2020

Factors That Influence Students' Decision to Drop Out of an Online Business Course

Sandra Gail Robertson
Walden University

Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Sandra G. Robertson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee
Dr. Cheryl Keen, Committee Chairperson, Education Faculty
Dr. Janet Strickland, Committee Member, Education Faculty
Dr. Dimitrios Vlachopoulos, University Reviewer, Education Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost
Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University
2020

Abstract

Factors That Influence Students' Decision to Drop Out of an Online Business Course

by

Sandra G. Robertson

MBA, Regent University, 1999

BS, Florida Southern University, 1983

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

February 2020

Abstract

Although online enrollments at community colleges have increased in recent years, student dropout rates in online classes have also increased and educational researchers wonder why students are dropping out of online courses and if online instruction can contribute to student success. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to investigate the online experiences of students who dropped out of the Introduction to Business online course at a community college in a Mid-Atlantic state and the factors that led to their decision. The research questions concerned how students who took the Introduction to Business online course described their decision to drop out of an online course, their social integration in the class, and their perception of what could have been done by staff to help them continue in the online course. Tinto's student integration model and Bean and Metzner's nontraditional student attrition model served as the conceptual framework. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 7 full and part-time students. Interviews were coded, which led to 8 emergent themes: faculty unavailability and inflexibility for working students, lack of feedback from the instructor, the online course being designed for traditional students, too many assignments from the publisher and no creativity from the instructor, lack of student preparedness for the online format and weak online course orientation, frustrations regarding the course discussion board, isolation and lack of interaction with peers, and the need for more access to staff who might provide support. The results may be helpful to educational leaders in improving the design and delivery of online business courses, which may contribute to positive social change by increasing student retention and success.

Factors That Influence Students' Decision to Drop Out of an Online Business Course

by

Sandra G. Robertson

MBA, Regent University, 1999

BS, Florida Southern University, 1983

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Education

Walden University

February 2020

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my son, Gregory Robertson Jr., who supported and encouraged me throughout my dissertation process. He prayed with me and always had a listening ear. Gregory continues to be my biggest supporter and cheerleader.

Acknowledgments

The dissertation process was a challenging but rewarding experience where I learned so much on this journey. No one accomplishes a great masterpiece alone. I thank God for His leadership, protection, and guidance during this process. No one thing will be withheld from those who diligently seek Him. I humbly thank my sister, Myra Smith, for praying with me every Friday. I thank my weekly prayer team, Warfare Wednesday, for praying and encouraging me and never letting me doubt I would achieve such a great accomplishment. I want to thank Gregory Robertson Sr. for cooking, running errands, and having a listening ear when times got challenging. I am grateful to my committee members, Dr. Cheryl Keen and Dr. Janet Strickland, for their professional guidance on qualitative research and their support and encouragement throughout my dissertation process. Special thanks to Dr. Carol Koller, my editor. I am grateful to the many friends and family members who prayed and checked on my progress regularly. I thank the students who volunteered to participate in my study. Special thanks to my nieces, Avonisha, Alexia, and Shonta, for reminding me that this doctorate begins a new era of doctors for our family. No words in the dictionary can describe how appreciative I am of my son, Gregory Robertson Jr., and his support and encouragement let me know that this dissertation is not only for me, but I am setting a precedent for others to come. I love you, son

Table of Contents

List of Tables v

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study 1

Background 3

Problem Statement 4

Purpose 6

Research Questions 7

Conceptual Framework 7

Nature of the Study 9

Definitions 9

Assumptions 10

Limitations 10

Scope and Delimitations 11

Significance 11

Summary 12

Chapter 2: Literature Review 13

Literature Search Strategy 13

Conceptual Framework 14

Empirical Literature Review 18

Online Learning 21

Motivation Factors that Contribute to Student Persistence 25

Persistent Versus Nonpersistent Online Student Learners 28

Patterns of Enrollment Among Online Students 30
The Online Learning Environment 34
Misconceptions of Online Learning 39
Social Presence in the Online Classroom 41
Factors That Contribute to Student Withdrawal 44
Identifying Student Characteristics 46
Characteristics of Student Predictors of Attrition 46
Student Behavior Characteristics 49
Characteristics of Minority Students' Online Learning Experiences 53
Institutional Characteristics of College Students at Risk of Dropping Out 55
Instructor Differences 59
The Impact of Culture on the Online Community 61
Instructor Presence in the Online Classroom 63
Summary and Conclusions 64
Chapter 3: Research Method 66
Research Design and Rationale 66
Rationale for the Design 66
Role of the Researcher 68
Methodology 69
Participant Selection Logic 69
Instrumentation 71
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection 72

Data Analysis Plan 74
Issues of Trustworthiness 75
Credibility 75
Transferability 76
Dependability 76
Confirmability 76
Ethical Procedures 77
Summary 78
Chapter 4: Results 79
Setting and Demographics 79
Participant Recruitment 81
Data Collection 83
Data Analysis 87
Evidence of Trustworthiness 88
Credibility 89
Transferability 89
Dependability 90
Confirmability 90
Results 91
RQ 1: Students' Decision to Drop Out 92
RQ 2: Social Integration in the Online Business Classroom 99
RQ 3: Steps That Could Have Been Taken to Retain Students 105

Summary 107

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations 109

Interpretations of the Findings 110

Interpretation Related to the Conceptual Framework 110

Interpretation in Light of the Empirical Literature Review 114

Limitations of the Study 123

Recommendations for Future Research 124

Implications 125

Conclusion 127

References 130

Appendix: Interview Protocol 150

List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Participants 81

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In their current strategic context, U.S. community colleges are providing educational opportunities to help students develop new skills to earn a job promotion, certification, or a college degree to position them for the workplace. To advance their institutions' mandates, community college administrators are creating better partnerships with area businesses to provide the tools needed for graduates to stay ahead of technology and workplace trends as opposed to lagging behind the curve in a rapidly changing technological world (Collins & Halverson, 2018; Lee, Choi, & Kim, 2013). With the advancements in technology, community colleges have grown at an accelerated pace, meeting societal needs and recognized as key players in the world of academia (Khan, Shamim, & Nambobi, 2018; Scott, 2015).

As societal and economic factors continue to redefine what skills are needed in the workplace, community colleges are redesigning curriculum to meet industry needs (Adams Becker et al., 2017; Uttam, 2018). Indeed, the strategic vision of the community college can be understood best by its commitment to broadening program offerings to meet societal needs that result in employment for its students (Hachey, Conway, & Wladis, 2013; Wladis, Conway, & Hachey, 2016). With that view, the community college mandate is to provide comprehensive services that benefit students, employers, and communities, while maintaining a commitment to teaching excellence and fostering lifelong learning for a diverse community of learners. With the advancements in technology fueling rapid changes, the community college has transitioned from a

traditional on-campus-centered institution to a more consumer-focused one by offering online courses (Lederman, 2018; Tsai & Chiang, 2013; Wladis et al., 2016).

Shea and Bidjerano (2018) posited that the flexibility of taking an online course has afforded working individuals time to obtain college degrees or certificates while enhancing their skills for job promotions without having to commute to college campuses. According to a study spearheaded by the Babson Survey Research Group (Online Learning Consortium, 2016), distance learning experienced growth in enrollment in the United States for the 14th straight year in 2016, and 6% of students enrolled in distance learning took at least one online course. According to the Online Learning Consortium (2016), online learning has created intense competition, requiring better quality and relevance of online programs to avoid the risk of losing ground to those institutions successfully retaining their students. With the upward trend in distance education, there is a demand that educators reduce student dropout rates while increasing retention for lifelong success (Horzum, Kaymak, & Gungoren, 2015; Wladis et al., 2015)

In this chapter, I offer the background for my study, present the problem statement and the purpose, and discuss the importance of the study topic, investments in online learning, to community college educators and administrators. I also outline why there is a need for this study and the potential social implications of my research. Next, I provide important terms and their definitions and discuss the assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. This chapter concludes with a summary of key points.

Background

With future enrollments expected to decline, community college leaders must continue to retain their institutions' students by enhancing best teaching practices throughout the curriculum that will lead to better student performance outcomes or risk declines in state funding (Smith, 2018). Smith (2018) asserted there are two trends that community colleges must consider: (a) adult learners ages 25 and older are the student demographic enrolling in college, and (b) enrollment among students ages 18- 22 (traditional college age) is expected to be much smaller because birth rates are lower. Smith also noted that only nine out of each 100 students who enroll in a community college complete an associate degree, acknowledging that some only come for individual classes or certificates.

According to Yoo and Huang (2013), online learning involves both synchronous course delivery (i.e., the offering of course curriculum via the Internet with human-to-human contact) or asynchronous course delivery (i.e., the transmission of information or communication without the instructor and students being connected simultaneously). The benefit of online access is that it allows students to advance their education by taking courses anywhere at any time, regardless of the location, making the college experience more flexible than traditional on-campus classes (Ma, Pender, & Welch, 2016). Online learning thus allows students to multitask by responding to family needs, job demands, and travel away from home without missing classes. Although community colleges have experienced record numbers in student enrollment in online learning, some disagreement exists among academics regarding whether community college students have worse

outcomes online compared to students taking on-campus classes (Shea & Bidjerano, 2018). For instance, Jaggars and Xu (2010, 2011, 2013) found that online students in Virginia and Washington State had higher dropout rates, lower performance, and lower grades compared to traditional on-campus students in those two states and males who took online classes, Black students, and younger students showed the lowest GPAs. These findings provides evidence there may be achievement gaps between students in online and on-campus classes.

Problem Statement

A lack of knowledge about what factors lead to student withdrawal can be a contributor to retention problems in online learning given the large, diverse population of students who make up the online environment. The retention of online learners is particularly important concerning for community colleges, which educate 45% of U.S. undergraduates, because low retention lead to lower graduation rates; therefore, community college leaders implementing several strategies increase student success rates (Jaggars & Xu, 2010; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). In the Mid-Atlantic state focused on in this study, policy makers in the community college system are seeking ways to increase the course offerings for 400,000 students at over 20 community colleges to better meet the growing need for online learning at their institutions. The community college system has experienced higher dropout rates among online students than traditional on-campus or hybrid (blended) courses that combine both traditional and non-traditional classes. In contrast, the remaining material is provided in a traditional format;

this pedagogical approach helps maximize student engagement that can lead to student success.

Researchers have found that students usually persist in an online course according to grades earned; however, when students withdraw in the middle of a course, they often never return to complete the class, which prohibits progress to the next course required for that program (Jaggars & Xu, 2010).

Several scholars, in their quest to find a solution to the high dropout rates at higher education institutions, have highlighted the growing number of students who drop out of online courses affects graduation rates (Shea & Bidjerano, 2018). Lee, Pate, and Cozart (2015) found that 50% of students who registered in online courses did not stay until the end of the course. Similarly, Wladis, Wladis, and Hachey (2014) found that 60% of community college students who registered for an online course dropped out of the course during the semester. Hart (2014) and Phirangee, Demmans, and Hewitt (2016) asserted that the dropout rate for online students was 10 to 20% higher compared to students in traditional on-campus classes, which is a costly problem for both the colleges and students.

The level of support provided to online learners may be a factor in their higher dropout rate. Travers (2016) asserted that students taking online courses rarely are supported at levels comparable to those for students taking traditional on-campus courses. This may be because students taking an online class are often older, and usually work a full time job, and the community college has less impact on them. Travers found that student achievement is affected by the student's unpreparedness for the online course.

Weak online orientation program, and a lack of instructor presence is needed for some online learners. Travers noted that most nontraditional students who take online courses are typically older. The scholar also noted that instructors teaching online courses need to be trained in strategies that supports both young and adult learners. Although student achievement in online classes is like that of traditional courses, student course completion rates are lower in online course offerings (Travers, 2016). Travers noted that understanding the factors that lead to dropping out can help campus leaders to better support students and faculty and improve retention rates, thus strengthening the role of community colleges in student success. In this study, I offer further insight into the departure problem among community college students taking online classes. I do so by identifying patterns in behaviors from the students' experiences, examining academic and social integration patterns, reviewing financial concerns, and evaluating other internal and external factors that play a part in students leaving the online classroom (see Clement, 2016; Connolly, 2016; Tinto, 1993; Woods, 2016).

Purpose

I wanted to understand how student decisions are made to withdraw from the online Introduction to Business course at a community college in a Mid-Atlantic state in the United States using qualitative methodology. Online business courses showed the most substantial online course performance gaps in a study of community college students (Shea & Bidjerano, 2018). The Introduction to Business course has the highest enrollment compared to other online business courses. This course is required in several programs other than business (e.g., nursing, law, psychology, sociology, etc.) within the

state's community college system that comprises over 20 colleges statewide. My aim for this line of inquiry was to discover the factors students perceive are responsible for their dropping out early in a semester. With this knowledge, administration and faculty at the study site may be better able to address the retention issue with the Introduction to Business online offering and other online courses (see Leeds, Campbell, Baker, Ali, & Crisp, 2013; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017).

Research Questions

To accomplish the study's purpose, I developed three research questions (RQs), which I sought to answer:

RQ 1: How do students who took the Introduction to Business online course describe their decision to drop out of the online course?

RQ 2: How do students describe their social integration in the online business class?

RQ 3: What do students who drop out of an introduction to business online course perceive could have been done by the instructor, academic advisors, administrators, staff, or peers to help them continue the online course?

Conceptual Framework

Research on student departure in education offered a holistic framework for the collection and analysis of the participants' input. Tinto's student departure (1993) theory, also known as the student integration model, and Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model served as the conceptual framework for the study. Both Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's models illustrate that persistence is affected by the

students' successful integration into the institution. The two models indicate that academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment affect withdrawal decisions.

Tinto's (1987) model provides a framework for understanding student departure issues and highlights the importance of background characteristics that describe student experiences in higher education institutions. Tinto's theory explains the longitudinal and interactive processes that force students to voluntarily depart from the institution prior to degree completion (Tinto, 1987). Tinto posited that students are active in the integration process within the institution, and both student and institutional actions shape the college environment. Tinto used the term *integration* to describe the internalization process through which students include the values and norms of the college environment into their own value system (Tinto, 1993). Social and academic integration affects students' commitment to complete their college degree or leave college. Tinto explained that ineffective integration into social or academic life at college could be a factor that contributes to withdrawal from the institution.

Bean and Metzner (1985) asserted that student perceptions of their educational experiences are formed by their interaction with academic advising and course scheduling, and academic outcomes such as grades can affect the integration process. Bean and Metzner also noted that external factors beyond institutional control could affect a student's time devoted to studies, and resources can impact satisfaction, commitment to degree completion, and academic persistence (see also Bean, 1990; Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) and Bean and Metzner's models helped me gain an

understanding of what factors play a major role in a student's decision to continue in an online course or drop out.

Nature of the Study

The study involved a qualitative method and a basic generic design (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The college under study has two locations within a 25-mile radius. The participants for this study were students who enrolled in the online business course in either of the two locations and dropped the course during the academic year 2017-2018. I expanded the time frame to 2017-2019 to obtain a larger sample for the study. The population comprised full- and part-time students with no age limitations. Participants came from disciplines other than business, as several disciplines require the Introduction to Business course as part of their program of study. Seven students were recruited for this study. Six participants dropped out of the business course before completing the course, and one student was going to drop but decided to continue with the course. I conducted semistructured interviews with the seven participants. I based the interviews on a storytelling approach in which open-ended questions were asked as participants told their stories (Janesick, 2016). Using this qualitative method of data collection allowed participants to speak and be heard in a natural setting where they described their online experiences, particularly of academic and social integration with instructors, academic advisors, administrators, staff, and peers who could have helped them continue the online course (see Patton, 2015).

Definitions

The following terms have application in this qualitative research study:

Academic integration: Academic dimensions formed by students' college experiences and their perceptions of academic support from faculty, academic advising, and peers where students feel committed to the institution (Tinto, 1975).

Dropout: A student who withdraws from an online course (Lee et al., 2013).

Persistence: Continued enrollment in a course until the class ends (Bean & Metzner, 1985).

Social integration: Students' social integration with an instructor, academic advisors, administrators, staff, or peers and academic structures (Lee & Choi, 2011).

Assumptions

My qualitative study was based on several assumptions. One assumption was that the participants would give significant thought to their answers to the interview questions. In addition, I assumed that students were aware of why they decided to drop the online course and would be willing to trust me, as an interviewer, in sharing reasons for dropping a course that might reflect negatively on them. I also assumed that choosing participants who dropped the class in the previous academic year would have enough recall of their reasons for doing so.

Limitations

The generalizability of this qualitative study is limited to other community colleges and universities offering an introduction to business online course. The study is also limited to students who dropped the focal course in a particular time frame. The study sample was limited to students who enrolled in and departed from the online

Introduction to Business course during the academic year 2017-2019 and did not reflect students who dropped this type of course in other years.

Scope and Delimitations

This qualitative study focused on one community college in two locations in a Mid-Atlantic state within a 25-mile radius. The community college is one of 23 colleges within this system. The study focused on the Introduction to Business course because it has the highest enrollment of all online courses within this system and is required in several academic programs (e.g., nursing, economics, technology, etc.).

Significance

The investigation of student departure in online learning in community colleges focuses on a concern with retention rates, student withdrawal, quality of instruction, and accountability. This study adds to the research knowledge base on student departure by providing a better understanding of the factors concerning withdrawal by community college students from an online business course. This study contributes to the decades of research on student departure issues in higher education, especially for the nontraditional student who takes online classes. The results provided significant information in informing faculty, academic advisors, and administrators on ways to detect students at risk of dropping out. The results also showed how faculty could create better online programs to enhance student academic activities that promote student integration and lead to institutional commitment and increase graduation rates. This study can contribute to social change by offering recommendations aimed at having more students complete

online business programs; therefore, providing them with the opportunity to become employed and productive citizens.

Summary

Student dropout in online learning is a major concern for higher education institutions (McKinney, Novak, Hagedorn, & Torres, 2019). The lack of research that describes how student withdrawal decisions are made limits online faculty understanding of what factors (internal or external) play a role in student dropout rates (Cigdem & Yildirim, 2014; Lee et al., 2013; Lint, 2011). In this chapter, I investigated the online environment, the benefits of students taking online courses, academic and social integration, and how online course enrollment has been found to lead to impaired degree completion.

Despite earlier studies on retention related to traditional on-campus programs reported by Kang and Wang (2018), Kauffman (2015), and McAdoo (2018), this study noted there is little research available to educators explicitly focused on student departure from online business courses. The business course has the highest dropout rates and has the highest enrollment at the online college in the Mid-Atlantic state. This problem of high dropout rates has left educators puzzled, and this study sought to find a solution to this occurrence in the online Introduction to Business course.

Chapter 2 contains a literature review that began by evaluating research from scholars on factors that influence the student's decision to persist or withdrawal from the institution. In this chapter, I discuss the literature search strategy and the conceptual framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a shortage of research on the college experience of community college students who drop out of an online course which limits the chance for educators to gain an understanding of the internal and external factors leading to student departure in online classes. Gaining insight into this problem was the purpose of this study. This chapter is organized into several sections. It begins with overviews of the literature search strategy and the conceptual foundation where I will explain Tinto's (1975, 1987,1993) model of retention and other research models of student departure in higher education institutions, along with Bean and Metzner's (1985) student attrition model constituted the conceptual framework for the study. I will use these theories to gain insight into the departure problem affecting retention rates at higher education institutions despite the growing demand for online courses (Burch, 2018; Dewberry & Jackson, 2018; Holden, 2018; Lee, Godwin, & Nave, 2018; Pather & Chetty, 2016; Tinto, 1975). In the literature review that follows, I provide empirical context for this qualitative study, including relevant literature on persistence, dropout rates, retention, completion, withdrawal, student characteristics, and course type.

Literature Search Strategy

My review of the literature began with a search through several electronic databases in education and social science to find peer-reviewed journal articles that addressed student departure in online learning with a focus on online business courses. Databases included Education Source, Education Research Complete, Education Research Starters, Teacher Reference Center, Oxford Education Bibliographies, ERIC,

Psych INFO, SAGE Premier, and ProQuest Central Academic Search. Google Scholar was another search engine that provided rich, full-text scholarly literature included in this review.

From the database review, I identified peer-reviewed articles from 1975 to 2019 and examined them for a focus on the problem of this study (e.g., persistence, departure, online adult learning, and success in online learning) I excluded articles not related to factors related to student persistence and departure in online learning and online business courses that contained no original data. Articles that did not address student characteristics in distance learning, were not associated with online courses or departure from online business courses, and were not written in the English language were also excluded. The search provided several useful terms in identifying characteristics of the online learner dropping an online course (e.g., *nontraditional student persistence*, *online student motivation*, *online learner dropout in online business courses*, *attrition in online courses*, and *retention*). There were three terms used to refer to programs delivered online that I used to search with Boolean operators—*drop out* AND *online learning*, *retention* AND *distance education*, or *attrition* AND *e*-learning—which provided data focused on persistence, retention, or dropout in distance learning courses and distance learning business courses.

Conceptual Framework

I drew the conceptual framework from the theoretical perspectives of Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) student integration models to explain student departure in online learning. Research on these two models was relevant to the purpose of

this study and the related research questions. Both Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's theoretical models assert that persistence is affected by the students' successful integration into the institution. Student withdrawal demonstrates a disconnect between the student and the institution that affects persistence or departure (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). The two models are crucial in considering the conceptualization of this study, as both the traditional and nontraditional college experiences of the participants are of interest to understand the dropout problem in online learning.

Tinto's integration model is one of the most commonly discussed and cited theories in postsecondary education for understanding student departure (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Braxton, Hirschy, & McClendon, 2004; Minguillon & Grau-Valdosera, 2014; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1983; Rovai, 2003; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Travers, 2016). Tinto's (1975) theory of student departure offers a theoretical framework on persistence and withdrawal. Most of the research on student departure is centered on Tinto's model, which has sparked interest among many scholars using alternative approaches on this topic (Karp, O'Gara, & Hughes, 2008). Most scholars have conducted traditional research into student departure from on-campus classes and have not developed an integrated model for understanding student departure in online learning (Khuong, 2014).

Tinto's theory (1987, 1993) provides insight into the longitudinal interactive process that accounts for student departure prior to degree completion. Tinto's research has also opened a pathway for framing the processes by which individuals in group

settings construct meaning. This meaning can be viewed as involving cultural acculturation of one's world of meanings. The theory explains that a student's background characteristics and academic achievements prior to college directly influence a student's commitment to degree attainment and to the college (Tinto, 1987, 1993). Students tend to be active in the integration process, and both student and institutional actions shape the institutional environment (Karp et al., 2008).

