EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH
SPECIFIC LEARNING DISORDER (including ADHD)

IN

ONLINE COLLEGE DEGREE PROGRAMS:

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Seleta LeAnn Bunch
Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

Enrollment in online degree programs is rapidly expanding due to the convenience and affordability offered to students and improvements in technology. The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study was to understand the shared experiences of students with documented specific learning disorders (including Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) enrolled in online degree programs at a large, faith-based university in the Southeast United States. Colleges and universities must follow federal mandates as recommended by the Office of Civil Rights for students with documented disabilities in both traditional and online settings. Research is lacking in the area of understanding the experiences of students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in online college degree programs. Students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) participated in an online focus group and in semi-structured individual interviews to share their experiences as online learners. The following research questions were addressed: How do students with documented specific learning disorders describe their experience in the university online learning environment? How do participants with documented specific learning disorder describe their reported experiences using accommodations in the online learning environment? What benefits are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder in the university online learning environment? What challenges are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder in the online university learning environment? Challenges and benefits of online degree programs, ideas for improving online degree programs, internal characteristics for success, and external motivators for degree completion were the identified themes.

Keywords: hermeneutical phenomenology, online learning, post-secondary education, learning disabilities, specific learning disorder, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the participants who trusted me with their stories and experiences. I am amazed by your resilience and your commitment to reach your goals. Your willingness to take the time to participate in a five-day focus group and individual interviews showed me that you want to make a difference in this world for others. I will always be grateful for the experience of learning from each of you.
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My family has been supportive of my desire to be a life-long student since the very beginning. My husband, Len, has given me the greatest opportunity by supporting my dream of finishing my Ed. D. and providing a way for me to devote time to the research required for my chosen project. He has always been my greatest cheerleader! My mother, Seleta, and step-daddy, James, have been sources of encouragement and support. I will always appreciate the weeks I stayed in their home to prepare my literature review and to prepare for intensive classes. My constant companion for two years of dissertation research and writing has been Ranger, the wonder hound and best dog ever.

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List of Abbreviations

American’s with Disabilities Act 1990 (ADA)
Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
Department of Education (DOE)
Federal Education Right to Privacy Act (FERPA)
General Education Diploma (GED)
Grade Point Average (GPA)
Graduate Record Exam (GRE)
Intelligence Quotient (IQ)
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)
Office of Civil Rights within the U.S. Department of Education (OCR)
Office of Disability and Academic Support (ODAS)
Other Health Impaired (OHI)
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT)
Specific Learning Disorder which may include: Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, or Visual Processing Disorders, Language Impairment (SLD)
Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI)
World Wide Web (WWW)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

In this chapter the historical background of online learning and the topic of students with disabilities in higher education are explored. The researcher’s life experiences and interests, along with the gap in research literature which led to the idea for this research are discussed. The lack of qualitative research in the area of understanding the experiences of students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in online, postsecondary degree programs prompted this research. Both the research problem and the purpose for the research study are identified.

This hermeneutical phenomenological study was grounded in the work of several theorists including, Bandura (1989), Chickering (1969), Tinto (1987), Knowles (2012), and Kolb (1984). A detailed research plan is included in chapter one, in addition to a discussion of delimitations and limitations of the study. Four research questions were developed to address the research problem, which is a lack of information about the experiences of online students with disabilities in college degree programs. Finally, a list of frequently used terms and their definitions are provided to assist the reader in understanding the study terminology.

Background

Within the past decade in the United States there has been a significant increase in the number of online degree programs offered by higher education institutions. Students with disabilities may be choosing the online degree program option as opposed to traditional “in seat” degree programs because of convenience and anonymity offered through the online delivery model (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010). One challenge facing institutions of higher education today is the increased number of students with disabilities who are enrolling in post-secondary
degree programs. Students with Specific Learning Disorder (SLD), including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), represent one of the largest subgroups of students enrolled in college (Orr & Goodman, 2010). One recent estimate proposes that as many as one in every 11 college students has a learning disability of some kind (Quinlan, Bates, & Angell, 2012). The Higher Education Research Institute (2011) data about the incoming freshman class of college and university students with disabilities indicated that 5% reported ADHD; 2.9% reported SLD. Providing for the unique needs of these students has become a real concern among educators at the collegiate level.

Through technological innovations students can now seek college degrees via the Internet through online education offerings from most post-secondary institutions. Online education has been defined as “institution-based formal education where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunication systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors” (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2009, p. 4). New and rapidly evolving technology impacts every area of life in today’s society. Traditional institutions of higher education as well as online learning programs are responding to the demands of the new paradigm shift in communication technology (Becerra, Almendra, & Flores, 2012; Venable, 2010; Miller, 2014; Sener, 2010). Students in online learning programs express the need to feel a part of a learning community where they can participate in real-world learning experiences and have social interaction with other students, despite the fact they are not in a traditional classroom setting (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2011). Providing a sense of community presents a challenge to online course instructors yet is an integral part of helping students feel connected and supported in their learning.
Students with disabilities may face barriers to their learning in a purely online environment as a result of their disability (Gornitsky, 2011). Still these students are enrolling in online programs at an escalating rate according to Allen and Seaman (2010). The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the shared experiences of students with specific learning disorder (SLD, including ADHD) enrolled in an online degree program through a large, faith-based university in the Southeast United States.

Colleges and universities face federal mandates for providing equal access to all students regardless of their disability status. This includes students seeking non-traditional, online degrees. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) in addition to Section 508 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (Section 508) and the Telecommunications Act of 1996 provide the guidelines for ensuring that all students with disabilities in post-secondary education courses online receive equal access to all instructional materials (U.S. Department of Justice, n. d.). For the most part, the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) encourages institutions of higher education to follow the spirit of the Section 508 and Telecommunications Act guidelines as a show of good faith in providing accessibility for students with disabilities, thus staying true to the requirements of ADA and Section 504 (Crow, 2008).

While the phenomenon of students with disabilities seeking to earn a college degree through online learning is not a new concept, only a few current studies exist addressing this under-served population in online degree programs (Betts et. al, 2013; Coronel, 2009; Francis, 2012; Heindel & Wooten, 2014; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2015). Crow (2008) and Gronitsky (2011) discussed the legal ramifications and requirements for higher education institutions to follow in designing online education courses for students with disabilities. Marcyjanik and Zorn (2011)
explain how to achieve greater web accessibility within the Universal Design course design model for persons with disabilities in online nursing education programs. Barnard-Brak and Sulak (2010) concluded that students with disabilities do not have significantly different attitudes toward requesting accommodations in the face-to-face versus online learning environments. Barnard-Brak and Sulak note positive experiences by students with disabilities: “The primary implication of this study may be that online course options could be associated with greater access to higher education among persons with disabilities in particular” (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010, p. 88). One study looked at the intersection of the two trends: students with disabilities enrolling in colleges and colleges utilizing web technology to provide services and supports to students (Hollins, 2012). Another researcher examined the benefits and drawbacks of various online learning platforms from the perspective of students with disabilities in online courses (Coronel, 2008). Several studies indicate the need for appropriate teaching methodology designed for meeting needs of adult post-secondary students with disabilities in online learning environments (Becerra et al., 2012; Boling et al., 2011; Crum, 2009).

Research in Canada conducted by Fichtern et al. (2009) indicated that college students with varying disabilities experienced difficulty with e-learning related specifically to access of course management tools and instructional content. Similarly, a case study conducted by Muwanguzi and Lin (2010) with a small group of students with visual impairments revealed the difficulty these students with disabilities experience using the online course management system Blackboard. From Israel’s Open University, a study was conducted by Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh (2012) comparing usage patterns of online courses among students with and without learning disabilities (LD). Students in the LD group were more active in the online environment, discussion boards, and other interaction within the course than the comparison group.
McAndrew, Farrow, and Cooper (2012) brought together a variety of stakeholders to conduct program evaluations for the United Kingdom’s Open University program and concluded that the use of online resources has the potential to improve access for citizens who have disabilities to pursue higher education options. One online education program in Mexico at the University of Guadalajara provides a learning environment that incorporates, “flexibility, pervasiveness, personalization, and collaboration; making it especially conducive to reinforcing the application of theory to practice in real world settings” (Becerra et al., 2012, p. 207).

Understanding the experiences of students with disabilities who are enrolled in online degree programs may benefit the higher education community as well as those students who are looking at the variety of options for obtaining a post-secondary degree. There is a current need for additional research to include student perceptions and their personal stories in order to better understand the experiences of students with disabilities pursuing online degree programs at a college or university (Stewart, Mallory, & Choi, 2010); this study seeks to address that gap in the literature by engaging in dialogue with students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) who are currently enrolled in undergraduate and graduate degree programs through online focus groups and individual interviews. It is my hope that this study will provide better understanding about the degree-seeking, online learner with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) and will inform institutions of higher education about what factors attract students with disabilities to online learning options and how these programs might be enhanced to meet the unique needs of this population of learners.

**Situation to Self**

I have 15 years of professional experience working with the PK-5th grade special education identification and placement process and the Section 504 eligibility and compliance
process. I also am a mother of adult children. Both of my adult children were diagnosed as having ADHD when they were in elementary school. I have been their advocate. The topic of transitioning to college for students with disabilities has been a research interest of mine for several years.

The philosophy underlying this work was the ontological assumption that multiple realities exist, and the reality of each participant will create the essence of the shared experience (Creswell, 2013). This study is grounded in the constructivist paradigm where the participants’ perspective of the phenomenon is used to make meaning of their experiences. The theoretical framework for this research is Bandura’s (1989) social cognitive theory, specifically the role of self-efficacy or a person’s belief in their ability to accomplish a task. Other theoretical assumptions supporting the research include Chickering’s (1969) student development theory, Tinto’s (1987) theory of student retention and persistence, and Kolb’s (1984) theory and model of adult experiential learning. Further, Knowles (2012) theory of adult learning supports this research, specifically the adult learners’ need to know, and readiness to learn as motivators for learning.

**Problem Statement**

Currently, there is a lack of qualitative research in the area of understanding the experiences of students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in online, postsecondary degree programs, particularly at faith-based institutions. The focus of this research was understanding the experiences of students who have specific learning disorder in online degree programs from a hermeneutical phenomenological perspective based on the student’s descriptions. Well-developed self-regulation skills are necessary for success in the online learning environment, and students with disabilities may have difficulty if they do not
possess these skills (Bol & Garner, 2011). Further, learners must have some level of motivation and self-belief in their ability to succeed in online programs for them to complete work independently. These traits essential for online learning success may prove to be lacking in some students due to the nature of SLD and ADHD.

Additionally, many students with disabilities are inefficient at knowing when, where and how to safely disclose their disability information (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger & Lan, 2010). “Disclosure should lead to accommodation but it could lead to discrimination” (Trammell, 2009, p. 23). Perhaps the level of anonymity experienced in an online course provides a safety net for students with disabilities to seek accommodations to their learning. In the research conducted by Barnard-Brak and Shulak (2010) students with visible disabilities had significantly different attitudes about requesting accommodations than those with hidden disabilities in both face-to-face and online settings.

Technology required for online learning is easily accessible in today’s society, and online learning is making college degree options feasible for a larger and more diverse student population than ever before (Ortiz, McCann, Rayphand, & Leong, 2009). This increased accessibility makes online learning very attractive to a variety of students including those with disabilities. Busy students also appreciate the added convenience and flexibility in scheduling that they enjoy by taking online courses. Overall, technology has opened up a new world for students who want to complete college degree programs and post-secondary education has been radically changed through advances in technology during the 21st century. The problem which underpins this study was a lack of qualitative research about the experiences of students with disabilities in exclusively online college degree programs.
Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) enrolled in an online degree program offered through a large, faith-based university located in the Southeastern United States. The phenomenon of interest was the shared experiences in use of accommodations, relating to instructors and fellow classmates and navigating the course management system of online students with documented disabilities as they progressed through their online course work as online learners.

Significance of the Study

This research allowed university students with documented specific learning disorder to tell their personal stories through interviews and to gain greater understanding about their experiences in degree-seeking, online learning programs. Very little research in this specific area has been conducted to date, even though online learning has had a major impact on higher education in the past decade with over 25% of college students enrolled in online courses (Perry & Pilati, 2011). Allowing the students to share their personal experiences and to explain about how they came to choose an online-degree program stands to empower students as well as inform university practice in attracting, enrolling and retaining students with disabilities in the online learning setting.

Few research studies have been conducted on the topic of students with specific learning disorder and postsecondary online education. There have been several studies conducted in other countries and a few specifically looking at course design and world-wide web accessibility for students with all types of disabilities, both visible and hidden (Barnard-Brak & Shulak, 2010; Becerra et al., 2012; Betts et al., 2013; Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2012; McAndrew, Farrow, &
Cooper, 2012; Muwanguzi & Lin, 2010; Simoncelli & Hinson, 2010, Verdinelli & Kutner, 2015). Stewart, Mallory, and Choi (2010) mention the existence of a gaping hole within the current body of literature regarding students with disabilities taking online courses and their persistence, success rates, and so forth compared to non-disabled peers.

The most recent studies looking at students with disabilities experiences in online learning were specific in nature. For instance, Francis (2012) conducted a mixed-methodology study to determine levels of self-efficacy and the role of assistive technology and mobile media with online students with disabilities in higher education. Heindel (2014) conducted qualitative research with a group of students with varying exceptionalities (including physically disabled, visually and hearing impaired, as well as students with specific learning disorder). The students in Heindel’s research were enrolled in a university program where courses were offered both online and face-to-face formats. Wooten (2014) conducted and published research about students with disabilities in online, postsecondary programs that focused upon the experiences of deaf students in online courses. Verdinelli and Kutner (2015) identified persistence factors and developed a model of student persistence for online graduate students with disabilities. There is still much to be learned about the experiences of university students in online degree programs who have SLD and/or ADHD, particularly at faith-based institutions.

Theoretical significance for this study includes Bandura’s (1989) social-cognitive theory which emphasizes the idea of self-efficacy. Social cognitive theory supports the notion that students will accomplish their goals, if they believe they are able to overcome barriers and challenges (Bandura, 1989). Chickering’s (1969) theory of student development emphasizes the role of the institution in helping all students achieve self-actualization. Knowles’ (2012) andragogical model of teaching for adult learners and Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory
provide further theoretical underpinning for this research. Finally, Tinto’s (1987) student retention theory and Tinto and Pusser’s (2006) model of institutional action for student success support this research based on the assumption that it is the role of the institution to be vested in the success of all student groups.

**Research Questions**

Based on the literature that students with disabilities may prefer the online course options over the traditional “in seat” instructional delivery model (Stewart et al., 2010); it still seems as if many students are reluctant to disclose their disabilities to their instructors for the purpose of obtaining accommodations (Roberts, Crittenden, & Crittenden, 2011). The following research questions were developed to generate descriptions of the students’ personal experiences in the realm of online learning at the post-secondary level:

1. **How do students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experiences in the online university learning environment?**

   Adult learning theory stresses the value of experiential learning and the life experiences which come along with the learner into the learning community. “The resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience,” (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2012, p. 36).

   Furthermore, I utilized the hermeneutical, phenomenological approach to understanding student experiences in online courses. This method of understanding relies on rich descriptions of the experiences and interpretations of patterns and themes as they emerge from the data (Moustakas, 1994: Van Manen, 1990).

2. **How do participants with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experiences using accommodations in the online learning environment?**
A study by Vojtko (2012) examined effort, self-efficacy, and cognition in relation to the academic success in college students with disabilities and found 100% of participants reporting accommodations were helpful toward their academic success. Perhaps self-efficacy for students with disabilities is connected to their confidence in receiving accommodations designed for them to achieve success in their coursework.

3. What benefits are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the university online learning environment?

According to Nilson (2010), adult students at the college level need to feel as if they have some level of choice and control over their learning in order to achieve success. Human achievement requires this positive sense of self-efficacy because life is filled with difficult situations, inequities and challenges (Bandura, 1989). Social cognitive theory underlies this research question as well as Tinto’s theory of student retention. Students who feel connected to the online learning community and who experience support and some level of success throughout the process will persist to degree completion. Additionally, Chickering’s theory of student development supports the student’s unique needs are met through positive relationships with instructors and university staff.

4. What challenges are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the university online learning environment?

Students with disabilities pursuing a non-traditional, online degree program face different barriers to their success as compared to non-disabled students (Gornitsky, 2011). Verdinelli and Kutner (2015) developed a model of student persistence for online graduate students with disabilities.
Research Plan

I conducted this study using a qualitative, phenomenological approach in the hermeneutical style of Van Manen (1990). The setting for the study is a large, faith-based institution with a diverse online student population. I selected participants from the Office of Disability and Academic Support (ODAS) listserv via email recruiting. I interviewed online students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) and asked them to participate in a focus group so they could tell their own personal stories about their experiences in an online degree-seeking program.

Phenomenological research “aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences,” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). The use of a hermeneutical philosophical approach to understanding human experience allows the researcher to bring in some prior knowledge from life experience to help understand “what a certain phenomenon means and how it is experienced,” (Van Manen, 1990, p .29). This approach is appropriate because of my professional background experience working with students with disabilities and their families and teachers.

Delimitations and Limitations

Students were registered with ODAS at the university, a process which requires documentation of a legal disability. The university follows the guidelines of the Association of Higher Education and Disabilities (AHEAD) to determine a student’s eligibility for academic accommodations in the online classes under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the policies of the ODAS office (Office of Disability and Academic Support [ODAS], 2014).
Students with SLD and/or ADHD make up the candidate pool for this research. Frequently students with ADHD also have a co-morbid learning disability that may not have been formally diagnosed. Including both groups of students (SLD and ADHD) helped to ensure a richer pool of participants for the research. Students chosen for this study have completed at least one online course prior to participating. The students have the experience of at least one course online prior to participating in the study in order to fully answer the interview questions and respond to the discussion board topics. Another delimiting factor for this study is the setting, which is a faith-based institution of higher education, which may limit the generalizability of results to other settings.

Potential limitations of this study involve using students with disabilities as research subjects and gaining approval from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) considering these students are a more vulnerable human population. I documented my professional experience working with students with disabilities and their families and teachers during my career as a school counselor and special education compliance specialist. Additionally, I documented my professional educator certifications from Virginia in the areas of Special Education K-12, School Counseling K-12, and Educational Leadership. Questioning designed to be supportive and sensitive to the student was used. There may be students enrolled at the university who chose online learning because they do not want to publically disclose their disability status. Because these students are not registered with the ODAS they did not have an opportunity to participate in this research study. There was no way to know how many students may fall into this category, but it was a limitation of the research which must be considered.

**Definitions**

The following terms and phrases are pertinent to understanding the research and results:
1. **Accommodations** - Academic supports designed to assist students with disabilities by giving equal access to course materials and resources; accommodations are categorized by presentation, response, setting, scheduling; accommodations do not alter course content or required assignments in any way and are merely adjustments made to allow full participation in course assignments for students with disabilities (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010; Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Gregg, 2012).

2. **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** - ADHD is a neurological disorder involving areas of concentration and focus that may cause problems with overactivity, distractibility and impulsivity (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2014).

3. **Online Learning** - Educational delivery involving students and instructors in separate locations connected via technology or telecommunication systems (Simonson et al., 2009).

4. **Specific learning disorder** - Specific learning disorder is best described as a group of disorders that, “affect the brain’s ability to receive, process, store, respond to, and communicate information” (Betts et al. 2013, p. 28); Specific learning disorder affects a person’s ability to listen, speak, think, read, compute, spell or reason (NCLD, 2014). “Specific learning disorder is now a single, overall diagnosis, incorporating deficits that impact academic achievement,” (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013, p. 1).

5. **Self-efficacy** - Self-efficacy is the belief one holds about themselves and their abilities as a part of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989).

6. **Section 504** - Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973
7. **Section 508 - Section 508 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973**

**Summary**

In this chapter I provided an overview of the research including a discussion about the gap in research literature and the theoretical significance of the study. I formulated the problem statement and connected the problem and purpose to the literature. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of online students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD). I crafted four research questions, connecting them to both, literature and the theoretical framework of the study. Next, I identified potential delimiting and limiting factors of the research and concluded the chapter with a list of definitions for terms used frequently throughout the study.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter serves as a review of the current literature pertaining to students with disabilities enrolled in online degree programs. A historical overview of online learning, as well as the legal mandates for providing educational support to students with disabilities will be discussed. Theoretical connections for the proposed research include social cognitive (self-efficacy) theory, student development theory, student retention and persistence theory and adult learning theory. This literature review also includes discussion about the transition and integration of students into a post-secondary setting and the necessary components for optimal course design and accommodations for students with disabilities. The primary focus of this literature review will be the research specific to students with disabilities accessing post-secondary, online degree programs and their learning experiences while enrolled in the online degree programs.

With advances in technology and increased accessibility there are greater opportunities for students with disabilities to enroll in degree programs through online education. Yet there can be challenges and barriers to accessibility for the disabled learners who choose online course options (Gornitsky, 2011). Students with SLD, including ADHD, represent one of the largest subgroups of students enrolled in college (Orr & Goodman, 2010). The National Center for Learning Disabilities describes learning disabilities as a group of disorders that, “affect the brain’s ability to receive, process, store, respond to, and communicate information” (Betts et al. 2013, p. 28). Different from intellectual disabilities and autism spectrum disorder and physical or sensory disabilities, specific learning disorder affect any of these individual abilities - listening, speaking, thinking, reading, computing, spelling, reasoning (Betts et al. 2013).
Specific learning disorder is for life; it will not improve over time and is considered one of the invisible disabilities that are primarily neurological (Betts et al. 2013).

The American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) replaced the former DSM-IVR in 2014. The definition for specific learning disorder was broadened in the new edition and now incorporates all deficits related to general academic skills and the particular areas of reading, mathematics, and written expression. These problems are noted to have a long-term impact on a person’s ability to function in daily living.

Despite the increasing numbers of students enrolling in online courses current educational research in the specific area of investigating educational outcomes and understanding the experiences of online students with disabilities is lacking (Stewart et al., 2010). A purposeful search through ERIC and ProQuest databases during the Summer of 2013 yielded minimal results for qualitative studies about online students with disabilities in post-secondary educational degree programs. Regular, systematic searches through educational databases using keywords (students with disabilities, online learning, post-secondary) for the proposed research from Fall semester, 2013 - Fall semester, 2015 yielded several additional sources, but the topic of online learning for students with disabilities from a qualitative perspective is still under-represented in the current literature in education. Three similar research studies were identified in the search for current literature. However, there were no studies utilizing the same methodology or targeted specifically to the same participant demographic description (specific learning disorder, including ADHD) as this current study. The purpose of this hermeneutical, phenomenological study is to understand the shared experiences of students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) enrolled in an online degree program to fill the existing gap in current literature.
Theoretical Framework

I grounded this research in the social cognitive theory of Bandura (1989, 1993) and the student development theory of Chickering (1986). Tinto’s (1987) theory of student retention provides additional theoretical framing for this research. Students with disabilities pursuing a non-traditional, online degree program face different barriers to their success as compared to non-disabled students (Gornitsky, 2011). These three theorists contribute tenets that support the idea that students with disabilities can be successful in their pursuit of an online degree despite the challenges they may encounter. Additionally, Kolb’s (1984) adult learning styles model and theory lends understanding about why some post-secondary students prefer an online course delivery model. Knowles, Holton and Swanson (2012) present the model of andragogy, which is the notion that adults learn differently than children. They report that experience is the richest resource for adult learning and encourage teachers to engage adult learners in self-directed, experiential learning that allows them to take responsibility for their own learning (Herbold, 2012). One assumption of this study is that students with disabilities can be successful in online university degree programs if they possess a strong sense of self-efficacy and provided with appropriately experiential and accessible course design.

Social Cognitive Theory

The basic constructs of social cognitive theory are human agency or a person’s ability to control their own thoughts and actions, their cognition or workings of the mind and self-efficacy, or the beliefs one has about themselves (Bandura, 1989). “The capacity to exercise control over one’s own thought processes, motivation, and action is a distinctly human characteristic” (Bandura, 1989, p. 1175). People’s beliefs about their capabilities exercise control over the events in their lives. This is the principle of self-efficacy, and it has the capacity to determine the
course of human action (or inaction). According to Bandura (1989), those who visualize success scenarios through cognitive patterns can achieve their goals. Likewise, those who visualize failure can undermine their success through faulty cognitive patterns which have a negative effect on their performance (Bandura, 1989). This construct is vitally important in the framework of students with disabilities and their success in non-traditional, online, university coursework because of the connection between a student thinking about their own success and their positive outcome, according to this theory.

