institutions are the students and the institutions objective regarding student satisfaction should be market orientation, meaning knowing and understanding the needs of the students. They insisted that involving themselves in this type of practice will render repeat customers (retention), increased clientele and a promising reputation. What is unique about their findings is that they stated that the institution should identify things that could be stated as "unique needs" for students. In the case of online students this could be perceived as any one of the issues or concerns relating to problem resolution issues as the way that they are handled or responded to can create additional concerns in and of itself.

Policy and Legislation

Dundon (2015) provided varying points of view regarding how students are categorized by naming them consumers. The article does not provide a specific study but more of clarification points for and against the categorization. Dundon's argument is "many students enrolling in for-profit career colleges find that their investment has been worthless" (p. 1), and because the efforts of students that attend for-profit colleges are met with little academic gain and but extraordinary debt they should be considered consumers. A second point includes the need for students, which she notably stated are consumers, to be protected by policies and strict regulation to deter financial hardships and deceptive practices while increasing organizational integrity among for-profit colleges.

Krupnick (2013) discussed the reasons for the decline in enrollment at for-profit institutions starting in 2013. Among the top reasons were the barrage of lawsuits by individual students, class action lawsuits, and law suits by state government. Also included was the recruitment and enrollment process that were found to be fraudulent and deceiving, and lastly the increase in legislation that is focused on for-profit institutions.

The focus of this article was due to colleges and universities in the United States experiencing a decline in enrollment (Krupnick, 2013). To the surprise of many, for-profit institutions; which were seeing yearly increases prior to 2013 also had major declines as deep as 9%-18% on average. To explain the phenomena Steve Gunderson President and CEO of the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities stated "The sector experienced double digit growth at the beginning of the recession. It grew too far, too fast. It's going back to what the market can support" (p. 10). The foregoing supports the evidence of a decline without truly explaining why. Krupnick (2013) set out to bridge the gap.

Senator Tom Harkin, Chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee (HELP) released a report in 2012 that identified issues with for-profit institutions. Among the issues were tax payer investments through financial benefits for students such as the GI Bill (a funding source for active military and veterans), student aid provided by the U.S. Department of Education and the Department of Defense Tuition Assistance, high tuition, predatory recruiting, high debt, funding allocations for marketing, executive salaries and profit and regulatory system gaming activity. The purpose of the report was to reveal the identified issues to encourage legislation according to Fain (2012).

In 2014, Senator Harkin with the assistance of other members of the HELP committee introduced the SBPA. The purpose of the act is to combat the practices that were identified in the 2012 report which included deceptive enrollment practices, reporting activity and the misuse of federal funding. Meeting the objectives off the act would include the U.S. Congress establishing a joint bi-partisan committee to determine how for-profit schools should be governed; the committee will in turn determine monetary penalization for violators and increase the level of transparency.

However; in 2013 amidst the constant discussions by members of Congress to develop legislation that would pose strict enforceable accountability measures for proprietary institutions state governments were also identifying the challenges for students and seeking ways to deter what they deemed as unsavory practices and protect the student (For-Profit Colleges, 2013). This report detailed the efforts to identify and pass legislation in the states of Connecticut, Maryland, California, and Michigan. Each states policy focuses on different issues as stated by the federal government. For instance, the focus of the State of Connecticut's HB 5500 is on the reporting financial aid information, whereas Maryland's focus includes reporting, but also requires prohibiting payment and incentives to recruiters and creating a state fund as a guaranty fund in the event the school diminishes into bankruptcy and students need reimbursement.

Michigan's bill redefines the definition of propriety schools to" for-profit schools teaching a trade or vocation that do not have author to grant degrees" (p. 2). However, the policy that delved the most impact to proprietary institutions is the revising of California's Cal-Grant program which now links an institution's eligibility for state funding to student graduation rates and the percentage of student loan defaults. Although propriety institutions were not solely targeted, the financial impact to propriety institutions was significant as the impact rendered approximately eighty percent of propriety institutions ineligible for California grant funding. Fain's (2012) article supported the report of the National Conference of State Legislatures (For-Profit Colleges, 2013), and added that in order for colleges to be eligible, the average requirements for graduation rates must be 30 percent over 6 years and a maximum of 3-year default rate on federal student loans of 15.5 percent.

The call to action for the regulation of proprietary institutions is more widespread than federal and state entities. Individual taxpayers, former students and current students have voiced their concerns as seen with Naylor (2016) who believes ethical behavior of students begins with the behavior of the institution from which they are being served. She contends that billions of dollars in Pell Grants and the $20B in federal loans that are provided to proprietary institutions should demand accountability such as the development and enforcement of clear performance measures and higher standards. These measures would entail affordable tuition which is more comparable to nonprofit institutions, increased graduation rates and a decrease in student loan default rates and all the information should be posted on the institutions website for transparency.

Lastly, on a broader scale there was the introduction of PEOCIA which focused on establishing a bipartisan committee of members of Congress and other federal and state agencies and entities with vested interest in higher education. If enacted this would be the tie-in or the bridge as stated by Fain (2012) needed to increase efforts to ensure that students that attend for-profit institutions are treated respectfully and getting the education that they are seeking. Both pieces of proposed legislation are still being reviewed in their respective committees and awaiting further action.

Contrary to the call for heftier legislation is the push back that proprietary institutions had regarding the implementation of new policies. In 2014 at the height of the introduction of the Gainful-Employment Rule the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Department of Education stating that the department did not have the authority to implement such ruling (Field, 2014). Just three years later Abdul-Alim (2016) cites the continued and more aggressive actions taken by the Obama Administration, which include federal investigations, lawsuit actions, and general incivility regarding for-profit colleges and universities.

Summary

All four topics: organizational behavior, student services, academic policy and retention have very explicit suggestions as to how an online institution should be structured and what characteristics they should have. However, the one most important element is the student. In reviewing the literature, the researcher has concluded four key issues:

1. Student Services as it is currently understood by lack of a true definition in the traditional sense is not the same for online universities. The characteristics although similar are different and should be designed and executed differently.

2. None of the literature addresses problem resolution as it relates to students concerns with the administration, faculty, or nonacademic topics or issues. The focus of most, if not all, of the literature is on academic differences or minor grade disputes.

3. One size does not fit all, as is the case with proprietary universities. The literature paints a picture that encompasses institutions that may have minor problems, which can be addressed the same way regardless of institution, and this is not realistic.

4. There is not a thoroughly defined identity for students. The pendulum of definition swings between customer, consumer, or plain student.

5. It is believed that proprietary institutions should have more robust governance for the good of the students they serve.

Chapter 3 will identify the methodology that I used to conduct the research, discuss the research design, and the plans for analyzing the data.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore to what extent legislation such as the PEOCIA and the SBPA enacted by Congress are effective in enhancing the post recruitment quality of educational service experienced by the online doctoral students. A qualitative research method with a phenomenological design was deemed suitable for this study because of its ability to provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of participants from the identified population (Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, & Sixmith, 2013). In this case, the phenomenon was the students' experience of the ability of their institutions to facilitate their learning experience through student support and problem resolution. Trochim (2007) defined phenomenological studies as "qualitative approaches to subjective experiences and interpretations," which is the best suited method for this study because the participants have a subjective viewpoint of their situations and the topic is new, complex, and sensitive, which are all phenomenological characteristics.

Phenomenological studies bring forth philosophical perspectives that provide insight into the inner workings, and everyday lived experiences of the subjects being explored (Converse, 2012). These types of studies definitively describe the phenomenon from the study participants' point of view. Gaining a better understanding of the social and psychological effects of a person's lived experiences are major characteristics as well. For this research, I selected a phenomenological research design because, with the research questions, I sought to understand the experience students have with student services in online doctoral programs. This inquiry is likely to help better understand to what extent the students perceive student services and its ability to resolve their problems, a facilitator for their success in the program.