Uncovering how behavior is formed, be it cultural or unpreparedness, provides instructors with useful information that will help them identify at-risk students contemplating their departure from a course and provide the support that elicits processes of persistence that changes their course of action.

Tinto (1993) asserted that the classroom is the primary education community for students to establish academic and social connections. Student connections with instructors can create meaningful relationships but failing to create such relationships can impede their academic progress, causing them to feel isolated and disengaged from campus life (Tinto, 1993). Tinto also noted that classroom behaviors are an important component of a student's relationship with peers and faculty. The classroom activities faculty assign are key in providing students an opportunity to engage with the learning materials and class discussions, which are key ingredients of academic persistence (Khuong, 2014).

Bean and Metzner (1985) asserted that student perceptions of their educational experiences are formed by their interaction with academic advising and course scheduling, and academic outcomes such as grades can affect the integration process.

Bean and Metzner postulated that for nontraditional students, commitment to persist is contingent on their interactions with the academic system instead of their social interactions within the institutional environment. Bean and Metzner also noted that external factors beyond institutional control could affect students' time for their studies and their resources, and can also influence satisfaction, commitment to degree completion, and academic persistence (Bean, 1990; Tinto, 1993). Both models describe persistence as a longitudinal process, where the interactions between the students and the institution result in educational attainment and attitudinal outcomes that can lead to degree completion (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Travers, 2016). Both models have been successfully applied to diverse populations of college students at 2-year institutions (Khuong, 2014).

Using both Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) integration models as a foundation for my study allowed me to expand on their research by providing information that helps faculty provide better resources to students taking the online business course to get acclimated to the online environment. Additional research may close gaps on student departure while creating opportunities for further research on this topic. In addition, reviewing the empirical research literature helped me to refine this study. In the review, I examine integration, academic and social (internal and external), in the online environment (online learning, social presence, group dynamics); student characteristics (predictors, behavior, dropout trends, enrollment patterns); and culture (differences, student role, fit, persistence, departure issues). A gap in Tinto's theory and related research is an explanation of how external factors shape perceptions of

commitments to degree attainment (Cabrera, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992). The lack of empirical research that supports the propositions in Tinto's theory of student departure clarifies that changes or new conceptual frameworks are needed to describe the factors that contribute to student departure that affect college student retention.

Empirical Literature Review

The literature review provided many journal articles that presented pessimistic results on student dropout and its effects on retention rates at colleges and universities throughout the world offering online learning (e.g., Bawa, 2016; Burch, 2018; Dewberry & Jackson, 2018; Holden, 2018; Karp et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2018; Marks, 2016; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). Several theoretical explanations have been offered by scholars studying student retention that aid in developing a theoretical foundation for future research on attrition and retention studies in higher education institutions (Bean & Metzner, 1990; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Karp et al. (2008) noted that future researchers, should investigate the interactions between a college's ability to graduate students and the benefits gained by the online student. It is a perception that colleges that offer online courses with low graduation rates may cause students to experience a reduction in benefits affecting their online study and degree completion (Wladis, et.al, 2014). Wladis, et.al, noted that other variables may change student interest in online learning, including the quality of the design, the online environment, faculty development, and the attention the instructors give in examining student progress. Future researchers should explore student interactions among these variables and how they affect degree attainment (Jaggars, Edgecombe, & Stacey, 2013; Shea & Bidjerano, 2018).

According to Kang and Yelich Biniecki (2015) and Marks (2016), the U.S. educational system was developed to meet the needs and interests of the new middle class and industrial society, and to meet societal needs in the 19th century—a vision designed to help adult workers prepare for a better workforce using a higher education platform. This pedagogy seemed fair, but as the education system evolved from the traditional on-campus, face-to-face, and hybrid formats and expanded its educational presence online, the practice became more diverse, and the landscape of learning changed. Hamdan (2014) and Vaughan (2006) posited that with today's educational landscape expanding and providing access to online courses in many countries, the expansion of classes is attracting a growing number of learners from various cultural backgrounds. The educational desires of this diverse group of online students have created an urgency for faculty and administrators to adhere to the demands that culture plays in online learning, and how acculturation creates new meaning for the learning environment (Hamdan, 2014; Kang & Yelich Biniecki, 2015). Hamdan explained that enrolling more diverse adult learner populations is a student-centered approach trending in adult education.

To reach the community college student, Black, Terry, and Buhler (2016) explained that community colleges are offering seminars to first-year college students in an effort to increase retention and graduation rates. Black et al. posited that first-year students taking specialized programs, such as business, agriculture, nursing, education, and other discipline-specific programs, have the highest retention rates. Generalized courses, such as introductory English, philosophy, and college experience seminars, scored in the middle range of retention, while courses designed for transfer students have

the lowest retention rates. The study also provided several policy implications for educators. One implication was that institutions seeking to increase retention should engage students immediately with the course content of a program during first-year orientation. A second implication was that incoming first year and transfer students are an at-risk group that requires specific academic content and student support services to facilitate persistence.

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2015) reported a 69.6% persistence rate for students who registered for college during the fall of 2013 and returned to any institution in the United States in 2014. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center also reported a 59.3% student retention rate for those who returned to the same college. The study reported a 30% student dropout rate among first-year students. Student retention, according to Black et al. (2016), should be a top priority for higher education institutions as it has financial implications for these institutions.

Lee and Choi (2011) discussed 69 important factors that influence students' decisions to withdraw from online courses and identified and classified them into three categories: (a) student internal and external factors, (b) course and educational program factors, and (c) environmental education factors. To acquire a broader understanding of the challenges that can cause a student to drop an online course, Lee and Choi examined several strategies that may help educators design better course activities with support systems in place. Strategies include the need to understand that students enter classes with challenges and potential for success. The informed educator will help students

transition into the learning environment by minimizing student issues and emotional problems. Lee and Choi noted that most community colleges have an open entry enrollment and admission policy that does not have entry requirements. This practice may open the doors to some unprepared learners who may not possess the skills to succeed in an online environment. This lack of skill is derived from previous academic under-achievement, poor experiences, and skills development, which can make it difficult for instructors to accommodate all needs.

Online Learning

Online learning originated to make it more convenient for students to have access to a college education. This approach to learning emerged due to factors such as work schedules, family issues, distance from the college, and other personal challenges that make it difficult to take classes on campus (Kowalski, Dolph, & Young, 2014). Research has identified several reasons for this increase in online learning:

- It assists students in getting a college degree or certificate.
- It enables students to keep their jobs while pursuing a college education.
- It allows students to attend to family obligations.
- It keeps the costs of travel low.
- It enables students a flexible schedule.

Overall, these benefits make online learning more cost-effective than traditional on-campus classes (Preisman, 2014; Yoo & Huang, 2013). As more students continue to enroll in online courses, faculty and administrators have been puzzled with the substantial

dropout rates and the need for indicators that identify characteristics of a student who might be at risk.

Several scholars defined online learning as any class that has at least 80% of its coursework delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Wladis et al., 2014; Yeboah & Smith, 2016). Wladis et al. (2014) noted that course content in an online classroom is delivered on the Internet in a web-based format, often without the instructors and students being connected simultaneously. Seiver and Troja (2014) posited that technology is an essential resource in the online classroom and that instructors are using this in their online courses as an effective way to improve their pedagogy and learning outcomes. According to Seiver and Troja, several instructors are using technology by incorporating more active learning techniques, such as working collaboratively on group assignments, semester projects, reading and responding to case analyses, discussion boards, and other simulations.

Bolliger and Martindale (2004) developed a hypothesized structural equation model to examine key variables that may influence student interactions in an online environment. The findings revealed that having reliable technology equipment for both instructor and student is essential for online learning. The results found five dimensions of online student satisfaction: (a) interaction with both the instructor and students, (b) system-wide technology, (c) function-specific technology, (d) workload, and (e) difficulty. O'Keeffe (2013) noted that faculty who teach online courses might increase student success by addressing the correct factors underlying student frustrations with the class (Leong, 2011; O'Keeffe, 2013).

The growth in people using the Internet has spawned an increasing demand among students who want to get a college education without coming to campus, and the assortment of courses continuously being added has created significant growth and trends in online learning. The original intent of online learning was to serve nontraditional students who work during the day and wanted to get a college degree, but today student enrollment consists of high school students, students updating their skill-sets, and students who wish to change careers (Wladis et al., 2014).

According to Wicks et al. (2015), the growth in the online learning environment had changed considerably in the previous 10 years, and, in response to this trend, the educational community changed the curriculum and programs to adapt to this new era of learning. Concurrent with the change in curriculum and programs is a shift from the traditional on-campus face-to-face classroom that is instructor-focused to an online classroom that is learner-centered and more indicative of constructivist learning theory (Moore, 2011). According to Qing and Akins (2015), 20% of the majority of training worldwide is being delivered in an online environment with a prediction of $11.4 billion to be spent on this format. Qing and Akins contended that for administrators, online education provides cost-efficient alternative strategies for course delivery that saves college space and staff hires, while instructors have increased enrollment.

Preisman (2014) argued that not all instructors have embraced online learning and pointed out this approach to learning poses enormous challenges. Preisman explained that instructional approaches that work in traditional on-campus classes might not work in online classes. Preisman explained that some faculty feel online courses are not as

challenging for students, which has led online instructors to overcompensate by adding too much content and assignments for the online learner causing the student to feel overwhelmed, a feeling that can lead to withdrawal. Wladis et al. (2014) explained that students take an online course for various reasons (e.g., elective, required for a degree, enhance business skills). Students often perceive the online course to be less rigorous. This perception might be the reason the student enrolled in the class; however, such perceptions may lead to withdrawal when the student finds the online course to be more difficult than initially thought (Murphy & Stewart, 2017). Seiver and Troja (2014) explained that learning could not be passive as students must do the work and ask for help when needed; otherwise, the instructor has no way of knowing if the student is actively doing the work or having problems with the course (Koc & Xiongyi, 2016).

The literature on online learning established the breadth of this problem by confirming that while colleges and universities are experiencing significant enrollment in online learning, they have also experienced high dropout rates, which makes it a challenge in meeting outcome standards (Dubas, Best, Long, & Crumpacker, 2016; Evans, Baker, & Dee, 2016). Liu, Gomez, Khan, and Yen (2007) explained that significant challenges facing online learning were, a decade ago, retaining students until they achieved their academic goals (degree, certificate, career advancement). Liu et al. noted that course withdrawal is very costly to the student in lost potential and time invested with no return on investment. In addition, the college or university is affected by lost revenue, and society is affected by lost productivity. Liu et al. also noted there is a vital need for researchers to reexamine the internal and external factors contributing to

student dropout in online courses. Liu et al. stated that future research on how decisions are made to drop an online course should focus on family life, job, financial matters, student preparedness for the online class, cultural differences, and the impact of linkages between departure and persistence in the online environment. Liu et al. examined the work of Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993), Bean and Metzner (1985) using Tinto's theoretical model of student departure and persistence as a framework for their study. Liu et al. noted several studies that refined Tinto's model as helpful in expanding Tinto's research efforts on student departure.

Garland's (1993) model suggested that student dropout can be categorized into four areas: situational (student's life experiences), dispositional (students' learning styles and motivation), institutional (students' experiences with faculty and staff that have been poor instructional quality), and epistemological (difficulty in course content). Kember's (1989, 1995) model focused on several constructs that affect learning outcomes in open learning courses, while Garland's model addressed student departure that was most relevant to the institution. In conclusion, no single indicator of students at risk emerged as a predictor of dropout in an online course. Overall, these models provided a conceptual framework that describes, explains, or predicts student withdrawal based on Tinto's (1975) model.

Motivation Factors that Contribute to Student Persistence

Yoo and Huang (2013) and Preisman (2014) shared similar definitions of why students take online classes. Yoo and Huang posited that students enter the online environment at higher education institutions because they offer the online learner

convenience and flexibility by making courses accessible anytime and anywhere throughout the United States. Preisman explained that students enter the online environment because it is an appropriate educational format that is convenient, adjustable, adaptable, flexible, and immediately accessible.

According to Yoo and Huang (2013), motivation is the reason people do something, and students are motivated when they can improve their ability, or when there is an incentive for their efforts (e.g., grades and instructor feedback). Yoo and Huang identified four motivational factors for students to take an online course: "1) Intrinsic motivation, 2) Short-term extrinsic motivation, 3) Long-term extrinsic motivation, and, 4) Technological willingness" (p. 155) and claimed these factors are instrumental in program selection. Yoo and Huang explained that intrinsic motivation operates when people, on average, engage in learning activities when it is appropriate for them. Yoo and Huang later included the role of extrinsic motivation, a form of motivation that supports their theory of motivation in which an individual performs an activity to attain a separate outcome. Yoo and Huang (2013) noted that intrinsic is the act of doing the activity for the innate satisfaction of the activity itself.

Because of the enormous demand for online learning, community colleges have expanded their course offerings across disciplines, making it easy for students to take more online classes without the travel time involved in commuting to campus. This growth in online access provides increased financial incentives to institutions of higher learning to offer degree programs online (Preisman, 2014); however, with growth in student enrollment and more course availability, students are still dropping out of online

courses in record numbers. Preisman noted that motivational levels initially fall off by the end of the semester, leading to student withdrawal. Without knowledge of the factors that contribute to the lack of motivation and commitment to the online degree programs, the gap gets wider as the problem remains under-investigated, resulting in unfavorable program outcomes that lead to low retention rates in online learning (Yoo & Huang, 2013).

Preisman (2014) also noted that, in a virtual world, the environment in which the students enter means they cannot see, hear, or physically interact with others with whom they are communicating. This factor has caused some first-time students to feel isolated and develop anxiety as they enter an unknown environment. Yoo and Huang (2013) explained that the strongest motivator for students who remain in an online class is their present life situations and personal motivation. Aviv, Elrich, and Ravid (2004) noted that students who believe in their willingness to achieve set, clear, and measurable goals and expect significant meaning when the goal is accomplished, they usually meet their goal. Another contributor to the debate is Holder (2007) examined the responses of 259 participants who took an online course and found emotional support, self-efficacy, time management, and student autonomy to be significant factors for student motivation. Although motivational factors can influence students' decisions to persist with the course, the results of the study lacked in addressing student engagement matters from the perspective of online degree program development.

Persistent Versus Nonpersistent Online Student Learners

The term persistence is used in several studies as merely the opposite of attrition, or departure from college (Chea, 2013; Cochran et al., 2014; Gaytan, 2013; Hart, 2014; Lint, 2011; Scott, 2015; Wladis et al., 2014). It was documented in the literature that the lack of persistence in online learning is a major issue that leads to student withdrawal from the online classroom (Scott, 2015). In investigating student characteristics on persistence, the literature identified several variables affecting student persistence and nonpersistence in online learning showing the same set of characteristics recurred to distinguish persistent from nonpersistent online students (Burns, 2013).

Several scholars conducted many studies on this topic by demonstrating the personal characteristics of persistence in online learners, such as enjoying lively discussions, confident of passing the course, and rarely disappointed by sudden events (Cochran et al., 2014; Hart, 2014; Scott, 2015). Hart (2014) explained that nonpersistent students do not enjoy the online discussions, and they do not believe finishing a challenging course will help them achieve their academic goals. Burns (2013) used a case study method that examined 60 Indonesian primary school educators enrolled in an online program in 2010. The objective was to explore the course design and delivery of a 5-month online training program for factors affecting the attrition and persistence rates. The exploratory study targeted students at risk of attrition in the online program. Burns administered surveys and conducted interviews and focus groups with all 60 participants. The study noted six participants left the course and 54 finished, but there was no explanation of why the six left (Burns, 2013). This research was helpful because it

identified three recurring sets of characteristics that distinguish persistence and nonpersistence factors contributing to online learning: personal characteristics, autonomy, and responsibility and internal locus of control.

Burns (2013) and Hart (2014) addressed skills related to online learning regarding student expectations and the level of difficulty, competency with technology, prior educational level, time management, writing ability, and previous successes with other online courses. These skills were strong predictors of persistence, estimating attrition rates in online programs to range from 40% to 90 %. (Hart, 2014). Burns noted that online attrition rates exceeded those of traditional face-to-face instruction by 10-20%.

Burns (2013) found that the greatest contributor to persistence or nonpersistence, success or failure, was the mode of instructional delivery in which the student learners participated. The student learners stated the online environment lacked the face-to-face interaction for bonding, they viewed online education as an imitation of real learning, and they felt they were getting the diluted version versus the on-campus classroom setting. With the lack of face-to-face interaction between students and the instructor, the participants explained it was easier to drop out of the online course because they felt no real relationship bonding was present.

Cochran et al. (2014) examined individual characteristics of student persistence by using an alternative approach focused on factors that identified a student's prior performance in college classes (cumulative GPA) and class standing (senior versus nonsenior) as important factors related to student persistence in online classrooms. Wang, Shannon, and Ross (2013) took a different approach by examining the relationship

between students' characteristics regarding persistence and focused on self-regulated learning, technology, self-efficacy, and course and learning outcomes in the online environment. Students with previous online learning experiences adopted more effective learning strategies and had higher motivation as compared to traditional on-campus students. Arpaci (2017) and Baturay and Yukselturk (2015) explained that when students have higher levels of motivation, their levels of technology self-efficacy and course satisfaction are increased, and they earned better final grades.

Patterns of Enrollment Among Online Students

The literature consistently showed patterns of enrollment among online students and how student characteristics affect course outcomes and low retention rates (Bawa, 2016; Burch, 2018; Dewberry & Jackson, 2018; Holden, 2018; Lee et al., 2018; Marks, 2016; Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). The research indicated a pervasiveness of noncompleters in online classes as compared to face-to-face courses. A broader review of the literature showed continued growth in online enrollment, although student demand changes from semester to semester, which makes it harder to predict online enrollment. The studies describe strategies used by several scholars to approach this topic (Bowen, 2013; Bowen, 2018; Evans et al., 2016; Lack, 2013; Jaggars, 2014a; Tanyel & Griffin, 2014; Wladis et al., 2014). To measure student enrollment, Jaggars (2014b) flagged a study that employed multinomial logistic regression, comprising nationally representative data to examine how student profiles have changed in American higher education institutions. The report revealed that student characteristics varied from semester to semester, with an increase of 5.9% in enrollment in 2000 and 32.1% in 2012. The study described the student

population as a macroeconomic concept of opportunity costs, which explains the cost of doing one thing as the later loss of any missed alternatives. (Jaggars, Edgecombe & Stacey, 2013).) Traditional education has a high opportunity cost for students who would sacrifice employment or caregiving responsibilities, while online students provide a considerably lower opportunity cost since students need not sacrifice by coming to campus, allowing them to take care of responsibilities while pursuing their education. Bowen (2018) argued that the growth of online education in higher education institutions would be hard to predict because minimal research has examined which kinds of students are most likely to engage in online education. Given that some student characteristics change from academic year and semesters, student characteristics are major predictors of the online learner's college experiences and learning outcomes. According to Tanyel and Griffin (2014), online courses appear to be in the highest demand among certain segments of the student population (e.g., working class, nontraditional, geographically distant from the college, older individuals), and most administrators and online instructors are endorsing this growth in online learning as a potential solution to college enrollment with lower costs.

Bowen (2013), Bowen (2018), Evans et al. (2016), Lack, (2013), Jaggars (2014a), Tanyel and Griffin (2014), and Wladis et al. (2014) took a broader look at enrollment patterns by examining different pedagogical practices in other colleges and universities outside the United States, focusing on engagement, persistence, and completion. Lack focused on educational institutions outside the United States, noting that researchers would have to consider the theoretical import of their findings and the extent to which

they refer to populations broader than that of their research. Lack noted that most studies of online learning fail to distinguish between the residential student taking one online course and the nontraditional student enrolled in an online program. As research in online education in higher education institutions is weak, for administrators and board members at most community colleges and universities in the United States, addressing student dropout worldwide in the online learning classroom would provide greater insight into the problem.

Wladis et al. (2014) explained that to gain an understanding of the reasons a student takes an online course (fulfill degree requirements, distributional, or elective), the researcher must examine the level of difficulty, which may be a predictor of completion. Wladis et al. sampled 2,330 students at a large urban community college in the Northeastern region of the United States to analyze two vital course-level factors that may affect online retention: (a) the students' reason for taking the online course, and (b) course difficulty level. The results indicated that online modality increases the risk of dropout rates in courses taken as an elective or distributional requirement, especially for lower-level courses. The findings suggest the student's reasons for enrolling in an online course may be a risk indicator, and that "focused learner support targeted at particular course types may be needed to increase online persistence and retention" (Wladis et al., 2014, p. 9). Wladis et al. also noted that the low rates of retention in lower level online courses taken as electives and distributional requirements were unclear; therefore, more research is needed to explain the reason for these low rates.

Evans et al. (2016) research focused on course engagement, persistence, and completion to answer the research question: “What are the factors in the course, lectures, and student characteristics best predict in-course engagement, persistence, and completion in online courses?” (p. 4). Evans et al. used a dataset of 44 massive open online courses (MOOCs) by examining over 2.1 million student observations across more than 2900 lectures to explore student engagement, persistence, completion rates, lectures, and course levels. Evans et al. used the MOOCs platform because a growing number of students have registered for these free online courses that reach tens of thousands of online students across the globe. This broad platform included, at the time, more than 100 colleges and universities worldwide that collaborated on online courses. The findings suggested that a strong predictor of course completion was found among students who had shown an interest in the course by registering a week before the semester began and who completed the online precourse survey. Those students who took these initiatives were 12 % more likely to complete a certificate and watch more videos than students who did not take the survey. These results support Tinto’s (1993) model in which academic integration leads to course engagement, persistence, and course completion. Tinto noted that institutional characteristics have essential ramifications for student persistence in an online environment.