Self-efficacy happens through four major processes: cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection. Self-efficacy plays a role in the self-regulation of motivation. People’s beliefs in their own abilities affect how much stress and level of motivation they will experience. Bandura’s expectancy value theory posits that motivation is governed by the expectation that behavior will produce certain outcomes. “Most human motivation is cognitively generated. People motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily by the exercise of forethought. They form beliefs about what they can do. They anticipate likely outcomes of prospective actions. They set goals for themselves and plan courses of action designed to realize valued futures” (Bandura, 1993, p. 128).

Online students with disabilities view their learning environment as a benefit or a roadblock to their success in their degree programs based upon their own beliefs and cognition about online learning based on this theory. According to Nilson (2010), adult students in post-secondary settings need to feel that they have some level of choice and control over their own learning in order to achieve success. Unfortunately, because of past experiences with academic failure or struggle some students with disabilities may not possess this belief in their own ability to become successful university students.
Adult Learning Theory

Kolb (1984) believed learning to be a continuous process that is grounded in life experiences. “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). In experiential learning, the process of adapting and learning is emphasized over the content or the learning outcomes. Akella (2010) described Kolb’s experiential learning theory as focused on learner involvement because the experience is what makes learning meaningful. “Knowledge is generated as new information and experiences are assimilated” (Akella, 2010, p. 100). Valuing the life experiences of the adult learner and the diversity this brings into the learning community sets apart the work of Kolb and Knowles (2012) in the development of Adult Learning Theory.

“The resource of highest value in adult education is the learner’s experience” (Knowles et al., 2012, p. 36). Adult learners bring a lifetime of background knowledge and life experiences into the learning community. Therefore, the learning needs of adults vary greatly from the learning needs of children. The theory of adult learning developed from this disparity between the world of pedagogy (teaching of children) and the uniquely different needs which adult learners bring into the classroom.

Malcolm Knowles and his colleagues developed an andragogical model of teaching and learning based on several assumptions which include: the need to know, the learner’s self-concept; the role of the learner’s experiences, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation (Knowles et al., 2012). The andragogical model of learning has strong connections to Bandura’s social cognitive theory in regards to motivation. Because human behavior is goal-oriented, motivation can improve within individuals as they desire to fulfill specific needs and interests, which only new learning can achieve. Knowles and his colleagues built upon the
foundation of Bandura’s motivational theory as they conceptualized the andragogical model to address the unique learning needs brought into the learning environment by adults with varied life experiences. They posited that adults, who believed in their ability to be successful in the learning environment, would be more likely to achieve success and attain learning outcomes (Knowles et al., 2012).

There is a connection between adult learning theory, the andragogical model of teaching, and the framework of this study because online learners enrolled in degree programs are adults who will bring their diverse life experiences into the learning community led by instructors who are facilitating their learning for the purpose of fulfilling a specific purpose (attainment of an online degree). Knowles believes individual differences among people increase with age (Herbold, 2012). Individual differences are important variables to keep in mind when teaching students with disabilities, further connecting the adult learning theory to this dissertation research.

**Student Development Theory**

In his book *Education and Identity*, Arthur Chickering’s (1969) introduced the theory of student development and emphasized the importance of the college or university setting being the most influential setting for human development and potential. His research shows that student development can be associated with various types of educational experiences and environments which can be encouraged under the right conditions (Garfield & David, 1986). Chickering’s theory focuses on the individual needs of students, and he helps to bridge the gap between research and practice through his work in the field of student affairs and student services in higher education. Student development is the process by which students learn, grow, and mature as adults. The major assumption of his theory is that college or university faculty
and staff, student services, and curriculum to help adults develop to their fullest potential (Garfield & David, 1986) can meet unique needs of students at the college level. This notion of human potential is the highest form of self-actualization an adult can reach in their lifetime.

Chickering’s (1969) theory of student development links to this study in two ways. First, the theory focuses on the individual student within a larger system and how student development programs and curriculum support the student. Secondly, the theory of student development assumes the student’s unique needs can be met through positive relationships with school personnel. This theory emphasizes the important role that the higher education institution plays in helping students achieve their human potential for self-actualization. This phenomenological study of the experiences of students with disabilities in online degree programs sought to understand more about how and why students chose online learning and how the online degree program is meeting their unique needs as students with disabilities.

**Student Retention Theory**

Vincent Tinto (1987, 1993, 2006) developed a theory of student retention and persistence that evolved from his original 1987 work through multiple studies and continued research, looking at the problem of post-secondary students leaving degree programs. His theory suggests the rate at which students leave colleges and universities can be used to gauge the school’s social and intellectual health (Tinto, 1987). Primary areas identified in the problem of student attrition include the quality of faculty and student interactions, and the student’s integration in to the university. Tinto suggested communicating and demonstrating a strong commitment in order for schools to be effective in retaining students.

Tinto and Pusser (2006) designed a model for institutional action for student success that delineates the important role of the school in creating an “expectational climate of an institution”
(Tinto & Pusser, 2006, p. 12). This climate of expectancy specifically refers to the expected behavior of faculty, staff, and students held by the institution as a standard to achieve. The expected norms are publicized, taught, discussed, and expected to be upheld by all. The institution’s role is to provide the support needed by every group of students (especially those from under-represented groups) to increase their sense of belonging and thus increase their chances of persisting to degree completion (Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

Tinto’s (1987, 2006) model and theory provides a foundation for the proposed research with online students with disabilities and their experiences in online degree programs because of his focus on the importance of students feeling integrated into their college program and the quality of faculty/student interactions. Tinto’s model of institutional action for student success illustrates the important role the school has in setting the stage for students to experience a climate of expectancy for their success and encouraging their persistence to degree completion. His work is especially applicable to students from marginalized groups such as those who have specific learning disorder, attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder, or traumatic brain injury.

**Related Literature**

**History of Distance Learning**

Distance learning through correspondence (mail order) courses dates back to the mid-nineteenth century with roots in the European countries of Great Britain, Germany, and France; then it spread to the United States. The original purpose of distance education was to provide access to educational opportunities despite geographical barriers (Keiarns, 2008). Letter writing was the original mode of curriculum and instruction during these early days of distance education. According to Miller (2014), in 1728 the first documented advertisement for a correspondence course was printed in the *Boston Gazette* by Caleb Phillips offering to teach
shorthand via letter writing to anyone, anywhere in the new colonies. One notable British educator, Sir Isaac Pitman, taught shorthand by mail in England around the year 1840. In 1873 the first correspondence schools in the United States, The Society to Encourage Studies at Home, were established (Miller, 2014). One of the instructors there was Anna Ticknow, who began a program of study for women of all classes to study at home and she provided correspondence courses to more than 10,000 students over a period of 24 years (University of Florida, 2001). “The origins of distance education can be traced to sparsely populated areas, both inside and outside the United States” (Keairns, 2008, p. 1).

In 1883 Cornell University tried to establish a Correspondence University based from its brick and mortar campus, but this attempt was unsuccessful. Later that same year, Chautauqua College of Liberal Arts in New York State granted degrees to students who completed coursework via correspondence courses and summer workshops. In the mid 1880’s, Thomas J. Foster began correspondence courses in mine safety education which later became the International Correspondence School (University of Florida, 2001).

In 1915, the National University Extension Association (NUEA) was formed to establish national guidelines for quality standards for correspondence educators, curriculum, and credits assigned to courses. Around this same time, new technology in the form of motion pictures and lantern slides emerged to provide an additional, visual medium for course delivery. Between the years 1910-1920, instructional radio became the newest way to provide distance learning experiences to students. The U.S. Federal Government issued over 200 radio broadcasting licenses to educational institutions between the years 1918-1946. Surprisingly, by 1940 only one college level course was still being taught via instructional radio, primarily because television had been invented and television production was gaining momentum in the United States.
In 1933, the world’s first educational television programs were broadcast from the campus of the University of Iowa (Keairns, 2008).

The Post-World War II years of the mid-20th century ushered in the medium of television into most homes in America. Distance education naturally began to evolve into educational television. By 1950 Iowa State University had become the only educational television broadcaster in the world, but by 1953 the University of Houston was offering televised college courses for credit (Keairns, 2008; Miller, 2014). One could obtain an accredited high school diploma through distance education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s Independent Study High School by 1969 (Keairns, 2008; Miller, 2014). The United Kingdom’s Open University began in 1969 and offered mixed media, tele-courses and correspondence programs for credit (Keairns, 2008). And by 1976 Coastline College became the first virtual college in the U.S. without a brick and mortar campus offering a variety of degree programs via tele-courses (Miller, 2014).

In 1969 the Internet was introduced by the U.S. Department of Defense as the ARPANet, but it wasn’t until the 1980’s that technology really began to change the way in which distance education operated (Miller, 2014). By 1985, Nova Southeastern University was offering accredited graduate degrees through online courses, and in 1989 the University of Phoenix launched their online campus (Miller, 2014). University of Phoenix became the first private university to offer the entire curriculum of both bachelor’s and master’s degrees online. This was a significant turning point in offering online education to all (Miller, 2014; Venable, 2010).

In 1989, the World Wide Web (WEB or WWW) concept was designed by Tim Berners-Lee of the European Organization for Nuclear Research (Perry & Pilati, 2011; University of Florida, 2001). The World Wide Web (WWW) was introduced to the general public in 1991,
and by 1993, “The Web” became a household term (Miller, 2014; University of Florida, 2001). The WWW and internet connection created a technology explosion that set the stage for a surge of online education programs over the past fifteen years. As a result, online learning at the post-secondary level has grown tremendously and is now an integral part of teaching at many universities around the world. One survey from the U.S. Department of Education indicated an enrollment increase in online education students from 750,000 in 1995 to 1.9 million in 2000-2001. A report by Singh and Pan (2004) showed 54,000 online courses offered in the U.S. with over 1.6 million students enrolled in 2000 (Li & Irby, 2008). At the 15th annual Sloan-C international conference in October, 2009, Dr. A. Frank Mayadas reported “from fall of 2002 to fall of 2009, online higher education enrollments in the United States rose from fewer than 10 percent (around 1.9 million learners) to almost 30 percent of total enrollments (around 5.6 million learners)” (Sener, 2010, p. 3). For-profit universities have continued to lead in online enrollments. In 2010, Kaplan University reported 68,000 enrolled in online degree programs, University of Phoenix reported 380,000 students in degree programs in 2011 (Bell & Federman, 2013).

Online education has been growing for the past seven years at ten times the rate of higher education, and if this trend continues, it could easily be that by the year 2017-2018 more than half of all students enrolled in higher education will be online learners. “Over the past decade, postsecondary education has been moving increasingly from the classroom to online” (Bell & Federman, 2013, p. 165). Full scale online education is possible in the U.S. by the year 2020 (Sener, 2010). Just in the past ten years, there has been an incredible paradigm shift in the field of education through online learning opportunities with roughly half of the nation’s 4,500 brick
and mortar institutions offering online programs and more than 80% of these institutions expect their online enrollment to increase each year (Venable, 2010).

**Benefits of Online Learning**

Online learning is now a part of the U.S. college experience; students are aware of it even if they are not taking courses online. Acceptance of online learning has grown across all stakeholder groups including students, faculty, and administrators (Sener, 2010). Familiarity with online learning leads to greater acceptance as time passes. Identifying the benefits of online learning will also lead to wider acceptance for more diverse and underserved student groups, such as students with disabilities. “Online education offers ways to improve teaching and learning which traditional education delivery cannot match, such as improving student access and facilitating richer student discussions among many others” (Sener, 2010, p. 7).

What types of students find online learning most attractive? Those who have work and family responsibilities, busy career people who want to advance themselves professionally, those in remote locations making commuting difficult, students who have scheduling conflicts with shift work and school hours, those who have limited financial resources, and students with disabilities who may not be physically or emotionally able to attend traditional, in-seat courses (Bell & Federman, 2013; Coyner & McCann, 2004; Deal, 2002; Hammonds, 2003; Li & Irby, 2008; Lyons, 2004). A 2011 survey conducted by the Instructional Technology Council reports, “the share of students taking online classes at community colleges is split almost equally between traditional students aged eighteen through twenty-five (48 %) and non-traditional students twenty-six and over (47 %),” (as cited in Bell & Federman, 2013).

There are numerous benefits to taking online courses such as accessibility, flexible use of time and the affordability online learning provides. The asynchronous nature of online learning
allows students unlimited access to course materials and the opportunity for feedback in a timely manner (Deal, 2002; Li & Irby, 2008; Sener, 2010). Students may prefer online learning because they can work at their own pace and can work from home. Online programs can provide, “an education at the learner’s own pace and learning style without the constraints of time or place” (Deal, 2002, p. 22). Some students may enjoy the easier access they have to professors and fellow students through an online learning community’s discussion board and email. Bell and Federman (2013) report some academic advocates of online learning believe e-learning can lead to better academic outcomes because of the unique instructional tools that can be utilized through alternative media that sometimes is not possible in a traditional classroom setting. Other potential benefits to the learner include customized instruction to meet the needs of the individual; this is of particular benefit to students with learning differences. Online education reaches places and groups of students who previously have not been given access to post-secondary learning opportunities (Li & Irby, 2008). That is perhaps the greatest benefit of online learning for all.

**Barriers of Online Learning**

As early as 2000-2001, Simonson (2001) was collecting data from post-secondary institution administrators about the perceived barriers to implementing online education courses and degree programs. Resistance to organizational change and lack of financial resources to fully implement the technology required for online courses, were some of the barriers identified at that time. The pervasive responses as to why institutions were hesitant to implement new online education programs included a lack of shared vision among staff, lack of personnel and financial resources that would be able to support a online education program and keep it up and running (Simonson, 2001). Institutions of higher education in the early years of implementation
of online learning programs were entering a different marketplace. Geography and distance no
longer were determining factors for students looking to pursue coursework, thus schools were
faced with marketing their online programs in a completely different way to attract a different
consumer of educational coursework (Furnell, Evans, & Bailey, 2000).

From an instructional perspective, Furnell et al. (2000) mentioned a valid criticism for
online learning for that time period: “there is a risk that information will be reduced to raw facts,
rather than being presented with the richness of someone’s experience and enthusiasm for the
topic” (Furnell et al., 2000). The shift from teaching a face-to-face course to teaching online
“requires online instructors to take on roles such as mentors, coordinators, and facilitators of
learning rather than conveyors of information” (Boling et al., 2011, p. 118). There were
concerns about instructional effectiveness and legitimacy/value of online degrees (Bell &
Federman, 2013). These pedagogical concerns were voiced by faculty members whose primary
job was instruction. Bacow, Bowen, Guthrie, Lack, and Long believed some faculty members
are hesitant to teach online because it is completely different from the way in which they were
taught and because it will add distance to the student/teacher relationship (as cited in Bell &
Federman, 2013, p. 168). Ironically, the growth of online learning is reflective of many
postsecondary institutions’ goals to generate greater enrollment (and additional revenue) and to
improve access for a variety of students who might otherwise not attend college (Bell &
Federman, 2013).

Concerns about maintaining academic integrity in online degree programs continue to be
a significant barrier for some institutions (Bell & Federman, 2013). The topic of cheating in
postsecondary education is not new. Bowers (1964) conducted the first major study of this topic
with findings that indicated 63% of respondents reported some level of academic dishonesty.
Compare this to a study conducted in 1993 by McCabe and Trevino who found the percentage of students who committed at least one act of academic dishonesty was nearer to 70% thirty years later (Bell & Federman, 2013). The respondents in both the aforementioned studies were in traditional, face-to-face postsecondary programs. Blum (2009) proposed that technology in current culture plays a role in how students understand and think about plagiarism because the Internet has blurred the boundaries between what is the intellectual property of another from general knowledge. “The Internet and electronic communication have affected much about their lives” (Blum, 2009, p. 4). Blum goes on to mention examples of how students are immersed in media and have become highly sophisticated with texts, both reading and writing, almost constantly. The key is to educate students through direct, explicit instruction about plagiarism and academic integrity policies through examples and discussions because today’s students operate much like the Internet, with speed and “intertextuality” (Blum, 2009, p. 4). Perry and Pilati (2011) posit, “How do you really know who is taking your course?” (p. 98). They advise online instructors to take care to “know” their students through a variety of interactions during the course, for example, “through the quality of their work, their writing, and their online presence” (Perry & Pilati, 2011, p. 98). When online instructors monitor for consistency across time and through a variety of methods they can improve the integrity of the course.

An additional potential barrier to postsecondary online education is the digital divide that exists among under-represented student groups, specifically the lack of confidence in using and accessing technology and skills required for success in an online learning environment (Bell & Federman, 2013). Recent studies in adult internet use show a digital divide exists between whites and African Americans and between those living above and below poverty lines. A third digital divide exists based on level of confidence using technology, according to Jackson (as
cited in Bell & Federman, 2013). It is the third divide that may actually decrease online enrollments more than any other for prospective online college students (Bell & Federman, 2013).

Another concern about postsecondary, online learning is that students might lose the social connection of peers in a purely online learning format. Bol and Garner (2011) express concern about students lacking an ongoing dialogue with instructors and their peers in an online learning environment which may lead them to feel a lack of support. Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, and Stevens (2011) reports one of the greatest challenges for institutions and instructors are designing online courses that are interactive in order to create a positive, supportive learning community for students. The factors that enhance the educational experience in a classroom such as a sense of community, timely feedback, clear expectations, and a reasonable chance of success are just as important for online learning (Bol & Garner, 2011; Boling et al., 2011; Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996; Perry & Pilati, 2011; Sadera, Robertson, Song & Midon, 2009). If any of these factors are ignored when a course is delivered fully online “student success will be negatively impacted” (Perry & Pilati, 2011, p. 98).

**Nature of the Online Learner and Skills Necessary for Online Learning**

Despite the boom in online learning in recent years, several concerns about the success of online learning for all students remain (Cho, 2012; Hall, 2009; Tsai, Chen, & Tsai, 2011). Not all students will find the online education environment optimal for their learning needs. Cho (2012) reports some students who are new to online learning may easily feel lost and a sudden sense of social isolation, especially if they don’t expect the online environment to be different from the brick-and-mortar setting. Interaction with others is essential to build community in an online learning environment. Some students may not understand how to effectively interact with
others which can result in failure of collaborative activities and a sense of isolation and loneliness (Cho, 2012). It is best to teach interpersonal communication skills in a face-to-face setting where there is opportunity for skills practice in a real-world setting. Students in an online course will need to be able to interact with fellow students using text rather than verbal/non-verbal communication. As a result, some meaning may be lost in the text-only format of most online collaborative activities which typically rely on a discussion board platform. Additionally, there may be misunderstanding of intent between sender and receiver of text-only communication within the online setting.

Tsai, Chen, and Tsai (2011) discussed the nature of some online learners who may be highly dependent (perhaps addicted) to Internet use. These students may have lower self-regulatory skills which could impede their ability to concentrate and remain focused on their online learning (Tsai et al., 2011). Clearly, online learning requires a certain level of self-regulation ability in order for students to be successful. This means students need to take charge of their own goals and know how to implement strategies to help them personally manage and organize their learning. Bol and Garner (2011) argue that the demands in an online education setting may be even greater than a traditional course, especially for students who may not be as self-directed in terms of setting goals, monitoring progress and seeking outside support.

Students who choose an online learning program should have basic skills in technology so that they don’t waste valuable course time navigating the course management system and their own computer to access the curriculum and course activities (Cho, 2012). Further, there is a need for all online learners to come into the online learning community with some sense of what is required for successful course completion. There may be a mistaken assumption by some students that just because a course is offered in an online format that the content and
requirements for course completion are less rigorous than the traditional course offered face-to-face.

Recent online course dropout research identified specific skills related to drop out rates in online learners (Lee & Choi, 2011). These skills include: time management, computer confidence, and coping strategies. While motivation, self-efficacy, and satisfaction were related attributes to success in online courses. Hall (2011) proposes using survey instruments during the advising cycle for potential online students in order to determine their potential for success in online learning versus face-to-face courses. While the information gleaned from these surveys may help in student decision-making, it may not be feasible for students to take such surveys and then receive adequate advising based upon the results if they are pursuing enrollment in a fully online college or university program. According to Cho (2012) explicit online student orientation is warranted as a proactive practice designed to improve student outcomes in online courses and reduce the number of students who drop out of online programs due to failure. “The following modules are recommended for Online Student Orientation prior to the first course being taken: The Nature of Online Learning; How to Learn in Blackboard; The Technical Requirements for Taking an Online Course; and Learning and Motivations Necessary for Online Learning” (Cho, 2012, p. 1051). Participation in an online orientation such as this would likely increase student self-efficacy and reduces the attrition rate for online learners at the postsecondary level. However, this may be difficult to implement from the institutional perspective when the goal of the educational entity is to increase online student enrollment.

**Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education**

“People with disabilities are the world’s largest minority group, the only one any person can join at any time” (Langtree, 2010). In postsecondary education, especially in online
programs, there is a wide range of students in terms of age and demographics. Many non-traditional students return to school later in life to pursue postsecondary degree goals. It is not uncommon for these students to enter college without a documented learning disability and then to discover later in life that they do, in fact, have some kind of learning problem. However, for the vast majority of students in postsecondary educational settings, their learning differences and/or problems with attention were discovered prior to leaving the K-12 educational system. Of the six million students with disabilities enrolled in K-12 schools, approximately 57% of them have SLD and about half of these students go on to pursue some sort of postsecondary educational program (Orr & Goodman, 2010). These students reported positive experiences when they developed relationships with instructors and counselors and became more involved in campus activities such as clubs, sports, and performing arts groups (Orr & Goodman, 2010).

Mentoring of students with disabilities in the transition to postsecondary education also yields positive results for students. Brown, Takahashi, and Roberts (2010) examined mentoring relationships between students with disabilities and their mentors in postsecondary educational settings. This endeavor was initiated to increase graduation rates for students with disabilities in a higher education setting. However, the findings of the study do not support the existence of a positive impact on graduation rates for those students who were mentored during their postsecondary educational years. Students with disabilities in higher education need flexibility and a multi-layered system of support for the best success (Brown, Takahashi, & Roberts, 2010). When students with disabilities are making decisions about which college or university to attend, they need to become knowledgeable about their own strengths and weaknesses as well as the educational supports offered by the institution, in order to make the most informed decision.
about which school to attend (Montoya, 2009). It is the knowledge of self that drives the decision-making process for students with disabilities at the postsecondary level.

Students have identified that receiving the appropriate academic accommodations was likely the most helpful thing in helping them become successful students at the postsecondary level (Vojtko, 2012). The areas of effort, sense of self-efficacy, and cognition about their academic success were also explored, but the primary factor leading to student success was the accommodations received in the class setting to mitigate the effects of the students’ disability (Vojtko, 2012). Additionally, other factors identified as having impact on student success in students with specific learning disorder or ADHD include: helpfulness of faculty and staff, applying for accommodations, available resources, socialization, and meeting other students with disabilities (Randolph, 2012). Disability rights laws protect students and can assist them in achieving a satisfactory level of support from the institution. Part of this protection includes feeling comfortable in communicating with instructors about the necessary accommodations and actually using the allowable accommodations in order to succeed (Quinlan et al., 2012).

It is estimated that about one in every 11 college students has some sort of disability. As this number increases, it becomes more important to connect students to the appropriate support services to help with academics. Historically, students with disabilities at the postsecondary level do not always request or utilize the accommodations to which they are entitled. More often than not, it is the students’ failure to request accommodations or to inform the instructor they have an accommodation play that leads to poor course performance (Quinlan et al., 2012).

**Federal Legal Mandates Affecting Online Post-Secondary Learning**

The flexibility and convenience offered through online learning attracts students to post-secondary programs. A 2010 report by Allen and Seaman indicated at least 4.6 million students
were enrolled in an online course during the fall 2008. Roberts, Crittenden, and Crittenden (2011) report 5.6 million students were enrolled in at least one online course. “... online enrollments are escalating at a rate much higher than their traditional, face-to-face counterparts and there is no indication that this rate has reached its apex” (Roberts et al., 2011, p. 242). Quinlan, Bates, and Angell (2012) report an increase in the number of students with specific learning disorder enrolled in post-secondary education and the fact that many of them underreport their need for support services. These figures indicate a real need for educators and post-secondary institutions to be proactive in delivering accessible online educational programs for students with disabilities in order to be compliant with current federal legal mandates for serving students with disabilities in online programs.

The American with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) require post-secondary institutions provide equal access to the communication and information contained in their websites and course delivery systems to students with disabilities (Crow, 2008). Additionally, Section 508 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act (Section 508) and Telecommunications Act of 1996 (Telecommunications Act) work together with the ADA and Section 504 legislation to provide a total safety net for persons with disabilities to have equal access to all educational products and services offered by post-secondary institutions in the United States (Crow, 2008). The U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) monitors this legislation for compliance, and investigates reports of any discrepancy of service by an institution. OCR exists to protect the civil rights of students with disabilities receiving any educational service from institutions within the U.S. and will assist both students and institutions in mediating disputes regarding the accessibility of online course materials and required accommodations (Gornitsky, 2011). These
five pieces of legislation are guiding documents in assisting the institution with compliance for accessibility and accommodations for students with disabilities in their online degree programs. For the purposes of this study participants are online students with specific learning disorder pursuing a college degree program and will be taking all of their courses in an online format.