Online learning environments may pose a different set of challenges than traditional institutions. In researching the topic, it does not appear that there is a lot of information regarding online institutions and problem resolution as it relates to the complaint process. At least $10.3 billion is spent annually by universities to upgrade and enhance student services (Technology Innovation, 2011); however, it is not clear how the humanistic aspect is addressed. This research provided insight into the issues of problem resolution and problems stated by students, and explored the perceived effects of problem resolution on student retention. In turn, the results of this study may be able to further provide more insight into the how this phenomenon is guided by existing public policies that govern online institutions.

The qualitative methodology for this study was guided by Eisner's *Six Features of a Qualitative Study* as it was field focused, employed the self as an instrument, had an interpretive character, made use of expressive language, paid attention to particulars, and was believable. The data for this study were collected using semistructured interviews using guidelines from the Klein and Meyers' (1999) *Seven Principles of Interpretive Research* as its foundation.

According to Klein and Meyers (1999), there are seven modes of understanding (principles) to consider when conducting interpretive field research, (a) the fundamental principle of the Hermeneutic Circle that suggests that human understanding sways between understanding individual parts of a meaning to understand the whole meaning; (b) contextualization via an understanding of the history and background of the research; (c) the Principle of Interaction Between the Researchers and the Subject; (d) the Principle of Abstraction and Generalization by applying historical and whole thought understanding to describe a social action and human aspect; (e) the Principle of Dialogical Reasoning implying a necessary sensitivity towards raw data; (f) the Principle of Multiple Interpretations which acknowledges the differences in a participants experiences; and (g) the Principle of Suspicion, which renders sensitivity towards the participant's stories and experiences. However, although this research is qualitative and not interpretive, the principles are still relevant. For this study, the fundamental principle of the Hermeneutic Circle (Trochim, 2007) guided the data collection process because the primary purpose was to understand how various processes, points of view, and sentiments, which are small interdependent parts, relate to an overall outcome as a whole. The Hermeneutic Circle is, in essence, the principle of human understanding, which is the overarching objective of this research.

Typically, a phenomenological study does not require more than 6-10 participant interviews because the rationale is at some point the essence of the phenomena is going to be the same or similar with each interview (Willig, 2007). Additionally, acquiring a higher number of participants was first thought to be difficult because of limitations such as geographic location; however, this was not the case. Emerging and continuously improving audio/visual communication platforms such a Skype, Facetime, and Facebook video was used to compensate for limits imposed by geographical location.

Phenomenological studies are inherently qualitative as the focus is to investigate the meaning of the research and delve deeply into the lived human experience (Garza, 2012). According to Tuohy et al. (2013), phenomenology can be "descriptive and interpretive" (p. 17). The characteristics associated with this research are parallel to the objectives of a descriptive phenomenological study and seeks to reveal logic, interrelationships, and communication in the most general meaning of the phenomenon, as is essential to the narrative (Garza, 2012).

Of the three varieties of phenomenological research stated by Garza (2007); *Sein gefragtes*—that which is asked about; *Ein befragtes*—that which is interrogated and *Das erfragte*—that which is to be found out by asking, the variety that lends itself to revealing the lived meaning and intentional relationship for this study is *Das erfragte*.

The focus of largely experiential, phenomenological research is also on identifying the meaning behind the phenomena, not just what the participants experienced, but why they experienced it and how the experience made them feel (Groenwald, 2004). Information such as this must be described in one's own words, which coincides with the type of open-ended questions this research will include in the questionnaire.

Phenomenological research has evolved from its beginnings of descriptive pretranscendental practices. Sanders (1983) stated that phenomenology was the "new star on the research horizon," (p. 353) and at the time there was not a definitive methodology for researchers to use. In present-day research, this method is the best to answer the research questions as it is the best means to articulate the voice of the student and may assist in filling a gap in the research literature.

In contrast, a quantitative study would not have been a suitable research method because the data gathered would not provide lived experienced as stated by the participants. Quantitative methods, such as a Likert-type questionnaire, are more suitable to understand average trends in a population. Once the key themes associated with the phenomenon are identified via interviews, a quantitative approach may be more suitable in a subsequent phase of this research to understand trends around a specific theme of the phenomenon. This chapter will introduce and discuss phenomenology; the method that was used to conduct the research, discuss the research design in detail, and the analyzing of the data.

Research Design and Rationale

The focus of this research was to explore the perceived effects of an institution's problem resolution capability on student retention among online doctoral students. The following research question was designed to guide the research:

RQ: What are the lived experiences of online doctoral students regarding the ability of their institutions to resolve problems?

The main research question was categorically investigated through the following sub-questions:

- How have the online doctoral students experienced the enrollment process?
- How have online doctoral students experienced the financial aid process?

- What is the perception of online doctoral students about the role their institutions should play in resolving their academic problems?

The research population included current and former doctoral degree-seeking students in for-profit proprietary online institutions of higher learning. This population was selected because they had the most access to problem resolution and student services by the very nature of their being enrolled as a student. The groups that were targeted for solicitation were Facebook and Reddit because of the overwhelming results there was not a need to solicit from any other social media outlets.

Purposive sampling specifically snowball sampling was the technique used to acquire participants. This method of sampling was used because the research sample was targeted, but proportionality was not a primary concern, and there was one predefined group: students that attended an online institution that filed a formal complaint regarding an issue which had to be counseled, mediated, or elevated to administration, which also serves as the criterion for which participants are recruited for this study. Also, snowball sampling was the most viable option for this research because social media and informal networks were used to obtain participants (Trochim, 2007).

As the researcher, I joined various social media forums and groups to include Reddit forums: a community dedicated to creating and executing scientific research and has 31,000 subscribers; Academia—a group developed to discuss academic life and ask questions directed towards people in academia; Online Education—a group of students or alumni of online institutions; as well as Twitter groups distance education comprised of teachers and students (current and former) of online institutions; and Online Education—

whose primary focus is to assist high school students with preparing to make decisions about their academic choices based on the participants' experiences. In the end, the groups that provided me with an overwhelming interest in supporting the research by being a participant was the Capella Cohort a Facebook group that is comprised of members representing at least six for-profit institutions and the Walden University Ph.D. group that is on Facebook.

The goal of the study was to interview 20 current and former online doctoral students. Of the 20 participants, I was able to interview; one resides in the same city as I do. As a result, I was able to do a face-to-face interview. The other interviews were completed via electronic means. According to Sanders (1983), the first critical rule for the phenomenological researcher is: more subjects do not yield more information. "Quantity should not be confused with quality" (p. 356). According to Fowler (2009), sample sizes should be determined on a case-by-case basis, including variables such as goals to be achieved, margin of error, population, and the perceived realistic number of participants. Twenty interviews were chosen because although it does not provide an accurate depiction of what is happening throughout the entire higher education system, it is not focused on trying to subjugate a theory, but rather provide suggestions for answering questions relating to the relationship of problem resolution and retention. Lastly, 20 interviews may provide a level of saturation that Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) expressed is yielded in homogeneous groups of 12 participants.

Characteristics of phenomenology include subjective and objective descriptive investigation or consciousness meaning the point of when the awareness of the phenomena meets managerial or organizational excellence and because there was not a focus on or target of any one specific institution, the research benefitted by having greater diversity in participants.

This research falls directly in line with the intention of organizational research phenomenology because the objective was to use the experiences of the research participants (phenomena) to understand the effects on them and whether the effects were great enough to affect their being retained as students. The characteristics of the questions provided the participants an environment to elaborate on their experiences; provide demographic information such as academic status, gender, and the origin of the perceived challenges.

The trustworthiness and validity of the data can only be assumed. It is also assumed that a level of external validity as defined by Trochim as "the generalizability of conclusions" (2007, p. 34) would be present, but to what extent is unknown. This is because, although the participants were vetted and the interviews were one-on-one, there is no way to determine the level of truth or fabrication is in the responses.

A pilot study using three participants from the identified population was conducted in preparation for the actual full-scale study. The purpose of this pilot was to test the construct validity of the interview questions. Feedback was requested from the pilot participants regarding the clarity of questions. I revised the interview questions based on their feedback to improve the understandability of the interview questions and to allow the process to flow more evenly during transitions.