Another study instrumental in understanding patterns in student enrollment was done by Allen and Seaman, 2016) in partnership with the Online Learning Consortium, Pearson, WCET, Study Portals, and Tyton Partners. This group reported that an excess of 2.8 million distance education students were taking courses in higher education in fall

2014, an increase of 12.8% from fall 2013 enrollments, and 2015 showed a 3.9% increase from the previous year in higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2016). This growth, however, showed uneven numbers for private nonprofit and for-profit institutions. Private nonprofit institutions showed a growth rate of 11.3%, while private for-profit institutions showed a decline in online enrollment by 2.8%. These findings showed a 13% consecutive year growth rate in the number of students taking online classes (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Online Learning Consortium, 2016). While recent studies show a decrease overall in online learning, colleges offering online courses have seen an increase in enrollments in these programs. Most of the growth has been in online professional degree programs, as students are more focused on employability and advancing their careers. These student characteristics indicate that most community college students are more likely to enroll in at least one online course during their academic study. The reports showed that the long-term strategic goals to increase student enrollment must stimulate continued growth in online learning or embrace nontraditional online students as underserved learners whose life circumstances (job, family obligations) serve as obstacles that precluded them from reaching their academic goals.

The Online Learning Environment

In describing the online environment, student engagement, according to Martin and Bolliger (2018), increases satisfaction, the student's motivation to learn, decreases isolation and improves student performance in the online environment. Martin and Bolliger posited that it is essential for educators when designing online courses to provide the learner with opportunities, such as collaborative group work, presentations and

discussions, opportunities to share resources actively, create projects with hands-on components, and case studies and reflections so the students can hone their skills.

Meyer and Murrell (2014) found Tinto's (1993) model a gateway for students to establish academic and social connections. They suggested that the importance of student engagement in the online classroom could be shown as evidence of students' cognitive development in their ability to create their knowledge leading to a level of student success. Watson and Ferdinand-James (2018) noted that a student's interactions with content, peers, and instructors could help them become more active learners and engage more in their coursework. Interactivity and a sense of community in this environment can cause high-quality instruction and better learning outcomes. Watson and Ferdinand-James asserted that the student's perception of the online environment could influence satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their online course experience and performance. Hart (2014) recommended that for faculty designing online courses, instructional strategies should focus on ways to improve the students' online learning experiences that could increase course outcomes.

Tinto's (1975) model played a significant role in theory building and forming a foundation for rethinking the departure issue and reinvigorating research on this topic. Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2013) asserted that the educational environment in which student groups share constructions of reality and expectations of interactions that govern their behaviors defines the online environment. Johnson et al. posited that for interactions to exist in the online classroom, student interactions must impact each other and that change in one student can cause a change in the other students. The scholars asserted that

problems could arise when one group dominates the online environment and pressuring students, which can cause feelings of uneasiness, not belonging, not feeling safe to speak out or voice opinions, and feelings of being an outsider. When a student is experiencing this pressure, they keep quiet, feel uncomfortable, or drop out of the online course.

Seiver and Troja (2014) explained that a researcher could utilize an interpretive perspective to examine social presence as a predictor of satisfaction of student withdrawal. In the interviews, I listened to the participants' perceptions of course activities, pedagogy, methodological practices, and student and instructor interactions to investigate factors that may contribute to student withdrawal (Leong, 2011; Tinto, 1993;Wei & Chen, 2012). Hart (2014) and Scott (2015) explained that more research is needed to examine (a) the online learner (student characteristics in online learning), (b) faculty preparedness and professional development in online educator training, (c) course design, and (d) the online student. Several scholars noted that more research is being conducted around issues involving the interaction between instructors and students (Baturay & Yukselturk, 2015; Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012; Dubas et al., 2016; Moore, 2011; Purarjomandlangrudi, Chen, & Nguyen, 2016).

Purarjomandlangrudi et al. (2016) performed an exploratory study by examining a specific aspect of interaction: student versus instructor, student versus student, course content, the information conveyed by the instructor, teaching quality, and how directions are facilitated. The authors posited that the primary focus of online learning is substantiated as useful when students are exchanging ideas through intellectual stimulation. Ben-Yosef and Pinhasi-Vittorio (2012) asserted that stimulation is

"optimized in an emotionally, mentally, and physically safe environment where everyone belongs, has a voice, and is accepted as they are" (p. 1).

Ben-Yosef and Pinhasi-Vittorio (2012) explained that a poor learning environment could produce low achievement for some students, and this can lead to student dropout, which can be discouraging for students, faculty, and administration at higher education institutions. Cochran et al. (2014), Chea (2013), and Cohen, Brawer, & Kisker, 2013). suggested that educators could no longer escape noticing any disconnect between theory, praxis, and performance in U.S. education system if they wished to increase retention. Educators continue to explore new ways to teach online learners, and yet, there has been a lack of consensus among educators on which strategies, such as instructor or student facilitation, leads to student success. This lack of clear direction or empirically derived research that illustrates how to develop effective online programs is needed in the education system. Best teaching practices are good sources of instruction on a particular topic, but more instructional strategies are needed to meet the needs of this diverse culture of online learners (Phirangee et al., 2016).

One area that could better inform educators is how different facilitation methods influence student activities and support the development of a sense of community in the online environment as there seem to be conflicting recommendations. Some researchers provide recommendations that urge the instructor to take on the role of facilitator; others question that role and note that more interaction is needed. Phirangee et al. argued that discussions should be moderated more, but questions arise: How much more, and to what

extent the instructor should participate? This is unclear. The research provides information but is not specific about what steps are needed to enhance student success.

Baturay and Yukselturk (2015) explained that the online environment has helped transform teaching and learning in community colleges, but the transformation requires cultural changes for students and instructors. The changes for students include availability and accessibility of the course content and assignments, engagement of different learning styles, encompassing the development of a new skill, rethinking pedagogy, redefining learning objectives, reevaluating assessments, and redefining work roles and the online culture. Dubas et al. (2016) explained a need to examine the effectiveness of the online program in meeting the needs of students. Dubas et al. presented taxonomies, frameworks, online learning theories, and models to help educators recognize the various stages of learning that students go through and the changing roles of instructors and students. Dubas et al. posited that in an online environment, the instructor's role is one of facilitator of the learning process in which the instructional approach becomes learner-focused, and students acquire knowledge through active participation. Dubas et al. explained that outcome-focused instructions could be helpful for student success when templates, samples of assignments, projects, and assessment rubrics are provided to students. Finally, Dubas et al. noted that the use of these tools helps clarify the instructor's expectations for the assignment and improve student engagement and course outcomes that lead to student success.

Moore (2011) posited that student success begins with a learner-centered approach, and active collaborative online discussions are the key to learning in this

environment. Moore noted that continuous professional development for instructors is needed to aid the inception and enhancement of online learning programs, curriculum, course design, and facilitation. A key factor is a need for ongoing collaborative discourse to promote student success and retention.

Those participating in the online environment continue to struggle within the strict curriculum, and the achievement gap for some student groups continues to affect program outcomes and generate low graduation rates. As this reflection opens the possibility of meaningful educational experiences for our students, it is the responsibility of faculty to construct lessons with all cultures in mind. This point is important when creating a conceptual foundation of a learning-centered pedagogy designed with respect for all student groups and providing a learning environment in which all students can achieve academic success (Baturay & Yukselturk, 2015; Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012; Rovai, 2003;).

Misconceptions of Online Learning

Misconceptions of the online environment can derail the participation of the student and prevent the integration process for student success. Misconceptions are misguided assumptions about an online course. Once viewed by students as a less rigorous form of education, and an easier way to complete a college course or obtain a degree or certificate, students now understand they were wrong in their perception of online classes. What has been realized is that completing a course and degree program online requires a lot of hard work and discipline, and faculty and administrators now understand a lot of time and effort is invested in the development and delivery of a high-quality

online course that requires considerable skill (Qing & Akins, 2015; Wicks et al., 2015; Wladis et al., 2014).

Qing and Akins (2015) explained that the quality of online education depends on committed and dedicated students and instructors. The authors listed the myths to clarify goals, pedagogy, and a way for faculty to seek methods to overcome limitations of online learning while promoting student success that offers students a platform to obtain a degree or certificate that enhances their present and future endeavors. According to Tinto (1993), students will persist in an educational environment if they see how they fit. Creating a successful online environment depends, in part, on the instructor designing the course where the student can develop connections with other students while feeling comfortable with communications with the instructor Karp, Hughes, and O'Gara (2008). Using Tinto's integration framework, examined ways first-year community college students could engage with the institution. Contrary to findings from other studies on student departure that did not see where Tinto's research applied to community colleges, their research findings provided insights about how much integration might happen to both academic and social integration. The researcher's findings explained the importance of information networks as a personal resource where students can receive useful information about the course or problems and concerns. Students who used information networks were less likely to have misconceptions about their educational experiences where knowledge was given. This network helps students feel confident in their decision-making efforts and helped them better fit into the college environment; therefore, providing a successful experience for the student.

Yeboah and Smith (2016) and Wladis et al. (2014) explained that student satisfaction is a critical measurement of learning outcomes and a vital factor in the success of the online program. Wladis et al. explained that course completion is a measure of student outcomes and success of the online program and also noted that student dropout is a costly expense for both the student and the institution. Because of the high cost of student dropout and its association to program quality, there is an immediate need for faculty to detect students who may be at risk of dropping the online course and address issues of concern to ameliorate the problem (Wicks et al., 2015; Wladis et al., 2014; Yeboah & Smith, 2016).

Social Presence in the Online Classroom

Understanding the importance of social presence in the online classroom is a critical factor of communication in the instructor and student relationship (Leong, 2011; Miller, Cavanagh, & Furr, 2018). Several factors add to a positive social presence in online learning and include the quality of instruction, technology, peer interaction, and course design. Miller et al. (2018) posited that an active social presence in the classroom could increase cognitive absorption of the course content.

Social presence helps the students feel more engaged while cultivating a sense of community. Miller et al. (2018) noted that students promote their social presence by participating in group discussions and classwork. The student shares their information in the discussion forum while creating their social presence by what other students and faculty share. It is essential for faculty to design online courses that increase social presence while promoting student interactions. Miller et al. (2018) asserted that social

presence is a vital component of the online classroom because it promotes student satisfaction. These critical factors, Miller et al. explained, play a vital role in developing positive relationships with the students while encouraging diversity and difference.

O'Keeffe (2013) asserted that another crucial element of social presence is how well students connect to the institution, faculty, staff, administration, and peers. Rovai (2003) asserted that the key to online learning is creating an effective learning community where students have accessibility to information, a presence that is welcoming to different learning styles, and promotion of instructor and student engagement. Vaughan (2006) asserted that to be effective, the community college faculty should see their mission as "primarily one of providing education to a community of learners by educating people to survive and thrive in a global economy" (p. 6). Vaughan noted that most communities want courses and activities that meet the social and cultural needs of the community to enhance education and community life.

To gain an understanding of social presence in the classroom, the exploration of the critical factors affecting communication in the online classroom is essential. Schroeder, Baker, Terras, Mahar, and Chiasson (2016) examined graduate students' online experience and levels of connectivity in an online asynchronous learning environment. Little attention was given to their level of access to the internet. Students revealed a desire to feel levels of connectivity to their academic programs, faculty, and advisors. Three themes emerged from the study: (a) students desired connectivity more with advisors than with fellow students; (b) the students desired connectivity with the instructors and with peers showed variations by age category; and (c) students

experienced high connectivity in the online program overall. Schroeder et al. asserted the need for further study to compare connectivity between students and the institution, instructors, other departments, and across different institutions to determine variables that may influence the perception of connectivity.

Exploring another characteristic of online learning and social presence was represented in research done by Wei and Chen (2012), who presented a framework developed from social cognitive theory to examine the relationships between students and instructors. Their research demonstrated that students who enter the online environment sometimes feel isolated and alienated, and the enhancement of social presence could change these negative experiences. Success for students who experience anxiety with online discussion is not the focal point of social presence, but it was essential to examine how student perceptions of the online environment alter their behavior (Beach, Stefanick, & VanOverbeke, 2018). Wei and Chen asserted that social presence is a crucial component in promoting learning in an online environment that helps students hone their communication skills, where discussions between students are adjusted through better interaction with each other.

Leong (2011), O'Keeffe (2013), Schroeder et al. (2016), and Wei and Chen (2012) noted that the focus of social presence is on making sure that all students are given an opportunity for expression in a discussion board where they feel comfortable responding to discussion questions with less stress or anxiety. The scholars noted that the trend in online learning is towards a blended design called a hybrid, a design that combines asynchronous and synchronous modes in which an instructor can apply various

pedagogical approaches. The asynchronous design allows instructors to carry out course assignments, such as presenting course materials, course projects (e.g., term papers, simulations), discussion forums, and assessments, all online without constraints of time. The synchronous design requires instructors and students to be online providing several features that allow students to access class rosters, chat rooms, videos, audio meeting rooms, and an electronic whiteboard for better synchronous communication. Understanding social presence is a starting point in the online environment as it serves as a means by which the students' behavior is defined.

Factors That Contribute to Student Withdrawal

Several factors contributed to a student dropping out of an online course (Gillett-Swan, 2017; Marks, 2016; Orlando & Attard, 2015; Wei & Chen, 2012; Yoo & Huang, 2013). Wei and Chen (2012) asserted that when examining factors that contribute to student dropout, internal and external factors should be considered when describing student withdrawal behavior. Wei and Chen explained that internal and external factors shape behavior and define the shared culture of the online environment. According to Gillett-Swan (2017) and Yoo and Huang (2013), several internal and external issues can arise during the semester that impacts the online learner. The internal content on the online site is often converted from a form deemed suitable for external delivery. The instructor who teaches the same course in a face-to-face format assumes the format is compatible with the online format. Gillett-Swan and Yoo and Huang (2013) asserted there are scales of adaptation and differentiation within this approach that should be considered by faculty who teach and design online programs.

Yoo and Huang (2013) posited that without the purposeful formation of an online environment where students continue until completing the course, educators are doing nothing new to reduce student dropout rates in online learning. Gillett-Swan (2017) explained that the generalized pedagogical assumptions often associated with the online learning curriculum focus more attention on task/content with little focus on delivery. The premise that online students are familiar with group work online or with the different tools needed to access their group members can be an added challenge for the external or isolated student, as the student may feel alienated causing disengagement, or withdrawal from the course. (p. 122)

Orlando and Attard (2015) addressed some of the internal challenges of online learning by describing that problems with technology and using a one-size-fits-all-approach are factors to be considered. Other factors include the curriculum content, teaching pedagogy, and construction of learning experiences. Davidson (2015) explained that some students experience personal problems such as anxiety with technology and group-work and sometimes feel they are outside their comfort zone. Marks (2016) utilized a different approach and noted the success of an online program rests on its overall quality. Marks asserted that the role of the instructor is to help balance the needs of the students and to understand the extent to which internal and external factors shaped the online environment. It is important for educators to gain insight into these factors to acquire an understanding of the role they play by examining, “1) student and instructor relationships, 2) pedagogy, 3) roles within cultures in the online environment, 4) the

effectiveness of collaborative discussions, and, 5) quality of the online program" (Marks, 2016, p. 78).

Identifying Student Characteristics

When seeking to understand why a student might drop out of an online course, it is useful to identify the characteristics of student predictors to gain a better understanding of which factors contribute to withdrawal issues. Kauffman (2015) noted that student characteristics (age, gender, educational level, learning styles, motivation, beliefs, the locus of control, and components of self-regulation) are predictors of withdrawal or retention. Vaughan (2006) explained that "the broad demographic shifts across the nation has led to a new global economy with cultural differences, a challenge for educators designing curriculum to meet the urgent needs of both the changing workforce and society" (p. 1). Several researchers investigated the characteristics of online students' behaviors to provide evidence that some characteristics are predictors of or associated with student dropout (Fontenot, Mathisen, Carley, & Stuart, 2015; Jaggars, 2014a; James, Swan, & Daston, 2016; Liang, 2017; Tanyel & Griffin, 2014; Wladis et al., 2014).

Characteristics of Student Predictors of Attrition

Tanyel and Griffin (2014) approached this topic by positing there are predictors that affect differences in student outcomes when comparing online courses versus face-to-face traditional on-campus instruction. Tanyel and Griffin noted the literature is methodologically weak, and student evaluations that show the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of online courses vary widely in focus and scope. Jaggars (2014b) asserted that students taking online courses should no longer be put into a homogenous

group of learners; cultural differences have led to many constraints, which make methodologically rigorous evaluations of outcomes difficult to measure. Tanyel and Griffin explained that measuring student outcomes were weak due to the small sample sizes, and the studies failed to report persistence rates and outcome measures. Tanyel and Griffin also explained that biases might exist due to the researchers performing dual roles—participating in the experiment and as an instructor—as well as in the comparisons of formats in reporting online in one discipline and using case studies. Wladis et al. (2014) posited that little research had been conducted on how student characteristics affect course outcomes, and little information in the literature focuses on whether the student who enrolls in a required course versus elective online courses affects online retention.

Liang et al. (2017) suggested that to gather data to identify the characteristics of student predictors that decrease student dropout rates one should explore which demographic characteristics have a significant effect on dropouts from online learning. Liang et al. state that there are specific demographic characteristics representing student groups who might engage disproportionately with computer-mediated instructions. Liang et al. reviewed several journal articles to identify the demographic characteristics of the online student. Jaggars (2014a) identified demographic characteristics by pointing out a need to examine the social and economic gap between disadvantaged individuals without easy access to computers and their peers, a factor which may give credence to the “digital divide” (p. 48) referenced in some literature.

Wladis et al. (2014) explained that other factors could identify student characteristics and explored the differences between nontraditional students and traditional students at higher education institutions as usually being over the age of 30, having dependents, employed full-time, and enrolled in one or more online courses compared to traditional students. James et al. (2016) investigated similar comparisons (traditional on-campus courses, online courses, and hybrid courses) at five primarily online institutions. The study was comprised of 656,258 students and reported that students taking online courses did not show lower retention rates. To get a better understanding of which demographic characteristics affected online courses, James et al. posited that age affected delivery mode effects. James et al. also noted that the older students' retention rates were higher than younger students when taking both online and traditional on-campus courses. These findings suggested that despite some media reports, taking online courses provides the student with opportunities that otherwise might not be available, especially for other education delivery modes (i.e., traditional on-campus courses, hybrid courses).

Fontenot et al. (2015) also took a different approach and examined the differences in predictors of students who had taken an online course and those planning on taking an online course. The research findings revealed that students who had taken an online course were focused on the quality of learning, while the students who had never taken an online course focused more on scheduling and timing.

In conclusion, the research findings of Wladis et al. (2014) and Fontenot et al. (2015) indicated that student perceptions of online learning have been in the literature to

be a better predictor of outcomes in the postsecondary level than grade point, and most course types, whether it is an elective or a requirement linked to student behavior.

Student Behavior Characteristics

Several studies on student behavior characteristics related to student dropout from online courses. Understanding the factors that contribute to different behaviors represented in the online classroom can allow faculty and administrators to adjust online education strategies and enhance the quality of online learning at community colleges (Angelkoska, Stankovska, & Dimitrovski, 2016; Gurantz, 2015; Liang et al., 2017; Nakayama, Yamamoto, & Santiago, 2014; Wang et al., 2013). Several scholars examined student behavior characteristics that can lead to dropping out of an online course. Gurantz (2015) explained that late registration reflects a weaker commitment for a student earning a college degree and suggested that procrastination is a predictor of student behavior and academic outcomes (e.g., late assignments, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor self-regulation, and one's belief they cannot complete a task). Wang et al. (2013) suggested that student motivation is a predictor of success in online learning. Both Gurantz and Wang et al. indicated that students with previous online experience had motivational levels higher than students taking the online course for the first time. Angelkoska et al. (2016) explained that personal characteristics are a set of internal components that determine academic success or failure. Angelkoska et al. examined the personal characteristics of the personality traits of students and their role in achieving academic success. With a sample of 74 students whose ages ranged from 20-22 years, Angelkoska et al. tested the personality traits using the big-five model (neuroticism, agreeableness,

conscientiousness, extroversion and openness to experience). The results indicated that female students were more open to explore and learn new things, and their openness impacts the success they achieve. Male student success, however, was contingent on the enjoyment they feel with others; they liked to help fellow students and to receive help when needed. Male students used this strategy to reduce anxiety and stressful situations related to learning.

A study by Liang et al. (2017) supported the findings identified by Nakayama et al. (2014) in that both used MOOCs to study behavior patterns. Liang et al. explored several variables as predictors of student dropout from online courses to determine if there were patterns in student behavior. Liang et al. examined MOOCs and Coursera, one of the largest online platforms in the world established by top universities in the United States, to study behavior patterns. There were 1563 courses, and over 17 million students registered on the platform. China's online platforms, however, have experienced 7%-9% of learner success with complete MOOC online courses according to Coursera statistics (Liang et al., 2107). Because of the low retention rates, using a student profile was implemented as a novel method to analyze the behavior of online learners.

Nakayama et al. (2014) suggested that students' attitudes or impressions of online learning could be incorporated into the characteristics because they influence a student's performance in the online environment. This trend to examine the behavior of online learners is spreading worldwide. Both Nakayama et al. and Liang et al. (2017) analyzed the effectiveness of online students using MOOCs as course completion rates are still one of the most serious problems affecting colleges and universities. Nakayama et al.

explained that using notetaking was an effective way to track a student's learning process and because students' records reflect their progress, analyzing these notes can help educators track the learning process of online students. These scholars pointed out that knowledge of the topic and how they approach the assignments affect students learning performance.

Liang et al. (2017) also noted that in foreign countries, by analyzing data from student activities, online researchers have demonstrated they can learn behaviors such as reading course information, submitting assignments, and detecting student problem areas due to poor learning performance. This information will enable the instructor to make recommendations for improvement and to guide students to learn the course materials. Liang et al. suggested that data analysis could help educators identify factors affecting the student profile according to age. Utilizing this approach enables the instructor to define relationships between student behavior and the duration of the course. The second benefit of data analysis is the potential to build a student profile model by collecting and preprocessing data based on the connection to the student learning behavior attributes using a Jaccard coefficient algorithm to help form a student profile. A benefit of building a profile is that the instructor may better understand the learning behavior of students. The student profile can help online instructors guide student learning behaviors and provide personalized information that will promote student success.

Nakayama et al. (2014) explained that colleges and universities are using various factors to examine the student's characteristics in online learning to provide better courses. Continuing with the examination of student characteristics, Nakayama et al.

focused on how internal factors, course design, psychological factors, personality and literacy, and support services affect online learning. This study introduced the effectiveness of notetaking in an online course while examining students' learning styles towards various activities. Implementing a learning management system has allowed researchers to collect data about the student's learning process. The learning management system access logs and online tests, for example, can predict student dropout. The data about student dropout, however, cannot explain the actual problems students face while taking the online course or the online learning system.