In 2010, the U.S. Justice Department and the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights (OCR) both issued updated compliance guidelines for colleges and universities detailing how to deliver educational services to students with disabilities. Many institutions are now struggling to follow these revised guidelines because they are broad and vaguely written, open to misinterpretation by both schools and students (Oguntoyinbo, 2014). There have been multiple, recent allegations of ADA compliance violations and several high dollar settlements as a result of the federal government enforcing compliance regulations for students with disabilities in online higher education programs. In 2013, one Louisiana Tech student received $23,000.00 in settlement for damages from the university and several other institutions have been involved with consent decrees and settlements under the ADA in recent years (Oguntoyinbo, 2014).

Understanding Disabilities

The ADA 1990, as amended under Title 42, Chapter 26, and Section 12102 defines the term disability as:

- A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of an individual
- A record of such an impairment
- Being regarded as having such an impairment

Major life activities, as defined by ADA (2009) are divided into activities and functions. “Major life activities include, but are not limited to, caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, seeing,
hearing, eating, sleeping, walking, standing, lifting, bending, speaking, breathing, learning, reading, concentrating, thinking, communicating, and working” (ADA, 2009). “Major bodily functions include, but are not limited to, functions of the immune system, normal cell growth, digestive, bowel, bladder, neurological, brain, respiratory, circulatory, endocrine, and reproductive functions” (ADA, 2009).

The United States Census Bureau categorizes disabilities into three domains: communicative, physical, and mental (Disability Funders Network, 2013). The communication domain covers people who have one or more of the following disabilities: blindness or low vision; deaf or hard of hearing; difficulty having their speech understood. The mental (and neurological) domain includes those who have: a learning disability, an intellectual disability, a developmental disability, Alzheimer’s disease, senility or dementia; some other mental or emotional condition that severely interferes with everyday activities (schizophrenia, ADHD). The physical domain covers those who have impairment with any physical activity such as walking, grasping, self-care, or any health condition which severely limits daily activities (cancer, spinal cord injury, brain injury, etc.) (Disability Funders Network, 2013).

Further, there are some disabilities considered to be “hidden or invisible” disabilities because they are not visibly apparent. Disabled World (2012) website describes it this way, “invisible disabilities” is an umbrella term used to capture a whole spectrum of hidden disabilities or challenges that are primarily neurological in nature. The Invisible Disabilities Association (2014) website states, “. . . invisible disabilities refer to symptoms such as debilitating pain, fatigue, dizziness, weakness, cognitive dysfunctions, brain injuries, learning differences, and mental health disorders” (para. 6).
Learning Disabilities / Specific Learning Disorder

The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, 2016) explains learning disabilities in this way: “a group of disorders that affect the brain’s ability to receive process, store, respond to, and communicate information.” Learning disabilities are not the same thing as autism spectrum disorder or intellectual disabilities. Learning disabilities affect a person’s ability to listen, speak, think, read, compute, spell, or reason (NCLD, 2016). “It is estimated that about 2.4 million students in the United States are diagnosed with learning disabilities” (NCLD, 2016). The American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2014) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) takes a different approach to learning disorders than in previous manuals. In DSM-5, SLD includes the following: dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, auditory processing disorder, visual processing disorder that impair a person’s ability in the realm of academic achievement and daily living.

Dyslexia is a disorder with processing language and may cause difficulty with reading, spelling and writing (NCLD, 2016). Dyscalculia causes difficulty with math skills and can cause trouble with computation, remembering math facts and concepts involving time and money. Dysgraphia affects written expression including: handwriting, spelling, and composition. Dyspraxia affects fine motor skills and may present as trouble with coordination and/or manual dexterity (cutting with scissors, fastening buttons, etc.). Auditory processing disorder affects the way a person interprets auditory information and may cause trouble with language development and reading skills. Visual processing disorder affects visual interpretation of information and can affect the areas of reading, writing, and math (NCLD, 2016).
Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) was once considered a related disorder to the specific learning disabilities previously explained. According to the APA (2014) DSM-5, ADHD is now classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder involving areas of concentration and focus and may cause problems with overactivity, distractibility, and impulsivity. Students who have ADHD may struggle with problems requiring the executive functioning skills such as: emotional control, flexible versus rigid thinking, organization, self-monitoring, and task initiation. Other learning issues related to a diagnosis of ADHD may include the two areas of working memory: visual/spatial and auditory (NCLD, 2016). People who have difficulty with visual/spatial working memory do not have the ability to visualize something with their “mind’s eye” or to create a “mental movie” as a way to recall important information. Those who have a disability area within the auditory working memory may not have the ability to remember information that they have not heard long enough to use it or apply it to a real world situation. For example, if one cannot listen to a phone number being called out long enough to dial the number or repeat the number, the auditory working memory is likely weak (NCLD, 2016).

Transition for Students with Disabilities to Postsecondary Education

Intentional instruction of self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities who intend to pursue postsecondary education or training must begin early. Students who have an opportunity to practice self-advocacy under direct supervision while still in high school will acquire the skills necessary for greater success in the postsecondary setting. Cano-Smith (2009) identified self-advocacy as an important factor to the success of college students with specific learning disorder. Students with well-developed self-advocacy skills tend to have more meaningful relationships
with faculty, leading to better accommodations and success in course work according to Cano-Smith (2009).

Most students with and without disabilities have to make adjustments when they begin a postsecondary program of study, however these new challenges may affect students with specific learning disorder and ADHD more than other students (Hamblet, 2014). These students also must navigate the differences in how their services are delivered and accommodations are received unlike when they were enrolled in secondary school. They no longer automatically receive accommodations because their educational services are now governed by a different set of laws than when they were high school students. Initial encounters with admissions staff, advising and enrollment counselors, and the office of students with disabilities all aid in postsecondary transition for students with disabilities (Corcoran, 2010; Hamblet, 2014; Stoelting, 2010). A necessary part of successful transition to postsecondary education for students with disabilities involves meeting with the office of disability support services and giving the staff copies of educational records, testing documentation, and the most recent Individualized Education Plan (IEP), so that appropriate accommodations can be requested (Hamblet, 2014; Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtengberg, 2010). Students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary educational settings need to know and understand how their disability affects their learning and how to ask for what they need in order to be successful.

**Integrating Students with Disabilities into the Postsecondary Community**

Successful integration into the college learning community is another important step in persistence towards degree completion for students with disabilities (Connor, 2012; Corcoran, 2010; Daviso, Denney, Baer, & Flexer, 2011; DaDeppo, 2009; Hamblet, 2014; Shepler & Woolley, 2011; Stoelting, 2010; Townsend & Wilson, 2009). Randolph (2012) interviewed
several students with disabilities about their integration into a post-secondary academic community. Specific themes identified by students, such as the helpfulness of the faculty, requesting accommodations, and knowing how to access available resources, shaped their academic success (Randolph, 2012). Students with disabilities may require more individualized support than their non-disabled peers to fully integrate academically and socially to postsecondary education (Troiano et al., 2010).

Tsargis (2010) reported the use of a student homepage as a tool for students with disabilities to use to introduce themselves to their instructors, and share information about their learning styles, disability, and accommodation needs. For this strategy to be helpful for students, they must be self-aware and knowledgeable about their own strengths and weakness. Self-knowledge can help guide decision-making for students with disabilities at the post-secondary level (Montoya, 2009; Troiano et al., 2010). In a study designed to look for predictors of college adaptation, students with disabilities who have higher levels of acceptance of their disability were found to be more adapted to college (Herrick, 2011). Troiano, Liefeld, and Trachtengberg (2010) noted in their research that students with disabilities who regularly attended academic support sessions were more successful than their peers who did not receive academic support.

Connor (2012) discussed helping students to focus on their strengths rather than on their skill deficits. It is from the place of strengths and abilities that college students will find solutions to the challenges they experience during their transition to postsecondary education. This strengths-based approach will improve student self-efficacy. Incorporating discussions about the vast range of learning differences among the abled and disabled community will also improve student understanding of their own personal value and strengths as students. All of these approaches will strengthen students’ internal motivation and sense of self which, in turn
builds self-confidence. Self-confidence is a necessary strength for college students with disabilities to be able to utilize when self-advocating (Connor, 2012).

Hamblet (2014) pointed out that many of the students with specific learning disorder and ADHD, who begin postsecondary programs of study, don’t complete their degrees at the same rate as their non-disabled peers. Knowledge of their disability and of their personal strengths and weaknesses, an understanding of how their disability impacts learning, and an understanding of what is needed to be successful in postsecondary coursework, is essential for students who may become overwhelmed with workload and struggle to organize and prioritize tasks for completion. These students may isolate and not ask for what they need. Instead, their successful integration to postsecondary education can be improved through access to resources and connection to instructional and support staff (Connor, 2012; Hamblet, 2014; Shepler & Woolsey, 2011; Townsend & Wilson, 2009).

**Students with Disabilities as Online Learners**

A study conducted by Coronel (2008) surveyed online learners with disabilities from a variety of higher education institutions, and 89% of participants chose online learning over traditional learning because of their disability status and limitations. Most of the participants in the Coronel research had hearing impairment or physical impairment. Online learning removes barriers, not only for disability status, but for transportation, racism, and other forms of discrimination against students from marginalized groups (Coronel, 2008).

Simoncelli and Hinson (2010) reiterate that computers and instructional technology are making a positive impact on students with disabilities and improving their access to greater educational opportunities. Yet, students with disabilities could become frustrated and feel left behind in the online learning environment without the necessary assistive technology and
academic accommodations (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010). Research conducted comparing students with disabilities in online programs versus traditional programs, indicated the online students had no significant difference in their attitude about requesting accommodations than their peers in traditional settings (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010). The primary implication of their study results “may be that online course options offer greater access to higher education among persons with visible disabilities in particular” (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010, p. 88).

Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh (2012) studied students with disabilities enrolled in online higher education specifically looking at the usage patterns of assistive technology and students’ perceived well-being. They noted that students with specific learning disorder visited the course website more frequently, reported feeling more comfortable using assistive technology and the online course management system, and reported higher scores on the perceived well-being scale than non-disabled peers (Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2012). Serianni and Coy (2014) mentioned that flexibility and individualized learning made possible through online learning “are two major factors driving the increasing enrollment of students with mild and moderate disabilities in online programs” (p. 103). In addition, the online courses generally make resources available, such as review materials, additional links to helpful websites, teaching tools, and other support, for struggling students to have for additional support (Serianni & Coy, 2014).

Some areas of concern for students with disabilities in online programs may include students’ lack of understanding of the online course management system, technical difficulties with connecting online, and a novice lack of understanding about how an online course operates (Fichtern et al., 2009). Online courses may not be the best option for every student with mild-to-moderate disabilities. Online learning requires understanding of a student’s strengths and weaknesses in order to plan for their success if it is the preferred choice (Serianni & Coy, 2014).
The National Center for Learning Disabilities (2016) listed several challenges for students whose disability may affect their executive functioning ability such as: planning, task and time management, activating background knowledge, evaluating and reflecting, coping with change, asking for assistance, group dynamics and problem-solving, and impulsivity. Some of these areas of challenge are mitigated simply through online learning due to the level of control students with disabilities have over their course completion and task management when working online (Serianni & Coy, 2014).

**Online Course Design for Students with Disabilities**

Effective course design can improve access and equity for all students in online programs, not just those with disabilities. In their research, Marcyjanik and Zorn (2011) explain how to achieve greater web accessibility within the Universal Design model for persons with disabilities in online nursing education programs. This type of approach to course design will prove beneficial for all students as it addresses multiple ways of learning and multi-modal ways of accessing course content. When curriculum delivery is framed according to Universal Design principles, all students, not just those with disabilities, can have access to accommodations embedded within the course materials and activities (Francis, 2012). Online courses created using the Universal Design model assist students with disabilities, and most students believed they would be successful in the course according to research conducted by Francis (2012).

Another study conducted by Herbold (2012) explored giving online students more independent, academic choices within the structure of an online course and based upon what is known about the needs of adult learners. Adults need more flexibility in their learning, especially if they are older and working while taking classes, as the majority of online students are today. The results of Herbold’s (2012) research indicated 92% of participants found online
learning ideal, especially when allowing flexibility to choose their own assignment topics and
learning activities. Giving adult, online learners options and choices increased their engagement
(Herbold, 2012). Learning resources, syllabi, and course deadlines and requirements were
permanently built into the structure of the electronic classroom, thus allowing students the ability
to plan their time and self-manage their learning setting, pace of learning, and assignment
selections. Instructionally, similar course structure could be beneficial for students with
disabilities in online programs.

**Accommodations for Students with Disabilities Online**

Students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) drop out of high school two
to three times more often than non-disabled peers (Gregg, 2012). Those who do persist on to
postsecondary education or job training programs continue to be underserved and underprepared
for the demands they are faced with in the educational settings. The importance of academic
supports such as course and assignment accommodations cannot be stressed enough for students
with disabilities in higher education. The accommodation of extended time appears to be one of
the most important accommodations for adults and adolescents in postsecondary education who
have specific learning disorder, according to Gregg (2012).

Types of accommodations can be viewed in four categories: presentation, response,
scheduling, and setting (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010; Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Gregg, 2012).
Presentation accommodations allow students to access the information through a different
means, such as through alternative media or a screen reader. Response accommodations allow
students to produce responses through alternate means, such as through a scribe, oral responses,
voice to text, or other assistive technologies. Scheduling accommodations allow students to
adjust the time to complete the task, such as receiving extended time to complete tasks or taking
multiple breaks during task completion. As mentioned before, the accommodations for scheduling are the most utilized accommodations for students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in postsecondary settings. Finally, the setting accommodations involve a change in the location where the task is completed. For instance, a student may take a test in a quiet room in the office of students with disabilities. Not every student is eligible to receive accommodations in all subject areas or accommodation categories; rather they are individualized based upon the student’s disability and the demands of the course. Some accommodations may be appropriate for traditional courses delivered in a brick and mortar setting and would not be appropriate or even necessary in an online learning environment (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010; Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Gregg, 2012).

Federal legislation guarantees access to course materials and educational services based on individual need. These individualized services, or accommodations, are usually written into a plan for each individual student and communicated to their instructors at the beginning of each semester by the Office of Disability and Academic Support (ODAS). Accommodations do not alter course content or required assignments in any way and are merely adjustments made to allow full participation in course assignments for students with disabilities (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010). Accommodations are generally for additional time, use of assistive technology devices, different presentation of course materials (video, audio, written script, etc.), and provide equity between non-disabled and disabled students (Gornitsky, 2011).

One area of concern in online course management environments is the accommodation for additional time during tests which is difficult to provide individually via the online testing system. Professors can typically only assign one, specific time duration for all students when setting up exams in the online evaluation system, and this can be frustrating for some students
entitled to unlimited or additional time to complete tests (Fichtern, et al., 2009). Access to accommodations and navigating through the course materials are both important pieces toward building a positive learning experience for students with disabilities in online degree programs. Very little research exists on this topic and researchers mention a wide gap in the current literature looking specifically at the experiences of students with disabilities taking online college courses (Stewart et al., 2010).

**Summary**

Online learning originated as a solution to meet the learning needs of those whose needs could not be met in traditional settings, mostly due to geographical distance. Now it has grown into a medium for meeting the learning needs of those whose desire for postsecondary education is impeded by schedules, family responsibilities, transportation and cost factors, and unique learning needs. Students with disabilities whose academic needs are going unmet in the brick-and-mortar setting frequently turn to online learning as a means to attain their educational goals (Serianni & Coy, 2014).

Online degree programs attract a diverse student group who are generally non-traditional in terms of their academic background, disability status, age and socio-economic group and some are re-entering formal education after a lengthy time away (Bol & Garner, 2011). Online learning requires some level of self-regulated learning and the ability to work autonomously. Students with disabilities may find the anonymity of online learning to be comforting and enjoy the convenience and affordability it offers. However, some will struggle with accessing needed accommodations for academic success. The lack of on-going and interactive dialogue and support from classmates and instructors may prove to be a barrier to success for students with
disabilities in an online program (Bol & Garner, 2011). Modern technology allows online instructors and course designers to meet the needs of a wider range of differing learning styles.

Stewart et al. (2010) conducted research which demonstrates that college students with disabilities can be successful in online learning environments. These results make online college degree programs even more attractive for students with disabilities and open up a whole new realm of options for obtaining a degree. Barnard-Brak and Sulak (2010) suggest future research may want to look at why it is students with disabilities prefer the accommodations process in the online learning environment as opposed to the traditional school setting. The current study takes a qualitative, phenomenological approach to understanding the experiences of students with disabilities in online college degree programs. This research adds knowledge to the current body of literature, and informs institutions of higher education about the experiences of online degree-seeking students with disabilities.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of online college students with disabilities who are enrolled in college degree-seeking programs through a large, Southeastern U.S., faith-based university’s online learning program. This research set out to address the gap in the current literature about students with disabilities pursuing online degrees. There is a need for the study to give insight to course designers, online instructors, and institutions of higher education about how students with disabilities experience their educational pursuit in an online setting. I employed a qualitative, phenomenological approach in order for participants to tell their personal stories through interviews and interactions with other participants during an online focus group. Within this chapter, I discuss the research design and rationale for selecting the design, along with data collection, and data analysis. I also discuss sampling procedures, site selection, and provide a description of the participants in this chapter. Finally, the role of the researcher, along with a discussion of the ethical considerations taken during the research, has been included.

Design

This study follows a qualitative, hermeneutical, phenomenological design. Moustakas (1994) described phenomenological research design as focusing on the whole experience rather than the individual parts. This type of human science research is epistemological in that it holds in high regard the essence of the human experience as key to understanding and making meaning from the experience (Moustakas, 1994). “Obtaining first-person descriptions of events and experiences through formal interviews and informal conversations then searching for the
meaning or the essence of these experiences” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21) described the phenomenological approach to research.

I designed this study according to the hermeneutical tradition that proposes, “There are no such things as un-interpreted phenomena” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 24). Hermeneutic phenomenology is both descriptive and interpretive. According to Van Manen (2014), the two essential components for hermeneutical phenomenological research and analysis are an appropriate phenomenological question and experiential material. Therefore, I focused all discussions and research questions upon the experience as lived by the participants (Van Manen, 2014).

Within the hermeneutic approach are offshoots of the traditional position. For example, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) provides a newer construct to traditional phenomenology and closely aligns with cognitive psychology in its approach to making meaning of human experiences (Smith, 2004). In fact, Smith (2004) suggested that the IPA approach to phenomenology lends a “double hermeneutic” slant as the researcher has a central role in making sense of the personal experiences of the participants. The researcher plays an important part in this inductive method of research.

IPA requires the researcher to remain flexible during the data collection phase and to be open to the exploration of unpredictable themes and topics that may arise during interviews. For this reason, Smith (2004) recommended very broad research questions be used in the semi-structured interviews so that the researcher maintains the flexibility and responsiveness needed for obtaining the most information possible from participants. To be able to focus on the purpose of the research, it required the ability to remain flexible and responsive to the participants during the interviews. IPA strongly influenced this researcher during the designing
of questions and throughout the interviewing phase. In order to minimize personal bias, it was important as a researcher to be reflective and self-aware during the data collection and analysis process. These guidelines for conducting phenomenological research influenced this researcher’s decision making as the process of designing a strong study progressed forward over time. Although this study was conducted from a hermeneutical approach, IPA was influential in this researcher’s thinking.

The study sought to find the essence of the experience of students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) seeking a degree in an online program and sought to make meaning of those experiences in order to improve online educational experiences for future students with disabilities through increased understanding utilizing a hermeneutical approach. The design itself is a framework understood to be flexible and emerging (Patton, 2002). This methodology allowed me to be interrogative in the sense that I could pursue additional analysis based on my expertise and experience, and as supported by current literature (Smith, 2004). However, as a co-researcher it would be naïve of me to claim my participants do not have a voice of their own. My study merely provided the participants with a structured platform and an audience from which to share their unique experiences. The participants themselves told their own stories. It was my role as the co-researcher to share their stories through rich descriptions via narratives and to provide hermeneutical interpretation with careful and thoughtful consideration given to the owner of each story (Piantanida & Garman, 2009).

**Research Questions**

Given the nature of the proposed inquiry and based on the indications within current educational literature, these research questions served as the framework for the study:
1. How do students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experiences in the online university learning environment?

2. How do participants with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their reported experiences using accommodations in the online university learning environment?

3. What benefits are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the university online learning environment?

4. What challenges are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the university online learning environment?

**Setting**

The setting for this research was a large, faith-based institution serving over 90,000 students in various online degree programs. The university’s distance learning program started in 1985 with a pioneering effort utilizing videotape and cassette tape lessons that were mailed back and forth to the students, along with curriculum. Today’s online learning program at the university offers more than 250 different online learning degrees and certificates to graduates. Students can earn a bachelor’s and master’s degree from one of the 123 degrees offered 100% online. Additionally, there are 19 different post-graduate degrees offered that are more than 80% online, with some residency requirements for degree completion.

The university is fully accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) to award degrees. “This accreditation ensures that courses taken and degrees earned at the university will be accepted by other institutions recognized by the U.S. Department of Education” (Accreditation, 2016). Regional accreditation also allows the university to participate in federal programs such as government and corporate
tuition assistance and military tuition assistance. The university has many of its programs accredited and officially credentialed by specialized, professional accrediting bodies such as the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs, National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education, Accreditation of Allied Health Education Programs, Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education, American Osteopathic Association Commission on Osteopathic College Accreditation, American Bar Association, State Council of Higher Education, and Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (Accreditation, 2016). This level of national and regional accreditation adds value to the degree programs offered by the university and attracts students from varied backgrounds with a wide range of career interests.

The 7,000 acre campus is located in the Southeastern United States and also has a traditional, residential, undergraduate, and graduate school population of 13,500. This setting was chosen for this specific study because the university has recently experienced a huge surge in enrollment in the online degree programs to include students in all parts of the world. While the university is a faith-based school, it does not require students to sign a statement of faith when they enroll which provides a large, diverse sample pool for educational research.

**Participants**

Patton (2002) says when purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research it allows the researcher to focus the inquiry on those cases that are information rich and will allow an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon. Purposeful sampling allows for researcher judgment in selection of the most information-rich cases (Gall et al., 2007). Criterion sampling is described by Creswell (2007) as being useful for phenomenological research “quality assurance” (p. 158)
in that all participants must meet the same basic criteria for inclusion in the study. The most
information rich participants are sought in order to lead to greater learning about the shared
experience (Patton, 2002). “The point of criterion sampling is to be sure to understand cases that
are likely to be information rich because they may reveal major system weaknesses that become
targets of opportunity for program or system improvement” (Patton, 2002, p. 238). For this
reason, criterion sampling emerged as a logical choice for participant sampling in this particular
study which described the shared experiences of a specific group of university students.

Patton (2002) does not give specific numbers for an ideal sample size in qualitative
research. However, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommend sample selection “to the point of
redundancy or saturation” (p. 202). I recruited participants from the more than 1300 students
with documented disabilities currently enrolled in any of the university’s online degree
programs.

Initially, participants were contacted through the Office of Disability Academic Support
(ODAS) via their listserv email list to determine if they had an interest in participating in the
study (See Appendix B for Participant Recruitment Email). I asked the 31 students who replied
to the researcher’s initial contact to complete an online screening questionnaire using an online
survey to determine if they met the criterion for the study. I analyzed this data to determine
which students met the criterion for inclusion in the sample pool for the focus group and
individual interviews. The criteria for selection were as follows:

- Students had a documented disability on file with the university’s Office of Disability
  and Academic Support (ODAS).
- Students self-reported their disability was in one of the following categories: specific
  learning disorder SLD which can include: dyslexia, auditory or visual processing
disorder, language impaired, or ADHD. Rationale for this requirement for inclusion in the study was that these disability categories are the most highly reported for students in college degree programs (Stewart et al., 2010) and approximately 30% of those with ADHD will have a co-morbid learning disability (Dupaul, Gormey, & Laracy, 2013).

- Students self-reported completing at least one full semester in the online university program. Passing classes was not a requirement. Rationale for this inclusion criterion was to limit the number of newly-enrolled students into the online program. Transfer students were only included in this study if they had completed at least one semester in the online university program. Students new to the program may not have had enough experience with online learning to engage in deep reflection and discussion with the researcher. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the shared experiences of college students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) enrolled in an online degree program through a large, faith-based university in the Southeast United States.

- Students self-reported that English is their primary language.

- Students self-reported they are over the age of 18.