Role of the Researcher

My role in the research was as a noninterpretive interviewer with the responsibility of asking the interview questions, recording the sessions, taking notes and asking follow-up questions. I did not have any personal relationships with the participants; however, I am a part of the phenomena as an online student of a proprietary institution that is working towards a Ph.D. I minimized any misleading or perceived interpretation of support for the participant by not displaying emotions verbally, through body language or by demonstrating any actions that could be perceived as judgment.

Methodology

The research population included current and former students, and alumni of doctoral programs who attended online proprietary institutions; 20 interviews were conducted. To be considered for participation in this research the study participants had to have been enrolled as a doctoral student in an online proprietary institution. There was not a minimum of time requirement nor did that participant have to have completed a degree from the institution.

To determine whether a candidate for participation met the criteria the interested party was asked the prequalifying question “where you enrolled in a proprietary online doctoral program?” If the response to the question was yes, they were qualified to participate.

Purposive sampling, specifically snowball sampling, was the technique used to acquire participants. This method of sampling was used because the research sample was targeted, but proportionality was not a primary concern, and there was one predefined group: students and alumni who were enrolled in a proprietary online doctoral program. Also, snowball sampling was the most viable option for this research because social media and informal networks were used to obtain participants (Trochim, 2007). Participants were solicited via word of mouth and participant solicitations using social media, which included Facebook and Reddit.

Data Analysis

The steps used for data collection included: interview, transcribe, organize results, perform thematic coding and open coding. NVivo software was used to facilitate open a thematic coding of the collected interview data to identify themes and subthemes emerging from this research.

The analysis of any data could be as good as the quality of data collected and prepared for analysis. Before data analysis, I took a few precautionary steps to maintain a high quality of data. While recording interviews, I also took handwritten notes to capture the body language and the tone of voice of the participant. After transcription was completed, I matched the transcripts with interview recordings to validate the correctness of transcripts. Once the data was ready for analysis, I used NVivo software to facilitate data coding. First, I applied theoretical thematic coding, which is a process by which I focused on coding words and phrases that pertain to the theme of the research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that while applying theoretical (or deductive) thematic analysis a researcher focuses on the analytical interest pertaining to the research questions. The authors explained that this approach generates results that are less rich in content but provide detailed analysis of a specific aspect of data (e.g., data pertaining to the research questions). I implemented deductive coding by looking for keywords and concepts among the interview data that pertain to the topic of my research questions.

Next, to compensate for the lack of richness in the initial round of analysis I went over the entire dataset again and implemented inductive coding. Through inductive coding, I was able to identify any new themes that were not initially covered in my research questions. Braun and Clarke (2006) explained that an inductive approach ensures that the themes identified are strongly dictated by the data, related to the data, and may bear little relationship with the research questions or the original intent of the researcher. Findings from inductive coding may provide wider and deeper insight into the phenomenon being studied by introducing new perspectives. I implemented inductive coding by not focusing on the research questions, but rather by identifying patterns presented by the data itself. These patterns may not be related to my original interest.

As part of data collection, I also collected some demographic data about the participants such as age, gender, and the number of years in the online doctoral program, etc. I explored whether the found themes showed any trends if divided across the demographic variables. After all, coding was completed, results were compiled systematically and presented in Chapter 4.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Internal and external validity and reliability are terms that are typically associated with quantitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested alternative terms that have since applied to the qualitative research process. The researchers suggested that for a qualitative research, internal validity would be expressed best as credibility or trustworthiness of the study, external validity would be better expressed as transferability, and reliability was better expressed as dependability of a qualitative study.

Credibility

The credibility or trustworthiness of a qualitative research means to what extent are the findings of the research believable and make sense not only in the context of the research but also in the context of associated theories. From this perspective, the researcher should emphasize not on the quantity of data collected, but on the quality of data analyzed. To maintain the credibility of the study, I intend to focus on the richness of the data collected from interviews and on the depth of analysis of the collected data. The main research question of the study was approached from various angles (through sub-questions) so that the emerging themes could be used to triangulate the main research question.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is reciprocal of what is commonly known as the external validity, which defines how generalizable or applicable the results of the research will be in other contexts of the topic. The transferability of this research is likely to be limited to the domain of online education. However, where the focus of this research is on online doctoral students, the results may be applicable to all levels of online programs that are governed by similar public policies, and that are challenged by similar student issues.

Dependability

Dependability of a qualitative study refers to the reliability of the study, which suggests how likely the results are to be similar if the study is conducted again. For the purposes of this study, I will attempt to reach out to online doctoral students from as diverse backgrounds as possible who may be in varying doctoral programs and from various online universities. The intent was to capture as rich a data set as possible that is representative of most common issues. For this purpose, I continued the interview process until data saturation is reached.

Conformability

Conformability of a qualitative study refers to the degree of neutrality maintained by the researcher. Although eliminating researcher's bias is critical in all kinds of research designs, it plays a more prominent role in a qualitative study where the analysis of collected data is primarily based on the contextualization and sense-making on the part of the researcher. To maintain the conformability of this study, I tried to eliminate my personal biases as much as humanly possible and attempted to stay objective in collecting and analyzing data. While collecting data, I kept my verbal interaction as limited as possible to avoid generating a leading thought or asking a leading question. I also checked the construct validity of my research question and sub-questions to ensure that they were clear and non-leading. Depending on time and budget, I may also seek external support to validate my coding of the collected data to ensure that the identified themes are not a result of researcher's bias.

Ethical Procedures

The researcher followed all IRB guidelines to ensure that the research is compliant with all ethical requirements. The steps to ensure ethical integrity of the research include, but are not limited to, providing the potential volunteers with the context of the study; providing all disclaimers; and ensuring that their participation is absolutely on volunteer basis; collecting a signed consent form from participants that explains their rights and procedures for withdrawing from the study even after data collection; and protection of participant identity and collected data. All processes of the research will be conducted under the strict guidelines of the ethical protocols of a doctoral study. Data collection was not conducted until IRB clearance was received.

Summary

The research problem was restated and discussed in detail regarding the suitability of using a qualitative method and a phenomenological design to approach solving the underlined research problem. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a sample from the identified population. A brief discussion on why some other research methods were not deemed suitable for this research was also provided.

In Chapter 3, I also defined the population and details of the research process, which included the ethical considerations in engaging the population, collecting data and the process for construct, internal, and external validity of the interview questions. A brief discussion was also provided on the data analysis. NVivo software was used to facilitate open and thematic coding of the collected interview data to identify themes and subthemes emerging from this research. Results of the collected data will be presented in

A discussion of the results of the pilot study, demographics, data collection, analysis, and results of the study will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore to what extent proposed legislation such as the PEOCIA and the SBPA if enacted by Congress, would be effective in enhancing the postrecruitment quality of educational service experienced by online doctoral students. In this research, I explored the lived experiences of twenty doctoral students relating to enrollment, financial assistance, and problem resolution.

In Chapter 4, the findings acquired from the interviews of twenty current and former doctoral students from various for-profit online institutions. Guiding this study was one main research question and three subquestions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of online doctoral students regarding the ability of their institutions to resolve problems?

Research subquestion 1: How have the online doctoral students experienced the enrollment process?

Research subquestion 2: How have online doctoral students experienced the financial aid process?

Research subquestion 3: What is the perception of online doctoral students about the role their institutions should play in resolving their academic problems?

Once I received approval from the Walden IRB (09-06-17-0068338), I used the qualitative research method to explore the feelings and experiences of current and former online doctoral students regarding their perception of the supportive roles of their institutions for success in their doctoral programs.

Chapter 4 includes the following sections: introduction of the study, its purpose and intention, pilot study results, research setting, demographics of the 20 participants, data collection methods, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the conclusion, which includes a summary of the findings from the study.

Pilot Study

After the approval of the IRB to conduct the study, I solicited participants through social media communities such as Facebook and Reddit groups that have dedicated platforms for students that attend for-profit online institutions. This was done by posting the approved completed announcement to the groups. The announcement was submitted on a Wednesday to over 5,000 people, and by Saturday there had not been any interest in participation. After reviewing the original announcement posted to the groups, I concluded that although the information was complete and thorough, it needed to be less generic and impersonal. Also, after speaking with one person in an online group, they stated that they thought the announcement was lengthy. Further, though it included pertinent information, they could not truly identify how the study was relevant to them, Thus, I submitted a follow-up notice with a more detailed description solely regarding the context of the study and how it relates to them. After reposting, people started to respond and volunteer to participate. As each participant responded via email and provided the Informed Consent, I scheduled a date and time to conduct their interview via Skype or Facetime.