Angelkoska et al. (2016), Liang et al. (2017), and Nakayama et al. (2014) defined student characteristics as single mental factors that affect learning activity, the primary cause of problems related to online learning that affects online retention rates. To improve retention in online education, a more extensive array of student characteristics such as motivational factors, efficacy, students' thinking styles, learning skills, and socio-cultural factors have been implemented to enhance online learning. These researchers explained three factors that may affect learning activity: information literacy—the student's capacity to use technology is critical for success—the way students organize their work, and how students' interface with faculty.

Nakayama et al. (2014) explained that previous studies noted that causal relationships existed between a student's characteristics such as note-taking behavior, the student's learning experience, note assessment, and test scores.

Characteristics of Minority Students' Online Learning Experiences

As new students enter the community college each year, the environment affects how these students will participate in the cultures represented by faculty, students, and administrators. A person's culture can affect the way one navigates in the college environment; paradoxically, it may improve one's ability to engage in higher education institutions and subsequently to attain positive educational outcomes (Yeboah & Smith, 2016). According to Yeboah and Smith (2016), the reality of a progressively diverse student population and the low retention rates of minority students call for new epistemological frameworks and theoretical insights into how students from different backgrounds enter the online environment.

Yeboah and Smith (2016) discussed the importance of examining relationships between minority students and their academic performance in distance education. As demand continues to grow for students pursuing college degrees through online learning, educators must focus their attention on the cultural characteristics of the online environment to get a clearer picture of the factors that influence student behavior leading to a withdrawal decision. Yeboah and Smith contend that much of the research has ignored cultural and subcultural differences in online learning by failing to address diversity issues.

Since the inception of online learning, minority students have participated in this learning forum to pursue their college education. Several researchers examined how minority students approach the online environment by exploring student behavior. Yeboah and Smith (2016) asserted that the relationship between minority students'

academic performance approach could induce anxiety in students, and the stereotype can undermine achievement through misidentification resulting in low self-esteem. Okwumabua et al. (2011) explained there are cultural differences in the way minorities approach learning and that most African American students have positive attitudes toward computers but lack confidence in working in the online environment. Okwumabua et al. added that African American students performed more poorly on tests than their White counterparts. The findings, however, show that African American students performed better when their race was not used as an underlined focus. The literature revealed most African American college students have a positive behavior toward academic performances and group identification. Okwumabua et al. explained that minority students believe their racial identity plays a positive role in their future educational goals.

Okwumabua et al. (2011) discovered that Latino students, for example, experience disadvantages in an online learning environment where the course design has a low-context culture. It is important for faculty to recognize all diverse groups' contributions to the online environment, and they should be considered in designing online courses and programs (Okwumabua et al., 2011). Yeboah and Smith (2016) and Okwumabua et al. recommended that faculty, administrators, and educational researchers design online courses that encourage cultural responsiveness, set multicultural expectations, and recognize the many challenges cultures face while adapting to the online environment.

Identifying at-risk students, their personal and social difficulties, or their decision to leave college before they graduate would help college instructors design and implement interventions to help streamline at-risk students. Designing programs that will motivate and engage minority students to stay in college is a challenge college's face (Yeboah & Smith, 2016). The urgent task for the community college administration is the need to graduate more students who are academically well-prepared to succeed at 4-year colleges or universities. To face this challenge, administrators must change the way they help students succeed at their institutions (Wladis et al., 2014). The review of the literature revealed an array of factors that can influence dropout decisions. The next two sections focus on uncontrollable factors that can play a part in the decision-making process leading to student dropout, including student dropout trends, institutional characteristics, and instructor differences (Lei, 2016).

Institutional Characteristics of College Students at Risk of Dropping Out

Hachey et al. (2013), Evans et al. (2016), and Lei (2016) posited that while community colleges are adapting to the 21st century to meet the huge demands of online learners, they are facing difficulty with identifying characteristics of at-risk students who might drop out of an online course. According to Allen and Seaman (2016), a survey of online administrators in 2017 noted a 76% increase in the demand for online courses at their institutions, and 99% of all the administrators surveyed reported that demand was increasing or holding steady within the past few years. Further, according to a survey in the 2018 Online Education Trends Report, the online programs that are expected to have

the most growth in enrollment over the next 5 years are in business and related subject areas, such as accounting, management, and logistics (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

According to Jaggars and Xu (2010), several questions remain unanswered about the effectiveness of the online course when comparing the same course on campus, and traditional on-campus research suggests that students who complete both earn equivalent grades. Hachey et al. (2013) and Jaggars and Xu noted two important capabilities of institutions promoting student success in online classes: (a) the institution's capability to model the factors that are barriers to persistence, and (b) the institution's ability to recognize programs and policies likely to enhance student persistence within the institutional context. It is vital for the community college administrative staff and faculty to start carefully analyzing their internal data-driven pathways to make program improvements in online learning that will lead to better student outcomes.

According to Manning (2011), the perception of an effective institution is that it utilizes its data efficiently and assesses and evaluates the results to make program improvements and maintain an institution of quality. Murray (2014) explained that a few studies had identified institutional factors associated with student persistence versus dropout: (a) a voluntary dropout, where an individual with an excellent academic standing drops out by transferring to another college or university; or (b) an involuntary dropout, where the individual has been dropped due to poor academic performance. Chen (2012) also sought to provide an understanding of factors that contribute to the student's dropout decision-making process and noted the following influences:

- The student demographics of an institution, concluding that minority students are positively associated with dropout.
- An institution's structural characteristics are associated with student persistence and dropout, but the number of classes and selectivity are negatively related to student dropout.
- The percentage of courses taught by part-time faculty are negatively related to student retention rates.
- Schools with higher student-instructor ratios have higher dropout rates.
- A lack of spending on academic support and students.

Manning (2011) and Kai et al. (2017) explained that institutions must be effective in improving student retention and program outcomes, respond appropriately to the changing demographics shifts in the online environment, design programs with all cultures represented in the online environment, address the pressures of student financial concerns, and assure students and communities that they are their top priority in meeting educational needs. Manning defined institutional effectiveness as "a set of ongoing and systematic processes and practices that include, planning, evaluation of programs and services, and the identification and measurement of outcomes." (p. 14). Manning explained that using internal data can cause better program assessments and better decision making that will improve student success and institutional quality.

Murray (2014) used a case study to examine students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal to explore how dropout time is defined. At the University, each course was 16 credit points, and the standard completion of a college degree was approximately

3-years with 384 credits awarded. Murray suggested that many factors may have a causative effect during student dropout; therefore, a dataset that identifies a voluntary dropout is a student who has completed 64 credit points, and students who failed over 64 credit points were removed from the dataset. This action was taken because it was hard to determine whether the cause of the withdrawal was academic or nonacademic (e.g., funding, family-related). The study introduces a new methodology into the literature that educators could use to compare student graduation and retention rates at community colleges. This study gives faculty another perspective to examine student characteristics that may affect student dropout. By changing to a calendar period from the number of credit points before a student graduates, the study focused on how dropout impacts an online course. The purpose was to provide faculty with better insight into factors that contributed to the interruption of a student's studies (e.g., family, financial, when the student begins school again, or if the student takes a lighter load to help with academic success), and some characteristics such as age, race, gender, and financial status that can affect a student's motivational behavior. Manning (2011), Murray (2014), and Kai et al. (2017) have applied consistent methods to measure the longitudinal characteristics of institutional variables that affect the withdrawal process by using multilevel modes of national data, the changes in institutional characteristics over time; however, there is a lack of research on factors regarding faculty characteristics at the institutional level.

Chen (2012) examined institutional characteristics that contribute to situations that can reduce student withdrawal risks by analyzing longitudinal and hierarchical data to identify the institutional attributes that affect student withdrawal risks in a longitudinal

process. The institutional characteristics investigated in this study included institutional demographics, structure, faculty, and financial resources. First, results showed that academic preparation and students' college experiences are essential factors in predicting withdrawal. Educational aspirations and the first-year student's GPA were viewed as positive factors, while academic and social integration were adversely associated with student withdrawal. Second, financial aid showed a negative relationship between the amounts of aid received (subsidized loans and merit aid) and student withdrawal. Chen also noted that disparities existed in funding received by some students and their peers. The outcome was a recommendation that some consistency at the federal and state levels is needed to foster equality in higher education funding. The studies by Chen (2012) Manning (2011) and Murray (2014) revealed institutional expenditures on student services affect dropout. Chen, Manning, and Murray also noted that this trend was apparent in colleges or universities that place a high priority on programs and practices aimed at reducing student dropout, a practice that can maximize retention results by putting more emphasis on the student in the first year of enrollment.

Instructor Differences

According to Vaughan (2006), community colleges are devoted to providing excellence in teaching and learning to a diverse student population that continues to grow. The most important challenge community college faculty face is to develop programs that meet all cultural learning styles (Marks, 2016; Wang, Shannon, & Ross, 2013). According to Marks (2016), instructor qualification is one way to measure the

quality of the online learning environment and to evaluate misunderstandings of quality in online teaching.

Wang et al. (2013) asserted that the instructor is responsible for creating an online environment where students thrive academically and personally, and that student unpreparedness and departure are problems faculty and administrators must confront together. Instructors must improve teaching and online learning environments and establish plans to enhance the academic and social experience for online students while offering motivation, encouragement, and a sense of community for students who often feel isolated and disenchanted.

Marks (2016) grouped instructor quality into three subsets: the quality of the instruction as a reflection of the instructor's competence, their qualification (degree, certification, subject-matter expertise, experience), and their psychological qualities (love of students, honesty, compassion, fairness). Other characteristics examined were the pedagogical standards, such as using certain instructional strategies, classroom managerial skills, and the ability to establish a positive classroom environment.

Too (2013)) study reviewed the reflections of 25 preservice teachers in Malaysia on literary texts in online meetings and weblogs. The study established a framework for analyzing thoughtful responses to literature in two literary pedagogical courses. The study showed that 77% posted 286 entries that revealed deep learning and showed the highest level of reflection. The study demonstrated, however, that 27% of the entries did not engage in the highest level. Too noted that this outcome was due to a discrepancy between the syllabi of the two literary pedagogical courses and their expected results.

Too recognized the importance of synchronizing syllabi and learning outcomes to facilitate the development of deep reflection by instructors. The quality of reflection can be depicted by the expectation of familiarity with the instructors' knowledge in using an online forum platform as a way of reflection. Marks (2016) and Too posited that online instructors should not assume that everyone taking the course is knowledgeable of the processes on their site, despite their familiarity with some previous online coursework.

The Impact of Culture on the Online Community

The need to examine how culture impacts the online learning community was well documented in the literature review (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Chouadaha & Chang, 2012; Kang, & Yelich Biniecki, (2015) Tan, 2009; Wong, 2007) as a valuable tool that needs a place in online programs. Each culture represented in the online environment is distinct, and overlooking the impact culture plays in this environment can lead to negative educational experiences, psychological consequences, feelings of isolation and alienation, frustration, anxiousness, being upset, depress or helplessness (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Kang & Yelich Biniecki, 2015; Szilagyi, 2015). According to Szilagyi (2015), students' cultural backgrounds can have deep layers that affect how they learn such as communicative attitudes in the online classroom when students respond to their classmates and develop their relationship with the instructor.

Kang and Yelich Biniecki (2015) reviewed the literature published in four U.S. adult education journals to gain knowledge on how culturally diverse learners learn, and the activities that help with the learning process. Kang and Yelich Biniecki viewed culture as a lens through which educators can examine adult learning, or as a useful tool

in helping educators address issues and challenges that adult learners encounter. Through the review process, produced preliminary maps were used to visualize culture and how it has been perceived and framed in online learning in the United States. Kang and Yelich Biniecki noted that more research is needed to refine their findings, and they identified the main themes in their study by posting four research questions:

1. Is culture an incubator developed in the minds of the students in the online classroom used to serve many purposes?
2. Are the cultural experiences used to include all unknown distance learning factors to help develop theoretical frameworks or typologies that serve the interest of different student populations in adult learning online programs?
3. Is culture an intentional guidepost that empowers or marginalize several online formats?
4. Is culture a common practice in an adult learning environment?

Research by Kang and Yelich Biniecki (2015) and Chen and Bennett (2012) offers faculty and administrators a way to understand the difference in student populations represented in the online environment. This diversity can be problematic in an online environment where the student is expected to function with minimum support from the instructor, a factor that can lead to student withdrawal. By identifying the differences in the population represented in the online environment, the questions posed are a start in designing better online programs and a way to address many concerns of the online learner.

The theory of culture provides a useful theoretical frame in examining the characteristics of students who persist in an online course. While the concept of culture varies by discipline, most definitions of culture are interrelated, and several theoretical explanations have been raised about the relationship between culture and student dropout in online classes. Kang and Yelich Biniecki (2015) and Hamdan (2014) explained that culture is collective programming that begins in the mind of the student that distinguishes his or her groups from another group or category of people and from other groups within that environment. For the student who enters an online cultural environment, this distinction is helpful when examining the role culture plays in processes like how decisions are made to drop out of an online course. Kang and Yelich Biniecki also noted that culture plays a major role in how online students learn, and there is a lack of understanding of faculty on how culture impacts the learning environment. Kang examined culture from three dimensions: teacher-student relationship, curriculum development, and teaching and pedagogy.

Instructor Presence in the Online Classroom

According to Preisman (2014), there is minimal evidence that creating a greater teaching presence in the online classroom would increase retention rates, but the instructor's role should be the facilitation and creation of the learning process. Burns (2013) found indicators of the instructor's presence needed in an online format and listed several advantages such as instructor's feedback, clear course objectives, response time to student's needs, timeliness of information, and clear course requirements. The research findings did not indicate a need for participants to hear or see the instructor as a motivator

for taking an online class; instead, the participants noted the educators' value was best utilized as a pivotal role in the course design and execution of the learning process. Preisman's research examined the reasons students took an online course and noted there was no indication in the literature that students need a one-on-one relationship with the instructor. Preisman noted that students take online courses because it is suitable for independent study, and the delivery format is convenient, flexible, asynchronous, and immediately available. Wang et al. (2013) revealed that students miss the immediate interaction they have in traditional on-campus classes, and to better prepare them for the online course, an informative orientation is significant that helps students to succeed as online learners. As an on-campus orientation will allow students to meet the instructor and classmates while fostering a sense of motivation and bonding, the study demonstrated that online students who participate in an on-campus orientation have higher graduation rates than those who do not.

Summary and Conclusions

As required by the scope of this topic, the literature reviewed for this qualitative study examined many fields to gain an understanding of the factors that contribute to students dropping out of the online course Introduction to Business at Online College (pseudonym). The literature focused on retention, dropout, withdrawal, culture, decision-making, satisfaction, persistence, departure, and online learning. The online environment was reviewed to gain a better understanding of student characteristics in an online program.

In reviewing the literature for this study, I investigated the role of culture and its effect on the student population in the online learning environment. The model of culture provided two distinct aspects, persistence and dropout, which were relevant in evaluating the online classroom. Besides the literature on culture, I examined the roles of the student and instructor in the online environment. The literature review revealed a consistent gap in the information around achievement within the online environment.

In this study, I sought to address the gap and provided an interpretive understanding of roles as they relate to the retention problems and factors contributing to students dropping the online business course at Online College. Despite the growing demand for online classes, the literature does not provide specific direction for faculty or administrators regarding why some students drop the course while others continue. The literature provided examples of research on this issue, noting that motivated students persisted in an online course and offered reasons students did not persist. Other examples uncovered in the review outlined how changes in pedagogy contributed to or detracted from student success. In Chapter 3, I review the methodology of the study.

Chapter 3: Research Method

I designed this study to investigate how students who took the online Introduction to Business course at the target community college described their social integration into the online classroom, what they experienced that led them to drop out, and what they perceived could have been done by faculty and other college personnel to help them continue in the course. In this chapter, I explore the qualitative research method used for data collection. I present a detailed description of the research design and methodology adopted for this study. The chapter is organized into four sections: research design and rationale; the role of the researcher; research methodology; and issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The research questions formulated to guide this study were as follows:

RQ 1: How do students who took the Introduction to Business online course describe their decision to drop out of the online course?

RQ 2: How do students describe their social integration in the online business class.

RQ 3: What do students who drop out of an introduction to business online course perceive could have been done by the instructor, academic advisors, administrators, staff, or peers to help them continue the online course?

Rationale for the Design

To collect data pertinent to the purpose of my research, I conducted a qualitative study. Qualitative research is the most common method used in education studies because

it allows for the collection of detailed information from participants in contrast to quantitative or mixed methods (Wladis et al., 2016). The available research designs are premised on different presumptions: Quantitative researchers assume their independence from the variables under study, whereas qualitative researchers interact with the phenomena being studied, however there were no data available for secondary analysis regarding students' decisions to drop out of the introductory business classes at community colleges within the Mid-Atlantic state's community college system, which comprises 23 colleges and it would have been difficult to get enough students or former students to respond to a survey so as to do a rigorous quantitative analysis.

I used a qualitative design with a generic approach. This generic approach offered a flexible method to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences and represents no specific methodological approach (see Caelli, Ray, & Mill, 2003; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Caelli et al. (2003) asserted that generic research is not guided by a specific or traditional set of philosophic assumptions in one of the known qualitative methodologies. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), generic qualitative research studies exemplify the characteristics of qualitative research but do not include a focus on a specific culture, as do ethnography and grounded theory. In using this approach, I wanted to discover and understand the participants and their perspectives; using this approach allowed me to obtain an understanding that I could not have obtained from a survey.

Role of the Researcher

Following Creswell (2013), my role as the researcher was to serve as a key instrument in the data collection process, examining transcripts of the interviews and keeping a researcher's journal during the interview process. I gathered data from the interviews and analyzed them to generate codes, categories, and themes. In a qualitative research study, it is vital to avoid biases because it affects the validity and reliability of the research findings (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Because of the desired credibility attached to my role as the researcher and the instrument in this qualitative inquiry, I noted in my journal any biases that might have occurred during my study.

Biases can distort the truth and skew data in qualitative research. Qualitative studies demand that the researcher acknowledge any bias; therefore, I sought to ensure the data analysis led to or supported a conclusion, and that all information was included so the reader could determine validity. In pursuing validity, all participants were privy to the transcripts within 1 week of the interviews to determine whether their input was correct, if there were enough data, and to immediately report any errors (see Patton, 2015). I also took steps to minimize biases of mine that could have affected my interpretation of the data. Having worked as a program chair and department head of the business department in which the Introduction to Business class is taught, I have experience across a broad range of cultures within the business department. To counteract the potential for bias, I did not use students whom I had previously taught who had taken the Introduction to Business online class during the academic year 2017-2019.

Methodology

This section includes discussion of the research instrument, methods, and steps used to gather the data for this qualitative generic research design and explanations of sampling, instrumentation, and data collection.

Participant Selection Logic

The criteria for the population for this study were students who had dropped out of the online Introduction to Business course during the academic year 2017-2019. The college under study has two locations within a 25-mile radius. The population for this study was comprised of students who registered for the online business course at either of the two locations and dropped the course during the academic year. Approximately 313 students across 11 sections enroll in the online Introduction to Business course during each of the fall, spring, and summer semesters. About 20-25% drop out each term. The population consisted of full- and part-time students with no age limitations. Some participants came from disciplines other than business, as several disciplines at the college require this course as part of their program of study. All but one of the participants recruited had dropped out of the business course before the end of the semester. The one student who considered dropping but did not neglected to reveal her status until we were into the interview. I found her interview to be consistent with the other six and therefore decided to keep her in the sample.

According to Patton (2015), sampling in a qualitative research study is neither based on probability nor convenience; rather, it is purposeful or criterion-based in that participants in a homogenous group can provide information on the topic that cannot be

obtained from other choices. Elo et al. (2014) noted that the study sample should contain participants who can best represent the question under investigation and have characteristics that enable detailed exploration and understanding of the central themes the researcher wishes to explore. Elo et al. also noted that when determining the sample size of a qualitative study, there is no universal standard because the sample depends on the purpose of the study, research questions, and data needed. A caution offered by Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2007) is that in a qualitative study, the researcher must create guidelines for the sample size selection to achieve saturation. The interviews with seven participants allowed me to reach saturation in the data.

Selection of the sample. I met with the director of institutional and effectiveness at the community college regarding my study before the recruitment process. The director stated that upon Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the proposal would be forwarded to the vice president of academic affairs and the vice president of student affairs before permission was granted to conduct the study at the college. The college approval process outlined that it was necessary for there to be a formal research proposal describing the purpose of the study, the methods to be used, and the benefits to the college and its students, as well as official documentation of human subjects or IRB approval. Official college approval to perform such a study had to be received before recruiting participants or collecting data. Once IRB approval was granted and approval granted from both vice presidents (approximately two weeks), I e-mailed the director a copy of the host campus's IRB approval letter requesting that the department compile a

list of students who dropped the Introduction to Business online course during the academic years 2017-2019 regardless of the reason.

I conducted all research by the methods outlined in the IRB, followed the established best practices, and highlighted the highest ethical standards. With the cooperation of the director, the students' email addresses were released, and I began the recruitment process conducted asynchronously by email and through an electronic listserv, asking possible participants to respond. The correspondence sent to each participant informed them of the purpose of the study, any risks or benefits associated with the research, and what their participation would entail. Participants were asked for their consent to participate and were told they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. I informed the participants that they would not be identified when results were presented and/or published. I notified the college when the research was completed and provided a copy of the study results. The first seven participants who responded to this inquiry with a willingness to participate formed the study sample. I initially offered a $10.00 Starbucks gift card to all participants as a token of appreciation, but later had Walden's IRB office's approval to increase it to $25.00 to facilitate recruitment.

Instrumentation

The instrument used to collect data in this study was a list of semi-structured interview questions with follow-up questions when needed (see Appendix). Semi-structured interviews allowed me to diverge to parse a student's response in more detail, and it provided participants with some guidance on what to talk about during the interview, which was helpful. It also allowed the participants flexibility in their responses

as compared to structured interviews and gave them the opportunity to elaborate on information important to the participants I may not have thought of relating to this study (Janesick, 2016).

Interviews are the most appropriate data tool to use when there is little known about the study phenomenon or where detailed insights are needed from participants being studied. The design of the interview questions was related to the conceptual framework of the study. As Janesick (2016) noted, the convening of interviews allows the participants to share their thoughts and feelings through open-ended questions and probes, eliciting various responses that led to dropping out of the online business course.