- Students agreed to participate in the interview / data collection process which included internet technology such as Skype™, and agreed to phone calls and emails, if needed, during the data collection process.

Further recruitment of participants was not necessary because initial recruiting yielded 20 eligible participants. The focus of the research was to understand the experiences of the students in their online program and for this reason issues of gender, age, and ethnicity were not a
primary concern. There were enough respondents who participated in all phases of data collection to achieve saturation of data once I conducted interviews.

**Table 1**

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age/Race</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
<th>High School Graduate</th>
<th>Degree Program/ Major</th>
<th>Disability Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Employed FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Ed. D.</td>
<td>OHI- ADHD &amp; Anxiety Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ernie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>58/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Masters/ Professional Counseling</td>
<td>ADHD &amp; TBI, SLD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>40/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Employed FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Ed. D.</td>
<td>SLD- dyslexia &amp; dysgraphia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Employed FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Masters/ Professional Counseling</td>
<td>SLD &amp; ADHD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juanita</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51/ AA</td>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>Employed PT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MAT/ Education</td>
<td>OHI- ADHD &amp; PTSD; Bipolar Depression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23/ C</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>MAT/ Education</td>
<td>SLD- dyscalculia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>49/ C</td>
<td>Widowed</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelors/ Criminal Justice</td>
<td>OHI- ADHD &amp; Borderline Personality Disorder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34/ C</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Employed FT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Ed. D.</td>
<td>OHI- short term memory &amp; processing speed deficits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23/ C</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Employed PT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelors/ Christian Ministries</td>
<td>OHI- ADHD &amp; chronic pain; SLD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suzy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Masters/ Professional Counseling</td>
<td>SLD-dyslexia &amp; OHI- ADHD &amp; chronic heart condition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buddy</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Unemployed (Retired Military)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Bachelors/ Religion</td>
<td>SLD &amp; TBI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>61/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Employed PT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Masters/ Professional Counseling</td>
<td>ADHD; Depression; TBI</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>41/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>Masters/ Professional Counseling</td>
<td>SLD; OHI (bipolar depression &amp; PTSD)</td>
</tr>
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<td>M</td>
<td>46/ C</td>
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<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Bachelors/History</td>
<td>ADHD</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>53/ C</td>
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<td>No</td>
<td>Masters/ Professional Counseling</td>
<td>SLD-dyslexia &amp; dysgraphia; ADHD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Employed PT</td>
<td>Degree</td>
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<td>Employed PT</td>
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<td>SLD-dyslexia &amp; ADHD</td>
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<td>54/ C</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Employed PT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Masters/ Professional Counseling</td>
<td>OHI- ADHD &amp; chronic pain (fibromyalgia)</td>
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</table>

*Note: Participants have been assigned pseudonyms.  
*Note: Race key: C=Caucasian AA= African American

There were 17 students with disabilities who participated in both the focus group discussion and the individual interview portions of data collection for this study. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 61, with a median age of 45. There were 10 females and seven males in the participant group: two African American participants and 15 Caucasians. The online program at this university serves a diverse student population. Four participants reported being single or widowed; 13 were married at the time of the data collection. Eleven participants reported being employed, while six were unemployed.

There were 3 of 17 participants who did not graduate (traditionally) from high school. Students with disabilities enrolled at all levels of the university. Participants in this study included four students working on their first bachelor’s degree, 10 in a master’s degree program, and three students in the Ed. D. program. All 17 participants were majoring in a degree program leading to a career within a helping profession (education, counseling, ministry, criminal justice/law enforcement). Students self-reported their disability type(s) during the screening survey and later during the individual interviews. Of the 17 participants, 13 reported having more than one area of disability. The most frequently occurring disability of these research participants was ADHD, which was reported by 13 of the 17 students. Nine participants reported having some form of SLD, with the most frequently reported area of disability being Reading (dyslexia). Within the participant group, several other co-morbid disabilities were reported outside of the criterion conditions for participation in the study, this did not disqualify those participants from the study.
Procedures

Prior to beginning the data collection, the IRB of the researcher’s university approved the research proposal of the (See Appendix A for IRB approval). Once I gained the approval to proceed, a collaborative conference took place with the supervisor for the online Office of Disability and Academic Support (ODAS), the dissertation chairperson, and the researcher, to clarify the purpose of the study and to develop a timeline for recruitment. I defined the ODAS role in recruitment to include sending the researcher’s recruitment email (including IRB approval and informed consent forms) to the 1359 students on the ODAS listserv. The initial plan for recruiting included sending the recruitment email and consent forms once in July and again in August, just prior to the start of fall semester. The researcher and the supervisor of ODAS established a timeline and plan for communication during the recruitment phase of the study.

I conducted purposeful sampling according to this protocol in mid-July. I maintained copies of signed informed consent forms (See Appendix E for IRB Consent Document) and survey results (See Appendix B for Screening Protocol) for all potential participants. There were 31 students who returned consent forms; 29 completed survey responses, and 20 were determined to be eligible for the study. All respondents who did not meet the inclusion criterion received an email of explanation. Additional recruitment was not needed because there were a sufficient number of eligible respondents to proceed.

The 20 respondents who were eligible for the study received an email giving instructions for participation in the focus-group which began on September 1, 2015. During the two-week interim between the end of participant recruitment and the beginning of the focus group, three participants dropped out of the study. This left 17 eligible participants for the remainder of the study.
The Researcher's Role

I hold teaching certification in the areas of Special Education K-12, Guidance and Counseling K-12 and Educational Leadership all levels. For 15 years I worked in the field of elementary education and most of my career was in the area of School Counseling as a Nationally Board Certified School Counselor. For three years I worked as a Special Education Placement and Compliance specialist for the second largest school system in Florida. I have worked with students with disabilities and their teachers, parents, advocates, and classmates extensively as a teacher, school counselor, and placement specialist. I also am a mother of adult children. Both of my children were diagnosed as having ADHD during elementary school. I have been their advocates.

I have been an online learner at the graduate level for more than five years and have completed more than 10 graduate courses online. Prior to my current online program of study, I was enrolled in a hybrid program (partially online) for obtaining certification in the area of Educational Leadership at the University of North Florida. In the spring of 2009, I completed all requirements for Educational Leadership certification in Florida, including passing the Florida Educational Leadership Exam. My experience as a special educator, counselor, and online graduate student all impact my desire to help students with disabilities achieve to their greatest individual potential in higher education.

As an advocate for students with disabilities for most of my career, I had an interest in learning more about the post-secondary experiences of students with documented specific learning disorder, including ADHD. These students often received a tremendous amount of individualized support and personalized accommodations during their K-12 educational years. I wanted to know more about these students who may have faced many academic challenges, but
who are now attempting college-level coursework. Stewart et al. (2010) reported students with specific learning disorder, including ADHD are the largest subgroup of students with disabilities enrolled in online post-secondary education; yet this group has graduation rates among the lowest of all subgroups of college students.

I selected this online university as the setting for my research because of my relationship as an alumna and continued graduate study at the university, which gave me access to participants. I enlisted the assistance of ODAS staff to send recruiting emails to potential participants. Students who were interested in participating contacted me via email. Of the 17 qualified participants, I had prior knowledge about one student before conducting the research. One participant was in a Facebook group of other graduate students and I interacted with that student briefly in that context. The research participation for this student was kept confidential and separate from any interaction through Facebook group discussions.

Online learning opportunities allow greater accessibility, convenience, and flexibility for students who need to fit post-secondary education into their busy lives. What else does the online learning community offer for students with specific learning disorder, including ADHD? There are pros and cons for choosing online learning as a means to a college or post-graduate degree for all students. This research sought to give students with documented disabilities enrolled in online secondary educational programs a platform to share their stories and voice their challenges and triumphs as online learners at a faith-based university to fill an identified gap in current educational literature.

**Data Collection**

I utilized triangulation of data sources in this study as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and to explore the phenomenon from multiple perspectives.
(Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Schwandt, 2007). The multiple sources of data collected for this study included an online screening survey, transcripts from a five-day discussion board focus group, transcripts from individual interviews, artifacts from participants, researcher journal entries, and decision-trail memos. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), “Gathering data from multiple sources and by multiple methods yields a fuller and richer picture of the phenomenon under review” (p.125).

Thirty-one students responded to a recruitment email sent out to all students with disabilities registered with the Office of Disability and Academic Support (ODAS) at the university. Those 31 students returned signed consent documents to me and received the link to the Survey Monkey™ participant screening survey via email (See Appendix C Online Screening Protocol). Twenty-nine students completed the screening survey and I analyzed results to determine qualification for further participation. Based on the results of the participant screening, nine students did not meet the criterion for participation in the study and notified them via email. I contacted the 20 students who qualified for participation in the research via email and sent the instructions and schedule for participating in the online focus group. I sent reminder emails during the two-week interim between participant selection and the beginning of the focus group discussions.

The data collection took place in two stages. The first stage was the focus group that took place in an online discussion board format using the web-based Class Chatter™ site. I used information gleaned from this seven day focus group to further refine interview questions, as well as to collect anecdotal data from each participant’s daily discussion board posts. I scheduled the focus group very early in fall semester to promote involvement of the student participants at a time that is typically less stressful for students. The focus group was active for
seven days, during which time 17 students participated in the discussions. I contacted the three students via email, who did not participate in the focus group, and disqualified them from further participation in the study. After the focus group concluded, the researcher refined the interview protocol based on information gained from the focus group data.

I scheduled individual interviews at the mutual convenience of the researcher and the participants. I gave participants the choice of participating in the interviews using Skype™ audio only; Skype with audio and video; or a recorded telephone interview. It was not possible to conduct interviews in-person because of the geographical distance between participants and researcher. The 17 research participants were located in a variety of different states within the United States and one student lived in Canada. The researcher resided in Virginia.

Focus Group

Once I had an adequate pool of students selected, I conducted the focus group via an asynchronous, online discussion board format (Class Chatter™). Because the focus group data provided a wider description of student experiences, it was important to conduct this phase of data collection first.

The bulletin board focus group approach was chosen for this study because (a) online university students were familiar with using Blackboard as their course management system, (b) it allowed participants opportunity to reflect on the questions and the responses of other participants, (c) it allowed participation across geographic distances and time zones, and (d) respondents were able to connect with others in the study despite their location. The primary disadvantage of using the bulletin board focus group format was the linear nature of the discussion which limited any spontaneity that might occur if the group were conducted face-to-face (Krueger & Casey, 2009). I used a non-directive, open-ended approach to designing focus
group questions. This open-ended approach, “allows subjects ample opportunity to comment, to explain, and to share experiences and attitudes” (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 3).

Using Class Chatter™, I created an online discussion board for participants to be able to interact with one another and the researcher in regard to their online degree programs. I presented focus group questions via this online discussion board forum over a period seven days.

Krueger and Casey (2009) described a bulletin board focus group as a group of people who agree to participate in online discussion board over the course of an agreed upon time, usually several days in a row. The electronic discussion board format for the focus group took place asynchronously and the comments appeared in chronological order. This approach allowed participants the flexibility of responding only to the moderator’s topic of discussion for that day or commenting and interacting with the other participants in the group.

There were both advantages and disadvantages of using the electronic bulletin board focus group format. Participants had the ability to be reflective and thoughtful in their responses to questions or discussion topics when using a discussion board format versus chat room style approach (Krueger & Casey, 2009). They were able to participate at a time of personal convenience and the asynchronous nature of the format allowed participation both across time zones and in both the U.S.A. and Canada. Krueger and Casey (2009) listed several disadvantages to using online bulletin board style focus groups including the lack of spontaneous discussion that might occur if the participants and the moderator were physically together in one place (p. 179). According to Morgan (1997) the presence of other participants in the focus group can have a negative effect on the discussion and may keep some participants from fully participating or saying what they really want to say. In a recent study, Forrest (2013) conducted a Blackboard™ focus group as a data collection point utilizing writing prompts related to
research questions within that study. Forrest (2013) reported the use of follow-up questions within the discussion board thread as a method of further engaging participants in the focus group sharing.

I informed participants that their participation in the focus group was voluntary and I could not guarantee anonymity. As an attempt to protect participants’ anonymity during the online focus group, Class Chatter™ allowed me to scramble the names of the participants to prevent disclosing their identity to others in the group. However, by the end of the focus group discussions 100% of participants had self-disclosed their names and their disabilities. They also engaged in very transparent, personal sharing about their experiences with the university, instructors, and the use of accommodations in the online degree programs. The level of personal sharing that took place within the focus group discussions seemed bonding and affirming for group participants. There were multiple examples of participants offering encouragement, support, and ideas for learning strategies to others within those discussions.

Since the purpose of the research was to understand the experience of students with disabilities in online college degree programs, the choice of a bulletin board focus group seemed the most appropriate option. A final concern mentioned by Krueger and Casey (2009) was that some participants may encounter emergency situations with work, school, or family schedules preventing them from participating for the entire time span of the focus group but this delimitation can occur in any study regardless of delivery platform. During the focus group, I accommodated participants with flexibility in scheduling for those who needed an extra day or two to respond to the daily discussions.

I developed bulletin board focus group questions according to the five-day model and they link logically from one day to the next (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. 181):
Day one: Discuss the problem.

Day two: Narrow the discussion of the problem.

Day three: Discuss possible solutions.

Day four: Identify the preferred solution.

Day five: Offer advice on implementing solution/ moving ahead/etc.

The online bulletin board focus group questions followed a day by day timeline that moved from general to specific questioning over several days with the themes narrowing in scope as the discussion progressed. However, I provided student participants with the option to extend their participation across a period of seven days, depending upon their personal schedules. As long as participants completed discussion board responses in the order they were posted for Days one-five the participants could choose to reflect and take extra time to complete the discussions. Given the online nature of this study and the fact the student participants had specific learning disorder, flexible time accommodations seemed most appropriate for the structure of the focus group. Students posted their own response daily and were encouraged to respond to at least one or two other students during the course of the focus group. I used follow-up query within the discussion board thread to prompt additional participant dialogue, as a data collection strategy (Forrest, 2013).

Bulletin Board Focus Group Discussion Questions

Five-Seven Day Timeline format:

Day one: The purpose of this study is to learn about the experiences of students with specific learning disorder in online college degree programs. Comment today on your experiences in online courses as a student with disabilities. There is no word limit to this post. You may write sentences or paragraphs. You may use bulleted lists of your thoughts. Spelling
and grammar will not be judged. The expectation is that you will give an overview of your experience as an online student in your degree program thus far. Please be specific and use examples, if possible. Feel free to comment on posts from other group members, just as if you were in a course discussion board.

Day two: Yesterday’s discussion was about the overall experiences you’ve had as students with disabilities in an online program. Today please discuss any challenges you’ve encountered in your online program; include examples, if possible. Again, there is no limit to your comments and you are encouraged to comment on other posts.

Day three: Yesterday you shared examples of challenges faced as online students with disabilities. Today you are asked to please narrow this list of challenges to what you consider to be the one that most impacts your learning experience as an online student with disabilities. Please feel free to comment on other group member’s postings.

Day four: Yesterday you narrowed the list of challenges by identifying the one challenge that has the most impact on your learning. Today please discuss possible solutions to the specific problems or challenges that were mentioned. What solutions would improve your experience as an online student? Please feel free to comment on other’s posts, as well. The interaction between group members strengthens the research and can lead to collective problem-solving. You may have a potential solution to another student’s problem/challenge. If so, please comment on their post.

Day five: This week you’ve been involved in discussing the experiences of students with disabilities in online college degree programs and have identified specific challenges and potential solutions to these challenges. Today you are asked to comment on this final topic: If you could create the perfect online learning environment for students like yourself what would it
look like? How would it be designed to meet the needs of all students? What advice would you give to course designers, professors, and university leaders that might improve the experiences of students with disabilities in online programs of study? What advice would you give to fellow students?

Day six-seven (optional follow up): Thank you for your participation in this bulletin board focus group. The comments you’ve provided will be valuable for future course design and further research in this area. You are encouraged to read through all the final posts from your fellow group members. Is there anything else you would like to share to finalize your participation in the group discussion? Please feel free to post here or to contact the primary researcher directly via email at pollards3@liberty.edu

**Interviews**

The data collection process also utilized individual web-based interviews and recorded telephone interviews. Qualitative interviews conducted using teleconferencing technology such as Skype™, WebEx™, and GoTo Meeting™ have become more common data collection tools in scholarly research (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014; Forrest, 2013; Hanna, 2012; Hamilton, 2014). Hamilton (2014) reports Internet use in the United States has reached 85% of the adult population and 20% of those users have attempted video chat. Given the nature of the online learner, video interviews and long-distance connections should not affect the study since the purpose is to understand the experiences of online learning for students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD).

I provided participants with a choice between Skype™ audio, Skype™ audio/video, or recorded telephone interviews. I recorded individual interviews using Skype™ and SuperTintin™ software technology for those participants who chose the Skype™ option. I
conducted three interviews by telephone and recorded using Google Voice™ technology. I conducted the interviews online or via telephone from my home office. Once I recorded interviews, I had them transcribed professionally. I uploaded transcriptions into ATLAS.ti™ program for further coding and analysis.

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012) responsive interviewing involves choosing the right people to interview. Their recommendation for effective responsive interviewing is to “talk to people who are knowledgeable, listen to what they have to say and ask new questions based upon the answers they provide” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 5). This interview style aligned with the phenomenological approach which is to gain insight into life experiences from those who have shared a similar experience. In this case, the shared experience of students with disabilities in online degree programs. Throughout the process of responsive interviewing I was listening to hear the meaning of what was said, how that has affected the participant, and what I can learn from the experiences shared (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This method of interviewing requires the researcher to be responsive and prepared to probe the respondents during the process, using the protocol as the framework to guide the interview.

The primary method of data collection for this study was responsive semi-structured interviews using Skype™ or Google Voice™ technology. Hamilton (2014) describes good qualitative interviewing as a craft of research and “Skype™ is a tool for practicing that craft” (p. 354). Using a video conferencing tool allowed for face-to-face interviewing without the inconvenience and expense of travel and provided natural boundaries with respect to safety and personal space (Hanna, 2012; Hamilton, 2014).

The act of interviewing is by nature intrusive and can cause participants to feel especially vulnerable during the process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Deakin and Wakefield (2014)
suggest allowing participants to choose if they prefer audio or video recording option during the web-based qualitative interview based on their level of comfort with the video process. For the purpose of this research, audio or video recording allowed the student participant to share their experience. The researcher built trust and rapport with participants through acknowledging social roles and the potential perception of a power position on the part of the researcher. The researcher was responsive and reflexive during the interviews.

I divided the interview questions into three sections. The first section of icebreaker questions were designed to help the participant feel at ease with the interviewer and to allow an opportunity to check technological connections and recording devices for an accurate recording. Moustakas (1994) discusses structuring the opening of an interview with a friendly conversation or activity that will help to create a relaxed and trusting setting for the interview. The next set of questions were designed to illicit responses from the participant about the time prior to their enrollment in the online degree program and to gain insight into their educational experience up to the time of their enrollment. These questions helped to understand the participants’ prior experiences in educational settings and how those experiences may have influenced their decision to pursue an online degree. The second set of questions focused on the current degree program and have basis in the theoretical constructs which frame this study (Bandura, 1989, 1993; Chickering, 1969; Knowles et al., 2012; Kolb, 1984; Tinto, 1987, 1993, 2006; Tinto & Pusser, 2006).

In an effort to enhance the content validity of the interview questions, the interview protocol went through a vetting process by two members of the dissertation committee at the university who have professional expertise in qualitative research, adult education, and students with disabilities. Additionally, the supervisor for ODAS reviewed the interview questions and
provided feedback used to extend questions. Two doctoral students who work primarily with students with disabilities conducted a peer review of the questions during the process of writing this proposal. Within the semi-structured interview, I utilized follow-up questions as appropriate using the responsive interviewing model (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

**Interview Questions**

**Icebreaker questions**

Tell me a little about yourself. What’s your name? Where do you live? How old are you? Are you employed? Where do you work and what is your job there?

**Prior to enrolling in the online degree program**

1. Where did you attend high school? City/State? When did you graduate?
2. When did you first find out you had a learning disability?
3. What type of special education services did you receive during your high school years?
4. What other schools or colleges have you attended since leaving high school? What classes did you take there? Please describe the setting? What kind of accommodations did you receive while a student there?
5. Tell me about how you chose the online degree program at this university?

**Since enrolling in the online degree program**

6. What is your current major in the online degree program?
7. How many courses have you completed in the online program so far?
8. What courses are you currently taking this term? Tell me about your favorite and least favorite courses so far.
9. What has been your experience in obtaining an accommodation plan from the office of students with disabilities?
10. Tell me about your current accommodation plan for each of your classes? How do you communicate the plan to your instructors? What are your accommodations?

11. How do you feel the online degree program is meeting your needs academically?

12. Tell me about who gives you support as an online student?

13. Tell me about your experience connecting with other students in the online program.

14. What challenges have you faced in this online program?

15. When will you graduate with a degree from this online program?

16. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about your experiences in the online degree program at this university?

**Theoretical foundations.** I designed most of the “Since enrolling in this online program” interview questions based upon the theoretical constructs which frame this study. Adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2012; Kolb, 1984) values life experiences which students bring into the new learning environment. This theory is the basis for the “since enrolling” questions four and seven. Knowles’ (2012) assumptions about how it is that adults learn best and his andragogical model of learning are the basis for the “since enrolling” question six.

Bandura’s social cognitive theory and the notion of self-efficacy were the basis for the “since enrolling” question nine. Students who are able to visualize success and can discuss their future success in an online program will be more likely to accomplish their goals (Bandura, 1989). Chickering’s (1969) student development theory and the assumption that a student’s unique needs can be met through positive relationships with school personnel is supported by questions four, five, and nine. Likewise, Tinto’s (1987) student retention theory and the model of Tinto and Pusser (2006) posits that the school plays a role in setting the stage for student success and retention is the basis for “since enrolling” questions four through 10.
Artifacts

Artifacts for this study included the researcher’s journal and memos, as well as email communications between researcher and study participants. Additionally, several students shared personal communications with their instructors and ODAS staff, along with copies of their accommodations plans with the researcher. Van Manen (1990) explained that keeping a research journal or diary can be helpful as a way to record events in the process of doing research. The research journal was an ongoing series of notes and collection of thoughts for the purpose of, “discerning patterns of the work in progress, reflecting on previous reflections. . . . and may contain reflective accounts of human experiences that are of phenomenological value” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 73).

Forrest (2013) discussed the use of “decision trail memos” as a means to help document decision making during the process of recruiting participants, data collection, and data analysis. These types of notes are artifacts for the purpose of documenting the researcher’s thinking about the study and the overall process involved to complete the project. This type of artifact is useful for establishing credibility of the research during the auditing process.

Given the nature of students with disabilities, having both audio and written data proved to be beneficial to the researcher to gain more pertinent information from respondents. Student emails, communications with instructors, accommodation plans, and other artifacts were collected directly from the participants in order to gain a broader picture of the student’s experience in their online degree program. Also, I gave students my email address and used email communication as another source of data collection for this study. Email communications between the researcher and study participants provided further details about the participants’ lived experience as online students with disabilities. These glimpses into the personal lives and
experiences of the student participants helped to fill gaps in information gained from focus group
discussions and personal interviews. Therefore, any email communications received from
participants were printed, uploaded into ATLAS.ti™ program, securely stored, and analyzed as
artifact data.

Data Analysis

The hermeneutical approach of phenomenological analysis seeks to interpret for meaning
and goes beyond simply describing the experience. “The purpose of phenomenological
reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 77). This
approach to data analysis allowed the researcher to seek insight into experiences previously
unknown. There is, in a sense, a phenomenological dilemma once a researcher has data to
analyze that requires moving back and forth in thinking and writing, between the phenomenon of
interest and the descriptions and interpretations of the meaning. It is a struggle for the researcher
and a process of seeking to understand more fully another human’s experience in the setting. An
ethical/moral obligation exists for the researcher to maintain reflexivity throughout the process in
order to accurately report, describe, and interpret data which cannot be taken lightly. Students
with disabilities in higher education are an under-represented group, who are sometimes
marginalized as a result of their disability status. During the process of participant selection and
data collection/analysis, I kept a researcher’s journal (see Appendix E, Researcher’s Journal) to
explore my own reactions and beliefs about the information I received from participants. I also
used decision-trail memos as notes to document the process of participant recruiting and
selection, data collection, and analysis of all data (Forrest, 2013). I uploaded these notes and
memos into the ATLAS.ti™ qualitative data analysis program for further analysis and data
storage.
The analysis of data for this study began with printing out all discussion board posts and responses at the conclusion of the seven day online focus group. The researcher read and re-read this data to look for patterns and recurring themes. In-vivo coding, “words or short phrases from the data record used as codes to honor the voice of the participants” (Saldana, 2013, p. 264) as a means for initial open coding in the first round of data analysis. Students in the online degree programs at this university are accustomed to responding to discussion board posts and providing responses to peers in this way because all the online courses are designed using this format. The online focus group design yielded enough data to gain insight into the students’ experience in their degree program in a very broad sense. I utilized the data to enhance the background knowledge of the researcher for each participant and to help tailor the focus of the semi-structured interview.