The first three interviews were used as the pilot study. The first interview was shorter than anticipated and lasted only 18 minutes. All the questions were asked and answered thoroughly.

For purpose of uniformity in the interviews, once the audio recording started the researcher verbally announced the date, time, and participant number. I also read the consent statement, requested verbal consent, and read the main research question and three subquestions so that the participant could have a clearer understanding of the objective of the study.

In the second interview, I realized that the order of the questions needed to be changed to transition the responses from the participants in a more fluid manner. Also, two questions were added to gain more information regarding enrollment to keep from asking the participant to clarify. The original question: Describe your enrollment experience? Was followed up with two additional clarifying questions:

- What was the perception that you had of the program and institution before enrollment?
- Did the pre-enrollment perception match the post-enrollment experience and expectations?

Adding these questions provided for a more robust response that did not need additional inquiry or the need to request clarification. With the changes that were made from the experience of the first and second interview, the third interview now rendered a more complete and robust study result with no additional changes needed.

Research Setting

All study participants were current and former doctoral degree-seeking students in for-profit proprietary online institutions of higher learning. The interviews were conducted via face-to-face, Skype, Facetime and Facebook video. Each participant was in a comfortable setting which they selected and would not be interrupted. There were not any organizational conditions that influenced the participants or their experiences negatively at the time of study that would influence the interpretation of the study results.

Demographics

Twenty participants that were current or former students of for-profit institutions while enrolled in a doctoral program were selected for the data collection of the qualitative study. The semistructured interview was administered through face-to-face, Skype, Facetime and Facebook video, and audio recorded on my Apple MacBook Pro computer in which all participants answered all questions for the interview. I selected participants based on when they responded to the announcement and when they were available to be interviewed: as each participant responded with their desire to participate, I sent them the informed consent and once I received their consent via email, I scheduled the interview. I interviewed participants based on the schedule until I reached 20 completed interviews. Each participant was interviewed one time. There was not a reason to conduct follow-up interviews. Out of a total of 20 participants, 16 were female, and four of the participants were male, as seen in Table 1. All participants were in the age bracket of 25 years to 65 years which can further be categorized into two ranges, i.e., *25 years to 40 years* and *41 years to 65 years*. Seven of the participants were in the *25 to 40* *age* range, while the remaining 13 participants were in the *41 to 65 age* range. Additional demographic information obtained included program duration. Responses of the participants indicated that a majority of the participants spent a little more than five years in the academic process of their doctoral program, and three had been in their respective programs close to 10 years.

Participants were also asked about their knowledge of the proposed congressional legislation (i.e., PEOCIA and SBPA). For the SBPA, only five participants were familiar with the proposed legislation while the remaining 15 participants had no knowledge, and in the case of the PEOCIA, only three of the participants responded that they had knowledge of the proposed legislation, while the remaining 17 participants showed no familiarity with the proposed legislation and their implications.

Table 1

Individual Participant Demographics

Classification Code	**Age**	**Gender**
P1	29	Female
P2	29	Female
P3	41	Female
P4	50	Male
P5	52	Female
P6	43	Male
P7	52	Male
P8	57	Female
P9	44	Female
P10	29	Female
P11	38	Female

table continued

Classification Code	Age	Gender
P12	56	Female
P13	44	Female
P14	35	Female
P15	41	Female
P16	38	Female
P17	47	Female
P18	40	Female
P19	63	Male
P20	59	Female

There were two variations in data collection from the plan presented in Chapter 3. First, Skype presented a challenge with participant #6 and #19, as the program kept freezing and would not stay engaged. At the request of the participants, we changed to Facebook Video to complete the interview. Second, the interviews took 20-25 minutes with detailed responses to the majority of the questions as opposed to the 45 minutes originally planned. Neither of the variations affected the quality of the study or created unusual circumstances.

Data Collection

All the participants were provided a specific code for the encryption of their responses in the NVivo 11 software and referencing of their quotations in later stages of analysis. Any detailed personal information about the participants is kept confidential, and for the purpose of anonymity, participants are coded as per participant number during the interview.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the participants of the study is analyzed in this chapter through thematic content analysis supported by NVivo software to draw the findings and conclusions as per the results of analysis and objectives of the study. The qualitative content analysis technique is applied to achieve the basic aims and objectives of the study which is the lived experiences of online doctoral students regarding the ability of their institutions to resolve problems.

For the purpose of the qualitative study, a semi-structured open-ended interview was designed to be administered to the participants of the study to gather their opinions and perceptions as per their lived experiences relating to the enrollment process, financial aid process, and the ability of their institution to resolve issues with the current resolution process and the role of the institution relating to academic issues. The lived experiences of online doctoral students were captured through these research questions: a) how have the online doctoral students experienced the enrollment process, b) how have online doctoral students experienced the financial aid process and, c) what is the perception of online doctoral students about the role which their institution should play in resolving their academic problems. A semi-structured interview was developed based on these research questions and was aimed to access their perception through their lived experiences. For the purpose of qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews, NVivo 11 software system was used to get the reliable results.

The interview was the only research instrument used in the study to collect all the data from the sample participants for analysis and derivation of results. Therefore, each question was designed to provide responses to the overall theme of the research to assure that all of the research questions have the appropriate representation and the objectives are thoroughly met.

The qualitative data collected through the interview was coded and classified as per the predefined content area or section for elaborative analysis for each research question. These sections were aligned with the research questions and were referred to during the NVivo analysis for better understanding and interpretation of the results. The following predefined sections were developed for qualitative content analysis;

- Section 1: The Enrollment Process for Doctoral Students at Online Institutions
- Section 2: The Financial Aid Process for Doctoral Students at Online Institutions
- Section 3: The Role of Institutions in the Resolution of Student's Academic Problems at Online Institutions

A detailed explanation of each section and theme or subtheme is discussed in the summary.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Internal and external validity and reliability are terms that are typically associated with quantitative studies. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested alternative terms that have since applied to the qualitative research process. The researchers suggested that for qualitative research internal validity is better expressed as credibility or trustworthiness of the study; external validity is better expressed as transferability, and reliability is better expressed as dependability. These are the criteria that are used to evaluate the trustworthiness of this research.

Credibility

Credibility was accomplished by member checking. Once the interview commenced, I read the informed consent to the participant so that they would hear the scope and objective of the research and provide consent as well as have the opportunity to ask questions. During the interview, I asked the questions and requested clarity to ensure that the questions were being answered thoroughly and the participants' thoughts and sentiments were being accurately conveyed. I took written notes that detailed responses such as body language that was not captured in the audio recordings. After the completion of each interview, I listened to the audio recording to ensure that there were not any technical issues with the recording and that the participant's responses were clear and understandable. During the review of each interview, I also updated my written notes to any gestures or statements that might have been missed during the interview. After receiving the transcribed data from the transcriptionist, I compared the documents to the audio recording to ensure that the transcribed information was verbatim. The transcribed data and the audio recordings matched exactly, and therefore no other actions were taken.

Transferability

Transferability was attained by my providing a clear and thorough description of the type of participants to be involved in the study to include: the type of educational institutions the participants attended, the academic status and degree criteria. Purposeful sampling was used as the participants attended various educational institutions. Participants in the study included current and former students who are or were enrolled in a doctoral program in an online for-profit institution of higher learning.

Dependability

To establish dependability, I supported the verbal interview responses with written notes that included nonverbal responses, body language, and gestures. The document and the verbal interviews were reviewed at least five times during the process. The data was compared during the coding process by which NVivo 11 was used. The cross-checking of codes and responses were consistent.

Conformability

Conformability was attained by my use of external support (Data analyst) to validate my coding of the collected data to ensure that the identified themes were not a result of researcher's bias. Also, during the interview, I maintained the conformability of this study by eliminating my personal biases as much as humanly possible by keeping my verbal interaction limited, avoiding or generating a leading thought, or asking lead-in questions.