The interview questions were designed to yield as much information about the students who dropped the Introduction to Business online course. The aim was to answer the research questions using a neutral, sensitive, and gentle approach. This approach helped the participants feel comfortable while building confidence and a rapport that often generates rich data (Patton, 2015). The questions were reviewed by business faculty who teach the online Introduction to Business course to ensure trustworthiness.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The data used in this study came from interviews of students sharing their college experiences related to their reasons for dropping out of the online course Introduction to Business. I interviewed seven students: six students who dropped out of the online course and one student who was going to drop the course but decided to stay during the academic years 2017-2019. I practiced interviewing students before the data collection process to redesign questions and to help me with my interviewing skills. I held

interviews with a few college students in the business department who dropped an online course to get honest feedback on my interviewing skills and make changes where needed.

The participants received a letter of consent about the study procedures and given assurance about confidentiality before the interviews began. I also explained to the participants the purpose of my study and addressed any concerns they may have and assured them that the information they shared with me would be confidential. I scheduled interviews according to the participant's availability. The interviews were held at a public library nearest the participants for convenience, comfortability, privacy, and confidentiality, so the participants could share their experiences with no distractions. The chosen location and its familiarity helped the participants feel comfortable, which resulted in more productive interviews (Patton, 2015). The interviews were audio-recorded.

Before starting the interviewing process, I looked over my interview schedule so that the process flowed naturally and did not sound rehearsed. I tested the technology to ensure I captured the data. I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix) and used probing questions when necessary to get more information. I took handwritten notes as well as used an audio recorder. After each interview, I reviewed the data to note responses that were different than previous interviews or intense reactions to the open-ended questions, which generated ideas for me to analyze more carefully later. I designed the last interview question to provide closure and left the interviewee feeling empowered that their experiences helped in this research study. The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to protect against bias. Within a week,

I shared the transcripts with each participant and asked them to make any corrections that might be needed.

Data Analysis Plan

I took several steps in the data analysis process (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015); my plan was comprised of these steps:

1. I began by organizing my data—checking to make sure I had all the data from the interviews (transcriptions of interviews, field notes, and journaling memos)—making sure I had copies of the data. I listened to the audiotapes of each interview and read over my written transcripts. The participants received a copy of her or his transcribed data for review and correction of its content.
2. I found and organized ideas and concepts from the data. When looking at the different responses to the research questions, I highlighted specific words, phrases, or concepts that kept coming up and noted the different responses.
3. I categorized the ideas and concepts and coded the data. The coding was done by sifting through the data and noting recurring themes, patterns, or labeling some of the data to indicate what themes, patterns, or ideas were reflected. I used different colors to highlight themes. I used axial coding to highlight ideas and categories using open coding while rereading the text to confirm that the ideas and categories accurately represented participant responses and to explore how the concepts and categories were related. Taking my list of codes, I then grouped the information into categories, relating different

experiences and themes that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

4. I highlighted the main categories that emerged from the interviews to see if the interview data answered the research questions (Patton, 2015). The goal was to categorize the responses of the interviewees to identify recurring themes to made it easy to compare the responses to the questions and see patterns. I performed a second sweep of the data to search for any themes I may have missed.

Issues of Trustworthiness

My research design followed the guidelines of qualitative methodology to ensure the trustworthiness of data collection regarding credibility, validity, reliability, and confirmability. I developed a strategy for incorporating the students' responses by exploring their meaningful experiences in the online environment through interviewing so that I gained an understanding of why students dropped the Introduction to Business online course. Through triangulation of the data, internal validity was strengthened. The goal of my research was to emerge with findings based on the consistency of the data (Patton, 2015) and help college faculty, administration, and future researchers understand the online experience of student dropouts and course design and delivery.

Credibility

Credibility (internal validity) is essential in qualitative research, as researchers can demonstrate reality through an in-depth description of the discussion (Patton, 2015). As the instrument for credibility in this research study, my evaluation of whether the

findings represented a credible conceptual interpretation of the data derived from the participants who provided a rich picture of student dropout. Using triangulation helped me to determine accurate information. To prepare for data collection, I conducted a literature review to familiarize myself with research concerning the phenomenon I would investigate to gain insight into what factors contribute to student dropout. Through triangulation, individual opinions and experiences could be validated against other participants', painting a credible picture of attitudes and behaviors that constructed the meaning of student dropout.

Transferability

My role as the researcher was not to prove my research findings applies to student dropout but to provide evidence it can be used. Through transferability (external validity), researchers are presented with information that my study's findings could apply to other contexts, situations, times, and populations.

Dependability

Dependability established that the research findings are consistent and repeatable. As the researcher, I verified that my study's research findings followed the raw data I collected during the collection process (interviews). Another researcher who examines the data may arrive at similar findings concerning the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability concerns the level of confidence of the participants (students who drop out of the online course) in the study, and that the study's findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than the researcher's biases. Confirmability

helps to verify that the findings are shaped by participants more so than a qualitative researcher shapes them. Confirmability helps explain how the decisions were made in the research process. This information can help provide valuable insight for potential researchers to understand how the themes emerged from the data.

Ethical Procedures

Qualitative research is primarily based on gathering information from people studied and to protect everyone who participates in the study. Each participant had full autonomy, had the right to understand the type of research and to participate in the study or not, was privy to questions, and had the right to withdraw. All participants were given a consent form to participate in the interview before the study began. I informed participants that no physical or emotional risks should exist while participating in the study. If any did exist, each participant had the right to full confidentiality during or after the interviews.

Before any steps began with this study, I got the approval from Walden's IRB (04-16-19-0084311) to carry out the study. The purpose of the IRB is to protect the rights of human subjects who participate in a research study. A copy of the IRB approval was provided to the director of Institutional Research and Effectiveness at Online College, a community college in a Mid-Atlantic state. In this qualitative study, I ensured that the data from the interviews were protected electronically, and a personal database accessible to participants part of this study. I stored the data collected in this study on my computer and iPad, which is password protected and will be kept for 5 years.

Summary

As stated in Chapter 2, research on student departure in education offered a holistic framework for the collection and analysis of the participants' input. Tinto's (1993) student departure theory, also known as the student integration model, and Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model served as the conceptual framework for this study. Both Tinto and Bean and Metzner's models noted that persistence is affected by the students' successful integration into the institution. The two models indicate that academic integration, social integration, and institutional commitment affect withdrawal decisions.

I began this chapter by describing the research methodology for the study and the objectives in fulfilling its purpose. A generic qualitative approach guided the study. I discussed the method and procedures utilized to study student dropout of an online business course, Introduction to Business. In this chapter, I identified the participants in my study, the coding methods, and data collection procedures. In Chapter 4, I interpret the data and answer the research questions.

Chapter 4: Results

In this qualitative, generic study, I wanted to understand how students made the decision to withdraw from the online Introduction to Business course at a community college in a Mid-Atlantic state I call Online College. In this chapter, I explain the research process I used to interview the seven participants to collect information pertinent to the purpose and objectives of this study. I also report the thematic results from the seven interviews conducted according to the three research questions. The chapter includes six main sections: the setting and demographic characteristics, participant recruitment, an overview of the data collection process and analysis of data (each its own section), and evidence of trustworthiness, followed by the results of the research. The research questions that I sought to answer were

- RQ 1: How do students who took the Introduction to Business online course describe their decision to drop out of the online course?
- RQ 2: How do students describe their social integration in the online business class?
- RQ 3: What do students who drop out of an introduction to business online course perceive could have been done by the instructor, academic advisors, administrators, staff, or peers to help them continue the online course?

Setting and Demographics

In Chapter 3, I defined possible participants in this study as those who dropped out of the Introduction to Business online course during the academic years of 2017-2019. The campus setting was a community college, which I call Online College,

comprised of two locations. Officials at the partnering institution e-mailed a recruitment letter to 274 students. The recruitment process resulted in a sample size of seven participants from Online College . I arranged interviews with the seven responding students at one of the two campuses in quiet places, which included public libraries, my office, and over the phone, over the course of 3 months. I reserved a private room in the library where the participants were comfortable and free from distractions. I conducted some interviews at my office for the convenience of the students taking on-campus classes. The phone interviews were scheduled on a day and time convenient for the participants.

The respondents in this study included one male and six female students who had dropped the online course. The participants interviewed were four White and three Black students; the respondents varied from 23 to 55 years of age, with the average age being 36. One student had left the college after dropping the course, and three had graduated while three were still taking classes at the time of the interview. Five of the seven respondents dropped the course midway to avoid their GPA being affected, one student dropped during the first 2 weeks of classes, and one student finished the course. All respondents lived near one of the two locations of Online College. Table 1 presents the overall ages and races of the respondents in the study and shows no dominant age category represented by the participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant, as well as the college.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

Pseudonym	Race/Ethnicity	Age
Alice	White	23
Joan	White	24
Sue	White	26
Janice	Black	32
Cynthia	Black	42
Mark	White	48
Mary	White	55

Participant Recruitment

Before I collected data for this study, I obtained Walden IRB approval (number 04-16-19-0084311) for investigation involving the use of human subjects. Staff at the Department of Institutional Research and Effectiveness at Online College sent the names and e-mail addresses of students who had dropped out of the online Introduction to Business course during the academic years of 2017-2019 to my Walden student e-mail address. The analyst provided me a list of students who dropped online sections of the Introduction to Business course for any reason in the 2017-2019 academic years (excluding students who dropped sections in which I was the instructor). All drops, including drops for nonpayment, drops for never attending, and drops due to class cancellations, were included. The Excel workbook was password protected, and a separate e-mail was sent to me with the password to access the list of student dropouts in

the online business course. The list had multiple rows for some students, as students may have dropped an online section of the course in multiple terms. The list included the student's first and last name, e-mail address, and the term and academic year they dropped the online section of the course. The list comprised 274 possible participants to participate in the study.

I made three attempts at recruitment via e-mails to the 274 possible participants in 3-week intervals. I first contacted each student on the spreadsheet to solicit their willingness to participate in this study. I e-mailed each of the 274 students the approved recruitment letter, which informed the students of the purpose of my research and included my phone number and e-mail for contact if they were interested. Everyone receiving the recruitment letter was assured of confidentiality throughout the interview and dissemination process. The initial response rate from the recruitment letters was much lower than anticipated; only two students responded. However, a low response rate was not surprising. Students and former students who drop out of an online course may feel no sense of obligation to the college, and some are no longer enrolled in an online program or have left the college. Some may no longer be reading e-mails. Therefore, I changed my recruitment letter with Walden's IRB permission (increasing the gift amount from $10 to $25 and extending the academic period of enrollment from 1 year to 2 years, from 2017 to 2019) to increase participation. With the new recruitment letter, I sent follow-up e-mails to 272 students with an interval of 3 weeks between them. I received responses from five interested students, giving me seven respondents who made up this study. Once I obtained the sample size of seven, I ended the recruitment phase of the

study as the process of continuous comparison of the data suggested I had reached saturation, and I did not contact students again.

Data Collection

I collected data over a 3-month period that began in May and concluded in July 2019, interviewing seven participants. The interview dates and times varied based on each respondent's schedule. I met two participants at library of their choice in a private room reserved through the library where there were no interruptions, and which was comfortable for the participants. I interviewed three participants in my office and two via phone. I used my iPad and cell phone to record all interviews.

At the start of each interview, I reiterated the purpose of the study. I also assured participants that pseudonyms would replace their names to ensure confidentiality and told participants they could leave the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable. Finally, I obtained permission from participants to record the interviews and gathered the consent forms.

I used the interview protocol with open-ended questions (see Appendix) for each interview along with probing questions based on the participants' responses so a more in-depth understanding could be gained. I scheduled two interviews each week and used the constant comparative method to compare one interview to the next, looking for similarities in the data that would help with the coding process and insights to listen and probe better in the next interviews.

According to Patton (2015), quotations are a source or raw data revealing the respondents' depth of emotions, level of response to a research question, a way in which

the respondents organize their world, thoughts about the online environment, their experiences in the online classroom, and their basic perceptions about the course. I began by providing a framework in which each respondent could respond to represent their views about the Introduction to Business online course. I started each interview with the same three interview questions/prompt: (a) Why did you take the Introduction to Business online course, and what led you to drop the course? (b) How can you describe your social integration into the online classroom? and (c) What could have been done by the instructor, academic advisors, administrators, staff, or peers to help you continue the online course? Students were encouraged to discuss their experiences or views and openly express anything and everything that led to their decisions to drop out of the online course. This opening set of questions offered respondents an opportunity to tell their personal stories about the online course. The questions instigated discussion to get a deeper understanding of the participants' perspectives by encouraging them to talk freely and openly with no distractions or interruptions.

Because I am an online professor, I had to consider my background, my beliefs, and biases from teaching online classes, my own personal interests for this study, and philosophical paradigm that could influence how I interviewed and how I coded the data (Patton, 2015). I recognized that I identified with many participants' responses to the interview questions. I often found I wanted to explain some teaching pedagogy in response to participants' comments, but to interject my thoughts would risk leading to a misrepresentation of the data. For example, a student noted that it was unrealistic for an instructor to have assignments due on a Sunday when that is a day she must work.

Although all instructors who teach online courses at Online College prefer Sunday as the due date for the week because it allows the student 7 days to submit assignments and any other day of the week would allow them less time, it was not my role to comment. I maintained my role as an interviewer; bracketing my thoughts helped to alleviate any bias I had that could affect the data analysis process.

As I continued the interviewing process, I noted subsequent questions that arose from the participants' responses. I probed with additional questions to get further clarification on the topic to ensure that the respondents were interpreting the interview questions the way intended. During the interviewing process, I highlighted patterns in their responses by coding, adding labels to the highlighted sections and identifying similar phrases, emotional statements, and pauses before answering the research questions. All interviews were recorded and stored securely on my iPad and laptop computer, which is password protected.

I began by writing memos to sort through my thoughts at the end of each interview. I wanted to see what was emerging from the data and if I needed to change some interview questions or delete them. It was easy to remember the interviewing experiences by stopping after the second interview instead of trying to rush the interviewing process by interviewing all seven participants within 2 weeks. I felt I could get richer data by not interviewing more than two participants a week. I continued the interviewing process by coding the responses of the respondents until I interviewed all participants. I also wanted to evaluate my progress as an interviewer to see if I had made progress from the start of the interviewing process. The latter interviews differed from

my first interview. While some participants' responses were similar, in coding the later interviews, I captured more content. The participants' responses were more descriptive, and I was becoming an experienced interviewer.

Memoing helped me examine my thoughts to avoid any biases in the interpretations of the data by documenting personal reflections and impressions I observed from each interview. For example, after each interview, memoing helped me code for inconsistencies in the interviews when I reflected on how different the participants responded to the same interview questions designed to address the research questions. Rather than rest on my interpretations, through memoing, I reflected on what the participants said, trying to understand the world from their perspective. After each interview, I used memoing to write the participant's stories asking questions to see if there were common themes or lengthy pauses (e.g., did they find the question difficult or take time deciding what to say) before answering a question. I did this to consider if I should revise the question, probe more, or if the participants often expressed negative experiences, and to ask if I was getting good samples. Memoing helped me evaluate if my interview questions were providing the data I needed, and if I needed to probe more on some interview questions. I also kept a reflexive journal (different from my field notes or memos) to note my personal observations and biases, noting additional questions as they arose throughout the data collection process, which allowed me to get richer data while adding credibility to my research findings (Janesick, 2016). I reached saturation by the seventh interview.

When I completed the interviewing process, I e-mailed the participants, thanking them for their time and participation, requesting they review their transcript and to email any changes within 7 days. The email also included an electronic gift card of $25.00 from Starbucks, as stated in the informed consent form. I received no changes in the transcripts and concluded the data collection process. My aim in data collection was to reach an understanding of dropout, so I could tell the participants' stories using exemplars from their lived experiences to provide insight into student dropout in the online Introduction to Business course.

Data Analysis

I read all the transcriptions along with field notes, memos, and reflexive journal to help with my reflections and analysis of the interview process. I examined the transcripts, looking for relevant information to answer my research questions. The process allowed me to get closer to the data; I had to suppress my feelings by stating verbatim what was said by the respondents and not add my opinion to their responses. The transcribed interviews were used to develop a textual description of the decision to drop out of the online course from the participants' online experiences.

I listened to each recording four times and read the transcripts three times to see if any interesting patterns had emerged. Based on the research questions, I looked for relevant information in the data and then assigned labels (codes) to that information. I wanted to see if there were relationships between the codes and found it easier to sort the data by grouping the codes into categories; labeling produced clusters of codes either relevant to one of the research questions or not relevant. I grouped the codes into

categories based on the research questions. In Chapter 2, I identified themes in the literature review relevant to my research questions and compared these to the themes that emerged from the data, looking for relationships between them.

My aim for this line of inquiry was to compare interviews to see if there were patterns of dropout from the online course. I also used multiple sources of data collection (interviews, memos, field notes) to ensure the validity of my study and to establish the accuracy and consistency of the data obtained from the seven interview transcripts. I also used triangulation among the interviews and my field notes to provide evidence to shed light on a theme or perspective and to give validity to my findings.

Through coding, I reduced the data without losing the meaning of the data, to not overwhelm future researchers with too much content. The coding process helped me to understand the participants, to capture the importance of the meanings behind their responses to each research question. The more I coded, the better I became at understanding the participants in this study. As I labeled the participants' responses by putting the statements into categories, themes emerged and developed into constructs that could be explored in future studies.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

To established confidence in the trustworthiness of my research findings, I followed the processes necessary to account for trustworthiness: credibility (ensuring that confidence in the truth of the findings), transferability (showing that results can be applied to other contexts within the data), dependability (showing the findings consistently allow for replication of the processes in the data collection process) and

confirmability (the extent to which the results of my research are shaped by the participants' responses and not of my own bias, motivation, or interest) of the data collected from the interviews. Trustworthy practices help the researcher to identify trends and measures data that quantitative data might not be able to define.

Credibility

I considered the credibility of this study when designing the interview questions. All seven participants had dropped the online course, and their experiences were a good source of information in answering the research questions. After I conducted all interviews, each participant was e-mailed their transcript to check for accuracy. I used a step-by-step systematic approach to thematic analysis to ensure the credibility of my research. Through triangulation, efforts to increase reliability and the utilization of the constant comparative method were used to establish credibility and to enhance the trustworthiness, transparency, and accountability of the data to gain an understanding of how students who took the Introduction to Business online course described their decision to drop the online course.

Transferability

I described the setting in enough detail that other researchers could see similarities and differences with their research settings without revealing the identity of the data collection site. I also provided thick data in my presentation of the findings so researchers might recognize similarities and differences with their study participants. The data from the interviews allow potential researchers to make the transferability decisions themselves.

Dependability

Dependability was established so that other researchers could seek or examine findings that would be consistent. I sought enough information that other researchers could obtain similar results. I collected rich data from the interviews. Scholars who might be interested in the replication of my research can gain an understanding of dropout through the connection between the online environment, the online student, and the social contexts that surround the data collection process. In this study, I described data collection and the interview process (where they occurred, the number of participants, demographics, etc.). I discussed the possibility of conducting interviews after the participants got off work at public libraries, in my office, and over the phone, as well as other aspects of the data collection that provided a general understanding of the research setting.

This information can help readers construct the scene that surrounded my research study, from the scheduling of interviews to the way implicit biases may affect the participants' responses. It is helpful to provide detailed responses from the participants' experiences into the context of the surroundings of the online student, their social integration, and the online environment on which my research study is framed.

Confirmability

I established confirmability by making sure that the participants' responses were transcribed verbatim, seeking to reduce any personal bias that might be reflected in my findings. To establish confirmability in my study, I used field notes, and reflexive journals after each interview. I frequently recorded words that described participants'

emotions (contradictions, anger, feelings, confusion), common themes, negative experiences, and similarities. I questioned if I was getting useful data from the interviews because some responses were vague. I often probed more on some questions to establish that my findings were thorough, honest, transparent, and accurately described the participants' responses. Journaling helped me to record every step of the data analysis process to provide a rationale for the decisions I made in the analysis and data collection process.

Results

The results of the data collection and analysis provided useful information in answering the research questions regarding how decisions were made to drop out of the Introduction to Business online course. The participants' responses were very descriptive regarding their experiences in the online classroom. Under the three research questions below, I list eight themes that emerged from the analysis of the participants' responses. Four themes emerged for RQ 1, the students' decision to drop out: (a) faculty unavailability and inflexibility for working students, (b) lack of feedback from the instructor, (c) the online course was designed for traditional students, and (d) too many assignments from the publisher and no creativity from the instructor. Three themes were identified from RQ 2, social integration in the online business classroom: (a) lack of preparedness for the online format and weak online course orientation, (b) frustrations regarding the course discussion board, and (c) isolation and lack of interaction with peers. One theme, more access to those who might provide support, emerged from RQ 3: What could have been done?

My analysis, as presented here, includes quotes from the participants whose pseudonyms are Mary, Mark, Cynthia, Janice, Sue, Joan, and Alice. I used pseudonyms to protect the participants' privacy. Information about their race and age are included in Table 1.

RQ 1: Students' Decision to Drop Out

There were four themes related to RQ 1: How do students who took the Introduction to Business online course describe their decision to drop out of the online course?

- Faculty unavailability and inflexibility for working students,
- lack of feedback from the instructor,
- the online course was designed for traditional students, and
- too many assignments from the publisher and no creativity from the instructor.

Faculty unavailability and inflexibility for working students. All respondents were clear and consistent in their responses about faculty unavailability while enrolled in the online course. All seven respondents stated something like, "The instructor was only available one day a week and did not respond to any student on a day other than that day." Joan and Mary stated that when emailing their instructor about an assignment, the instructor responded after 6 days of waiting only to state, "Read your syllabus." Alice, the one student who did not drop the online course, stated, "I struggled with assignments, and not having the instructor available made me redo a lot of assignments."

Mark and Janice both work retail and sometimes must work over 40 hours a week. They found it difficult to submit some assignments on time, especially if they had

to work overtime. Mark and Alice reported they were penalized for submitting late work, and that caused them to drop the online course. Some students worked on weekends and having a due date that was not flexible made it impossible for students to meet those deadlines. Mark stated, “The penalty for submitting late assignments can result in the professor not accepting the assignment, or the penalty can be up to 50 points deducted from your grade.”