Hermeneutic phenomenological data analysis gives primary focus to the writing and rewriting of the experiences. According to Van Manen (2014) the purpose of reduction is to gain access to the lived experience through the vocative, the reflective writing. The writing in and of itself becomes an interpretive device in sharing the meaning of the lived experiences (Van Manen, 1990). Thematic analysis of the data in phenomenology can be understood as finding and identifying the structures of the lived experience (Van Manen, 1990). In the data analysis phase of research it is important to stay oriented to the research questions and the “What it is I want to know?” to stay grounded and focused so that it is possible to derive meaning from the data. “Theme gives control and order to our research and writing” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 79).

Van Manen (2014) also cautions, “One needs to be aware of one’s own constant inclination to be led by preunderstandings . . .” (p. 224). For this reason, it is important to have checks and balances in place to maintain high standards for ethical research and trustworthiness.
I employed the triangulation of the data sources (artifacts, transcripts from both interviews and focus group) has been employed. I utilized member checks with several of the co-researchers after each phase of data collection (focus group, interviews) to ensure accuracy of data transcription. Oversight from the dissertation committee comprised the peer review and process audit of decision-making memos for ensuring replicable research methods and procedures.

**Trustworthiness**

Striving for validity in qualitative research requires a philosophical understanding of certain assumptions about how to analyze, interpret, report, and integrate the data into the current knowledge base. This proposed study was grounded in a constructionist or interpretive perspective that values trustworthiness and authenticity in the process of research as well as belief in the interpretative, contextual nature of the data (Creswell & Miller, 2010). Similar to a naturalistic philosophy, constructionists believe all meaning is sifted through people’s prior experiences.

According to Rubin and Rubin (2012) constructionists believe all meaning is created through interpretation and understanding the external world they have experienced. Thus constructionist researchers are concerned with how participants view their realities and how they interpret experiences, while recognizing that it is neither possible nor desirable for either researcher or participant to fully eliminate all biases (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Constructionist researchers must spend time reflecting and examining their own assumptions. This required a level of mature self-awareness on the part of the researcher and the ability to suspend personal assumptions, so that I did not influence the analysis of data during qualitative research (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). This approach required reflection on the research questions and journaling about
surprises found within the data in order to look at the data without the influence of faulty prior assumptions.

Lincoln and Guba (1986) explained further that the naturalistic inquiry method is never value-free and comes forth from underlying paradigms grounded in theory and researcher influenced. Therefore, researchers using naturalistic methods should strive for trustworthiness (rigor) as described by Lincoln and Guba (1986). “Credibility as an analog to internal validity, transferability as an analog to external validity, dependability as an analog to reliability, and confirmability as an analog to objectivity” (Lincoln & Guba, 1986, p.18); this criterion for trustworthiness set apart my research as noteworthy according to the guidelines of Lincoln and Guba (1985).

**Credibility**

The importance of establishing credibility within a qualitative study ensured a strong assurance that I accurately reported participant’s words and descriptions of their experiences (Schwandt, 2007). As explained by Creswell and Miller (2010), when conducting qualitative research, it is important that a variety of strategies to establish the credibility of the study are used.

Creswell and Miller (2010) encouraged researchers to build collaboration with the participants in a hermeneutical phenomenological project and to view the participants as “co-researchers” in the process. Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe this relationship between researcher and participants as a “conversational partnership.” I used member checking of the interview data and the data analysis as another tool in understanding and clarifying the intent and message of the “co-researcher” participants. One co-researcher completed the Ed. D. just after participating in this study. I asked her to review codes and themes identified during data
analysis. I integrated her feedback into the rewriting of the manuscript. A final credibility strategy employed as a part of this process was a transcription audit by a peer editor who listened to the recorded interviews and read the transcriptions for accuracy. I kept decision trail memos as a means to document the process of making decisions during the data collection and analysis phases of research (Forrest, 2013). Finally, two different doctoral cohort members conducted peer reviews and editing.

**Transferability**

When determining transferability in qualitative research it’s important to have detailed descriptions from information-rich cases. Has the researcher provided sufficient description and details on each case that a generalization could be made on similar cases in a similar setting? Transferability in qualitative studies has much to do with the similarity of settings and contexts (Schwandt, 2007). It is hopeful that principles and findings learned from one context may also be useful to those in a similar situation, thus it is helpful to have detailed and descriptive descriptions (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). I established transferability in this study through triangulation of multiple data sources, audit trail using decision trail memos, and phenomenological writing that provided a thick and rich description of each participant and setting (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2013; Forrest, 2013; Gall, et al., 2007; Patton, 2002).

**Dependability**

The importance of dependability to the overall trustworthiness of a qualitative research project determines if it is possible to reproduce the research (Schwandt, 2007). If the research methods and processes are logical and well documented, then the study has dependability. Having an audit trail allows outsiders to examine the process of conducting phenomenological
research based upon the data and increased dependability of the final product according to Creswell and Miller (2010) (See Appendices F and G for Audit Trail). Additionally, I used the decision trail memos (Forrest, 2013) as documentation of step-by-step decision making. I conducted further data analysis using ATLAS.ti™ qualitative analysis software as a tool for organization and coding of the data.

The outside readers were able to examine the research and question researcher bias, methods and analysis of data in a way that increased the overall trustworthiness of the study. Strategies for establishing dependability within this study include: audit trail, decision trail memos, peer review/debriefing, triangulation of data from multiple sources, and researcher reflexivity.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability in qualitative research is concerned with the accuracy of data analysis and interpretation (Schwandt, 2007). Has the researcher accurately reported the data as collected and analyzed the data according to established qualitative methodology? In order to maintain confirmability of the data through analysis and interpretation phases, I implemented several recognized qualitative strategies.

I reviewed multiple data sources in order to have triangulation of data from the online questionnaires, data from focus groups, interview transcripts, emails, and other artifacts. Co-researchers provided feedback after reviewing their transcripts upon completion of conducting the interviews.

The researcher used the peer review process by collaborating with a research consultant and a dissertation chair to further ensure trustworthy research practices. Peer debriefing was ongoing since the prospectus stage and continued until defense and publication. I used
ATLAS.ti™ qualitative analysis software as an organizational tool for coding and comparing data. Peer review of codes and emerging themes took place during data analysis with fellow doctoral cohort members.

Carefully written detailed descriptions give the reader a sense of being in the setting and having the “real experience” (Creswell & Miller, 2010). This kind of rich description also helps readers to make real world connections that may benefit others in similar situations. According to Grbich (2007) one role of the researcher is to bring the reader as close as possible to the essences as described by the participants, which provides transparency to the research process (p. 1778). Finally, the process of self-reflection and reflective memos was ongoing throughout the research process as a mechanism for becoming more aware of personal feelings, beliefs, and biases that may influence the interpretation and analysis of research data as recommended by Rubin and Rubin (2012).

**Ethical Considerations**

Anytime research is conducted with participants from an under-represented group such as students with disabilities, ethics and the safety of the participants is a primary concern. I obtained IRB approval prior to recruiting participants. This included permission from the ODAS to contact students in their listserv. I assigned participants pseudonyms during the research and in the publication of results. I followed Federal Education Rights to Privacy Act (FERPA) guidelines in accordance with university policy and the IRB guidelines at the university. I offered student participants information about academic, spiritual, and mental health resources they could access, if needed. Storage of records and transcripts from this research was set up in a secure location (a locked file cabinet in the home of the researcher). I utilized safeguards to protect the identity of the university and the participants upon the completion of the study, such
as secure record storage and a password protected computer file. I compensated each of the participants with a $20 Visa™ gift card at the conclusion of the data collection phase of the research.

**Summary**

In this chapter, I detailed the methodology for this qualitative, phenomenological research and provided a review and explanation of the data collection and analysis. Responsive interviews were the primary method for data collection. I grounded the interview questions in the theoretical framework proposed in Chapter Two and connected each to the over-arching research questions for the study. The secondary method of data collection was an online focus group, which took place prior to conducting individual interviews. I addressed ethical considerations for conducting the research, and discussed all aspects of trustworthiness in detail, including specific strategies to ensure credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the study. I conducted data analysis using a hermeneutical phenomenological approach in the style of Van Manen (1990). Initial open coding, “in vivo” coding, and secondary axial coding methods were implemented (Saldana, 2013) using ATLAS.ti™ qualitative analysis software for organization. I reviewed the coded data and five themes with subthemes emerged as significant for describing the shared experiences of students with specific learning disorder in online degree programs.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to understand the shared experiences of students with documented specific learning disorder (including Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) enrolled in an online degree program at a large, faith-based university in the Southeast United States. Within this interpretive hermeneutical phenomenological design, the researcher remains reflexive in order to make sense of the personal experiences shared by the participants (Smith, 2004). The data collection methods used within this study included an online screening survey, online focus group, individual interviews, and participant artifacts. I utilized ATLAS.ti™ software as the primary tool for coding and organizing data from these sources.

The purpose of this chapter is to review the findings of the data analysis conducted through coding and identifying emerging themes from the transcripts of the online focus group, participant artifacts, and individual interviews. I approached analysis of data in a sequential, iterative manner that took place over a four-month time period. I identified five themes with subthemes from this analysis of data. Themes included (a) Challenges during online degree program, (b) Benefits from choosing an online degree program, (c) Student’s ideas for improving online degree programs, (d) Internal characteristics of students for success, and (e) External motivators for degree completion.

These research questions served as the framework for the study:

1. How do students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experiences in the online university learning environment?
2. How do participants with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their reported experiences using accommodations in the online university learning environment?

3. What benefits are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the university online learning environment?

4. What challenges are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the university online learning environment?

Participants

I assigned each of the 17 research participants a pseudonym to protect their anonymity. Participants ranged in age from 23 to 61 years with a median age of 45. There were 10 females and seven males; two African Americans and 15 Caucasians who participated. The participants each met criterion for inclusion in the study, which included having SLD (and/or ADHD). Some students self-reported the disability area of Other Health Impaired (OHI) as in the case of Lucy, Juanita, Judy, Samantha, Suzy, Cheryl, and Joni. Additional probing with these participants yielded information to connect them with the disability area of ADHD and they were included in the study on that basis (see Table 1).

A majority of the participants (13 out of 17) reported having more than one area of disability while enrolled in an online degree program at the university.

Lucy

Lucy is a soft-spoken, 52-year-old female doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the university. Lucy self-reported her disability to be OHI specifically with deficits in the areas of ADHD and short-term memory. Lucy described her experience in the online program as
being positive and has established good relationships with her instructors. Her biggest challenges have been working on group projects and attending intensive courses. Lucy shared, 

Oh how I hate group projects! I mean I really hate them with a passion because it becomes SO obvious how much slower my processing is and everyone else is just way ahead of me and waiting on me to catch up. I can’t stand that. (Interview, September 11, 2015).

Students in graduate online degree programs are required to attend on-campus intensive, week-long courses. Lucy had difficulty when she attended the final intensive week of traditional classroom instruction which included a stressful comprehensive final exam. Lucy shared she couldn’t have made the trip and been successful during the intensive week if her husband had not traveled with her and driven her to class each day. She reported that being on campus and in the classroom setting was very stressful because of the academic pressure, the pace of the course, and the nature of her disability.

Ernie

Ernie finished his bachelor’s degree in Psychology at the university three months prior to this study and is now enrolled in the master’s degree program for Professional Counseling. Ernie is 58 years old and self-employed as a carpenter. He is seeking a career change, because of the physical requirements of his current work that he is no longer able to do. Ernie reports that as he gets older, he has more trouble with the effects of his disabilities. He reported his disabilities as SLD and ADHD; he also has a TBI resulting from a car accident. Ernie reported having difficulty in his personal relationship with his wife as a result of his disabilities, specifically having a short temper. Ernie’s participation and sharing in the online focus group, as well as the individual interview was quite candid. Ernie’s personality came across as abrasive during some
discussion board interactions. He wasn’t as abrupt during the video interview but he spoke very loudly. Ernie expressed feeling frustrated and impatient with instructors who do not respond right away to his questions.

If I don’t step up to the plate and contact them (instructors) I don’t have a connection. As a matter of fact, I asked him the other day about a concern of mine and I’m still waiting after three days. I’m choosing to be patient with him because I don’t want it affecting how he grades my material. What else can I do? (Interview, September 15, 2015).

Joy

Joy is a 40-year-old female doctoral student who successfully defended her dissertation and completed her Ed. D. soon after she participated in the interview for this study. She has SLD; both dyslexia and dysgraphia. She is married and works as a teaching assistant for another university. Joy completed her Bachelor’s degree in a hybrid program where she took some courses in person at the college and others were taken online. She discovered that she could excel in online classes. “I just flourished; it’s perfect for the way I learn!” (Focus Group, September 1, 2015). She completed her master’s, specialist, and doctoral degrees in online programs. Her advice to other students with disabilities, “It is important to ask for and to accept help from others when needed. It does not mean that they are incapable it just means that they need help just like anybody else.” (Focus Group, September 5, 2015).

Tom

Tom is 56 and enrolled in the master’s degree program for Professional Counseling. He has both SLD and ADHD. Tom is a married foster parent who works as a vocational counselor. Tom shared about his experience as an online student,
It's the communication that's the key to your professor knowing what your needs are and knowing you. It's like sitting in class. They recognize me (in person) because of the fact I walk with a cane. They'd always know me. Or, “There's so and so with their little twitch that they have. You can see that in a classroom. Because there's no video interaction with professors like you and I in an online course, which I think is highly missing, they don't get to know their students.” (Interview, September 15, 2015).

Tom would like more interaction with fellow students and instructors because he sometimes feels isolated as an online learner.

**Juanita**

She is a 51-year-old woman who has returned to school to pursue a master’s degree in Teaching (MAT). Although she holds teaching credentials for several subject areas, she works part-time in a retail job. Juanita self-reported her disabilities as Other Health Impaired, including ADHD and Bipolar Depression. She shared that she enjoys the online learning format because she doesn’t like to have much interaction with people outside her home. Juanita began a bachelor’s degree program at a traditional university setting. She needed to transfer to an online program because of family responsibilities and her disabilities. She completed her bachelor’s degree online and now she is in a fully online master’s degree program to become a special educator.

I want to teach children that have disabilities. I want to teach and help people like myself. I feel like that's probably best accomplished in the public school system because from what I know of the private schools, there's not a whole lot of disabilities, I don't think. (Juanita, Interview, September 16, 2015).
Juanita shared openly about her personal life and struggle with the effects of her PTSD and bi polar depression; both are reasons for her under-employment and her need for online learning.

**Lauren**

Lauren is enrolled in the MAT program to obtain a master’s degree in Teaching from the School of Education. She self-reported her disability as Dyscalculia, under the umbrella of SLD. “My disability is in math, and also they said that I have a somewhat of a slower fluency thing. I get As and Bs mixed up. I get really bad test anxiety,” (Interview, September 9, 2015). Lauren is 23 and single. Her career goal is to become an elementary school teacher. One of her struggles with the online degree program has been obtaining accurate information about the requirements for licensure and course enrollment from advising. Lauren shared,

I have to try and work really hard. I don't want to be thought of as someone that's disabled. Honestly, there are people a lot worse off than I am. Yes, I have some things, like my brain works differently. My thing is I try and play to my strengths. I know I'm not good at math. I know that. You don't see me trying to become an engineer, but I'm (stronger) in other areas. I just try and play to my strengths. (Focus Group, September 1, 2015.)

**Hope**

Hope is a 49-year-old female who is widowed. She reported her disabilities as ADHD and Borderline Personality Disorder. She is currently unemployed and working toward her first bachelor’s degree. Hope shared, “I quit High School when I was 19. I quit there in '85, and then I went to Job Corps in '86,” (Interview, September 9, 2015). Her major is Criminal Justice and her career goal includes working with released prisoners in a half-way, vocational rehab
program. Hope lives with family members and reports feeling very little support as she is working on her degree.

She is motivated by the possibility of giving back to her community when she completes her degree. Hope shared with me,

I want to better myself, because there's too many people out there that needs help, and one of the reasons why I want to get this degree is because there's a lot of teens where I live that have problems like I was growing up with. They don't know how to deal with it. And to me, somebody who's been through what they're going through, I think would help them do better, especially if they didn't stay in that rut and let what happened to them growing up affect them as an adult. (Interview, September 9, 2015).

Judy

Judy is employed as a School Psychologist and she just recently finished the Ed. D. program. Judy is 34 and she is single. Her disabilities are OHI for Memory and Processing-Speed deficits. “My memory is the biggest thing I think, and that goes along with the attention, too. My office is covered in post-its, so I needed the extended time. Also, my processing speed has slowed way down,” (Interview, September 14, 2015). This was her first experience in an online degree program. Judy earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in traditional “in seat” programs. She felt the doctoral program online met her needs as a working adult in the school system who needed more flexibility.

“My disability has changed my personality and makes me much more sensitive and much more upset at things. And I break down a lot easier” reported Judy (Interview, September 14, 2015). This made choosing a supportive dissertation chairperson and the right committee members very important for her success. Judy credits her compassionate dissertation
chairperson and her brother as being the main sources of support who encouraged her to complete her Ed. D.

**Samantha**

Samantha is a 23-year-old student who is seeking a bachelor’s degree in Christian Ministry. She reported having both SLD and OHI (including ADHD and chronic Lyme disease and narcolepsy). She works part time and is a single female. Samantha chose the online program and entered as a transfer student because of her chronic health condition, which impairs her ability to drive to and from class or sit for long periods of time. She shared,

I figured that online would probably be the best option because even if I don't feel up to driving, I don't have to drive, and if I didn't feel up to leaving my apartment, I didn't have to. I could just do it all from home. (Samantha, Interview, September 11, 2015).

**Suzy**

Suzy is in the last semester of the master’s degree for Professional Counseling. She is 34 and reported her disabilities as SLD (dyslexia and dysgraphia) and ADHD. She is married and is currently unemployed. Suzy shared at length within the focus group discussions about specific learning strategies she used during her bachelor’s and master’s degree programs to help with her reading comprehension and memory issues. Suzy reported one of her best strategies for success in the online degree program was having her sister enrolled in the same degree program and the same courses each semester. This provided her with an additional level of support and assistance with schedules and timelines for assignments. Suzy said of her sister, “We had the same professors, so life was a lot easier in that aspect. She knew exactly when our stuff was due,” (Interview, September 16, 2015).
**Buddy**

This retired military man is 53 years old. Buddy left home at 16 and never graduated from high school. He obtained a GED while in the Army. Buddy served 31 years in the Army before he was medically retired. He reported his disability as SLD in the area of memory related to a Traumatic Brain Injury sustained while in military service in Afghanistan.

Buddy said, “I’ve been called to preach,” (Interview, September 10, 2015). He is majoring in Religion/Theology and working toward his first bachelor’s degree. He is not currently employed. Buddy shared that some of his Bible courses have had to be re-taken multiple times in order to pass and count toward graduation. When asked if he ever requested additional time on assignments Buddy replied, “No ma’am, I don’t. When you read the guidelines for the university and the professors, they don’t have to give the extra time at all.” So Buddy doesn’t ask for his accommodation of extra time to complete assignments, which has led to multiple course failures. His attitude was positive, despite these challenges. His unwavering belief that he has been called into ministry keeps him motivated to learn and complete his degree.

**Joshua**

Joshua is a 61-year-old man with severe ADHD and SLD. He reported having a significant memory deficit which affects his learning. He is completing his master’s degree in Professional Counseling. He currently works part-time and is married. Joshua reported that he was once a pastor of a church. Interviewing Joshua proved challenging, as his ability to attend to the questions seemed impaired. He jumped around from topic to topic, despite my best efforts at structuring and guiding the interview process. Joshua has a jolly, dynamic, engaging personality
which makes it easy to become absorbed in his narrative. When describing himself, Joshua shared:

Actually speaking, quite honestly, I know more about more things than most people my age, most people younger than I. I have a very strong understanding of technology and its uses. One thing I've always done is I've always pushed the envelope, and my wife said the one thing that scared her when she considered marrying me was that I had no fear.

(Interview, September 10, 2015).

Cheryl

She is a former teacher who is currently not working. Cheryl is 41 and married. She is completing a master’s degree in Professional Counseling. She has OHI (PTSD and bipolar depression) and also SLD. Cheryl holds both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in Education, but this is her first online learning experience.

Cheryl was forthright in admitting she has experienced some challenges with communicating with a few instructors during the online program. She brings 16 years of background knowledge and experience as a special education teacher with her into the learning setting. Cheryl displayed strong self-advocacy skills and a sense of understanding her rights to receive accommodations as a disabled student. However, during the interview and email conversations it became clear that Cheryl’s communication skills are very direct and assertive. She also seems impulsive in her responses and doesn’t pause to think before responding. Cheryl met with resistance when she requested accommodations from two of her instructors.

I emailed both of them asking for clarification on a specific assignment, and was told that I needed to read the instructions; that it was fully explained. One of them even told me that as a graduate student, I'm supposed to have the ability to understand written
instructions. Neither one of them expanded on the instructions. (Focus Group, September 2, 2015).

This type of response from her instructors caused Cheryl to feel embarrassed and defensive. She reported both the instructors to ODAS and may have created a worse situation for herself by her emotional response to their emails. Cheryl admitted that she tends to take things personally.

**Johnny**

Johnny is 46 years old and has ADHD. He currently works at home as the primary home school instructor for his teenage daughter. His daughter also has ADHD and Johnny shared that it was through his daughter’s struggle in school and her diagnosis that he came to believe he also may have a similar problem.

Observing her and the things she went through really made me more aware of the problems I had when I was in school. So the more I thought about it and the more I recognized myself in her and her similar issues, I went and was evaluated. I am ADHD as well. When I was in school it’s not something there was a lot known about. (Interview, September 15, 2015).

Johnny shared that his ADHD symptoms affected him in other areas of life.

And even in the jobs that I’ve had, now that I know about my ADHD I can recognize where it affected me professionally. And if I had known about it then, how I could have maybe changed things or anticipated different things. (Interview, September 15, 2015)

So he uses the information he has gained as a tool to help change his future. Johnny is majoring in History and completing his first bachelor’s degree. His career goal is to continue to graduate school and become a professor one day.
Chris

Chris reported learning disabilities in both reading and writing (dyslexia and dysgraphia) in addition to ADHD. He recently completed his master’s degree in Professional Counseling at the age of 53 through the online degree program. He owns and operates a private counseling practice, specializing in pastoral counseling and addiction recovery. Chris was a high-school dropout at the age of 15 and finished his GED and bachelor’s degrees in non-traditional settings. “I came in through some back doors to obtain my education” (Chris, Interview, September 14, 2015). He credited this university with having a flexible admissions process that allowed him a chance to obtain a graduate degree despite his past educational experience and lack of GRE scores. Chris said,

Yeah, so that would be the trouble is I don't fit the boxes that we've created in the American education system. I'm plenty bright. My IQ level is above normal IQ level, but my learning problem is significant. It impedes my ability to kind of do things normally. I thought the online school was going to be really a challenge. When you have a reading/writing disorder, to do something that's all about reading and writing . . . but I’ve used nothing but adaptive technology, and that's made all the difference in the world. (Interview, September 14, 2015).

Terrell

Terrell is a 42-year-old male, who is married with young children. Terrell is enrolled in the master’s degree program for Professional Counseling. He has both SLD and ADHD. He enlisted in the Navy after high school and completed three years of service. He worked several different jobs before finishing his bachelor’s degree. He is currently unemployed; having recently been laid off from a position in the local school system.
Terrell reported several challenges with the online degree program including time management, planning ahead for completing work, getting started on assignments, sustaining focus, and the amount of reading required for the program. Terrell expressed concern about the amount of time his degree program takes from family time. Because of his disability, assignments requiring a lot of reading take him a very long time to complete. He shared about getting behind on his work and then sometimes forgetting due dates, as well. Terrell said, “I ended up missing an assignment and I got a C in that class. If I would have completed that one assignment, it would have been an A for the course” (Interview, September 10, 2015).

Joni

She is a 54-year-old female graduate student in the master’s degree program for Professional Counseling. Joni reported her disability as OHI (including ADHD and fibromyalgia with chronic pain). She is married and employed part-time as an advocate for students with disabilities at the local college where she completed her bachelor’s degree.