Results

Section 1: The Enrollment Process for Doctoral Students at Online Institutions

The first section of the qualitative analysis is providing the views and perceptions of the participants lived experiences as an online student in a doctoral program at a for-profit institution. This section addressed the enrollment process adopted by the online institutions, the characteristics of these institutions which matched the perceived criteria in the minds of students when choosing the institution for the pursuance of their doctoral studies. As seen in Table 2 this section of the analysis is relevant to the first research question of the study which was focused on the lived experiences of online doctoral students in respect of their enrollment procedures. Themes for this section were identified from the interview. The coding of the responses by participants provided the emerging subthemes.

Table 2

Theme and Subtheme: Enrollment

Theme	Subtheme
Enrollment process in online institutions	• Experiences of students • Characteristics of an online institution and student's anticipations.

Enrollment process in online institutions. Participants of the qualitative study were interviewed about their lived experiences as part of the enrollment process through which they have received admission in the online institution as an online student pursuing a doctoral degree. Participants were also asked to provide the characteristics of their institution which matched with their perception and selection criteria for the pursuance of their doctoral academics. Participants were also asked about their anticipations for pre-enrollment and post-enrollment experiences and overall doctoral program.

Responses of the participants related to this theme provided their experiences and their perceptions about the enrollment process of online students for doctoral programs in online institutions.

Experiences of students. To acquire the understanding of the lived experiences of the students regarding the enrollment process they participated in an interview which asked specific questions. The analysis of the responses gave the evidence that all the participants shared a very positive experience towards the enrollment process and none of them had any issues or faced major hurdles in enrollment of the doctoral program. Eighteen of the twenty participants were of the view that the enrollment procedure was very systematic, smooth, and easily understandable by all the online students. Participants also provided the opinion that the enrollment process has a flawless transaction procedure which was guided excellently by the administration of institution and the advisory services were very helpful for the overall completion of the enrollment process.

According to P04,

> *"The enrollment process was excellent, and they wanted me to figure out which program I wanted to join and would suit my requirements and my previous academic credentials. After the selection of the program, I was required to submit some documents, and then they assisted me in understanding the degree program for my doctoral studies."*

As per P07,

> *"Actually, I was planning to go to another school, but when I contacted this university, the enrollment procedure seemed to be excellent and flawless. It was up to the mark and met my expectations, and I highly recommend the institution to others".*

Characteristics of online institutions and students' anticipations. In case of selection of online institution and the doctoral program, participants were questioned about their perceptions in respect of characteristics which should be present in an online institution to meet the expectations of the students. Participants provided their views as per their understanding and their opinions regarding characteristics which were dominating which provided the basis for the selection of such institutions.

The responses of the participants highlighted the two most prominent facts which were referred as the characteristics of the institution for the pursuance of the doctoral program. These two prominent characteristics were the flexibility of time and the social change aspect. 16 participants emphasized that the selected online institution was providing a flexible time schedule for the pursuance of their studies and this flexibility of time was needed by them due to their job, family commitments, and financial issues. Online study schedules and availability of resources was considered as a plus point for the participants who were already working in a job and have some family commitments. According to P03,

> *"I was mainly interested in the online program as I am a single mom with family commitments along with a 48-hour work shift. I also have to travel a lot which makes things even harder. With online education program, I can have access to all the tools and resources necessary for my education at all points of time at any place I am in."*.

Another feature highlighted by the participants under the category of the flexibility of time was the availability of financial discounts provided by some schools to ease the financial burdens of the student, some with incentives for professional development and career growth.

As per P12,

"My institution had a type of program that I wanted to go for. As I was already an employee of the same institution; therefore, I got the faculty discount which eased out my financial requirements as I already had some loans. Also, I did my MBA from the same institution, so my previous experience also played a great part in selection of the same institution for my doctoral program."

On the other hand, four of the participants mentioned the aspect of social change as an influential factor for the selection of their institution as well as and some specialized doctoral programs.

P16 stated,

"The institution has a slogan for social change and has programs which are of my interest and not offered by other institutions. Also, already I am a volunteer with organizations that focus on social change."

Similarly, the participants inquired about their anticipations for their selected doctoral journey with their institutions at the time of their enrollment. The majority (n = 12) of the participants had already anticipated the hard work and tough efforts at the time of their enrollment. While some of the participants had perceived their doctoral journey an easy task, but in reality, they have faced the opposite of circumstances especially once the dissertation process began.

According to P05,

"I anticipated the journey to be an easy one in terms of coursework, and I thought would not take more time than projected three to five years; however, it was

opposite to my perceptions, and the whole journey is a very tough one and lonely because of the online system."

Section 2: The Financial Aid Process for Doctoral Students at Online Institutions

The second section of the study which was defined in accordance with the transcripts of the interviews provided responses of the participants regarding the second research question with respect to the financial aid process during their doctoral programs.

Questions from the interview provided the basis for the identification of themes and the responses by the participants gave birth to the emerging subthemes as seen in Table 3.

Table 3

Theme and Subtheme: Financial Aid

Theme	Subtheme
Financial Aid Process	• Experiences of students for financial aid • Guidance provided by institutions for finances.

Financial aid process. The participants of the study were questioned about their experiences with the financial aid process provided by their institution for their academic program. Furthermore, the participants were also asked about their perceptions regarding any support and guidance provided by their institution for financial aid. The responses of the participants are classified as the emerging subthemes for this specific topic.

Experiences of students for financial aid. The majority of the participants (n=11) shared their views that they had a positive experience with the financial aid process provided by their online institution for their doctoral program. Only five of the participants had a bad experience, and four of the participants provided the opinion that they were not in need of any financial aid.

As stated by P10,

> *“Financial advisors of the institution were very helpful in providing me relevant information for taking up the financial aid. The financial aid department is very active and responsive in communication. They were always available to answer my query, and I had a very good experience getting financial aid from the institution.”*

The negative experience regarding the financial aid process was captured in these words by P06,

> *“My institution didn’t help me out in any aspect regarding getting financial aid. Initially, for the first year of my study, my educational expenses were covered with the government financial aid, but for the rest of four years, I had to pay all my educational expenses by myself."*

Guidance provided by institutions for finances. In another question, participants were enquired about the guidance and support which has been provided by their institution for their educational expenses in respect of their financial aid process. The majority of the participants (n=13) provided the opinion that not much guidance was provided by their institution for their financial aid process and the only method of communication or correspondence with the relevant department was merely a process of sending and receiving emails. The output of all these efforts seemed to be null. Based on the participant's responses there was no guidance about the current and prevailing interest rates nor did they elaborate the substitute options available to ease the financial aid process. The only usual response was to get guidance from the website which was a generic guidance list and information on the website was not based on the specific requirements of students.

In the experience of P12,

> *"The only available guidance was through the website, and the person to care for my queries didn't clearly explain to me everything, e.g., interest rates were not made clear to me at that time, which is why I had to face the financial burden myself".*

Five of the participants, however; provided the opinion that the guidance they had from their institution was up to the mark which has helped them in processing the financial aid process through loans, grants, scholarships, etc.

According to P10,

> *"My mother, who died last year, helped me out by signing me up for the financial aid process so initially, I didn't know about the whole process, but what she told me was that; it was a smooth and easy process."*

Section 3: The Role of Institutions in the Resolution of Students' Academic Problems at Online Institutions

The third section of the analysis is addressing the role of the institution in the resolution of student's academic issues and as a subtopic the retention of students in the institution and the academic success of the student as seen in Table 4. The questions were related to the lived experiences of students for resolution of their academic problems by the assistance of institution and the expectation of students from the institutions for their ideal role to be played in case of any issue faced by the students.

Participants were asked about their perception regarding the priority of institutions. The interview questions identified the predefined themes and the emerging subthemes in this section.