Joan also reported on how her time limitations left her confused:

> I often felt overwhelmed and confused about how to get started. When I contacted the instructor for help, she copied and pasted the instructions from the publisher’s website I had read at the beginning of the class. I dropped the course because I did not have enough time to put into the class, and the instructions were confusing. If the instructor does not help the students, why do we have to pay for the class? I can buy the book and go to the publisher’s website that accompanies the textbook.

Alice had similar problems related to the deadlines and what she perceived as inflexibility by the instructor: “When I contacted the instructor during her office hours and told her I had an emergency over the weekend, the instructor said, ‘Do your assignments earlier.’” Alice continued,

> I knew I had to drop the course, there was no way to predict when an emergency would happen again, and I didn’t want to continue with an instructor that was not willing to work with me. I dropped the course to protect my GPA.

Other respondents shared similar stories about the instructor’s unwillingness to accept late work due to job responsibilities, including Mark:

> I was working on my assignments on a Sunday since I had to work 6 days that week [one full-time and one part-time job], and my son had a high temp and had to go to the emergency room that took hours, which caused me to submit my assignments late. When I contacted the professor, he said, "You had a week to get the assignment done. I will accept it with a late penalty of 50 points."

Mark dropped the course, fearing his GPA would be affected.

Lack of feedback from the instructor. Participants were not clear about what the instructor expected on some assignments and often got vague responses when asked about a specific grade they received on an assignment. The students got feedback that did not provide concrete suggestions about how to improve their grades. The participants wanted feedback that helped them understand the assessment criteria, more specific guidance, and suggestions on what they could do to improve their scores. Mark stated, "The instructor wrote you would be dropped from the class if your grade continues to remain low on this assignment." Mark also said that when he e-mailed the instructor to get clarity, the instructor responded: "You need to read the instructions more carefully." Mark asked, "What, how in the world he knew how long I read the instructions. What did I do wrong? I couldn't get a clear answer to what I could do differently to improve my grade." Mary shared Mark's concern, stating, "How can I improve my grade if the instructor does not suggest what procedures I must follow to improve my grade?"

Alice viewed a faculty member's email response to her email query as dismissive: "I got a 95 on an assignment, so I sent the instructor an email and asked how I can get a 100? The instructor responded, 'You're doing good. Do not waste your time on 5

points.'" Mary said, "Five points can make the difference between an A or B [in the final grade]." Joan also seemed to have read email instructions as dismissive:

> Referencing the content on the discussion board often confused me. The instructor remarks, "Follow instructions; I have told you this twice." That's the only feedback I got back. I read and reread the instructions and tried to improve, but that [was] the only response I got from the instructor, and that information didn't tell me nothing [*sic*]."

Mark, Mary, Alice, and Joan responded that they needed better clarity from the instructor on assignments. The participants wanted feedback from their instructor that explained why they got the grade they were awarded and guidance on ways they could improve their grades. The participants identified that they felt anxiety, not knowing if they were doing the assignments correctly.

All the participants shared that there was not just one thing that caused them to drop the course related to the lack of feedback from the instructor; there were multiple reasons. For example, Alice said that after navigating the website, she immediately became overwhelmed. The instructions for assignments were unclear regarding the instructor's expectations, and she noticed that over half of the class posted comments that shared her concerns. After hearing the responses on why the students dropped the course, I asked if they contacted the instructor on days other than when they offered office hours or had access to their phone number for emergencies, and if this would have prevented them from dropping the course. Of the seven responses, five students said, "Yes, it would have prevented dropout from the online course."

Alice stated,

> The relationship with the instructor means a lot, and contacting them about an emergency or assignments to get a clear understanding of what is expected can change how a student thinks about dropping the course; [however], we often felt left out in the online classroom. The only interaction with anyone is when someone responds to a discussion board. I usually respond to every post to feel a sense of connection. When the instructor does not interact with you, you feel a sense of isolation, like you're in the classroom alone.

Mary and Mark stated more contact information from the instructor would not have made a difference even if the instructor interacted with them as there were other areas of concern. Mary stated, "The online classroom is not for me. I immediately became overwhelmed, and I am used to getting quick responses from the instructor. I am an on-campus student, if I didn't know it then, I know it now."

The online course was designed for traditional students. The seven participants felt that the online class was designed for an on-campus student without the instructor.

Joan stated,

> I took the Introduction to Business on-campus class and had to drop due to my work schedule changing. I transferred to the online course and noticed the same assignments. In the on-campus class, you could get clarity on assignments from classmates' questions or your own questions to the instructor. The group work was the most challenging for me. On-campus, you get into groups, and you can

> get to know your classmates. [In] the online class, you will be lucky if one person participates. On-campus you get a lot of help with assignments from the instructor. Online you do all the assignments alone with no help from the instructor. Some assignments were assigned to groups, like cases, we worked on those in groups of four and turned in one paper on-campus. The said case was assigned to us individually.

Mark perceived the course was not written with students like him in mind:

> The workload was designed for that type of student. The syllabus was the same, except the lectures were excluded. I missed the lectures that helped me understand the information in the textbook. The instructor used the same PowerPoint presentations he used in the on-campus class, but without getting clarity on some information [it] left me unprepared for tests and quizzes.

Sue stated,

> An online student cannot be expected to do the same amount of work as an on-campus student. On-campus students have access to the instructor one to two times a week, and the online students have access to the instructor only during his 1 hour a week office hour in which several students were lined-up outside his door. If you make an appointment, they only allow 15-20 minutes, and if you have multiple things you want to discuss, you must schedule another day because other students are waiting to meet with the instructor.

Too many assignments from the publisher and no creativity from the instructor. The participants' responses were similar when describing the workload in the

Introduction to Business online course. The participants found the course to have too many assignments from the publisher's website. Sue said, "If you got an answer wrong, you had to go through multiple exercises to get the answer correct." Mark stated, "You can do all the work on the publisher's website, and none of it appears on tests or quizzes." Sue and Mark felt that some instructions were not clear and got little or no help from the instructor; they dropped the class, fearing a low GPA.

Cynthia stated,

> It was a lot of tedious mind work, and it was a lot of assignments due each week. It was too much work from the publisher and no creativity from the professor. It was like ten things due each week that were overwhelming, so I dropped the course. I retook the course with a different instructor the next semester and didn't have all that work due each week.

Joan was also concerned about the number of assignments on the publisher's website and stated:

> I work over 60 hours a week, and it takes several hours a week to do all the assignments from the publisher's website. I have little time between work and school and doing homework for hours is not good for me.

Mark stated**,**

> I felt the course [cookie-cutter] information came from the textbook only, and the instructor showed a lack of creativity, no original input, and no personality. I often wondered who this person is [who is] teaching this course because he did not engage with his students. The only communication was his responses on some

> assignments [when he] stated, “Redo the assignment.” He gave a page number to help in answering a discussion question without an explanation to help me understand the question better. If you wanted to challenge a question on a test, he gave the page number, and the test generates that information.

Sue and Janice both found the Introduction to Business online course like the Principles of Management course. Sue stated,

> Sometimes I didn’t know which class I was taking. I took both at the same time, the content was the same, or the instructor made the course similar; I swear some assignments were the same, especially the cases he posted.

Janice said it was like taking the same online course with the only difference being the PowerPoint slides. She noted, “I felt like I wasted my money. I learned nothing different.” Both students took the class from the same instructor and found that only the textbook was different.

Mary stated,

> Like any other business course online, I have taken nothing different, same format. It seems like the same instructor was teaching it because it was [*sic*] few changes. The instructor taught the course like all online instructors: strictly from the book, nothing different.

RQ 2: Social Integration in the Online Business Classroom

I interviewed students regarding RQ 2: How do students describe their social integration in the online business class? Three themes emerged:

- Lack of preparedness for the online format and weak online course orientation,
- frustrations regarding the course discussion board, and
- isolation and lack of interaction with peers.

Lack of preparedness for the online format and weak online course orientation. The participants stated that the synchronous online webinar offered by Online College only discussed the basics like how to log on to the management system by showing how to get a password but included no instruction on how to locate assignments, tests, quizzes, discussion boards, or resources on the site. Sue said, “Most instructors’ classrooms look different; there is no format for all online business courses.”

Joan, being new to online learning, stated, “After navigating on the site, I concluded I was unprepared for the online classroom. Too many assignments from the publisher. Locating assignments was like searching for a needle in a haystack.” Mary said she originally thought the online class was easier than the on-campus class: “Boy, I got a rude awakening. The online course required more reading and writing and more work than the on-campus class. I was not ready for the online course.”

The lack of preparedness included feeling overwhelmed, technology issues, evaluations, and a combination of more than one reason for dropping out of the Introduction to Business online course. Respondents new to online learning found that online orientation did not prepare them for the online environment.

Cynthia reported,

> I felt overwhelmed with the number of assignments due for the Introduction to Business online course. I had difficulty finding where some assignments and where to submit them. I was often confused about the instructions for most assignments. It was like the instructor just copied and pasted instructions that were not relevant to the course and expected us to do the work.

Sue reported that her confusion and decision to drop was related to her financial aid:

> I did not know most of the time what I was doing, if I did the assignment correctly or not until I got my grade back and saw I had a failing grade. I was on financial aid and had to maintain a GPA of 2.0 or higher, so I dropped the course.

Cynthia reported on technical challenges she had:

> My technical issues led [to] getting low scores on assignments. The system only accepted Word documents, and an advisor told me I could submit documents using my Mac computer. I often got zeros because the instructor claimed he couldn't open my documents.

Several participants reported that online instructors discussed only the basics like how to log on to the management system by showing how to get a password but provided no instruction on how to locate assignments, tests, quizzes, discussion boards, or resources on the site. Joan specified,

> The discussion board was a mystery and difficult to comprehend. No one prepares you on how to post your responses. It is an assumption that because you are taking an online course, you know how to navigate on the site. I struggled to navigate on the discussion board, trying to post my responses. I rarely had any

> support from the instructor or peers when I posted questions for help. When the instructor finally responded, I was instructed to contact tech support. When you reach the tech center for help, it is like waiting in line in an emergency room; it takes hours for someone to respond.

Alice was critical of the orientation and the weak discussion prompts:

> I attended the online orientation, and it did not cover half of what is required for an online student, especially how to post on the discussion boards and submission of assignments. It focused on the definition of online learning, the benefit, how you get started by getting a password, but nothing about how to locate assignments. I found the discussion boards boring, and they generated repetitive responses. How many ways do you describe, "What is business"? After the first three responses from students, I got bored. I also noticed that some students were copying other students' responses.

Mary, like Joan and Alice, found that attending the online orientation did not prepare her for the online course. Mary suggested that the orientation needed to be more interactive, giving the student a chance to navigate on the site with a skilled instructor who can answer their questions without waiting 6 days for an instructor to respond and that the facilitator should start off by showing them how to login to the classroom, locate assignments, and ask for help when needed.

Frustrations regarding the course discussion board. A discussion board is typically an area devoted to reflections where students hone their skills while reading other students' responses, but some of the students' responses were reported to be

difficult for the participants to comprehend when answering the discussion question. The discussion board or forum may be devoted to student reflections on learning content from the chapter readings and responding to questions posed by the instructor for discussion; however, the students found the discussion board something of a mystery, and at first, difficult to comprehend. Mary stated, “There are no specific instructions from the instructor, only a question posted for discussion." Joan agreed,

> I found it difficult to navigate because this was my first online course. I e-mailed a lot of students, and one student responded and stayed on the phone to help me. I also found some of the students’ responses to the discussion question difficult to comprehend [as to] what they were trying to say when answering the discussion question.

Janice also had technical problems that made the discussion board frustrating:

> I missed a lot of due dates due to not knowing where to post my responses on the discussion board. The instructor expects you to understand how to navigate on the site with no proper introduction. I had difficulty finding assignments and had a hard time locating them without help from the instructor. It was very challenging and frustrating; I often felt like I was left out in the cold.

Isolation and lack of interaction with peers. The third and last theme related to RQ1 related to the participants’ hope that the online course could provide them the opportunity to get a degree or take a class to enhance their business skills. However, the participants stated they often felt like they were not part of a college community and felt lost and alone. Several reported they needed to feel a sense of belonging to the online

classroom. Through an asynchronous threaded discussion on the discussion board, students responded to a discussion question as well as two of the students' responses to the question. Participants also stated that they felt lucky to see three or four students posting something or responding to a discussion question simultaneously. One stated, "You may be lucky to get someone who will communicate with you longer than 10 minutes even when working on group assignments, which are another challenging assignment." Mary stated,

> The only interaction with peers was responding to two student responses on the discussion board. Most students work, so if you try to reach them, they do not respond. I liked the introduction where students tell you a little about themselves; it allowed me to feel like I were in an on-campus class, but reality sets in, and the interactions were soon lost.

Janice agreed that peers were hard to reach but pointed out the related problem of feeling embarrassed about her writing and how it diminished her peer interactions.

> I often felt embarrassed because of my poor writing skills when responding to a discussion question. I don't know why, because many posts I read lacked the correct grammar. Some posts had a lot of typos, and poor sentence structure made it hard to understand what was being said. I had a hard time comprehending what the question were [*sic*] asking of me, and there were no examples to follow. I also feared ridicule from other students because of my poor writing skills.

Sue also was self-conscious about her writing, saying,

> I was always afraid to post on the discussion board for fear a classmate would make fun of me, so I didn't post as often. We had a discussion board weekly, and I eventually became uncomfortable and discouraged from writing something that often that everyone could see.

RQ 3: Steps That Could Have Been Taken to Retain Students

RQ 3 asks, "What do students who drop out of an introduction to business online course perceive can be done by the instructor, academic advisors, administrators, staff, or peers to help them continue the online course?" There were several suggestions made by the participants that were captured in the preceding eight themes. For instance, responses to RQ2 included several suggestions regarding improving orientation to online learning and navigating the classroom. The participants' suggestions about faculty were included in the themes related to RQ 1, and responses regarding peers were reflected in the themes related to RQ 2. There was one unique theme related to RQ 3, and it focused on what I heard regarding academic advisors, administrators, and staff.

More access to those who might provide support. All seven participants stated that when taking an online course, it is impossible to have a relationship with college personnel. Cynthia stated, "It is hard to have a relationship with peers in the online classroom. All students are busy, and most do not return emails if you try to contact them when working on group projects. Alice's concerns about academic advising reflect what I heard from many participants.

> The wait time was like waiting in an emergency room; seeing an advisor could take up to one hour. Students must sign in and wait. Sometimes you sign-in, and it

> takes 15 minutes or more before a person approaches you only to ask you, "Have you signed in yet?" or "Someone will be with you soon, another 15 or 20 minutes."
>
> Janice felt disconnected from other staff, besides the advisors:
>
> When taking an online course, the only contact you have is with the instructor; you do not have time to come on campus—that is the reason you take online classes. You often feel isolated and disconnected from the college community. You log into the management system, do the work assigned (if you can understand what you are doing), and log-off—that is your connection to the college. How can you interact with an administrator, advisor, classmate, or staff when taking an online course? It would be helpful during orientation if those people pictures were identified, noting when to contact them if you encounter a problem.

The three participants who met with advisors gave good reports. When they finally got to speak to an advisor, they got useful information regarding signing up for classes. However, because of the long wait times and too many students needing their service, the advisors focused mostly on college policies, tips on study skills, and effective time management, which left little time for the students to explore career options within their disciplines. Mark stated, "We come to college to get the skills needed to get a job. We need career counselors to help us while we are taking classes, so when we graduate, we will have a job or [be] on the right track of [*sic*] getting one." Some participants stated they had never seen advisor or other college personnel. Mary stated, "My relationship

with Ms. B has been very helpful. I feel more connected to the college, and I can call her, and she is good about returning my calls and answering my questions. I just wasn't ready for online learning."

The participants felt it was hard to build relationships with college personnel because they were online students and rarely came on campus; all activities were done online. Joan also agreed staff should be better identified at orientation, specifically that "their pictures should be displayed with the service they provide. Yes, I can look them up, but what role do they play in student development?" Alice stated, "While purchasing my textbooks at the bookstore on campus, I saw the president of the college, and he smiled and asked me my name. I felt so special."

Summary

In this chapter, I reflected on the voices of those respondents who voluntarily participated in one-on-one interviews. These interviews were used to answer three research questions to gain insight into dropout in the online Introduction to Business course. The data obtained from the interviews provided insight into what factors contributed to student dropout decisions, how decisions were made, and if preventive methods by college personnel could have kept students enrolled in the online course.

In this chapter, I also summarized the methodology of the study, which included the data collection and analysis processes to discover how dropout decisions were made. To ensure the creditability of the research findings, I explained the data collection process and described how creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability provided trustworthiness to the study. The chapter concluded with an overview of student

responses to the research questions, a discussion of the major themes that emerged from the data, and subthemes to gain more in-depth insight into student dropout.

Chapter 5 provides an analysis of the findings and interpretation of the results within the context of the framework and literature review. In this chapter, I also discuss the study's implication for social change and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

In this study, I explored how students made the decision to drop out of an Introduction to Business online course and what factors contributed to that decision. The business course had shown the most substantial online course performance gaps and had the highest enrollment compared to other online business courses at a community college in a Mid-Atlantic state. I interviewed seven participants to collect data pertinent to the purpose and research questions of this study and reported in Chapter 4 the thematic results that emerged from the analysis. The three research questions that I sought to answer were

- RQ 1: How do students who took the Introduction to Business online course describe their decision to drop out of the online course?
- RQ 2: How do students describe their social integration in the online business class?
- RQ 3: What do students who drop out of an introduction to business online course perceive could have been done by the instructor, academic advisors, administrators, staff, or peers to help them continue the online course?

The analysis of the interview data led to the identification of eight themes. The first four themes addressed RQ 1 and included faculty unavailability and inflexibility for working students, lack of feedback from the instructor, the design of the online course for traditional students rather than online learners, too many assignments from the publisher, and no creativity on the part of the instructor. The three themes that addressed RQ 2 were lack of preparedness for the online format and weak online course orientation,

frustrations regarding the course discussion board, isolation, and lack of interaction with peers. One theme emerged that addressed RQ 3: more access to those who might provide support.

Interpretations of the Findings

Interpretation Related to the Conceptual Framework

In this section I provide interpretations of my eight key findings in the context of the conceptual framework which was based on Tinto's (1993) student integration model and Bean and Metzner's (1985) nontraditional student attrition model, noting how my findings confirm, disconfirm, and extend the body of knowledge in the current empirical literature noted in Chapter 2. For scholarly interpretation of the eight themes that emerged from the data analysis, I have drawn from the conceptual framework and the perspectives of theorists whose work informed my research. The participants' experiences that led to dropping out of the online environment are supported by Bean and Metzner's and Tinto's models, which provided a framework that helped guide my research design. Both models offer a baseline for this inquiry and for students who drop out of other online business courses. Tinto's model notes that successful social integration influences goal commitment and is a mental process in which the student finds value with the institution, leading to completion or dropout. Tinto asserted that students who fail to create meaningful relationships with their instructor and peers might have difficulties in their academic progress and suggested that online students would have difficulty building those relationships. Bean and Metzner's model helped me gain insight into the internal and external factors that can contribute to student dropout (e.g.,

family and work obligations). Bean and Metzner noted that these factors could contribute to how students integrate into the online classroom and can shape the student's self-confidence, development, and how they perceive the online environment. Both models included social integrations that aided in categorizing different types of participants' responses to the interview questions. In analyzing the validity of both conceptual models for this study, I found other scholars' support of Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's models (e.g., Bawa, 2016; Burch, 2018; Dewberry & Jackson, 2018; Holden, 2018; Horzum et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2018; Marks, 2016; McKinney et al., 2019; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Wladis et al., 2016) helpful.

The analysis supported the propositions in the two models (Bean and Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993) that student departure and social integration, to some extent, were perceived by participants to affect their withdrawal decisions. The models in the conceptual framework helped me understand that students enter the academic system motivated to finish college, which is characterized by grade performance and academic development. Tinto's (1993) model notes that the educational system and a social system where student and faculty interactions lead to social integration. The systems (academic and social) can influence the students' decision to persist or withdraw from a course. The study results revealed that a lack of student interaction with the instructor or peers could interfere or contribute to student withdrawal.

Both models of Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985) were reflected in several participants' responses that they needed to feel a sense of belonging to the online classroom. The participants stated that they felt lucky to see three or four students posting

something or responding to a discussion board question simultaneously. Bean (1990) noted that nontraditional students are more academically integrated into the college but less socially integrated. The findings of this study showed that more research is needed on student dropout and how decisions are made at community colleges. A theme that recurred during this study was that the online business course lacks creativity from the instructor and there are too many assignments from the publisher's website that take hours to complete, The findings indicate a need for exploration of coursework designed for online students, given that both the traditional and nontraditional classes at the institution had the same design and coursework.

Student perceptions of their educational experiences are formed by their interaction with academic advising, course scheduling, and academic outcomes such as grades that can affect the integration process (Bean & Metzner, 1985). The findings revealed that administrators, advisors, staff, and faculty assume students who sign up for online classes have the skill sets needed for online learning. The results follow Bean and Metzner's (1985) model in the assertion that academic advisors and the instructor are crucial factors in transitioning students into the online course. The results of this study demonstrated that interactions with academic advising and other college personnel other than the instructor were challenging because faculty and staff work hours conflicted with student work schedules of 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. (Schroeder et al., 2016). The participants stated that it is often impossible for students to interact with peers and the instructor simultaneously in an asynchronous classroom.

Martin and Bolliger (2018) posited that student engagement increases satisfaction, increases student motivation to learn, reduces isolation, and improves student performance and asserted that group work could help with online relationships. Meyer and Murrell (2014) found Tinto's (1993) model to be a gateway for academic and social connections because it helps with cognitive development from student engagement that leads to better relationships where students can hone their skills. Watson and Ferdinand-James (2018) noted that student interactions with peers and the instructor's presence help students become more active learners. The findings in this study support Watson and Ferdinand-James's research, noting that the importance of relationships formed in the online environment can lead to student success. The results from the interview data showed the participants had more intense emotions when answering questions on social integration into the online environment than the other two research questions.

Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner (1985) argued that the online classroom is the central location where relationships begin as students establish academic and social connections. The scholars asserted that students who fail to create relationships with peers and instructors might have difficulties in their academic progress. Bean and Metzner did not specify the essential elements of transformation into the online environment. However, this study is consistent with Tinto's and Bean and Metzner's findings that students' goal of educational attainment was strongly associated with their level of social integration, which affects their decisions to persist or withdraw from the online business course.