Joni described the effects of her disability and how they impact her ability to concentrate and complete tests in a timely manner. The online program gives her more flexibility and ability to manage her disabilities. She shared, “This program gives me more lenience with learning how to better handle my time and manage my pain and manage my schedule. It's just more kind to me,” (Focus Group, September 1, 2015). Joni shared that she easily stressed if she has looming deadlines and feels overwhelmed easily, especially at the end of the courses when her time is so limited. In fact, Joni almost cancelled her individual interview for this study because of feeling overwhelmed by the pressure of her practicum course. I was able to work with Joni to give her more choices for days and times to conduct the interview and she agreed to remain in the study.
Results

In the hermeneutical phenomenological approach there are no uninterpreted data (Van Manen, 1990). Initial open coding and “in-vivo” coding was used as the first approach to the data, followed by axial coding to extend the analysis further using code definitions (see Table 2 Code Book) as discussed by Saldana (2013). I derived the following codes and definitions after sorting, condensing, re-reading, and eliminating repetitive codes identified during first-round open coding (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Saldana, 2013).

Table 2

Code Book

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Code Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>The participant’s belief about themselves (+/-).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal effects of disability</td>
<td>Symptoms, behaviors, side-effects related to or caused by the disabling condition. For example: poor memory, inattention, lack of focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External effects of disability</td>
<td>A situation or consequence brought about as a result of the student’s disability. For example: failing a course, missing a deadline, lower GPA.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning Strategy</td>
<td>Process or tools used by student to organize, study, comprehend, remember or recall course material. For example: post-it notes, listen to recorded texts, copy notes, tab texts, note cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodations</td>
<td>Anything that aids in removing a barrier to the learning process for students with disabilities. Example: additional time on tests.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive communication with ODAS &amp; Instructors</td>
<td>Any perceived positive exchange of information between the student and instructor or ODAS via email, phone, and/or blackboard message.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative communication with ODAS &amp; Instructors</td>
<td>Any perceived negative exchange of information between the student and instructor or ODAS via email, phone, blackboard message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistive Technology</td>
<td>Low or high tech tools to help with learning for students with disabilities. Examples: audio players, speech to text writing support/software, graphic organizers, calculators, e-books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from family/friends</td>
<td>Support: to sustain, advocate, uphold, encourage, and provide for one going through a situation or trial – obtained from family members or</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from students/peers</td>
<td>Support: to sustain, advocate, uphold, encourage, and provide for one going through a situation or trial - obtained from fellow students in the same university degree program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support from university staff</td>
<td>Support: to sustain, advocate, uphold, encourage, and provide for one going through a situation or trial - obtained from instructors, ODAS, advisors, or other university staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expression of Christian faith</td>
<td>Any statement by participants that indicates belief in God, Jesus Christ, having a Christian belief system; Example: trust God, answered prayers, God’s faithfulness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas for improving online instruction</td>
<td>Specific suggestions offered by participant for improving course design, instructional delivery, test format, and curriculum for students with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas for improving online support services</td>
<td>Specific suggestions offered by participant for improving student support services for online students with disabilities such as: additional ODAS services, tutoring, advising, counseling.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits of the online degree program</td>
<td>Positive aspects of the online degree program reported by participants with disabilities, including reasons an online program was chosen instead of brick &amp; mortar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Career Field / Degree or Major</td>
<td>Subject area major, degree field, or future career plan as reported by participants with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive K-12 experience</td>
<td>Participant’s recollection of positive school experiences in K-12.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative K-12 experience</td>
<td>Participant’s recollection of negative school experiences in K-12.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Advocacy</td>
<td>Examples of online students with disabilities asking for help, finding their own solutions, accessing resources on their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of a support system</td>
<td>Participants report feeling a lack of any support network or relational support system while an online student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively influenced to continue education</td>
<td>Recollection by participant of a specific person or situation that left a positive influence and encouraged them to continue education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative influence re: education</td>
<td>Recollection by participant of a specific person or situation that left a negative influence on them about education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twice Exceptional</td>
<td>Participant self-reports having more than one area of disability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-traditional student</td>
<td>Participant self-reports being a “returning adult”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
student” (over age 30 when entering), holding a degree from a non-accredited school, obtaining admission without SAT/ACT or GRE scores, obtaining admission with a low GPA or some other waiver for admission.

| Internet/Connectivity/Technology challenges | Participant reports difficulty with internet service/ connectivity issues due to geographical location or poor service; also include participant reports of lack of experience as a barrier to learning online. |

I used this revised coding scheme during second round axial coding of all data sources. The use of ATLAS.ti™ software to organize and analyze code frequency and co-occurring open-codes and to create code families allowed me to see emerging themes. I identified five themes across the data and each theme had supporting subthemes evident. The themes that emerged provided answers to the four research questions which provided the framework for this study (see Table 3).

Continued analysis of data using ATLAS.ti™ software illustrated code frequency across all data sets for further analytic reduction. Open-codes supporting the five identified themes are illustrated in Table 4, along with their frequency across the data.

Table 3

*Emerging Themes with Subthemes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Challenges During Online Degree Program                        | • Obtaining Accommodations  
|                                                              | • Communicating with University Staff  
|                                                              | • Coping with Effects of Disability |
| Benefits from Choosing an Online Degree Program                 | • Convenience and Flexibility  
|                                                              | • Ease of Admissions Process, Affordability  
|                                                              | • Technology Removes Barriers to Learning |
| Student Ideas to Improve Online Degree Programs                 | • Accommodations  
|                                                              | • Students with Disabilities Support |
### Identified Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internal Characteristics of Students for Success</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Maturity and Life Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-Efficacy</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Faith</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Motivators for Degree Completion</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support from Family, Friends, Co-workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support from Online Students, Peers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Career and Financial Goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 4

*Open Codes and Themes*

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<th>Open-Codes</th>
<th>Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets</th>
<th>Themes</th>
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<td>154</td>
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<tr>
<td>Internal effects of disability</td>
<td>136</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External effects of disability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Negative communication with ODAS/Instructors</td>
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<td>Non-traditional student</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support from students/peers</td>
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<td>Support from university staff</td>
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<td>Assistive Technology</td>
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<td>Accommodations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive communication with ODAS/Instructors</td>
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### Open-Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open-Codes</th>
<th>Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets</th>
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<td>Support from university staff</td>
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<td>Positively influenced to</td>
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<tr>
<td>continue education</td>
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*Note.* Open-codes were analyzed using ATLAS.ti™ data analysis software to identify themes.

#### Theme One: Challenges during Online Degree Program

The first identified theme provides answers to Research Question four, “What challenges are perceived by students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the online degree program?” and in a broader sense provides insight into Research Question one, “How do students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experience in the online learning environment?” Students with disabilities in online degree programs face a variety of challenges ranging from time management, accessing accommodations, technology and connectivity issues, to communicating effectively with instructors and advisors.

The theme of challenges during the online degree program included these open codes: accommodations, internal and external effects of the disability, negative communication with ODAS/instructors, and twice exceptional. Subthemes which emerged as significant to these challenges are: obtaining accommodations, communicating with university staff, and coping with the effects of disability. These subthemes are indicative of the most frequently cited challenges.
faced by participants with disabilities in the online learning environment, as well as the challenges that are the largest barriers to student success.

**Obtaining accommodations.** This sub-theme answers Research Question two, “How do students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experiences using accommodations in the online degree program?” Vojtko (2012) identified receiving the appropriate accommodations as likely the most significant thing that led to student success at the post-secondary level. Quinlan et al. (2012) reported that student’s failure to request accommodations or to inform the instructor about their accommodation plan often led to poor course performance.

A few participants reported absolutely no concerns about obtaining accommodations during the online degree program. For the most part, these were the three doctoral students in the Ed. D. program. However, the overall results of this study indicated most of the remaining online student participants with disabilities faced challenges obtaining and utilizing allowable course accommodations.

One participant, Cheryl initially chose NOT to report her disability to the university at first and was not receiving any accommodations. She stated,

I had this can do attitude, and I didn’t want help. I don’t want to be different. I don’t want to be special. I can do this. I’m not a dumb person, and I ended up failing several classes and being put on academic probation. (Cheryl, Interview, September 15, 2015)

Juanita reported feeling badly about requesting accommodations,

It's a Catch-22 because I've always felt like . . . I always feel bad for having to use my accommodation. I try not to. I don't request it [accommodation] unless I see it’s
[assignment] not going to get done. I usually request it hours in advance, that type of thing, you know? (Juanita, Interview, September 16, 2015)

Another participant, Johnny, shared that he doesn’t utilize all his allowable accommodations:

I send in an accommodation request form which is a list of my courses and names of professors and the accommodations are extra time for timed assignments, extra time for other assignments if I need it. I would have to request that extra time in advance. I have not done that once and I’m determined not to. (Johnny, Interview, September 15, 2015).

Joy reported a very positive experience with accessing accommodations during the Ed. D. program. She shared,

I just outright emailed them (ODAS). They (ODAS) provided me with what was allowable, acceptable accommodations. And the instructors were always in agreement. If there was something I needed, I would just bring it up with my instructors. Usually it was just the same things like extra time, or maybe extra material to help explain something to make it a little clearer. I was always well taken care of. It wasn’t a difficult process or anything complicated. (Joy, Interview, September 8, 2015)

**Communicating with university staff.** Requesting and obtaining accommodations is closely tied to communication with instructors and university staff. Several students have been unable to fully access their allowable accommodations because of miscommunication with instructors. Also, some instructors were not keeping track of students in their courses who had been approved for accommodations. This information is emailed to the instructors from the Office of Disability and Academic Support (ODAS) at the beginning of each course. Suzy shared about some of the challenges she experienced when requesting her accommodations for extra time on assignments during her master’s degree program in counseling.
I was in school for 2 years. It happened every semester. Every professor. It's like they just forget. They don't care enough to know who you are, that you needed accommodations, so I'd have to copy and paste the original email. The second time I emailed them, "It's going to be 10 points off." I'm like, "Seriously, I just talked to you last week. Just copied and pasted this email, and you already forgot who I am again." I got to the point where it didn't matter what time of the semester it was, I always copied and pasted that original plan. (Suzy, Interview, September 16, 2015)

Joni also encountered some resistance from an instructor when she requested additional time to complete an assignment. She shared,

I just wrote and told her I need some mercy here. I need a little extra time on this. I'm nearly done, but I would rather have it be quality not quantity. She wrote me a little short note that said, "You can submit it late, but you'll still be subject to the late penalty."

(Joni, Interview, September 17, 2015)

I found it interesting that Joni works as an advocate for students with disabilities at a local college and yet she reported having difficulty advocating for herself with an instructor. She also shared,

I wasn't sure how far I could go with this professor. I wasn't sure what to do honestly. On Monday, I did write to the disability office and asked them, "This is what happened. I sent them the emails that I'd sent her and the one that she'd sent me." They said the same thing. "I wonder if she remembers that you have accommodations." They said, "The thing you need to do is remind her." Note to self, I'll know that next time. (Joni, Interview, September 17, 2015).
In some instances it appears that obtaining accommodations is more of a problem of miscommunication or lack of timely communication, rather than instructors not wanting to be supportive of students with disabilities.

Ernie also reported having some difficulty with communication with other students in course discussion boards. He shared,

I don't know anything about how you feel, how you act or anything of this nature. What your facial expressions or even if you're juggling a nervous up and down like that. I don't know. What I do know is when there's a divided line between how you take it personally and how you take it academically. That's where I draw the line at. If somebody's going to state something that they're going to say as it should be academically, then it should be academically. (Ernie, Interview, September 15, 2015)

Ernie feels strongly about having a voice in his own advocacy, yet he likes to push the envelope with fellow students and instructors within the discussion board forum. His response to another student within the focus group discussion board was confrontational, because he misread the other student’s response and took personal exception to the statement.

Lucy shared this piece of advice,

For students, my advice would be communication, communication, communication. Talk to your professor and let him or her know, up front, of your disability AND how it affects you. Don't just say "I need extra time" but maybe say "I have XXX problem and it causes me to XXX. Throughout the years, I have found that what works the best with learning is . . ." You don't have to go into detail, but just let them know things. You are paying for these classes and you are a client (just like someone who is going to buy clothes from a store, etc.). The professor has multiple students in his or her class, so don't
expect them to coddle you. Show that you want to do the work and are capable, you just need the access. (Lucy, Focus Group, September 5, 2015)

**Coping with effects of disability.** This sub-theme also addresses Research Question one, “How do students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experience in the online learning environment?” as it specifically relates to the way in which the effects of the student’s disability impact their online learning. The online learning environment can be difficult to navigate for some students with disabilities because of the lack of visual cues inherent in body language and listening for tone of voice that assist with effective communication between people. Additionally, some disabilities such as dyslexia make reading and comprehending written messages more complicated. When students have specific learning disorder and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), they may be more sensitive when reading feedback from instructors or peers.

   Additionally, time management and organization were two areas of shared concern for several participants. Buddy shared,

   You have just so much to have to go over and it’s hard to get all that in the short period of time. You’ve got eight weeks to complete the whole course and during the week you’ve got multiple tasks. You’re sitting there trying to figure out where you’re supposed to be at and the other side of it . . . A personal side, they sent out those books about how to write. But when you are in the middle of taking a class, there is not a lot of time left to read the writing book. It’s all that grammar stuff . . . I wasn’t able to get over that hurdle because I just didn’t have time to read the materials they sent. They offer writing classes but that’s time I just didn’t have. (Buddy, Interview, September 10, 2015)

Hope expressed frustration with the reading and writing requirements,
I don't understand how to word things. I don't have a high vocabulary, as far as... I'm not a college word person. Some of the wording they use, I don't even understand. I don't have these big words, so when it comes time to understanding what I'm reading, I have to read and read over and over again, until I can figure out what I'm reading about. (Hope, Interview, September 9, 2015)

In this research, the majority of participants reported having more than one disability type. Some participants also had physical and medical disabilities, in addition to their learning or attention issues. Dealing with pain, chronic illness, and physical limitations concurrently with learning differences created some unique challenges for several participants. Joshua reported,

The problem was that the professor was not at all interested in hearing about my challenges in getting the work in, and one of the things that's very hard for people with attention deficit is when a distraction comes up, it is not just a matter of sitting down and getting back on track. At times, it can take me a day to get back onto a task if the distraction is great, but when I'm focused on the task, I do very well. (Joshua, Interview, September 10, 2015)

Juanita described having trouble beginning her assignments as a result of her disability, she stated,

It's like with the discussion board, I only post in discussions what I have to. Even then, a lot of my work, I'm late because I just can't get myself... It's like I'm afraid to do it. I can't do anything until it's late. It's like I can't do it. I try. I start every week. I open my book to read it. I read my book, but I cannot start my assignment until it's due. (Juanita, Interview, September 16, 2015)

Joni shared her strategy for blocking out distractions on day two of the focus group discussion,
I found that a good way to keep from being distracted was to go in my office, remove any phones from the room, ask my husband that I not be disturbed and tell him why, shut my dog out of the room, and turn my iTunes™ on at just the right volume to shut out everything else. (Focus Group, September 2, 2015)

Participants shared planning tips and success strategies for online learning. Liz shared,

I try and look at my schedule each week and try and predict if I might need an extension on an assignment, and I make sure that I ask by Saturday of each week if I think I may need it even if I end up getting it in on time I have created the peace of mind I need to not feel rushed. (Liz, Focus Group, September 4, 2015).

Students must request accommodations for extended time on assignments for each individual assignment in advance, according to university policy and is subject to the instructor’s discretion about how much extra time will be allowed. Students with disabilities in online degree programs are challenged with obtaining their accommodations, communicating with their instructors about their accommodations, and coping with the effects of their disabilities.

**Theme Two: Benefits from Choosing an Online Degree Program**

Theme Two: Benefits from Choosing an Online Degree Program provides specific answers to Research Question three, “What benefits of the online degree program are perceived by students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD)?” In a broader sense, Research Question one, “How do students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experience in the online learning environment?” is also addressed through this theme and subthemes.

Theme two includes the codes: Positive communication with ODAS/Instructors, Non-traditional student, Support from students/peers, support from university staff, assistive
technology, benefits of online degree program. I identified the subthemes as benefits for students with disabilities in an online degree program: convenience and flexibility, ease of admissions process/affordability, technology removes barriers to learning.

Sener (2010) reported that online education can improve teaching and learning in ways that traditional educational delivery cannot. Among these ways is improving student access to course materials through asynchronous learning and timely feedback (Deal, 2002; Li & Irby, 2008; Sener, 2010). Li and Irby (2008) reported online learning gives access to previously marginalized groups of students, such as students with disabilities. I described what students reported as being several positive benefits to choosing an online degree program in this section.

**Convenience and flexibility.** A recent study by Verdinelli and Kutner (2015) reported that students with specific learning disorder appreciate the flexibility of the online environment for completing assignments; those with ADHD benefit from working during their chosen times for greater concentration. Findings in this current study were similar in terms of convenience and flexibility of online learning. Participant Lauren reported her reasons for choosing this online degree program,

> Also, I can work full time. I can have a job while I'm doing that. I chose (the university) and it was the day after I finished my bachelor's degree over the summer. The next day, I started classes. Also, I did want a Christian school, and one that was reputable. It just had a really good reputation, because I figured it was important if I'm going to pick up my Masters in Teaching. (Lauren, Interview, September 9, 2015)

Another participant, Judy, stated, “I'm working full time so, of course, I looked for online and things that would be flexible with my schedule,” (Interview, September 14, 2015). Because
of this flexibility, Judy was able to complete the Ed. D. degree and continue with her job as a school psychologist. Another doctoral level student, Lucy, said,

I didn’t want to travel back and forth for classes and waste time. I didn’t think it was worth it. I also didn’t want to leave my husband at home for long periods of time while I was getting a degree because I know what the divorce rate is for doctoral students. My family is very important to me and I knew I needed to be able to stay close to home. This university made it possible for me to stay home, keep working, and complete an advanced degree program, too. (Lucy, Interview, September 11, 2015)

Geography can play a role in students choosing online learning for convenience. Hope shared,

I have better access with internet than I do with transportation. The nearest university is almost 30 miles from me, so it's not easy. I draw a VA (disability) check every month. My husband's deceased, and that's what I live on. Once I pay bills, I don't have the excess gas money to drive back and forth every day. (Hope, Interview, September 9, 2015)

**Ease of admissions process / affordability.** Students with disabilities may seek an online degree program that makes the admissions process less stressful. Several participants described the way they came to be admitted to the university. Joni shared, “If I'd had to go to another grad school with my anxiety, and had to sit through those interviews and do all the hoops, I wouldn't have been accepted.” Another participant, Chris, actually dropped out of high school as a teen and has now completed his master’s degree. He shared,

I had to just kind of go through some back doors. The Bible College didn't require a . . . what's the exam I'm thinking of? (SAT score?) Yeah, did not require that. Well, I
couldn't have. I wouldn't have been able to do well with it. I would have crashed and burned, to tell you the truth. (Chris, Interview, September 14, 2015)

When I inquired if Chris had taken the GRE he said he did not because it wasn’t required for admission into his master’s degree program. This was another reason for choosing the university to complete his degree. Barriers that might make obtaining an advanced degree impossible for students with disabilities such as traditional assessments have been removed by the university giving greater access to a more diverse group of students.

Joshua inquired with the university admissions office about a course of study. He shared the following,

They asked if I was a veteran, and I said, “Why do you ask?” They said, "Well, we give a significant discount to all veterans." I thought about the discount. I did a quick calculation, and I said, "I can do this," and that will solve some problems. (Joshua, Interview, September 10, 2015)

In fact, Joshua later shared this discounted tuition for veterans will also make it possible for his wife to obtain an advanced degree at an affordable price, while she continues her career.

**Technology removes barriers to learning.** This subtheme of technology removes barriers to learning also addresses Research Question two, “How do online students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experience using accommodations?” For online learners to be successful there is a need for them to have at least basic skills in technology so that they don’t waste time navigating the course management system (Cho, 2012). Additionally, students with disabilities in online degree programs may need to utilize assistive technology in order to access course materials in a more comprehensible way.

Simoncelli and Hinson (2010) reported that instructional technology improves
access for students with disabilities in post-secondary education. The majority of participants in this research also reported technology and assistive technology tools improved their ability to learn course material and to have greater success in their online program.

Participant Suzy, with both specific learning disorder and ADHD said the following, I do eBooks. I know a lot of the people online in the study said that they hated eBooks. That's very odd to me, because you can push on a button, and it can give you the definition of that word, so when you're reading, it's real easy. You don't have to get stuck and wonder, "What does this mean? I don't understand. I can't go forward, because I don't know what this means." (Suzy, Interview, September 16, 2015)

Joy shared a technology strategy with the other participants on day four of the focus group discussion,

In order to overcome the difficulty that I have comprehending written course material, I have purchased a program called Kurzweil 3000™. This program allows me to scan course material, download, or uploaded course material, and highlight important material. I also use a program called Dragon Naturally Speaking™. This helps me to verbally record notes and then reads it back to me. (Joy, Focus Group, September 4, 2015)

Chris recounted his first experience using resources from Learning Ally™ that provide people with dyslexia or visual disabilities recorded textbooks. He shared,

Let me tell you what, I cried. When I finally got my first book on my phone, I literally punched in the name of the course. It found it. I downloaded it to my phone. I cried because I'm, at that time, a 51-year-old man, I'm going to cry telling you the story; who couldn't see, and all of a sudden somebody gave me a pair of glasses that made it all work. I, like a lot of other learning disabled students, learned how to fake the professors
out, and they thought I read the book, and I didn't. I just kind of jumped around and cheated and grabbed a little bit here and there. Would write a paper basically on maybe one chapter of the book that I really read well and faked my way through the rest of it.

Not with this Learning Ally™, I was finally able to use the text in a way that worked for me. (Chris, Interview, September 14, 2015)

Chris continued his sharing about assistive technology as an online learner with ADHD,

There's PDF readers that are out there. I didn't know about that when I first got there. Just a PDF reader that everybody can get through Acrobat™ so that when you're reading all these research papers (journal articles), you can get a PDF reader that reads it for you. I tell people this a lot. I think that technology caught up with me. I feel like for my learning disability, with a combination of books on tape and computer-assisted dictation, I was able to obtain an online education.

Yes, you are learning from the professors, and that's a part of it, but it definitely is a whole lot more of a self-taught and self-disciplined experience than I experienced when I was in a more mainline school. (Chris, Interview, September 14, 2015)

Although access to technology is available to all students in online degree programs, the audio recorded books that are available through Learning Ally™ are considered to be accommodations for students with disabilities. The PDF reader Chris described was being used as a specific accommodation for his dyslexia to enable him to listen to the journal articles through audio instead of reading them for himself.
Theme Three: Student’s Ideas for Improving Online Degree Programs

During the online focus group as well as in the individual interviews, I asked participants to share their suggestions for improving the online degree programs for students with disabilities. Theme Three: Student’s Ideas for Improving Online Degree Programs contains implications and solutions to answer Research Question four, “What challenges are perceived by students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in online degree programs?” From the participant responses to questions about the challenges they faced in their degree programs, emerged the theme of ideas for improving the degree program for students with disabilities. This synthesis of proposed solutions to their challenges also addresses Research Question one, “How do students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experience in the online learning environment?” and Research Question two, “How do students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experience using accommodations in the online degree program?”

The following open codes were recurring within this theme: accommodations, ideas for improving online instruction, ideas for improving online support services, negative communication with ODAS/Instructors, and positive communication with ODAS/Instructors. A few participants emailed additional suggestions to the researcher after the interviews had concluded and these artifacts were included in data analysis. I identified two subthemes within theme three: accommodations and support services for students with disabilities.

Participants demonstrated a high level of engagement when responding to this topic during the focus group discussion, as evidenced by their lengthy, detailed, and specific responses. Herbold (2012) found adult learners who were given flexibility and choices regarding their online learning increased their engagement. Participants in this study generated specific
suggestions for accommodations and support services for students with disabilities in the online degree programs.

**Accommodations.** I discussed obtaining and advocating for accommodations in the challenges section, earlier. However, research participants shared several ideas for improving the use and monitoring of accommodations that are worthy of sharing here. Buddy shared his difficulty using e-texts and made some suggestions,

Students with documented specific learning disorder should not be locked into using e-texts, as it is highly likely that texts in this format will impact the student's ability to study and learn the material, thus impacting the student's ability to be successful. I have since purchased hard copies of the texts, although this means paying extra for the same course materials, and the bookstore is out of one of the texts, 'hoping I'll receive it before the course ends. (Buddy, Interview, September 10, 2015)

Suzy, who has multiple specific learning disorder and ADHD, made these suggestions for improving accommodations in the online degree programs,

I would have all the Blackboard™ features functional, calendars and schedules, especially. I feel this would be an added bonus for students with learning disabilities. I suggest having a set extension for all work if the ODAS allows for extra time. This would take away a great amount of stress on students with disabilities in having to remember to ask for extra time for each individual assignment during the semester. I also suggest having all PowerPoint™ presentations in the audible form like some of the presentations already are. For some reason depending on the class some are basic PowerPoint™ and some are the PowerPoint™ that read the text to you. The university
should use the format that can help the most students. (Suzy, Interview, September 16, 2015)

Cheryl’s suggestion related to the last week of the 8 week course design, typically a shorter week which ends on Friday. She said,

My disabilities do not disappear during the last week of a course. It makes absolutely no sense to me whatsoever that (the university) expects students with disabilities not to be automatically granted their extended time accommodations, if needed. If I required accommodations during the other seven weeks of a course in order to be academically successful, why would I all of a sudden NOT need them during the last week of a course? (Cheryl, Focus Group, September 4, 2015).