Table 4

Theme and Subtheme: The Institutions' Role in Resolving Students' Issues

Theme	**Subtheme**
Role of Institution in resolving student's issues	• Experiences of students • Perceived ideal role of the institution.
Perception of the institutions' priorities relating to students	• Academic success of students

Role of institution in resolving students' issues. All of the participants (n=20) of the qualitative study provided their lived experiences regarding the role played by their institution in the case of resolving any of their academic issues. Furthermore, participants also provided their opinions for a perceived ideal role of an institution in case of an academic issue and its resolution for the benefit of the student as well as for the institution.

Experiences of students. Majority of the participants provided the responses that they feel the readiness of institution for resolution of any academic issue was not up to the mark of the expectations and institutions were reluctant towards the provision of assistance or support for resolution of academic issues at the doctoral level. 16 of the participants provided the opinion that the readiness of the institution is not good and effective for the resolution of academic issues of students.

As stated by P11,

> *"They have dealt poorly with the resolution process. During my dissertation, my mentors changed three times and to keep the mentors engaged at all times was a difficult process. Mentors never provided me any guidance, and whenever I sent them documents for review, they just rejected it. After the change of the 1st mentor, the 2nd mentor totally changed my research plan, and after some time, without any explanation, I just received an email that my mentor has been changed again. The third mentor was totally nonresponsive."*

According to P12,

> *"My problems seem to be my problems and not that of university. I kept emailing them which were never answered. In fact, I emailed them 92 times, and it took me seven months to get a committee member only. Nobody was there to listen to my problem. So, in my view, the role of institution in resolution of student's academic problems is not as it should be."*

In response to the question *"What do you perceive as major impediments in your doctoral journey?"* Participants provided challenges which occurred during their tenure as a student enrolled in an online institution. Analysis of the responses indicated that time management was the most influential and challenging factor for seven (n = 7) of the participants while lack of interaction from the chair was highlighted by six (n = 6) of the participants. Similarly, issues relating to change of mentors was emphasized by five (n =

5) of the participants whereas only two (n = 2) of the participants viewed the issues of finances as a challenge for their study.

For finances, P02 stated,

"Major impediments in my doctoral journey will be financial aid due to the financial responsibilities which I already have."

Challenges related to change of mentors was discussed by P11 in these words,

"Several mentors have been changed, and the dissertation process is awful."

Similarly, lack of interaction from the committee chair was explained by P06 as,

"There is a lack of support from chair and students are needed to be self-directive and self-motivated for doctoral program stages."

Finally, the most important challenge of time management was explained by P18 as,

"Time management and length of time of doctoral program specifically dissertation process is much more challenging than expected at the beginning."

Perceived ideal role of institution. Responses from the participants of the qualitative study provided the highlighting features of an institution and ideal role to be played by the institution in case of any academic issue faced by the students. As the study is based on the online institutions and the online students for the doctoral programs, therefore, the most important feature expected from the participants was the supportive and proactive role of institutions in the resolution of student's problems. 15 of the participants were of the view that they expect their institution to be supportive and proactive which should be listening to the students and advocating for them for resolution of their problems.

According to P04,

> *"I think they should be more proactive than reactive because a lot of the times, a lot of the issues the students are having go unnoticed. Institutions should already know that some students will have this particular problem or some students will have other particular problems. So, they should be proactive which means they issue the solutions for those problems because they are not new, so most of the times, what I hear at my institution, all students have similar issues."*

Similarly, another feature highlighted by the five of the participants was the better and enhanced communication system for the registration of complaints and response by the institution for resolution of such complaints. For instance, in the words of P08,

> "*They need to have a center where students can call and register their complaints because, in online educational system, it feels like you are in a dark hole without the communication and support from your institution*."

The results of the study suggest that the student's perceived ideal roles of institutions were higher than their lived experiences for resolution of their academic issues. More of the participants mentioned the ideal role of the institution as compared to their personal lived experiences because as per their perceptions, the lived experiences were not up to their level of expectation.

Priority of institutions. One last question in the interview process addressed the perceptions of participants regarding the priority of their institution for their academic success and accomplishments.

Academic success of students. The majority of the participants (n = 14) were of the belief that, their academic success is the priority for their institution while six (n = 6) of the participants disagreed with the statement. The participants who agreed also highlighted the fact that the academic success in courses is more like a priority for the institution but at the stage of the dissertation in the doctoral program, the online institutions are not supportive and not helpful. Hence, it can be said that the priority of the institutions for the academic success of the students is limited to the extent of the coursework and students face maximum hurdles and challenges in their dissertations because institutions do not give much importance to their research works and efforts. As per P11,

> *"It seems students' success is a priority for the institution up till the level of academic courses only. As soon as the dissertation started, it seems the priorities change and students are no more on the priority list of the school."*

A response narrative for disagreement with the statement of priority to academic success of students was expressed in these words by P13,

> *"At this stage, I don't feel like my success is a priority for my institution as there is lack of communication and especially lack support from my chair for the completion of my doctoral program."*

Summary

In summary, the analysis of the responses by the participants provided findings in three broad categories; the enrollment process, financial aid process, and the institution's role in the resolution of students' academic issues. These categories are in accordance with the research questions and objectives of the study. Overall the analysis of the qualitative data revealed that the enrollment process was very smooth and systematic, and no cases were reported as an issue in the enrollment process by any of the participants.

For the second section of the study, the results of the analysis can be interpreted that participants availed the financial aid process, but the guidance from the institution in this regard was very limited and not effective as they were seeking information that would render more resources for funding such as grants and scholarships as opposed to student loans.

In the third section of the analysis, the responses revealed that online institutions should have a supportive and proactive role in the resolution of academic issues of students through an enhanced communication network. The most influential challenges perceived by the participants were time management, lack of interaction from the committee chair, issues with multiple changes of committee members, financial burden and, more notably, how the institutions were less helpful at the dissertation stage of doctoral programs; the majority of the issues were related to nonresponsive and non-supportive behaviors of committee members and committee chairs. In the end, it can be concluded that the academic success overall of the students was perceived as a priority for the online institution, however; several statements that were made by some of the participants eluded to the concern being the successful completion of the dissertation and its approval as not being a priority for online institutions overall.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore to what extent legislation such as the PEOCIA and the SBPA, if enacted by Congress, would be effective in enhancing the post recruitment quality of educational service experienced by online doctoral students.

The research was guided by one research question and three subquestions. The main research question was: what are the lived experiences of online doctoral students regarding the ability of their institutions to resolve problems? The three subquestions were (a) how have the online doctoral students experienced the enrollment process? (b) how have online doctoral students experienced the financial aid process? and (c) what is the perception of online doctoral students about the role their institutions should play in resolving their academic problems?

As it relates to the main research question, the findings of the study revealed that students have very strong feelings regarding their institutions' ability to resolve problems based on their actual lived experiences. The quality of post recruitment services is important, and problem-solving is considered to be a service that should be rendered. This sentiment coincides with that of Barrett and Karrie (2009) who asserted that services provided to online students should be focused on more than academics as there is a needed balance for students to succeed. On the one hand, some of the participants expressed that although they felt that their institution *might* have the desire to resolve problems, their capability in key prominent areas (e.g., communication, timeliness, and consistency) were lacking. On the other hand, some participants felt that their institutions did not have the ability to resolve problems, mostly due to lack of resources and a dedicated process for communication. Maguad (n.d) believed that every aspect of a student's progression through an institution should be evaluated because there are different challenges at every stage and it varies from student to student. A third point of view was also emergent, this being at what level or stage was the participant in during their academic journey when a problem needed to be resolved?

All three points support the theoretical framework of Tinto's model of student retention (Tinto & Cullen 1973) as he believed that effective retention encompassed three distinct characteristics: institutions should be committed to the students that they serve, all students regardless of what level or program should be equally serviced, and the level of integration into academic communities should be developed in a manner that provides a supportive environment. The responses of the participants echo these characteristics as needed to not only be successful but also to be retained. Each participant has either completed their academic program or is progressing towards completion which is an indicator that at the least the most basic of the characteristics as stated by Tinto (1973) is being met. However; also, as suggested by Tinto (2014) for any institution to continue to improve issues with retention; a structured, coherent plan that has intentional implications for identifying issues with retention and making changes must be adopted. The key sentiment being intentional which again is supported by the sentiments of the participants.