Interpretation in Light of the Empirical Literature Review

Interpretation of themes relating to RQ 1. The four themes: faculty unavailability and inflexibility for working students, lack of feedback from the instructor, the online course was designed for traditional students, and too many assignments from the publisher and no creativity of the instructor, emerged from the participants' responses about their reasons for dropping out of the class.

Faculty unavailability and inflexibility for working students. In examining the participants' perspectives on faculty unavailability and inflexibility for working students, I found Kowalski et al. (2014) study helpful in explaining the origin of online learning and its purpose of seeking to make it more convenient for online students to have access to a college education due to factors such as work, family issues, distance from the college, and other personal challenges. Their findings noted a significant need for better interactions with online instructors as vital to advance student success. The participants' desire for more faculty availability and flexibility confirm Purarjomandlangrudi et al.'s (2016) findings regarding the importance of the online instructor to be more responsive to student inquiries about the course and content. The instructor's unavailability caused the students to experience a lack of direction regarding assignments, and inflexible office hours of only 1 day a week was not enough time for these online students. The participants in this study reported that they work from 8:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. and have family obligations that limit time communicating with the instructor during those office hours. Faculty inflexibility regarding penalties on late assignments was met negatively due to the students having little control over schedule changes due to job and family

obligations. The findings on faculty inflexibility for working students offer insights for a need for flexible due dates or a lesser penalty for late assignments for academic success. The participants contradicted the much-proclaimed adage that online learning allows students to attend to family obligations and it enables students a flexible schedule; it does not seem to apply to the working student (Preisman, 2014; Yoo & Huang, 2013).

Lack of feedback from the instructor. The participants experienced a lack of feedback from the instructor on assignments. Feedback from the instructor was a major concern. The vague feedback from the instructor on assignments was perceived negatively and left the participants confused, not knowing what direction to take, confirming the study by Preisman (2014). The participants described feelings of inadequacy regarding fulfilling the instructors' expectations that arose from not knowing how to make corrections on assignments when they received low grades. This finding followed the results of Burns's (2013) study which investigated instructor's feedback, and examined the instructor's responsibility to recommend clear course objectives, determining response time to students' needs, timeliness of information, and clear course requirements are needed for student success in the online environment. Similar to the findings of Gurantz (2015), Burns asserted that a lack of feedback from the instructor could lead to procrastination, which is a significant predictor of student behavior that can lead to course failure. The results from this study provided additional evidence that feedback allows the students to gauge their progress and access their own learning needs from the information communicated by the instructor.

Hachey et al. (2013) and Jaggars et al. (2013) asserted that it is vital for faculty to provide feedback that can help the student gain a better understanding of the course content and make course improvements in online learning that will lead to better student outcomes. The findings provided evidence that in the online environment, prompt and effective feedback from the instructor is a way to promote efficiency in the online classroom while allowing students to acquire self-reflection skills in analyzing their course performance.

Dubas et al. (2016) examined the effectiveness of the online program in meeting the needs of students. Dubas et al. posited that the instructor's role is one of facilitator of the learning process in which the instructional approach becomes learner-focused, and students acquire knowledge through active participation. Outcome-focused instructions could be helpful for student success when templates, samples of assignments, projects, and assessment rubrics are provided to students (Dubas et al., 2016). Dubas et al. noted that the use of these tools helps clarify the instructor's expectations for the assignment and improves student engagement and course outcomes, which leads to student success. The findings of this study support these findings.

The online course was designed for traditional students. At the core of this study was the investigation into the traditional on-campus versus the online Introduction to Business course. The participants felt the course was designed for the on-campus student without an instructor. Several studies focused on traditional learners versus nontraditional learners (Burns, 2013; James et al., 2016; Gillett-Swan, 2017; Preisman, 2014; Yoo & Huang, 2013; Wladis et al., 2014) This study’s findings can be viewed along with other

researchers because they identified multiple characteristics of the online learner to find the disconnect between the two formats. Preisman (2014) argued that the instructional approaches that work in traditional on-campus classes might not work in online classes. Preisman's findings indicated that some faculty feel online courses are not as challenging for students, which has led online instructors to overcompensate by adding too much content and too many assignments for the learner causing the student to feel overwhelmed, a feeling that can lead to withdrawal.

Wladis et al. (2014) noted there are different student characteristics for most online learners: they are usually over the age of 30, have dependents, are employed full-time, and enrolled in one or more online courses compared to traditional students. James et al. (2016) investigated similar comparisons (traditional on-campus courses, online courses, and hybrid courses) at five primarily online institutions. Their findings supported Waldis et al., Gillett-Swan (2017), and Yoo and Huang (2013), who examined instructors who taught the same online class in a face-to-face format. The results showed that the traditional format is compatible with the online format. Waldis et al., Gillett-Swan, and Yoo and Huang asserted there are scales of adaptation and differentiation within these approaches that should be considered by faculty who teach and design online courses.

This theme confirmed Burns's (2013) research findings that the online environment lacked face-to-face interaction for bonding. The students viewed online education as an imitation of real learning, and they felt they were getting the diluted version versus the on-campus classroom setting. With the lack of face-to-face interaction

between students and the instructor, the participants explained it was easier to drop out of the online course because they felt no real relationship bonding was present.

Too many assignments from the publisher and no creativity from the instructor. Preisman's (2014) theory that faculty view online courses as not as challenging for online students and overcompensating by adding too much content and assignments for the online learner has caused the student to feel overwhelmed, a feeling that can lead to withdrawal. The findings of this study confirm this theory. The findings in this study support Preisman's perspective that instructional approaches that work in traditional on-campus classes might not work in online classes.

Interpretation of themes relating to RQ 2. The lack of preparedness for the online format and weak online course orientation, frustrations regarding the course discussion board, and isolation and lack of interaction with peers are the three themes that related to RQ 2, and which I interpret here in light of the empirical literature.

Lack of preparedness for the online format and weak online course orientation. The theme lack of preparedness for the online format and weak online course orientation emerged from the participants' statement regarding social integration into the online classroom. The findings support Lee and Choi's (2011) 69 important factors that influence student decisions to withdraw from online courses. The authors noted that most community colleges have an open entry enrollment and admission policy that does not require entry requirements. This practice may open the doors to some unprepared learners who may not possess the skills to succeed in an online environment. This lack of skill derived from previous academic under-achievement, poor experiences, and inadequate

skills development can make it difficult for instructors to accommodate all needs. An example of unpreparedness for the online classroom was seen within this theme.

Several participants stated that navigating on the online site did not prepare them for the online classroom. Participants new to online learning found that online orientation did not prepare them for the class. The participants also stated that online orientation only covered the basics. The results from this study confirmed Chen's (2012) research that academic preparation and students' college experiences are essential factors in predicting withdrawal. A study by Wang et al. (2013) revealed that students miss the immediate interaction they have in traditional on-campus classes. To better prepare them for the online course, an informative orientation is significant in helping students to succeed as online learners. On-campus orientation will allow students to meet the instructor and classmates while fostering a sense of motivation and bonding. The research by Wang et al. demonstrated that online students who participate in an on-campus orientation have higher graduation rates than those who do not.

The participants in this study who had taken an online course found it easier to take the Introduction to Business course because they had overcome their previous challenges with online classes. First time online learners found the orientation did not prepare them for the course. Also, students who had never taken an on-campus course and for who the online course was their first course taken at the college, found they did not have the skills needed for online learning. Lee and Choi's (2011) research results showed that academic preparation and students' college experiences are essential factors in predicting withdrawal. Lee and Choi examined several strategies that may help

educators design better course activities with support systems in place. Strategies include the need to understand that students enter classes with challenges and potential for success.

Frustrations regarding the course discussion board. In sharing their frustrations regarding the course discussion board, all participants in this study admitted the instructor did not communicate how to post and respond to students' posts. The theme emerged from participants' anxieties about social integration into the online classroom. Research by Leong (2011), O'Keeffe (2013), Schroeder et al. (2016), and Wei and Chen (2012) showed that the focus of social presence is making sure that all students are given an opportunity to express themselves in a discussion board where they feel comfortable responding to discussion questions without stress or anxiety. The participants stated that the instructor had unrealistic expectations that all students who take online courses were familiar with this forum. This finding revealed that many students had poor writing skills and were unfamiliar with posting and responding in the forum. The findings support Leong, O'Keeffe, Schroeder et al., and Wei and Chen's research that the forum should be a place for students to hone their skills, and more professional development is needed for faculty who teach online courses.

Isolation and lack of interaction with peers. A key finding in this research is that the online business course was a lonely place for most participants in this study. The findings indicate that the online business course lacked instructor creativity, and there is a substantial need for better online course design. This theme emerged from the participants' feelings of isolation and lack of communication with peers in the online

environment. In sharing their stories, the participants stated they often felt like they were not part of the college community.

The findings revealed that a more diverse population of students are entering the online environment. Each culture represented in the online environment is distinct, and overlooking the impact culture plays in this environment can lead to negative educational experiences, psychological consequences, feelings of isolation and alienation, frustration, anxiousness, being upset, depression, or helplessness (Chen & Bennett, 2012; Kang & Yelich Biniecki, 2015; Szilagyi, 2013). Instructors play a vital role in developing positive relationships with the students while encouraging diversity and difference (Miller et al., 2018)

The findings in this study confirmed that a standard online format for online business courses would make it easier for students to transition into the online environment with a standard course design employed in all business courses to enable students a much easier transition. However, more information about what format or design is needed requires further investigation (Baturay & Yukselturk, 2015; Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012; Dubas et al., 2016; Moore, 2011; Purarjomandlangrudi et al., 2016). What continues to be unknown is what format or design will better serve the online students' needs because there is a diverse population of students with different needs and no one factor identified in this study causes student dropout (Cigdem, & Yildirim, 2014; Lee et al., 2013) The findings noted that more research is needed on this topic.

Interpretation of theme relating to RQ 3. The theme that captured what more could have been done emerged from responses to the question of what students perceived college personnel might have done to help them continue with the online course. Several studies supported the findings in this study. O'Keeffe's (2013) study on social presence illustrated the importance of how well students connect to the institution, faculty, staff, administration, and peers. Rovai's (2003) study asserted that the key to online learning is creating an effective learning community where students have accessibility to information, a presence welcoming different learning styles, promotion of the instructor, and student engagement. Qing and Akins (2015) explained that the quality of online education depends on committed and dedicated students and instructors. Tinto's (1993) study asserted that students would persist in an educational environment if they can see how they fit. Qing and Akins noted that the instructor must design the course so that the student can develop connections with other students while feeling comfortable with communications with the instructor (Karp et al., 2008). Using Tinto's integration framework, findings by Karp et al. (2008) explained the importance of information networks as a personal resource where students can receive useful information about the course or problems and concerns. Students who used information networks were less likely to have misconceptions about their educational experiences where knowledge was given. This network helped students feel confident in their decision-making efforts and helped them have a better fit into the college environment, providing a successful experience for the student.

Limitations of the Study

Although I followed the guidelines of qualitative methodology to ensure trustworthiness, there are limitations to this study when considering the results. First, this study sample was limited to only seven participants, and the results may be different with a larger population. While this study's findings assisted in gaining an understanding of the decision to drop the online course from the participants' experiences, the results only reflected students who enrolled in the online Introduction to Business course during the academic years 2017-2019 and did not reveal other years or other colleges within this system. If faculty at the other campuses within this system seeks to apply these results, they must consider the circumstances and context of this study when determining the transferability of its findings.

Finally, my position as a professor who teaches online business courses may lend itself to limitations—not in terms of my personal biases, but my influences as an interviewer. The participants' responses to the research questions could have depended on how comfortable they felt interviewing with me. I believe I presented myself professionally while establishing trust and rapport with all the seven interviewees. I also understand there could have been an underlying apprehension from a participant that I was unaware of, and trust and comfort may not have been achieved as suggested. However, because of the rich data collected, the research questions covered, the apparent honesty shared, the openness from the respondents, and candor I observed while interviewing each participant, this limitation was minimal.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this study provides an incremental step in identifying factors that contribute to the students' decision to drop out of an online Introduction to Business online course, the community college system, within the Mid-Atlantic state that offers this course, should be included. For example, the sample had only seven participants; it would be interesting to see that if the sample was larger if the participants' responses would be similar or different. Expanding this research to the other colleges would increase understanding of students' decisions to drop out of the business online course while expanding research.

Future researchers seeking to build on my study might interview instructors who teach such an online course. A theme that recurred during my research was the disconnect with the instructor and the online environment. Some participants stated they noticed differences in instructor presence with those who teach the same on-campus and online business courses. One participant said that she enrolled in the Introduction to Business online course because of an instructor from whom she had taken business courses on campus before but felt the instructor's presence was different in the online class. Similarly, noting the participants' differences may be significant in discovering where the disconnects exist in online teaching. There are three areas that future researchers can explore: (a) the disconnect between the instructor, online classroom, and the students; (b) course work; and (c) a curriculum that meets the needs of the working and older student. The participants explained that their decision to drop the course was not an immediate action; it was a progression of events that lead to that decision.

Future researchers should consider examining the different categories of tasks and functions of the online instructor. They should examine the pedagogical, social, and instructional tasks required for an instructor. Researchers should explore the pedagogical function around the education community, facilitation, the development of a social presence in the online environment, instructional facilitation, the evaluation of assignments, clarity on assignments, and the number of assignments (Baturay & Yukselturk, 2015; Ben-Yosef & Pinhasi-Vittorio, 2012; Dubas et al., 2016; Moore, 2011; Purarjomandlangrudi et al., 2016).

The results from the data also revealed that more instructor development is needed in online teaching. In particular, the results from this study suggest that an online instructor could provide better feedback on assignments, more student-instructor interactions, responding to discussion board posts regularly, more creativity with the course curriculum, better instructions on assignments, and more overall presence in the online classroom. The instructor presence, which I have described in relationships to the development of social presence needed in the online environment, is dependent on the promotion of the engagement of the instructor and the students' need for academic and social integration (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Tinto, 1993).

Implications

My aim for this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of student dropout in the Introduction to Business online course. The insights that emerged from the interviews, which included student experiences and personal perceptions of the online environment, have provided valuable implications for the content, delivery, and

understanding of how decisions are made when dropping out of the online course. A major contribution from this study that adds to the current research on student dropout was the need for more instructor presence in the online classroom. Also evident in this study was the importance of an online orientation that prepares the students to transition into the online course. The online orientation should include navigation on the site, how to post on the discussion board, location of assignments, technology, and more student engagement.

The results suggest that attention to the amount and quality of assignments in the online class and the coursework were a major concern for the participants in this study. The participants in this study stated there were too many assignments from the publishers' website, and if students got the answer wrong, they had to go through multiple assignments to get a correct answer. This caused students to drop out of the online course. Working students do not always work a 40-hour a week job; the participants in this study shared that some worked a 60-hour week and are on call on the weekends. The curriculum addresses the needs of a more diverse population of learners with different ethnic backgrounds. Some participants were over the age of 40; however, they felt that many of the surveys and curriculum accommodated the younger student population.

The creation of an effective online course involves a paradigm shift regarding the mode of delivery of the course, assignments, materials, and design. It is crucial to promote connections with faculty and peers through online blogs that can also be a tool that includes other college personnel if the student needs help. Since the findings did not

address other research on student departure that was specific to what time dropout occurs, faculty may need to have a monthly evaluation where the students write comments on areas they need help. A monthly assessment will allow more time to receive comments from the student on assignments to find-tune areas of difficulty before testing occurs on a given topic. In this way, the instructor can improve feedback through a reflective and continual monitoring of student needs and make the necessary adjustments.

Conclusion

Student dropout is a problem that is shared by many colleges and universities (Dubas et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2016). For years, community college educators have been puzzled about the causes of dropout since online learning continues to be in high demand. In an attempt to solve this problem, Tinto (1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) student integration models have tried to explain student departure in online learning. Both Tinto and Bean and Metzner's theoretical models asserted that persistence is affected by the students' successful integration to the institution. Dropout is a disconnect between the student and the institution that affects persistence or withdrawal. Student integration models offer a framework for this study. Students enter the online environment without a productive online orientation program, an active instructor presence, a delivery mode not targeted for the working student, a lack of available college personnel; therefore, the gap gets wider for finding a solution to the departure problem.

The online classroom is also becoming more diverse. The educational desires and needs of this diverse group of online learners have created an urgency for faculty and administrators to adhere to the demands that culture plays in online learning and how

acculturation creates a new meaning to the learning environment (Hamdan, 2014; Kang & Yelich Biniecki, 2015). Hamdan explained that enrolling more diverse adult learner populations is a student-centered approach trending in adult education. No more can an online instructor post an assignment and walk away for a week or stick to a 1 day a week office hour, post too many assignments from the publishers' website, and give vague instructions. If they do, they may have a flurry of emails with questions about the course, content, or assignments that they may have difficulty answering.

Surprisingly, when I started this study, my focus was on the student. I wondered, "Why the disconnect? What are educators not doing? What resources are needed?" I never thought of the disconnect with the instructor and the online environment. Is the instructor qualified to teach this course, or is there a need to recruit instructors who want to teach this course? The participants' responses reflected heavily on the instructor, the need for a stronger instructor presence. I found that the absence of the instructor caused reactions from the student: a sense of being overwhelmed, a lack of direction, and a feeling of isolation. The results revealed that more instructor-student interaction was needed for the student to be successful in the online course. The student needs an active instructor dedicated to teaching a diverse online student population—an instructor who is willing to put in the time to help the student transition into online learning.

Finally, the research shows that we need all college personnel to build a strong community of learners. A strong college community produces successful online students who will persist to graduation. A weak college community produces low retention rates, loss of revenue, and a suffering community with jobs that are not filled. Liu et al. (2007)

stated that future research on how decisions are made to drop an online course should focus on family life, jobs, financial matters, student preparedness for the online class, cultural differences, and the impact of linkages between departure and persistence in the online environment.

References

Adams Becker, S., Cummins, M., Davis, A., Freeman, A., Giesinger Hall, C., Ananthanarayanan, . . . & Wolfson, N. (2017). *NMC Horizon Report: 2017 library edition.* The New Media Consortium. Retrieved from https://www.learntechlib.org/p/182005/

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2013, January). *Changing course: Ten years of tracking online education in the States*. Sloan Consortium. Retrieved from http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changingcourse.pdf

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2016, February). *Online report card: Tracking online education in the United States.* Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group, LLC. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/onlinereportcard.pdf

Angelkoska, S., Stankovska, G., & Dimitrovski, D. (2016, June). The personal characteristics predictors of academic success. In N. Popov, C. Wolhuter, J. Kalin, G. Hilton, J. Ogunleye, & E. Niemczyk (Eds.), *Education provision to every one: Comparing perspectives from around the world* (BCES Conference Books, Vol. 16, pp. 262-268). Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED568088)

Arpaci, I. (2017). The role of self-efficacy in predicting use of distance education tools and learning management systems. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education*, *18*(1), 52-62. Retrieved from http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/

Aviv, R., Elrich, Z., & Ravid, G. (2004). Design and architecture of collaborative online communities: A quantitative analysis. In M. R. Simonson & M. Crawford (Eds.),

2004 annual proceedings—Chicago of selected research and development presentations at the National Convention of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (Vol. 1, pp. 59-72). North Miami Beach, FL: Nova Southeastern University. Retrieved from https://members.aect.org/publications/proceedings/archived/2004_Chicago_vol_1.pdf

Baturay, M. H., & Yukselturk, E. (2015). The role of online education preferences on student's achievement. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 16*(3) 3-12. Retrieved from http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/

Bawa, P. (2016). Retention in online courses: Exploring issues and solutions–A literature review. *Sage Journals, 6*(1), 1-11. doi:10.1177/2158244015621777

Beach, M., Stefanick, P., & VanOverbeke, D. (2018, March). *Student perceptions of features that contribute to their successes in online courses*. Paper presented at the Society for Information Technology and Teacher Education International Conference, Washington, DC. Retrieved from https://www.learntechlib.org/p/182698/

Bean, J. P. (1990). Why students leave: Insights from research. *The Strategic Management of College Enrollments, 63*(2), 170-185.

Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of non-traditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research, 55*(4), 485-540. doi:10.3102/00346543055004485

Ben-Yosef, E., & Pinhasi-Vittorio, L. (2012). Possibilities inherent in a learning-centered

pedagogy: Accessing and leveraging the richness of human capacities. *Encounter: Education for Meaning and Social Justice, 25*(4), 1-19. Retrieved from http://www.great-ideas.org/enc.htm

Black, A., Terry, N., & Buhler, T. (2016). The impact of specialized courses on student retention as part of the freshman experience. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal, 20*(1), 85-92. Retrieved from https://www.abacademies.org/journals/academy-of-educational-leadership-journal-home.html

Bowen, H. (2018). *Investment in learning: The individual and social value of America higher education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bowen, W. (2013). *Higher education in the digital age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Braxton, J. M., Hirschy, A. S., & McClendon, S. A. (2004). *Understanding and reducing college student departure: ASHE-ERIC higher education report* (Vol. 16). John Wiley and Sons.

Burch, J. J. C. (2018). *An application of Tinto's student integration model and Bandura's social cognitive theory to student retention in stem disciplines* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations. (UMI No. 10784812)

Burns, M. (2013). Staying or leaving? Designing for persistence in an online educator training programme in Indonesia. *Open Learning: The Journal of Open, Distance and e-Learning, 28*(2), 141-152. doi:10.1080/02680513.2013.851023

Cabrera, A. F., Castaneda, M. B., Nora, A., & Hengstler, D. (1992). The convergence

between two theories of college persistence. *The Journal of Higher Education 63*(2), 143-164. doi:10.1080/00221546.1992.11778347

Caelli, K., Ray, L., & Mill, J. (2003). 'Clear as Mud': Toward greater clarity in generic qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 2*(2), 1-24. doi:10.1177/160940690300200201

Chea, T. (2013). More colleges offering MOOCs but doubts on completion persist. *Community College Week, 25*(16), 9-9. Retrieved from http://www.journalofscience.com.