Another participant, Terrell, suggested a different improvement, “I would advise the faculty to consider providing lectures of the classes on Blackboard™. This would provide an opportunity for individuals with reading disabilities to have another modality of learning the information,” (Terrell, Interview, September 10, 2015).

Judy’s ideas include,

Have texts available for students with disabilities where things like font size, font type (such as Verdana, which is used here and also a dyslexic friendly font), change the background color, and have the ability to push a button to have the test spoken out loud. Have reading assignments shortened, wherever possible to help those with learning disabilities. (Judy, Focus Group, September 5, 2015)

Joy adds these suggestions for improvement,

I would advise University leaders, advisors, professors, and course designers to offer surveys to students who have disabilities to determine what these students feel would
benefit them, what these students have used that does help them, and what these students know does not help or benefit them in an online learning environment. (Joy, Focus Group, September 5, 2015).

Students with specific learning disorder and/or ADHD typically have less successful outcomes in post-secondary degree programs compared to their non-disabled peers. Students who are more successful in post-secondary settings have acquired study strategies and organizational skills, which have developed through intervention or experience (Farmer, Allsopp, & Ferron, 2015). Cheryl suggested this improvement for helping students prepare for exams,

Providing study guides for quizzes would also greatly assist me in knowing what to expect (to reduce my testing anxiety) and to allow me to know what I need to focus on when preparing for tests (my ADD causes me to waste a lot of time studying irrelevant material). (Cheryl, Focus Group, September 5, 2015).

Participant Terrell suggested the use of an assistive technology software to improve understanding of written course materials,

I have a program entitled Read Write™, I request my books in alternative format (PDF File) and allow the computer to read it to me. Additionally, Read Write™ assists with writing and studying text. Finally, another method to "even the playing field" for students with disabilities is to have professors video record lectures and post them on Black Board™. (Terrell, Focus Group, September 5, 2015)

Joy shared this idea that might be incorporated for students who have difficulty reading and comprehending text,
I also found that video clips of professors discussing weekly material to be very helpful. This method allows me to listen to the course material being presented and then review my textbook or lecture notes. The video clips also allow me to rewind sections that I did not understand or misunderstood while reading the course material. (Joy, Interview, September 8, 2015)

Hope explained in her interview that she is struggling with the English 102 course and she offered a few suggestions that might help other students with disabilities,

If the assignments were recorded and explanations provided alone with the reading that would help people with learning disability. I think lectures should be recorded that can help people comprehend better. Example: Right now I am working on Eng. 102. I am so lost I have no clue where I am going. There is a list of lessons I have to read a list of presentations I have to listen and watch, then the book that I have to read also. That is a lot. To be honest a whole lot for a person with a disability to even comprehend. This is one class that should have been expanded to a 16 weeks instead of an 8 week class. (Hope, Interview, September 9, 2015)

On the last day of the online focus group discussion, I asked participants to describe their idea of a perfect online learning environment for students with disabilities. Both Tom and Lucy suggested the university employ more instructors with disabilities. Lucy’s post said, “Hiring professors with disabilities and having them work through the course may be the greatest approach. Individuals with disabilities understand how to help other individuals with disabilities,” (Lucy, Focus Group, September 4, 2015).

Support services for students with disabilities. I asked participants to give their ideas for improvement of online student services and to make suggestions that might benefit students
with disabilities in online degree programs. There is an increase in the number of students with disabilities in online post-secondary programs and concern that may be under-reporting the need for student support services (Quinlan et al., 2012). Student support services discussed included academic advising, disability support services, and tutoring.

Lauren offered the following suggestions,

I would tell students to do their research and really see if an online program is for them. Make sure the online program will actually fit your needs, and try to reach out to other current students with disabilities to find out if the school really will work. It would be fantastic if there was a student advocate program where students with disabilities could connect with others, (including incoming students or potential students) and be supportive. Basically, get an insider's perspective. (Lauren, Focus Group, September 5, 2015)

She also explained both her focus group post and her interview how frustrating it has been trying to contact the ODAS for assistance. Several students shared this same frustration and how once they were able to get through to speak to someone in that office, there doesn’t seem to be consistent service from one person to the next.

Lauren suggested,

I would suggest for University leaders, advisors, professors, and course designers to all have to take a training course on disabilities and also sensitivity training. I believe knowledge is power, and they can best help students when they understand what students are going through. Also, make sure that students can actually get ahold of the disability office at the university and speak with a person, it would make life so much easier. I try
and call a number and hope for the best. I wasn't even able to get ahold of someone this last time. I spoke with an advisor instead. (Lauren, Interview, September 9, 2015)

Hope discussed her experience with an online tutor,

When a person needs a tutor, the tutor should be able to have access to the assignment the student is needing help with. I tried the tutor help last semester and was misguided and had to redo the assignment. Also, tutor help should be video or Skype™ that way the tutor can show as well as explain better. (Hope, Interview, September 9, 2015)

Participants identified access to accurate academic advising as another potential area for improvement. Participant Lauren shared her experience,

Within the advising department itself, each advisor tells me something different. Right now I'm trying to get a new advisor. My old one just wasn't helpful. He didn't even tell me about core competencies until I was at the school this summer and just very unhelpful. I'm basically my own advisor. In that way, I wish I had gone to a regular grad school. (Lauren, Interview, September 9, 2015)

Lauren encountered difficulty with advising regarding her transcript and upcoming courses she needed to fulfill the Core Competencies requirement.

I only found out about them when another student at intensives was saying, "I'm taking my core competencies over the summer. Which ones are you taking?" I said, "What's that?" I met with my advisor. I actually had a face to face meeting and he didn't even remember me or know who I was or anything. I said, "I've been hearing about these core classes. Do I have to take any?" He's like, "No. No. Not at all. You're good." I'm like, "Okay. Can't you come check into that?" Then, he emails me and he's like, "I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but you won't graduate on time. You have these eight classes
to take." A lot of them were actually ones that I had taken in my undergrad, history courses, and English courses. He just hadn't done a thorough job of looking it over.

Yeah. It was like someone hadn't even looked at my transcripts and just said, "I'm going to throw this class on her. She needs to take this or that." That definitely was a huge headache. (Lauren, Interview, September 9, 2015)

Finally, Joshua reported his suggestion for improving ODAS support,

I think in working with people with ADHD, I think the Office of Disabilities, for example, I think that what ought to be done is, "Okay, you're reporting with ADHD. These are the resources you ought to try and develop in order to be more successful in grad school, so that you can be more effective and efficient as a student," (Joshua, Interview, September 10, 2015).

I asked participants in this research to share their experiences as online students with disabilities in degree programs at the same university. Students shared their ideas for institutional improvement in the areas of student support services, online instruction, and accommodations for students with disabilities. These original participant ideas address Research Question four, “What challenges are perceived by students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in online degree programs?” and goes one step further to provide solutions for these challenges using student voices.

**Theme Four: Internal Characteristics of Students for Success**

Theme Four: Internal Characteristics of Students for Success implies answers for Research Question one, “How do students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experience in the online learning environment?” and Research Question three, “What benefits of the online degree program are perceived by students with specific learning disorder?”
disorder (including ADHD)?” Within the semi-structured interview and the focus group dialogue, I asked participants to share about life experiences and educational history to gain a sense of what led them to choose an online versus traditional degree program.

I designed some of the questioning to elicit sharing about K-12 experiences, prior work experience, and prior post-secondary educational experiences. This conversational probing of participants allowed for the emergence of three subthemes related to the student’s internal characteristics for success in an online degree program. The identified subthemes are maturity and life experiences, self-efficacy, and faith. Codes supporting the subthemes include: self-advocacy, self-efficacy, learning strategy, non-traditional student, expression of Christian faith.

Serianni and Coy (2014) reported that students with disabilities whose learning needs are not being met in traditional settings are turning to online learning as a solution to meeting their educational goals. I can classify the majority of the participants in this research study as successful online learners with disabilities. Internal indicators demonstrated and discussed by participants, which help them navigate the challenges of online degree programs, include their maturity and life experience, self-efficacy, and faith.

**Maturity and life experience.** The majority of the research participants in this study were over 30 years old. The median age of participants is 45. Most have been married, have held jobs and are working on advanced degrees. It is this level of maturity and life experience that help the students with disabilities in this study navigate through the university bureaucracy to self-advocate and obtain an accommodation plan through the ODAS. Maturity and life experience helps with professional communication with university staff and instructors and equips adult learners with a strong sense of responsibility and work ethic.

Chris, age 54 with a recent master’s degree in counseling shared,
I'm not waiting for anybody else to come and take care of me. I think that's a good idea to be in conversation with your professor early on. I often times would contact them two weeks before the class started, way before the Office of Disabilities even contacted them, and just tell them, "I'm coming. If I can get a head start on reading, it would be helpful to me, so do you have any hints? Is the book going to be the same? What are you looking for in a paper?" Those kind of conversations. There's a maturity factor, and there's a business experience. Those are two things going on. You're communicating to these people as you would in a business setting, in a professional manner. You're getting that back. (Chris, Interview, September 14, 2015)

Cheryl, age 41 with a background in teaching shared her feelings about the value of taking on-campus, intensive courses;

The intensives are critical for me because you get that live interaction and it's almost like student teaching. You get to practice. When I was getting my elementary education degree, I felt like that most of what I learned about teaching happened during my first two years of actual teaching. (Cheryl, Interview, September 15, 2015)

Adult learners can see the value from participating in a hands-on educational experience that allows peer interface and encourages collaboration.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy, according to Bandura (1989) is a person’s belief about themselves. From social cognitive theory, a person’s motivation is cognitively generated. According to Bandura, those who visualize success scenarios can achieve their goals. Likewise, negative self-efficacy may yield negative results. Adult student participants with disabilities with strong self-belief and a sense of positive self-efficacy are more successful in the online degree programs.
Hope provided a great example of self-efficacy when she said, “Yeah, whenever I look at it (degree completion plan), it kind of makes me feel good, because I was always told I would never get this far. I got to prove some people wrong.” (Hope, Interview, September 9, 2015). She concluded by saying, “I don’t like letting my learning disability or my PTSD or any of that get in the way of me learning, I don’t like crutches,” (Hope, Interview, September 9, 2015).

Juanita shared about a recent life challenge, “I’m getting through it. Don’t get me wrong. I’m getting through it. I’m a very strong person,” (Juanita, Interview, September 17, 2015).

Lucy, who went back to school as an adult learner after having children, “Yes, I was already a grown adult. I was working full time and going to school full time. And I was determined,” (Lucy, Interview, September 11, 2015).

Johnny said,

If I had gone to college at 18, I would not have been successful. My goal now is to complete my doctorate so that I can become a history professor. One of my goals is to graduate with a 4.0 and I really thought math would blow that dream for me. But I’ve been able to get through that and keep my high GPA. (Johnny, Interview, September 15, 2015)

Lauren shared she was homeschooled and became an independent learner in high school, “It taught me to be very self-motivated and that if I wanted something, I had to do it myself. It really taught me to have a great work ethic,” (Lauren, Interview, September 9, 2015).

Joy recalled a time during her senior year of high school when she was signing up for her last year of classes. Her high school guidance counselor told her she would not be able to attend the university, so she should just take business courses during her senior year to prepare for
working after graduation. Joy was determined to overcome this counselor’s poor advising and the fact that she was tracked into business classes when she wanted to go on to college. Joy recently defended her doctoral dissertation in the field of education, despite the naysayers who did not believe she had the ability to pursue higher education opportunities. These examples of self-efficacious belief from several students give a glimpse at the respondents’ internal characteristics that drive them toward success in the online degree program.

**Faith.** The code “expressions of faith” emerged without any prompting or specific questioning about the participants’ belief system or relationship with a higher power. This definition from *Table 2 Code Book*: “Any statement by participants that indicates belief in God/Jesus Christ, having a Christian belief system; Ex: trust in the Lord, answered prayers, God is faithful, etc.” was used each time a statement fit the definition. All participants spontaneously shared statements of faith and acknowledged the role of their Christian beliefs in helping them during their online degree seeking journeys. As this sub-theme emerged across all participants and all data sets it became important to include as part of the shared experiences of these online students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD).

**Led to this online program as a result of faith and prayer.** Johnny said, “Then doing some soul searching and prayer, I was led to this program. My goal is to complete my doctorate so that I can become a history professor,” (Interview, September 15, 2015). Juanita shared, “Well, I really wanted to go to a Christian college. I wanted to go to a college that was based, and put a lot of emphasis, on the Bible and God's word,” (Interview, September 17, 2015). She continued by saying, “When I looked at this university, I really wanted to get a Theology degree because that was my purpose, really, for going to school because I wanted to know the Bible,” (Interview, September 17, 2015). Later, she said that she felt God leading in another direction.
Juanita said, “God put on my heart to teach. As a child I always wanted to teach, but I forgot that I wanted to teach,” (Interview, September 17, 2015).

Terrell shared, “I decided that this school would be the best bet. It had a Christian emphasis, which I really needed because I really didn't want to get too far from my Biblical roots, my theological perspective,” (Interview, September 10, 2015). Tom shared, “They have the best format for teaching young Christians and older adults how to be the champions for Christ because that's what it's all about,” (Interview, September 14, 2015).

Cheryl stated,

God knew what he was doing and that this university was what I needed in my life, as I had not had a close relationship to Him in years. I blamed God for the things that happened to me and was mad at Him. I did not understand why he allowed me to experience so much pain. This university has allowed me to grow as a Christian and work on my relationship with God, while learning to become a Christian counselor.

(Cheryl, Interview, September 15, 2015)

Ernie shared about how he was led to consider this university for his degree program,

I was praying, "God you know how I need to do something different in my life and if this is you, show me a sign." This is the whole thing and then my wife is Jewish, so I got a big blessing. It blessed me that our university really backs up Messianic Jewish people.

(Ernie, Interview, September 15, 2015)

Lucy shared about her experience getting into the doctoral program,

I really feel the Lord wants me to do this. I said, “Lord, if you really want me to do this then I need you to let them accept me.” They accepted me and I said, “Lord if you really want me to do this you have to help me pass the comprehensive test I have to take.” And
I passed the test (laughing) without any accommodations. He kept letting it happen, so I know He has a purpose for me doing this. I surely give Him all the glory because I know without His help, I can do NOTHING. (Lucy, Interview, September 11, 2015)

Joni shared,

I'm an ex-Mormon. I'm born again now. This culture here is still to a high degree, my old faith. They claim to be Christian but they haven't quite got it right. I looked for something a little different because I thought, "Okay I've got a good foundation, but my Lord's telling me that this secular grad school that's here, isn't going to be the one I want." I just began looking online and asking the Lord for guidance and I just began researching a lot of them and I found this program. I was looking at a couple others as well but this one kept coming back. It kept coming back to me and I finally just applied. I felt, "Well, Lord if this is you, show me." And I got accepted immediately. (Interview, September 17, 2015)

I asked Joni if she was happy about her choice of degree programs now and she replied, “I love it. I personally love it. I'm realizing what a hand God has in it,” (Interview, September 17, 2015). I also asked Joni about who in her life had influenced her to continue to pursue a graduate degree and she responded, “I have to tell you. It was God. He brought me through such a huge healing in another area. He just brought me around to seeing that this life wasn't to be wasted, it was to be used,” (Joni, Interview, September 17, 2015).

**Personal faith a source of strength and support.** From the voices of the participants, their reliance upon personal faith and their relationship with Jesus Christ as a source of strength and support during the online degree program was evident. In an email to the researcher, participant Johnny stated, “I love 1 Cor. 10:13, that says God won't put more on us than He
knows we can handle,” (Johnny, personal communication, September 2, 2015). Lucy said her support comes from, “Only JESUS. I guess my husband does what he can, but really what can he do?” (Lucy, Interview, September 11, 2015).

Buddy shared, “The cool thing is, when I read the Bible, I totally understand it. Even what I have learned over the years about the Bible I have retained, even with my disability. The best thing I can say is, stay focused on God and He will see you through,” (Buddy, Interview, September 10, 2015). Doctoral candidate, Joy, shared, “I will be praying for you during the data collection process and throughout your entire study,” (Joy, personal communication, September 25, 2015). When I told Joy I would see her at graduation, she replied, “Yes it just seems unreal. With prayer and faith, I actually made it through,” (Joy, Interview, September 8, 2015).

Another participant, Ernie shared about his disability, “I have been praying to God every day to take this away since I never had this memory problem in my past,” (Interview, September 15, 2015). He added, “All I have left is to hope for the best, and pray to God that He increases my memory, and increases whatever it is to help me remember what I just read,” (Interview, September 15, 2015). Later he shared about a challenging time during the end of his bachelor’s degree program, “the Lord worked out all of the details, and I never had to quit school thank God,” (Interview, September 15, 2015).

Joni shared, “I find the most important part of my day is my daily quiet time with my Father, God. He establishes me for the day. I ask Him to walk beside me, and to please make sure we are walking His direction, not mine. And I ask Him to help with the pain control,” (Joni, Interview, September 17, 2015). Lucy said, “I feel that everything happens for a reason and is God's plan,” (Interview, September 11, 2015). Hope shared, “I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, He's got me this far. He could've taken my life back when I was 18, when I had my major surgery, but He didn't,” (Interview, September 9, 2015). Chris wrote these encouraging words as
part of a focus group response to another student, “Trust that the Lord's has purpose even in your disability,” (Focus Group, September 5, 2015).

Participant Tom shared about his pet chocolate Labrador, Hershey; “He never leaves my side, kind of like our Lord, always there to be of help. Thank God for dogs,” (Interview, September 14, 2015). Tom also stated, “We are all EQUAL in Gods eyes: ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’” (Gal. 3:28) when he suggested there was a need for more connection between students and instructional staff in the online program. Tom said he was not intimidated in the online program because, “Jesus is my God.” He recounted a time when he was experiencing some anxiety and turned to God, “It’s going to be fine son. God's in control. Sure enough, that's the answer,” (Tom, Interview, September 14, 2015).

Joshua spontaneously shared about his growing up years,

I grew up in a home that went to church, but not what you would call a Christian home. My parents both were ultimately believers, and I believe I'll see both in glory. I'll see my two already deceased brothers in glory. But I'm the only one who came out of growing up in that house with anything like a deep spiritual commitment. (Joshua, Interview, September 10, 2015)

Then, he shared that he had formerly pastored a church at one point in his life. When interviewing Joshua, he made multiple references to his faith, his seminary degree, and his former work as a pastor. Talk of faith was interwoven throughout Joshua’s interview transcript.

Lucy shared her experience as a younger woman at the beginning of her career in education,
I worked in retail management until the Lord called me to teach, when I was 21. And I laughed, I thought it was funny. I laughed out loud like Sarah did when the Lord told her she was going to have a baby. I thought, “I can do that!” And lo and behold, I think I shouldn’t laugh and I should go and try. So I applied and got hired to be a teacher’s assistant. I thought, “Wow” God knew and I didn’t! I know the Lord has called me to do this because he has opened every door for me. (Lucy, Interview, September 11, 2015)

**Theme Five: External Motivators for Degree Completion**

Questions about sources of support for participants and external sources of encouragement or motivation were deemed appropriate in order to answer Research Question one, “How do students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experience in the online learning environment?” and to some degree Research Question three, “What benefits from the online degree program are perceived by students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD)?”

Theme Five emerged from questioning participants about future goals and plans and sources of support in their lives. The codes supporting this theme included: positively influenced participant to continue education, support from university staff, support from students/peers, support from family/friends, future career/degree/major. Bol and Garner (2011) reported that a lack of on-going support from classmates and instructors may be a barrier for success for online students with disabilities. Three subthemes emerged from the data to describe the external motivators leading to degree completion: support from family, friends, or co-workers; support from online students/peers; and career and financial goals.

**Support from family, friends, co-workers.** The code definition for support that was used across all data sets was, “Support: to sustain, advocate, uphold, encourage, and provide for
one going through a situation or trial- obtained from family, friends, or co-workers.” Johnny detailed his experience coping with intermittent cell phone service and undependable internet connection where he lives in a mountainous area. Johnny said,

I have to be extremely careful if I’m taking a test worth a lot of points, although I’m aware I could contact my professors and let them know if I ever lost connection and ask them to reset the test for me, because I have had to do that. But I don’t want to be in the middle of submitting an assignment or taking a test and all of a sudden my internet goes down and my assignment is gone. Right now I’m trying to finish a paper that’s due this evening. (Johnny, Interview, September 16, 2015)

I asked Johnny what he does when he can’t get a connection and can’t contact the instructor because his phone and his internet are his primary modes of communication. He replied, “My daughter lives in town and I’ve got a key to her place, so if it’s at two o’clock in the morning I can go there and do that,” (Interview, September 16, 2015). Johnny’s mature sense of responsibility and his determination, coupled with his daughter’s unwavering support set him up for success in his degree program.

Samantha shared about Mrs. Carter from her church youth program from whom she derives support while pursuing an online degree,

She has supported me when I had to make tough decisions about what to do about finishing my degree and she pushed me not to give up on my dreams. She often reminds me that if finishing my education is going to help me to fulfill my dreams, then go for it; but if you find that your dreams change and no longer include finishing your degree than that’s okay to, but don’t forget how hard you had to fight to get this far.

Participant Joy credits her family for their support during all phases of her schooling,
As a child, I came home from school and had supper; my parents would try to help me. They were very supportive. I was stubborn, and persistent, and I had family support. That’s the only reason I passed every year and never failed anything. (Samantha, Interview, September 11, 2015)

Joy also shared, I would say emotional support is key. They’re always understanding. My family is always there for me, emotionally and when I’ve had challenges or successes or just need some down time. The family is key for me. If I didn’t have those, I wouldn’t have made it this far, now. It’s been critical, absolutely. (Joy, Interview, September 8, 2015).

Several participants also reported feeling comfort and support from their family pets. They reported asking for assistance from family, friends, and roommates for proofreading papers and helping to explain instructions. Cheryl said close friends and extended family have also been very supportive to provide her family with meals and childcare during her graduate degree program, “Let us bring a meal over tonight. We're going to pick CJ up after school. We'll have him until Greg can come pick him up after work. Don't worry about that,” (Cheryl, Interview, September 15, 2015). Lauren shared she felt support from a variety of external sources, Definitely my grandma. She's easier to get ahold of than my sister, because time difference and everything. Definitely my grandma. Also, I do have a dog. She's a good comfort, good support system in that way. My sister is definitely very helpful. (Lauren, Interview, September 9, 2015)

Samantha described how her friends and family support her when she is physically unable to complete assignments due to the effects of her disability,
Sometimes when I can't handle looking at the computer, they scribe for me while I dictate and they'll type so that I don't have to like, because otherwise, sometimes work just wouldn't get done because I couldn't handle looking at the computer without getting nauseous and dizzy. (Samantha, Interview, September 11, 2015)

Suzy’s sister was enrolled in the same degree program and she reported,
She, my sister, of course, was my constant reminder. We had the exact same course. She would just send me a text message, say, "You have an hour to submit this, if you haven't already done it." I'm like, "Okay, thanks.” (Suzy, Interview, September 16, 2015)

**Support from online students/peers.** The code definition for support from online students/peers used across all data sets was, “Support: to sustain, advocate, uphold, encourage, and provide for one going through a situation or trial- obtained from fellow students in a university degree program.” This code and subsequent sub-theme emerged most frequently in the online focus group discussion board posts as participants would leave supportive comments and encouraging words for each other on the daily posts. Additionally, several students shared specific learning strategies in this way with other participants who expressed they were having difficulty in some area. For example, Chris said in response to Lauren in a focus group post, “I love the way that you were taking responsibility for your disability and figuring out ways to reward yourself,” (Chris, Focus Group, September 4, 2015).

In like manner, Joni replied to Ernie,
I found that a good way to keep from being distracted was to go in my office, remove any phones from the room, ask my husband that I not be disturbed and tell him why, shut my dog out of the room, and turn my iTunes™ on at just the right volume to shut out everything else. Give it a try? (Joni, Focus Group, September 3, 2015)
On the next day of the focus group discussion, Buddy encouraged Joni by saying, “It seems like we both have we some of the same issues. I am not always able to deal with my pain, and it does distract me,” (Buddy, Focus Group, September 4, 2015).