In this chapter, I present the interpretation of the findings for the main research question, as well as the subquestions, limitations, recommendations for future research, and prospective influence for social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of online doctoral students regarding the ability of their institutions to resolve problems. The study was conducted through acquiring data via individual interviews and was supported by voice recording, transcription, and analyzed data. The findings relating to the research question were discussed. My interpretation of the findings for the three subquestions is conveyed in this section.

Research Subquestion 1 How have the online doctoral students experienced the enrollment process?

All of the participants reported that the enrollment process was positive and easy. Some of the expressions used were *excellent, easy*, *helpful*, and *outstanding*. Based on the participants' descriptions of their process, some were recruited (meaning they received some form of communication in which they were introduced to the institution by someone they did not know personally). Others stated that they reached out to the institution as a result of a commercial, a printed advertisement, or some other means and, as a result, a recruiter contacted them and provided them with information. Enrollment has increased significantly over the last 10 years from thousands of students enrolling, to millions around the world in every sector, especially technology, psychology, business, and cyber security, which is consistent with Fox and Bonnie's (2013) analysis of trends in the enrollment of online education (Enrollment in Distance Education, 2016). According to Gilpin, Saunders, and Stoddard (2015), the foregoing is a direct result of changes in the labor market and the changing needs for skillsets that are more technologically focused. The beliefs of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (Enrollment in Distance Education, 2016) and Fox and Bonnie (2013) are in direct contradiction to the sentiments of Pope (2012), who predicted that for-profit college enrollment would decline significantly. The consensus regarding the ease and pleasantness coincide with that of London (2013) who believed that the first impression of any business transaction must be favorable, as there are profits on the line and he questions who really profits from academia. Understanding his theory, the sentiments of the research participants regarding their enrollment experience were not surprising.

The enrollment process, as stated by the participants, included completing an application, providing transcripts, and speaking to an enrollment counselor. Most participants stated that the process took anywhere from 7-10 days to receive acceptance. Based on some of the participants' experiences, it is noted that in the enrollment phase the conversation between the enrollment counselors and the participants focused on academics and technology. There was a conversation regarding financial aid, but only three participants stated that the conversation was extensive or to a level of full comprehension while undergoing the enrollment process and seeking acceptance into the institution. The sentiments regarding the level of scrutiny or lack thereof in conversations during the enrollment phase coincide with the sentiments of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (For-Profit Colleges Win, 2015) as it is in this phase that the determination on whether to enroll is fragile and, if not handled properly, could result in a loss for a recruiter.

Another key finding is the perception of the academic programs and how they are addressed during the enrollment process. Most participants stated that they did not know what to expect once enrolled, while others stated that they anticipated the program to be hard but did not know exactly how to define *hard*, meaning the coursework, the time commitment, the engagement of others or the lack of the face-to-face aspect. The opinion that was provided by most participants was that during the enrollment activity a general picture was provided that provided a level of ease and supported the participants' decision to enroll. Palmadessa (2017) and Baum, Kurose, and McPherson (2013) described the actions of the institutions and the opinions of the participants as providing a gateway towards the promise of education in which every student can succeed with the right incentives and environment.

Research Subquestion 2 How have online doctoral students experienced the financial aid process?

The position regarding the financial aid process was positive overall according to most of the participants. There were a couple participants who did not have to apply for financial aid; therefore, they were unaware of the process and at least five participants who had bad experiences. Their opinions included helpful, responsive, confusing, ambiguous, incomplete information and not easily accessible. Although the majority of the participants stated that the overall process was positive, some of them stated that there was a level of confusion regarding deciphering how much aid was needed for them individually, where to locate the information, and who could help with the process of applying for financial aid and when. There was also concern that not enough information regarding aid such as scholarships and grants were provided to the students. According to the College Board Advocacy and Policy Center (Trends in Student Aid, 2012), the information is available, however; the utilization of resources outside of the institution, such as the reports that they provide may be necessary. This could potentially be a daunting task if the student perceives that the institutions should be a one-stop-shop where all of the information necessary is readily available to them from their institutions' portal. Also, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures (For-Profit Colleges, 2013), Connecticut requires that each institution "provide uniform financial aid information to every prospective student who has been accepted for admission to the institution" (p. 1). A policy such as this for distance education may be beneficial, the question is how much information is enough without overkill and creating more confusion? The participants' opinions regarding the negative aspects of the process from those who were reasonably satisfied coincided with those who stated that they had bad experiences due to the lack of understanding of financial aid limits, the differences in the types of financial aid, and who to speak with regarding how the aid could be used. Communication and the perceived level of guidance or expectation of the participant appeared to be the issue relating to whether the experience was negative or positive.

Research Subquestion 3

What is the perception of online doctoral students about the role their institutions should play in resolving their academic problems?

The responses to this sub question were very interesting as it revealed that all of the participants believed that the institution should play a significant role in resolving students' academic issues regardless of what category the issue may be (e.g., academic, financial, and technological). There were two distinct emerging themes: 1) the role of the institution in resolving students' issues should be responsive, supporting, proactive, and however collectively the participants felt that the level of communication is an issue, and 2) the academic success of a student appears to be the priority of the institution to a certain point.

Based on the responses of the participants recounting their lived experiences, the sentiment was clear that it is very difficult to have a need for resolution of an issue and not have an immediate response to their communication. Students enrolled in an online institution's primary form of communication to all departments is via email or telephone. According to some of the participants, there were multiple attempts to communicate issues using both forms of communication to submit their concerns. There were several attempts at following up. One participant stated that they lived in a different time zone and the counselor kept returning the call during a time in which they were clearly unavailable to resolve the issue and eventually closed the case based on lack of response of the student. Another participant stated that the counselor was less than empathetic to a special needs request due to the counselor not understanding the issues or the policy surrounding the special needs. Lastly, the sentiment that was resounding from the participants was the need for their institutions to anticipate students' needs so that they are proactive at resolving issues or creating an environment where the institutions have a plan for resolution prior to it becoming an issue.

Regardless of the issue, the ineffectiveness of communication appeared to be the number one challenge that was emergent in this study. According to the participants, the institutions should have a more cohesive approach to how students can make complaints, identify issues and challenges, and receive assistance. Some of the suggestions were to have a call center set up for nothing but this type activity, assign one person to the case and that person would follow the issue through to a resolution, provide more active listening from the counselors to the students as opposed to selective listening or attempting bulleted information and highlights, have the counselors investigate the information as opposed to passing off to the next person, having a database or program that shows the progression of a complaint, which would keep everyone in the loop, holding all involved with the process accountable and providing a level of consistency throughout the entire process. Communication appears to be the cornerstone of the expectation relating to the ideal role of online institutions resolving students' problems. It appears that the belief is if the communication at all levels is more comprehensive, inclusive, and cohesive; the number of complaints and issues would be less, and the need for resolution would be less, and the satisfaction of the student would be greater. Parr (2013) and Blumenstyk (2013) agreed with the sentiments of the participants but in different ways. Parr (2013) believed that if a for-profit institution works to improve the image of the institution by accentuating the positives that they accomplish the negative connotations would decrease. Taking this approach seemingly negates acknowledging and fixing the negative aspects. Blumenstyk (2013) felt that institutions really need to step back and look at the overall picture and regroup their efforts. This would include changing or revising areas in which the institution feels seemingly works but is not working to perfection, which is normally the areas that become overlooked because they rank somewhere in the middle. As a start to a resolution for the participants in this study, Blumenstyk's (2013) suggestions would be beneficial.

Academic success, however, was another emergent theme that rendered interesting results as most participants underwent a change in their perspectives and beliefs of whether their institution was truly interested in their success. The collective responses rendered a pattern that I found interesting. At the beginning of the journey (i.e., the enrollment phase) and during the participation of classes, all of the participants stated that during this time they believed that the institution was interested in their academic success. However; the change in the belief for over half of the participants came during the time when they were phasing out of the classes and starting the dissertation process or were adequately initiated into the process. The majority of the issues stated as lived experiences included the process for selecting committee members, the responsiveness of committee chairs, cohesive guidelines among the committee, multiple turnovers and defections in committee members, the length of time to move through the dissertation process, and the lack of communication regarding essential tasks and requirements. The sentiment from some of the participants included constant state of flux, never-ending cycle, setting up to fail, one participant even stated: “there are no words to describe this maze of a dissertation process.”