Chen, R. (2012). Institutional characteristics and college student dropout risks: Multilevel event history analysis. *Research in Higher Education, 53*(5), 487-505. doi:10.1007/s11162-011-9241-4

Chen, R. T.-H., & Bennett, S. (2012). When Chinese learners meet constructivist pedagogy online. *Higher Education, 64*(5), 677-691. doi:10.1007/s10734-012-9520-9

Cigdem, H., & Yildirim, O. G. (2014). Effects of students' characteristics on online learning readiness: A vocational college example. *Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 15*(3), 80–93. Retrieved from http://tojde.anadolu.edu.tr/

Clement, L. (2016). External and internal barriers to studying can affect student success and retention in a diverse classroom. *Journal of Microbiology and Biology and Education, 17*(3), 351-359. doi:10.1128/jmbe.v17i3.1077

Cochran, J., Campbell, S., Baker, H., & Leeds, E. (2014). The role of student characteristics in predicting retention in online courses. *Research in Higher*

Education, *55*(1), 27-48. doi:10.1007/s11162-013-9305-8

Cohen, A. M., Brawer, F. B., & Kisker, C. B. (2013). *The American community college* (6th ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Collins, A., & Halverson, R. (2018). *Rethinking education in the age of technology: The digital revolution and schooling in America*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Connolly, C. (2016, September 20). Student retention literature–Tinto's model. *Cornelia thinks: Discussions in higher education, learning and life* [Blog post]. Retrieved from https://corneliathinks.wordpress.com/2016/09/20/tintos-model

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Davidson, R. (2015). Wiki use that increases communication and collaboration motivation. *Journal of Learning Design, 8*(3), 94–105. Retrieved from ERIC database. (EJ1001779)

Dewberry, C., & Jackson, D. J. R. (2018). An application of the theory of planned behavior of student retention. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 107,* 100-110. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2018.03.005

Dubas, K. M., Best, K., Long, J., & Crumpacker, N. (2016). Enhancing student participation and course outcomes in online graduate courses. *Academy of Educational Leadership, 20*(1), 32-49. Retrieved from https://www.abacademies.org/journals/academy-of-educational-leadership-journal-home.html.

Elo, S., Kaariainen, M., Kanste, O., Polkki, T., Utriainen, K., & Kyngas, H. (2014). Qualitative content analysis. *Sage Journals, 4*(1). 10.1177/2158244014522633

Evans, B., Baker, R. B., & Dee, T. (2016). Persistence patterns in massive open online courses (MOOCs). *Journal of Higher Education, 18*(2), 206-242. doi:10.1080/00221546.2016.11777400

Fontenot, R., Mathisen, R., Carley, S., & Stuart, R. (2015). Predictors of enrolling in online courses: An exploratory study of students in undergraduate marketing courses. *Journal of Educators Online, 12*(1), 116-139. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/facpubs/3487/

Garland, M. (1993). Student perceptions of the situational, institutional, dispositional, and episte-mological barriers to persistence. *Distance Education, 14*(2), 181–198. doi:10.1080/0158791930140203

Gillett-Swan, J. (2017). Supporting and engaging the isolated learner. *Journal of Learning Design, 10*(1), 20-30. doi:10.5204/jld.v9i3.293

Gurantz, O. (2015). Who loses out? Registration order, course availability, and student behaviors in community college. *Journal of Higher Education, 86*(4), 524-565. 10.1080/00221546.2015.11777374

Hachey, A. C., Conway, K. M., & Wladis, C. W. (2013). Community colleges and underappreciated assets: Using institutional data to promote success in online learning. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 16*(1), 1-18. Retrieved from https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/journals/online-journal-distance-learning-administration

Hamdan, A. (2014). The reciprocal and correlative relationship between learning culture and online education: A case from Saudi Arabia. *International Review of Research in Open Distance Learning, 15*(1), 309-336. doi:10.19173/irrodl.v15i1.1408

Hart, C. (2014). Development of a persistence scale for online education in nursing. *Nursing Education Perspectives, 35*(3), 150-154.

Holden, C. (2018). Adapting Tinto's framework: Model of success and failure in a Middle Eastern transnational setting. *Journal Studies in Higher Education, 43*(6), 1002-1019. doi:10.1080/03075079.2016.1212004.

Holder, B. (2007). An investigation of hope, academics, environment, and motivation as predictors of persistence in higher education online programs. *The Internet and Higher Education, 10,* 245-260. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2007.08.002 I

Horzum, M. B., Kaymak, Z. D., & Gungoren, O. C. (2015). Structural equation modeling towards online learning readiness, academic motivations and perceived learning. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice, 15*(3), 759-770. https://jestp.com/index.php/estp

Jaggars, S. S. (2014a). Choosing between online and face-to-face courses: Community college student voices. *American Journal of Distance Education, 28*(1), 27-38. 10.1080/08923647.2014.867697

Jaggars, S. S. (2014b). Democratization of education from whom? Online learning and educational equity. *Association of American Colleges and Universities, 55*(1). Retrieved from https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2014/winter/jaggars

Jaggars, S. S., Edgecombe, N., & Stacey, G. W. (2013). What we know about online course outcomes: Research overview. *Community College Research Center. Columbia University*. Retrieved from http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/What-We-Know-About-Online-Course-Outcomes.pdf.

Jaggars, S. S., & Xu, D. (2010). Online learning in the Virginia Community College system. *Community College Research Center, Teachers College. Columbia University*. doi:10.7916/D80V89VM

James, S., Swan, K., & Daston, C. (2016). Retention, progression and the taking of online courses. *Online Learning, 20*(2), 75-96. doi:10.24059/olj.v20i2.780.

Janesick, V. J. (2016). *"Stretching" exercises for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Johnson, D. W., Johnson, R. T., & Smith, K. A. (2013). Cooperative learning: Improving university instruction by basing practice on validated theory. *Journal on Excellence in UniversityTeaching, 25*(3/4), 85-118. Retrieved from https://publons.com/journal/30622/journal-on-excellence-in-college-teaching

Kai, S., Andres, J. M. L., Paquette, L., Baker, R. S., Molnar, K., Watkins, H., & Moore, M. (2017). Predicting student retention from behavior in an online orientation course. *Proceedings of the 10th International Conference on Educational Data.* 250-255. Retrieved from http://educationaldatamining.org/EDM2017/proc_files/papers/paper_84.pdf

Kang, H., & Yelich Biniecki, S. M. (2015). Mapping the framing of culture in U.S. adult

education over the past decade. *Journal of Continuing Higher Education, 63*(2), 86-97. doi:10.1080/07377363.2015.1042957

Kang, K., & Wang, S. (2018). Analyze and predict student dropout from online programs. *Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference on Compute and Data* Analysis. 6-12. doi:10.1145/3193077.3193090

Karp, M. M., O'Gara, L., & Hughes, K. L. (2008). Do support services at community college encourage success or reproduce disadvantage? An exploratory study of students in two community colleges. *Community College Research Center*. Retrieved from https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/media/k2/attachments/support-services-reproduce-disadvantage.pdf

Kauffman, H. (2015). A review of predictive factors of student success in satisfaction with online learning. *Research in Learning Technology 23*, 1-13. doi:10.3402/rlt.v23.26507

Kember, D. (1995). A longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education. *The Journal of Higher Education, 60*(3), 278-301. doi:10.1080/00221546.1989.11775036

Khan, S. H., Shamim, R. H., & Nambobi, N. (2018). *Learning styles and online tools: How to construct an effective online learning environment*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Khuong, H. (2014). Evaluation of a conceptual model of student retention at a public urban commuter university (Doctoral dissertaton). Available from ProQuest Dissertations (UMI No. 3641273)

Koc, S., & Xiongyi, L. (2016). An investigation of graduate students' help-seeking experiences, preferences and attitudes in online learning. *Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology, 15*(3), 27-38. Retrieved from http://www.tojet.net/

Kowalski, T. J., Dolph, D., & Young, I. P. (2014). Student motives for taking online courses education administration. *Educational Research Quarterly, 38*(1) 27-42. Retrieved from http://erquarterly.org/

Lack, K. A. (2013). *Current status of research on online learning in postsecondary education*. ITHAKA. Retrieved from https://sr.ithaka.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/ithaka-sr-online-learning-postsecondary-education-may2012.pdf

Lederman, D. (2018). Who is studying online (and where)? *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from https://www.mtsac.edu/president/cabinet-notes/2017-18/Who_Is_Studying_Online_and_Where.pdf

Lee, E., Pate, J., & Cozart, D. (2015). Autonomy support for online students. *Tech Trends: Linking Research and Practice to Improve Learning*, *59*(4), 54-61. doi:10.1007/s11528-015-0871-9

Lee, J., & Choi, J. (2011). A review of online course dropout research: Implications for practice and future research. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 59*(5), 593-618. doi:10.1007/s11423-010-9177-y

Lee, J., Choi, J., & Kim, T. (2013). Discriminating factors between completers and dropouts from online learning courses. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 44*(2), 328-337. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01306.x

Lee, W. C., Godwin, A., & Nave, A. L. H. (2018). Development of the engineering student integration instrument: Rethinking measures of integration. *Research Journal for Engineering Education, 16*(4), 1-1. doi:10.1002/jee.20184

Leeds, E., Campbell, S., Baker, H., Ali, R., & Crisp, J. (2013). The impact of student retention strategies: An empirical study. *International Journal of Management in Education, 7*(1/2), 22-23. Retrieved from https://www.inderscience.com/jhome.php?jcode=ijmie

Lei, S. A. (2016). Institutional characteristics affecting the educational experiences of undergraduate students: A review of literature. *Education, 137 (2)*117-122. Retrieved from https://www.projectinnovation.com/education.html

Leong, P. (2011). Role of social presence and cognitive absorption in online learning environments. *Distance Education, 32*(1), 5-28. doi:10.1080/01587919.2011.565495

Liang, K., Zhang, Y., He, Y., Zhou, Y., Tan, W., & Li, X. (2017). Online behavior analysis-based student profile for intelligent e-learning. *Journal of Electrical and Computer Engineering, 3*(13), 1-7. doi:10.1155/2017/9720396

Lint, A. (2011). *The impact of student progress factors on student persistence in e-learning* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest database (UMI No. 3447654)

Liu, S., Gomez, J., Khan, B., & Yen, C. -J. (2007). Toward a learner-oriented community college, online course dropout framework. *International Journal on E-learning, 6*(4), 519-542. Retrieved from https://www.aace.org/pubs/ijel/

Ma, J., Pender, M., & Welch, M. (2016). *Education pays 2016: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society*. New York, NY: College Board.

Manning, T. M. (2011). Institutional effectiveness as process and practice in the American community college. *New Directions or Community Colleges, 10*(1), 1-10. doi:10.1002/cc.433

Marks, D. B. (2016). Theory to practice: Quality instruction in online learning environments. *National Teacher Education Journal, 9*(2), 75 -80. Retrieved from https://ntejournal.com/

Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning Journal, 22*(1), 205-222. Retrieved from https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/olc-online-learning-journal/

McAdoo, J. (2018, March). The impact of learning preferences on retention of adult students in an online program. *Olivet Nazarene University*. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/scholar_week_events/2018/march24/4/

McKinney, L., Novak, H., Hagedorn, L. S., & Torres, M. L. (2019). Giving up on a course: An analysis of course dropping behaviors among community college students. *Research in Higher Education, 60*(2), 184-202. doi:10.1007/s11162-018-9509-z

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2015). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

Meyer, K. A., & Murrell, V. S. (2014). A national study of theories and their importance

for faculty development for online teaching. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 17*(2), 1-15. Retrieved from https://teachonline.ca/tools-trends/journals/online-journal-distance-learning-administration

Miller, H., Cavanagh, T., & Furr, A. (2018). Communication and collaboration strategies for an effective online professor. In C. N. Stevenson & J. C. Bauer (Eds.), *Online Course Management: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications* (pp. 302-316). doi:10.4018/978-1-4666-5178-4.ch020

Minguillon, J., & Grau-Valdosera, J. (2014). Rethinking dropout in online higher education: The case of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 15*(1), 19. doi:10.19173/irrodl.v15i1.1628

Moore, D. (2011). Using collaborative online discussion effectively for teaching. *Journal of Applied Learning Technology, 1*(4), 12-23. Retrieved from http://journals.sfu.ca/jalt/index.php/jalt

Murphy, C. A., & Stewart, J. C. (2017). On-campus students taking online courses: Factors associated with unsuccessful course completion. *The Internet and Higher Education, 34,* 1-9. doi:10.1016/jheduc2017.03.001.

Murray, M. (2014). Factors affecting graduation and student dropout rates at the University of KwaZuluNatal. *South African Journal of Science, 110*(11/12), 1-6. doi10.1590/sajs.2014/20140008

Nakayama, M., Yamamoto, H., & Santiago, R. (2014). Impact of learner's characteristics and learning behaviour on learning performance during a fully online course.

Electronic Journal of e-Learning, 12(4), 394-408. Retrieved from http://www.ejel.org/main.html

National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Digest of education statistics, 2017*. U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. (2015, January). *Science & engineering degree attainment: 2004–2014*. Retrieved from https://nscresearchcenter.org/snapshotreport-degreeattainment15/

O'Keeffe, P. (2013). A sense of belonging: Improving student retention. *College Student Journal, 47*(4), 605-613. Retrieved from https://www.projectinnovation.com/college-student-journal.html

Online Learning Consortium. (2015). *Online learning consortium highlights the drivers behind the 'changing face of online learning'*. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/2015-infographics

Online Learning Consortium. (2016). *Babson study: distance education enrollment growth continues*. Retrieved from onlinelearningconsortium.org/news_item/babson-study-distance-education-enrollment-growth-continues-2

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Leech, N. (2007). A call for qualitative power analyses. *Quality and Quantity, 41*(1), 105-121. doi:10.1007/s11135-005-1098-1

Orlando, J., & Attard, C. (2015). Digital natives come of age: The reality of today's early career teachers using mobile devices to teach mathematics. *Mathematics Education Research Journal, 28*(1), 107–121. doi:10.1007/s13394-015-0159-6

Pascarella, E. T., & Terenzini, P. T. (1983). Predicting voluntary freshman year persistence/withdrawal behavior in a residential university: A path analytic validation of Tinto's model. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 75*, 215-226. doi:10.1037/0022-0663.75.2.215

Pather, S., & Chetty, R. (2016). A conceptual framework for understanding pre-entry factors influencing first-year university experience. *Southern African Journal of Higher Education, 30*(1),1-21. doi:10.20853/30-1-548

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Phirangee, K., Demmans, C. E., & Hewitt, K. (2016). Exploring the relationships between facilitation methods, students' sense of community, and their online behaviors. *Online Learning, 20*(2), 134-154. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Preisman, K. A. (2014). Teaching presence in online education: From the instructor's point of view. *Online Learning. 18*(3) 1-16. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Purarjomandlangrudi, A., Chen., D., & Nguyen, A. (2016). Investigating the drivers of student interaction and engagement in online courses: A study of state-of-the-art. *Informatics in Education, 15*(2), 269-286. Retrieved from https://www.mii.lt/informatics_in_education/

Qing, L., & Akins, M. (2015). Sixteen myths about online teaching and learning in higher education don't believe everything you hear. *Tech Trends: Linking Research and*

Practice to Improve Learning. 49(4), 51-60. doi:10.1007/BF02824111

Rovai, A. P. (2003). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *Internet and Higher Education, 6*(1), 1-6. doi:10.1016/S1096-7516(02)00158-6

Schroeder, S., Baker, M., Terras, K., Mahar, P., & Chiasson, K. (2016). Students' desired and experienced levels of connectivity to an asynchronous, online, distance degree program. *Online Learning, 20*(3), 244-263. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Scott, L. A. (2015). UDL in online college coursework insights of infusion and educator preparedness. *Online Learning, 19*(5), 99-119. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Seiver, J., & Troja, A. (2014). Satisfaction and success in online learning as a function of the needs for affiliation, autonomy and mastery. *Distance Education, 35*(1), 90-105. doi:10.1080/01587919.2014.891427

Shea, P., & Bidjerano, T. (2018). Online course enrollment in community college and degree completion: Tipping point. *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 19*, 2. doi:10.19173/irrodl.v19i2.3460

Smith, A. (2018). No bottom yet in 2-year college enrollments. *Inside Higher Ed.* Retrieved from https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/06/21/community-college-enrollment-rates-expected-keep-falling

Sorensen, C., & Donovan, J. (2017). An examination of factors that impact the retention of online students at a for-profit university. *Online Learning, 21*(3), 205-221.

Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Szilagyi, A. (2015). “I am different from other women in the world”: The experiences of Saudi Arabian women studying online in international master programmes. *European Journal of Open, Distance & E-Learning, 18*(1), 86-99. doi:10.1515/eurodl-2015-0006

Tanyel, F., & Griffin, J. (2014). A ten-year comparison of outcomes and persistence rates in online versus face-to-face courses. *B-Quest, 1*, 1-22. Retrieved from https://www.westga.edu/~bquest/

Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research, 45*(1), 89-125. doi:10.3102/00346543045001089:

Tinto, V. (1987). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student departure.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Too, W. (2013). Facilitating the development of pre-service teachers as reflective learners: a Malaysian experience. *Language Learning Journal, 41*(2),161-174. doi:10.1080/09571736.2013.790131

Travers, S. (2016). Supporting online student retention in community colleges. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 17*(4), 49-61. Retrieved from https://www.infoagepub.com/quarterly-review-of-distance-education.html

Tsai, C. W., & Chiang, Y. C. (2013). Research trends in problem-based learn (PBL)

research and online education environments: A review of publications in SSCI-indexed journals from 2004 to 2012. *British Journal of Education Technology, 44*(6), E185–E190. doi:10.1111/bjet.12038

Uttam, G. (2018). *Global adaptations of community college infrastructure.* Hershey, PA: IGL Global.

Vaughan, B. C. (2006). *The community college story.* Washington, DC: American Association of Community Colleges.

Wang, C. H., Shannon, D. M., & Ross, E. (2013). Students' characteristics, self-regulated learning, technology, self-efficacy, and course outcomes in online learning. *Distance Education. 34*(3), 302-323. doi:10.1080/01587919.2013.835779

Watson, M., & Ferdinand-James, D. (2018, April). *Unpacking the influence of online students' perceived course satisfaction/dissatisfaction on their performance*. Murray State University. Retrieved from https://works.bepress.com/firmfaith-watson/9

Wei, C. W., & Chen, S. (2012). A model for social presence in online classrooms. *Educational Technology Research Development, 60*(3), 529-545. doi:10.1007/s11423-012-9234-9

Wicks, D., Craft, B., Donghun, L., Lumpe, A., Henrikson, R., Baliram, S., . . . & Wicks, K. (2015). An evaluation of low versus high collaboration in online learning. *Online Learning, 19*(4), 67-87. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Wladis, C., Conway, K., & Hachey, A. (2016). Assessing readiness for online education:

Research models for identifying students at risk. *Online Learning, 20*(3). 97-109. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Wladis, C., Wladis, K., & Hachey, A. C. (2014). The role of enrollment choice in online education: Course selection and course difficulty as factors affection retention. *Online Learning, 18*(3), 1-14. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Woods, R. L. (2016). *Those who quit: A study of student retention at a 2-year community college and for-profit colleges* (Doctoral dissertation, Seton Hall University). Retrieved from http://scholarship.shu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3224&context=dissertatios

Xu, D., & Jaggars, S. S. (2011). *Online and hybrid course enrollment and performance in Washington State community and technical colleges* (CCRC Working Paper No. 31). doi:10.7916/D8862QJ6

Xu, D., & Jaggars, S. S. (2013). *Adaptability to online learning: Differences across types of students and academic subject areas* (CCRC Working Paper No. 54). doi:10.7916/D82N59NB

Yeboah, A. K., & Smith, P. (2016). Relationships between minority students' online learning experiences and academic performance. *Online Learning, 20*(4), 135-153. Retrieved from http://onlinelearningconsortium.org/read/online-learning-journal/

Yoo, S. J., & Huang, W. D. (2013). Engaging online adult learners in higher education: Motivational factors impacted by gender, age, and prior experiences. *Journal of*

Continuing Higher Education, *61*(3), 151-164.

doi:10.1080/07377363.2013.836823

Appendix: Interview Protocol

RQ 1: How do students who took the Introduction to Business online course describe their decision to dropout?

1. Describe the factors that led you to dropping the course?

   Probe: For example, financial, family, or job obligations.

   Why did you take the Introduction to Business online course, and what led you to drop the course?

   Did you discover after the class started that it was not what you expected?

   Probe: Please describe any unusual course assignments that did not line-up with your expectations.

2. How was the workload for you?

   Probe: Can you tell me about ways it was demanding and more than you could handle?

   Probe: Were you aware this course has a prerequisite requirement, if so, did you meet that requirement?

   Probe: How much time did you set aside to work on the course, modules, and weekly assignments?

   Probe: Were assignments explained so it was easy to follow? If not, please describe the assignments you found difficult.

3. How prepared were you to take an online course?

   Probe: Prior to taking this course were you familiar with our Blackboard system and able to navigate on the site comfortably?

Probe: Did you register for this course online or aided by an advisor? How often do you meet with an advisor when registering for an online course?

4. To help me get a sense of your context at the community college when you were in this class, could you tell me:
    - What were your reason for applying to this community college?
    - Why did you enroll in the Introduction to Business online course?
    - Was this your first online course? If so, what face to face courses where you enrolled in and did you complete the courses? How many? Can you please explain your reasons for staying or departing those other classes?

RQ 2: How can you describe your social integration into the online classroom? Did the online orientation help prepare you for this course, please be detailed in your explanation? What could the instructor have done differently to better prepare you for online learning?

1. Can you describe your interaction with the instructor?
2. Did you have weekly discussions on discussion board? If so, how were your interaction with classmates? Did you feel comfortable responding to discussion questions and student posts?
3. Did you feel isolated?
4. Did the instructor provide opportunities for real-time interaction into your online classroom in the course? Did the instructor use a web conferencing application (Blackboard Collaborate Ultra, Skype, Zoom) for office hours,

small group discussions, whole class discussions, or study groups? What were those experiences like for you?

5. Describe your social integration into the online classroom.

RQ 3: What do students who drop out of an introduction to Business online course perceive could have been done by the instructor, academic advisors, administrators, staff, or peers to help them continue the online course?

1. Are there any ways you think the instructor could have helped you continue in the class?

   Probe: Did the instructor give you an extension on some assignments, please explain?

2. Did an advisor, staff, your instructor, other faculty or administration contact you about an exit interview or talked with you about your decision to drop out of the online course? If so, what were that like?