The final phase, however, rendered some of the participants stating that although there are many issues surrounding the dissertation process they still believed that the institution has good intentions but needs to make changes in the process so that it is not viewed negatively by the students and the public. Baxter (2012) summed this up best as the sentiments garnered the belief that although most of the participants cannot definitively state that they feel that their success is a priority for their institution, they felt that the issues are systemic and can be fixed. However, to fix the issues, the institutions need to listen to the students to identify what the issues are, which circles back towards communication.

There is a plethora of policies and pending and proposed legislation to address all of the sentiments rendered by the participants lived experiences and recommendations. Complying with Title IV requirements, which holds states accountable for the actions of institutions conducting business in their states (Prepare to Comply, 2011) and the Office of Inspector General's assistance (USDOE, 2014), which specifically focuses on distance education. Loonin & McLaughlin (2011) identified the gaps in state oversite in for-profit institutions and suggested policy to address challenges and identify issues. However, as stated by Morella (2014), policies do not fix everything and can create other issues. Marcus (2013) stated that the increase in proposed legislatures could render the perception that for-profit institutions are under attack.

Limitations of the Study

The goal of this study was to explore to what extent legislation such as the PEOCIA and the SBPA if enacted by Congress, would be effective in enhancing the post recruitment quality of educational service experienced by online doctoral students. As detailed in Chapter 4, I paid specific attention to the details to ensure the trustworthiness of the study, and the limitations, as stated in Chapter 1, were not limiting at all. The study was perceived to be subject to several limitations: (a) sample number, which was expected to be at least 20 participants who had identified problems that needed a resolution; however, obtaining the 20 participants needed was not as much of a challenge as previously thought; (b) unevenness, although it was assumed that there would be a good blend of participants, the possibility that there would be a higher participation from one school as opposed to another was high. This too posed not to be a challenge as originally thought as there was participation from four different institutions and there was no clear dominance; (c) diversity, because the participants were invited through social media, getting access to students from different for-profit institutions was first thought to be a limitation that proved to be false.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the results of the qualitative phenomenological study, I have two recommendations. The first being replicating the research using students who were enrolled in programs that were at the bachelors and masters' levels paying particular attention to programs that involve a part of a program that breaks away from a classroom model to self-directed study. I believe that including participants from master's level programs is essential because it is also a program at most institutions that are primarily class focused with a written project. Capturing the essence of how that looks is essential in understanding where there may be gaps in the doctoral program. Allen and Seaman

(2013) described this as research continuity. The second being replicating the research making the focus of study around the administration in online institutions, specifically departments that focus on student services.

Implications for Social Change

The findings and recommendations of this study may affect positive social change by advising researchers on the phenomenon of the enrollment experiences of online doctoral students and their perceptions about the role the support structure of their institutions play towards their success in the program. The findings of this study emphasized the perspectives of current and former students who were enrolled in an online doctoral program at for profit institutions. The research findings could be of benefit to the senior administration of online for-profit institutions of higher learning and policymakers for higher education and the faculty and staff at for-profit institutions by identifying how students perceive the processes and actions that are rendered to the students after enrollment. In other words, having the real lived experiences conveyed to those who have the power to initiate change.

Effecting positive social changes for research such as this means that there has to be significant effort given to planning, strategizing, implementing and evaluating. It is a systemic process that must have support from human capital to financial resources. To start, for-profit institutions could initiate some type of listening tour in which a task force or panel is created to focus on the lived experiences of all of their doctoral students who identified issues. Another change mechanism would be to create a centralized effort to, or protocol for, a cadre of faculty, staff, and administration to follow a student from the enrollment to graduation. Tinto's (2005) theories regarding the best practices to retain students as well as the best practices for student success supports the researchers' theory regarding effective social change efforts as all theories suggest involving the beliefs, perceptions and experiences of the student.

Participants in this study shared their lived experiences from the time they became interested in pursuing a doctoral degree at an online for-profit institution through graduation for some or to the academic status they were in at the time of the interview. They provided their recommendations for improvement of the enrollment process and the financial aid process, as well as provided insight as to why they felt that their institution was or was not meeting their expectations regarding the resolution of students' academic issues. Three of the participants also provided insight regarding why they felt that their success was not a priority for their institution and at what point this sentiment commenced. Communication appears to be the overarching factor in any change that may occur as a result of this study.

Conclusion

If enacted, would legislation such as the PEOCIA and the SBPA be effective in enhancing the post recruitment quality of educational service experienced by the online doctoral students?

To answer this question, we must look at the objectives of both pieces of proposed legislation. The PEOCIA objectives include establishing a congressional committee that would provide oversight of proprietary institutions by coordinating activities to prevent institutions from taking advantage of students, increase oversight by involving collaboration between federal and state agencies, sharing information and developing best practices for the distribution of consumer information, and encourage transparency of an institution reporting data to include complaints, investigations, and abnormal reports, to name a few. The SBPA mandates that a fund is established using the penalties that are sanctioned on for-profit institutions that are out of compliance to provide financial relief to students who are enrolled in said institutions.

The issues that were identified in this study centered around communication, organizational operations, and uniformity; legislation such as the SBPA if enacted, would not render any results as the objectives of the act and the issues as stated are not aligned. However, PEOCIA may provide more of an impact because the objectives are broad and focuses on the students as consumers and the owners and shareholders of the institutions.

Individually the issues with communication, organizational operations, and uniformity would not be enhanced by either proposed legislation. Collectively, and if enough complaints were garnered from students for which the issues such as retention, student loan default, and possibly an area such as declining graduation rates were considered then, yes, PEOCIA would be beneficial and may be effective. However, there would need to be more than just oversight for the PEOCIA committee to be effective. Every for-profit institution would have to have similar standards and protocols relating to how students are treated and how services relating to complaints are processed. There would also need to be lengthy discussion on how services are defined and which services would render an institution negligible. Lastly, there would need to be a method for identifying which complaints would garner actions to be considered PECOIA worthy i.e. is it the number of complaints? or is it the type of complaints? A combination of both?

Here is a thought; instead of creating an oversight committee comprised of members of the United States Congress, veterans organizations, and others who have an interest in for-profit institutions, creating another layer of administrative burden to the government overall, would creating a department within the U.S Department of Education that focuses on these very issues and governs for-profit education in the United States with a higher level of scrutiny towards students as consumers and increasing customer service be more beneficial? I believe it would.

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Appendix A: Guiding Interview Questions

Research Question: What is the perception of online doctoral students about the ability of their institutions to resolve problems?

The main research question will be categorically investigated through the following sub-question:

1. How have the online doctoral students experienced the enrollment process?

   Guiding Interview Questions:

   (a) Describe your enrollment experience?

   (b) What were characteristics of your institution that matched your reasons to pursue a doctoral program?

   (c) What were your anticipations about the doctoral journey with your institution at the time of enrollment?

2. How have online doctoral students experienced the financial aid process?

   Guiding Interview Questions:

   (a) What kind of guidance did your institution provide to you through the financial aid process?

   (b) Regardless whether you applied for financial aid or paid out of pocket, what level of help did your institution provide you in furnishing your educational expenses?

3. What is the perception of online doctoral students about the role their institutions should play in resolving their academic problems?

Guiding Interview Questions:

(a) How do you feel about your institutions readiness to resolve any academic issues that you may have faced during your doctoral journey?

(b) What do you think should be an ideal role of an online institution towards resolving students' problems?

(c) What do you perceive as the major impediments in your doctoral journey?

(d) Do you feel that your academic success is a priority for your institution? If no, please explain.

Demographic Questions:

1. Age?
2. Gender?
3. Have you completed your doctoral program?
4. How long have you been in the program?
5. Are you familiar with the SBPA?
6. Are you familiar with The Proprietary Education Oversight Coordination Improvement Act?