**Intensives.** For students in graduate online degree programs, on-campus intensive, week-long courses are a part of the residency requirement for every degree. Participants reported feeling support from other students when taking part in these intensive courses. Joy stated,

The intensives were my favorite part, I must say, because I was able to be with my classmates face to face. That was very nice because I could see people, I could observe them. I could hear their voices. It was real and I could take it home with me. (Joy, Interview, September 8, 2015).

Cheryl added, “The intensives and discussion board posts, I just feel like everybody's so supportive and you can really connect because you have a lot of the same values about things,” (Interview, September 16, 2015).

Lauren talked about her intensive experience last summer, “I had so much fun with it and I actually got really top scores and feedback from my fellow peers. I just loved it. The classmates were fantastic,” (Lauren, Interview, September 9, 2015). She concluded by saying, “Definitely, the intensives were fantastic to connect with others. I'm still in contact and friends with a lot of my classmates from that,” (Lauren, Interview, September 9, 2015). Suzy added, “The intensives were . . . I met some of my closest friends now through the intensive course. We all live in different places, but they've been my biggest support system,” (Suzy, Interview, September 16, 2015). Terrell concluded by saying,

That would have been group counseling that was probably the most significant. That's because they put us in little groups and we had to do the group processing, so of course
we walk out of there, we feel like we've known each other for life. (Terrell, Interview, September 10, 2015).

**Career and financial goals.** For adults in online degree programs, regardless of disability status, there is typically an external motivating factor related to a desired job change, promotion, or the hope of earning more money. I asked participants to share about their degree programs, major areas of study, and future career goals. Cheryl disclosed, “I am currently working on my master's in Professional Counseling after teaching for 16 years,” (Interview, September 16, 2015). After working in a variety of different jobs, Johnny said, “I am, majoring in History with minors in Military History, International Studies, Criminal Justice and Homeland Security, and I’m actually, when I graduate I’ll be turning the Criminal Justice minor into an Associates with a concentration in homeland security,” (Interview, September 16, 2015).

Joni shared about her current position that will help to prepare her for a future in counseling, “Now I mentor college students with disabilities, and I love it. Not much of a paying wage, but it gives me a purpose in life,” (Interview, September 17, 2015). Similarly, Joy is working in an area that will help her advance, once she finishes her doctoral program, “I’m a professor’s assistant for an online university,” (Interview, September 8, 2015). Buddy is retired from the military and said, “Well I was called to preach so . . . Here I am in school,” (Interview, September 10, 2015). Chris shared, “I am 53 years of age. I am presently a licensed chemical dependency counselor and have gone back to school to earn a professional counselor degree and am seeking licensure in the state of Texas to be a licensed professional counselor,” (Interview, September 14, 2015).

Hope is working on her first college degree at the age of 49 and has big dreams for her future,
My goal, once I get the degree, is to open up a . . . Get a big abandoned building that can fit semis and cars and stuff like that, and divide it in half, and use it as a halfway house. Because I had to do some research for one paper I had to write up, and one of their main thing is, there's not enough places out there for inmates that have been released. A lot of work programs and places won't hire them, because they're criminals. I've been having this thought in my head for a long time, I've just had so many people discourage me from doing it. (Hope, Interview, September 9, 2015)

Summary

In this chapter, I presented the results of the research conducted with students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) enrolled in online degree programs at the same university in this chapter. From the data analysis, five themes emerged with subthemes to help understand the shared experiences of students with specific learning disorder in online degree programs and in answer to the four research questions initially framing this study.

Theme One: Challenges During the Online Degree Program and Theme Two: Benefits from Choosing the Online Degree Program emerged across all data sets and every participant and provided answers to all four research questions. Theme Three: Student’s Ideas for Improving Online Degree Programs emerged from the focus group discussion board and interview data. Of all themes, Theme Three allowed participants a voice in how they would design or improve the online degree program for students with learning differences. Theme Four: Internal Characteristics for Student Success and Theme Five: External Motivators for Degree Completion gave insight into the motivating factors and personal characteristics evidenced by the participating students with disabilities enrolled in an online degree program. Within each of the five themes, subthemes emerged and I discussed each within this chapter. I
shared the voices of participants in this phenomenological study to illustrate the themes and subthemes which provided answers to each of the four research questions.

Results suggest students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in online degree programs face challenges as a result of their disabilities and often have difficulty obtaining accommodations and communicating with university staff. Further results adult students with disabilities are choosing online degree programs because of the convenience and flexibility offered and the ease of the admissions process and access to affordable online education. Students with disabilities like SLD and ADHD report that the use of assistive technology removes some learning barriers within the online degree program.

Additional results discussed include student’s ideas for improving the online program in the areas of accommodations and increased support services for students with disabilities. The internal characteristics for student success identified in this study include maturity and life experience of the student, a sense of self-efficacy, and Christian faith. External motivators for students to complete degrees identified in this study include support from family, friends, coworkers, and online student peers. Finally, career and financial goals for the future emerged as an important finding for external motivation toward degree completion.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

An identified need exists for additional research to include student perceptions and their personal stories in order to better understand the experiences of students with learning differences pursuing online degree programs at a college or university (Stewart et al., 2010). The purpose of this study was to understand the shared experiences of students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) enrolled in an online college degree program at a large, faith-based university, to fill this gap in the literature. In Chapter Five the research findings connect to the literature and theoretical constructs. Additionally, I provide a description of how I answered the four Research Questions from the data. The themes and subthemes identified during the analysis of data in Chapter Four will frame the discussion of conclusions drawn from the study. I explain specific recommendations for stakeholders at the university and recommendations for future research. Limitations of this study are detailed, and I address recommendations for future research in the field of online learning for students with learning differences. I addressed the research questions through an online focus group, semi-structured individual interviews, and emails with participants. Data was collected, transcribed, and then analyzed using codes with qualitative analysis software, ATLAS.ti™. From these codes, themes with subthemes were identified which provided answers for each research question.

Summary of Findings

Finlay (in Friesen et al., 2012) describes the phenomenological research process as beginning with first-person accounts of lived situations followed by reflective analysis which generates general themes about the essence of the phenomenon. Van Manen (1990) states, “. . . responsive-reflective writing is the very activity of doing phenomenology. Writing and rewriting
is the thing.” (p. 132). Through the process of coding and journaling reflectively about the data, I was able to identify themes and subthemes to describe the shared experiences of the participants. In the process of writing and revising, journaling and reflecting I was able to make sense of these themes and use them as hermeneutic tools for understanding and interpreting the experiences of students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD), who are enrolled in online degree programs. “When the facts of lived experience are captured in language it is an interpretative process” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 181). As I moved through the process of writing about the experiences of participants, additional analysis and synthesis of themes and subthemes occurred and I identified several meaningful statements about the phenomenon.

These four Research Questions provided the framework of this study:

1. How do students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their experiences in the online university learning environment?

2. How do participants with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) describe their reported experiences using accommodations in the online university learning environment?

3. What benefits are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the university online learning environment?

4. What challenges are perceived by students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in the university online learning environment?

Research Question one was addressed across all data sets and by all five identified themes. Participants described their experiences in the online degree program through discussions about how they came to choose and gain admission into their program, benefits and challenges they have experienced while in the program, and specific ways in which they feel
supported and motivated while completing their program. Participants shared many examples of support they feel from family and fellow students. They each expressed a strong sense of self belief toward goal attainment. Participants shared a reliance on their faith as a source of support while enrolled in the online degree program. Overall, the majority of participants described the online degree program experience as very positive and that it was meeting their expectations for preparing them to meet their personal and professional goals.

Research Question 2 focused specifically on how the participants described obtaining and utilizing their accommodations as students with documented disabilities. I identified a subtheme of Accommodations within the challenges faced by students with disabilities. Several of the participants reported negative experiences in obtaining and using their allowable accommodations for test taking and extension of time on assignments. Some students described specific instances where instructors refused to allow the accommodations or made it very difficult for the student to get what they needed for success in the online course. The three students in the doctoral program reported the least amount of difficulty obtaining their accommodations. Two undergraduate participants had not yet asked to use their accommodation of extended time on assignments due to a lack of understanding about how the accommodation would be granted.

Participants also discussed the topic of accommodations within the focus group and individual interviews as one of the main areas that could be improved in the online degree program. Participants indicated more communication would help instructors to better understand their accommodations and the guidelines for using accommodations. Among the student generated ideas for improvement of the online program, they recommended accommodation for extended time on tests and assignments be reviewed by the university course designers and
ODAS. Several participants suggested that exams and quizzes should have a 24-hour window with no timer for students with disabilities. Also, participants discussed a need for the final week of the eight-week term to be lengthened to seven days, instead of having courses end on Friday. One participant, Cheryl, explained that her disability did not disappear just because it was the last week of the semester, and she added that the five-day week adds to her anxiety and stress about course completion.

I addressed Research Question three within the identified theme of benefits from choosing an online degree program. Participants discussed convenience and flexibility of being able to take classes and not leave home. Those who work said the online program allowed them to keep their jobs and achieve academic goals. Several participants mentioned the online aspect of the degree program and the use of technology helps them to be able to participate successfully in course work they might not have been able to manage in a traditional program. Finally, about half of the participants mentioned the ease of the admissions process and the affordability of the degree as a major benefit that caused them to choose their online degree program. A few participants shared specifically about how this university did not require traditional assessment scores or GPA requirements for admission, thus giving them an opportunity to access higher education that had not been available to them before.

Research Question four explored the challenges faced by online students with learning differences and I answered it through the themes of challenges during online degree programs and student’s ideas for improving online degree programs. Again, participants identified accommodations as one of the greatest challenges. Additionally, communicating with university staff including advisors, ODAS, and instructors was also a noted challenge for many students. Some ideas for improving support services for online students with disabilities included helping
university staff understand the needs of their online students who learn differently, and providing other opportunities for communication using technology between students and staff.

The essence of the shared experience of students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in an online degree program includes:

1. Online students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) possess important internal characteristics (such as maturity, life and work experience, self-efficacy, and faith) along with external motivators (such as career goals and support from others) that contribute to their success in their degree programs.

2. The online students with disabilities want to have more communication and connection with instructors and university staff. These students have a wealth of ideas about program improvement and resources to share about how they have been able to overcome challenges as online learners.

3. The university’s non-traditional admissions policy has given students with disabilities an opportunity for advanced degrees, and access to programs that had previously been out of their reach. The majority of participants will obtain degrees and improve their current standard of living as a result of being accepted into these online programs.

Discussion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of students with documented specific learning disorder (including ADHD) enrolled in online university degree programs. I grounded this hermeneutical phenomenological in several educational theories of importance to the context of adult learning and higher education. A review of empirical literature in Chapter Two of this dissertation provided an overview of relevant and current understandings of the phenomenon of students with learning differences in
Theoretical Framework

Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1989) was built upon several basic constructs including human agency, self-efficacy, and cognition. This includes the notion that motivation and the principle of self-efficacy, which has the capacity to determine human action (or inaction) are both cognitively driven. Bandura’s theory posits that humans form beliefs about what they can accomplish and set goals for themselves based on these beliefs. I identified the subtheme of self-efficacy within Theme Four: Internal characteristics of students for success.

Nearly all participants evidenced having a healthy level of self-efficacy, despite their individual disabilities. Joni stated, “I decided long ago that I would rather be fighting, working, growing, than give in to the pain and disability,” (Interview, September 17, 2015). Joni’s story and experience illustrated the concepts of human agency and self-efficacy. She shared in her interview, “Don't give up, because there's always a way through whatever you're going through. You've just got to find it. There's always a way through.” (Joni, Interview, September 17, 2015).

Adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2012; Kolb, 1984) considers the learner’s experience, individual differences, and background knowledge as important resources within the learning community. The andragogical model of learning is strongly connected to Bandura’s social cognitive theory because of the belief that adults who are goal-oriented can attain desired learning outcomes. Lauren discussed how she was paying for her own master’s degree in order to fulfill her dream of becoming a teacher. Chris commented that he knew the only way to obtain a counseling license was to obtain a master’s degree from an accredited university and that was his goal. Samantha shared, “Yeah, but I'm one of those people who like to try to prove
Chickering’s (1969) theory of student development connects to this research because it emphasized the importance of the institution and positive relationships between the student and the institutional staff. Likewise, Tinto’s (1987) student retention theory recognized that student persistence and retention hinges upon the quality of faculty and student interactions and the student’s feeling of integration in the learning community. Lauren shared that she sometimes feels like just a number and not an individual student because contacting university advisors and ODAS by telephone and email seems very impersonal. Terrell said he never gets to speak with the same person when he contacts ODAS for assistance. Several participants reported negative email communications with instructors regarding access to accommodations. Lauren also shared that she has been given conflicting information from academic advisors which has delayed her graduation.

Some participants were overwhelmingly positive about their interactions with university staff and instructors. Ernie shared he’s received personalized assistance from both the financial aid office and ODAS. Cheryl said that the interactions and connections she has had with fellow classmates and her instructors through the discussion boards and intensive classes have been uplifting and positive. Chris shared that he will be forever loyal as an alumni of the university because he felt respected and honored, regardless of his theological differences or his disability status, during his time in the degree program.
Empirical Literature

Online education has grown more rapidly than traditional higher education (Bell & Federman, 2013; Li & Irby, 2008; Miller, 2014; Sener, 2010; Singh & Pan, 2004). Bell and Federman (2013) predicted that by the school year 2017-2018, more than half of all students enrolled in higher education would be online learners. This study focused on the experiences of online learners with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in degree programs at the same online university. Themes emerged from the focus group and interview data which can be connected to the current literature.

Challenges during online degree program. Not all students will be successful in online learning environments (Cho, 2012; Hall, 2009; Tsai et al., 2011). Cho (2012) cautioned that some students may feel a sense of isolation and not understand how to effectively interact with others in a purely online setting. Participants Tom, Ernie, Hope, Cheryl, Lauren, and Joshua all reported feeling isolated as online students. Cheryl, Buddy, Hope, Terrell, Ernie, and Juanita all shared about times when they received failing grades on assignments or in courses. Cheryl, Lauren, Ernie, and Joshua all gave specific examples of miscommunication that occurred between them and university staff because of poorly worded and impulsive email exchanges or phone calls.

Participants in this study described a variety of challenges that emerged as subthemes. The most frequently mentioned challenge was obtaining accommodations. Vojtko (2012) noted that receiving the appropriate accommodations was the most important key to success for students with disabilities at the post-secondary level. Participants shared multiple examples of difficulty in obtaining the allowable accommodations from instructors, even though they had submitted the required documentation from ODAS. Sometimes, the accommodations were not
requested because of a fear that they would be denied. This led to students receiving lower grades on assignments and in courses. Buddy shared that he had taken one religion course three times before earning a passing grade. He also stated that he had not always requested extended time for completing assignments. Quinlan et al. (2012) stated that student’s failure to request their accommodations leads to poor performance.

Cano-Smith (2009) noted that self-advocacy was an important factor for student success in those with learning disabilities. Joshua, Suzy, Joy, and Cheryl all gave examples of how they advocated for themselves as students with disabilities in order to access their allowable accommodations and have open communication with their instructors. Tsargis (2010) discussed the use of a student homepage as a tool that can be used for students with disabilities to introduce themselves to their instructors. Cheryl, Chris, and Tom shared how they always emailed their professors before the semester began to introduce themselves and self-disclose about their disability, even before they had the accommodation paperwork sent from ODAS. They found this to be a proactive way to begin new courses and to make sure the instructors were aware of them as individuals with learning differences.

**Benefits from choosing an online degree program.** Students with disabilities are choosing online learning because it removes barriers and allows greater access to degree programs (Barnard-Brak & Sulak, 2010; Coronel, 2008; Fichern, et al., 2009; Hart, 2012; Heiman & Olenik-Shemesh, 2012; Kent, 2015; Serianni & Coy, 2014; Simoncelli & Hinson, 2010, Verdinelli & Kutner, 2015). Participants in this study recounted their experiences in K-12 educational settings and in other colleges. Several participants in this study did not traditionally graduate from high school and yet have access to higher education because of the online university’s admissions policy. This finding also confirms the research of Li and Irby (2008)
who reported online education was reaching marginalized groups of students who had not been given access to post-secondary education.

Participants Chris, Terrell, Joy, and Suzy shared about their successful experiences using assistive technology such as e-books, audio books, and speech-to-text software. Those participants who had multiple disabilities such as ADHD and chronic pain or anxiety disorders valued the online learning opportunity because it allowed them to complete course work when it was most convenient for them, given the nature of their disabilities. Likewise, participants who worked or who had transportation challenges found online learning met their needs for convenience and accessibility.

**Internal characteristics of students for success.** Verdinelli and Kutner (2015) identified persistence factors among online graduate students with disabilities including resiliency, self-determination, motivation, and goal commitment. Similarly, this research revealed the subthemes of maturity and life experience, self-efficacy, and faith as integral internal characteristics for student success in their online degree program. Hart (2012) indicated that if persistence factors are not sufficient then students may be at risk for withdrawing from online courses. The participants in this study were all between the ages of 23-61 and exhibited an appropriate level of maturity and ability to draw from life experience in order to persist in their programs. One characteristic shared by all participants in this study was their confession of faith and reliance on their personal faith as an important source of support during the online degree program.

**External motivators for degree completion.** Current educational literature indicates external factors for persistence in online degree programs are also important for degree completion (Hart, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009; Verdinelli & Kutner, 2015). Participants in this
study shared about their sources of external motivation for degree completion. These subthemes emerged as external motivators for degree completion: support from family, friends, co-workers; support from online student/peers; career and financial goals. Although the Hart (2012) review of literature reported support from instructors as an important persistence factor, this was not the case in my research. Most of the participants did not report feeling supported by their online instructors, in fact some perceived a lack of support from their instructors. The four participants who did report a higher level of support from their instructors were one master’s level student and the three doctoral level students.

The primary external motivator for participants in this study was their motivation toward a specific career goal which required the completion of the degree and, in some cases, further credentials. Participants in this study were motivated to complete their degree in order to attain their personal and professional goals. They received support and encouragement from friends, family, co-workers, and online peers within their degree programs.

**New Contributions to the Field**

**Adult learner ideas for improving online degree programs.** Review of the current literature focused mainly on the history of online learning, the legalities, and the reasons students with disabilities choose online learning as a post-secondary option from a benefits versus barriers perspective. The literature did not reveal similar findings of student generated ideas for improvement of online degree programs for students with disabilities. This information is considered to be a new contribution to the field of knowledge about online students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in college degree programs. Adult students want to have a voice in their learning and to feel as if they are valued as a member of the learning community. The adult learners’ experience and background is considered to be their greatest resource
according to Knowles et al. (2012). Several participants in this study hold degrees in education and have teaching experience. The median age of participants in this study is 45. Participants knew their learning strengths and weaknesses and their preferred modalities of learning. The ideas generated through discussion board sharing and in individual interviews for improving the online degree programs warrant consideration by university course designers, ODAS, and other university stakeholders. I mentioned the specific recommendations in Chapter Four and they will discuss them further under the Implications section of this chapter.

**Implications**

I have already discussed theoretical and empirical implications from the research. Presented in this section are practical implications and recommendations for stakeholders that I identified through the research study. This study gave voice to participants with learning differences who, for the most part reported very positive experiences and outcomes in their online degree programs. However, there were also identified areas where to make improvements for both students and the university at large. I also identified implications and recommendations for the purpose of improving online learning for students with disabilities. Additionally, I also provided recommendations for increasing instructors’ understanding of this subgroup of online learners.

**Implications for Students**

I heard and cited the voices of participants as they made recommendations for students with disabilities in online degree programs. Lucy advised, “My advice to incoming students with disabilities in this online program would be to make a plan and work the plan to meet deadlines,” (Focus Group, September 5, 2015). Terrell stated, “I would advise them to have a good understanding of their limitations, seek appropriate support from school, family, and friends,
keep in constant contact with instructors, and do not take on too much on their schedule.” (Focus Group, September 5, 2015). Lauren suggested that students do their homework and really research the online program in advance to see if it is the right fit. She said an insider’s perspective would have been nice to have prior to beginning her degree program.

Similarly, Chris recommended more communication from ODAS in the form of general guidelines or a handbook by degree program or even on a website forum for students with learning disabilities. Joshua also stated that he was flabbergasted when there was not a handbook for students with disabilities, nor a handbook for his graduate degree program. He suggested there were times it would have been helpful to know in advance about licensure exams, requesting unique accommodations, and starting very early to request audio books for courses.

Suzy shared, “The thing I felt was a challenge was that Blackboard™ is not fully functional. The ability to tie your calendar to the task and due dates was not available,” (Interview, September 16, 2015). She further explained that Blackboard™ features were not all accessible and how the calendar app could be a real benefit to students, like herself, who need reminders about deadlines and due dates. Students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) reported they are challenged by memory issues. Having access to this calendar app through Blackboard™ would help students manage deadlines and due dates in a more efficient way.

According to participants, the university may not be able to give advanced notice of registration for courses to allow for timely ordering of text books and audio texts from ODAS. By the time the audio books arrive from the university, the course may already have been completed--a problem noted by more than one student participant in this study. Johnny shared
his frustration about being required to purchase e-books for courses when he needs the printed text in order to make notes and highlight for his best learning experience. By the time he purchases the required text and has it shipped to his home, the course may be nearing completion. Additionally, he is paying twice for materials he only needs to receive in printed form.

As participants described this problem, it appears to be rooted in a lack of timely communication between the department course schedulers, academic advisors, ODAS, and the university bookstore. The implications of this problem greatly affect online students who are located all over the world. Students with learning differences in need of audio or printed texts, in order to access the materials in the most efficient way for their mode of learning, are at a disadvantage as a result of this identified problem. Chris described this situation, “It’s ridiculous!” (Interview, September 14, 2015). Even with tremendous advantages of technology and e-learning, students are at a disadvantage because of a breakdown in communication and timely access to necessary materials for their best success.

**Implications for the University**

The greatest challenge discussed by participants relates to accessing their allowable course accommodations. The implication of student access to accommodations has potential legal ramifications for the university if not addressed and understood by students and instructional staff. Each student’s accommodation paperwork from ODAS to instructors’ states,

“1. The student must request additional time to complete an assignment prior to the assignment deadline. 2. The student must request additional time for EACH assignment when additional time is needed as a result of a disability. (The student cannot make a blanket statement that additional time is needed for all assignments in the course.)” (Lauren, personal
communication, September 9, 2015). According to many participants, this statement has been interpreted differently by instructors across degree programs. Some participants believe instructors have the right to refuse accommodations. Several participants reported being told, “No” or “With a decrease in points/grade” when extended time for assignments has been requested. This statement appears at the very end of the accommodation paperwork, “Please note that the above accommodations are mandated as they are approved and within accordance of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Professors do retain the right to approve additional help as they see fit.” (Lauren, personal communication, September 9, 2015)

Students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) in university online degree programs do not always understand the rules and guidelines surrounding the extension of time accommodation. The language of the accommodation paperwork seems ambiguous, sometimes contradictory, and leads to problems with interpretation. Further, instructional staff who are not consistent in interpreting the extension of time accommodation may be inadvertently placing the university at risk of legal action by violating the civil rights of students with documented disabilities.

Likewise, the interpretation of the rule for receiving the extension of time accommodation changes greatly during the last week of the course. Participant Cheryl recounted that she is never able to get her allowable accommodation of extended time during the last (shortened) week of classes. The last week of class is shortened to five days instead of seven days, and all course requirements must be completed at the end of the fifth day. Cheryl said that she finds it frustrating that the university instructors expect she will not need her accommodations during the last week of class when she has needed the accommodations during every other week. Participant Terrell reported having to request an Incomplete in a course
because he was unable to use the extension of time accommodation during the last week of class. An incomplete grade for a student creates a problem for university instructors who want to report grades for each of their students in a timely fashion to meet the federal financial aid deadlines. This implication may be remedied through ODAS in the form of advising students how to plan in advance for asking for extended time accommodations. Additionally, students with learning disabilities (including ADHD) may benefit from webinars addressing planning, accommodations, use of calendars and other resources.

Several participants mentioned an interest in having ODAS create a website that is accessible for students with disabilities and instructors as a way of sharing information about disabilities, learning styles, accommodations, assistive technology, learning strategies, and other helpful information. During this study, communication between students with disabilities and university staff emerged as an area of concern that needs improvement. A website would improve communication about disability services for both students and staff and give a platform for accessing resources to help all stakeholders.

Overall, participants with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) shared positive experiences about their online degree programs. Improving the identified areas of communication, accommodations, and access to accommodating course materials will improve support and instructional services for students. Making these improvements will serve to protect the university from legal consequences from unintended violations of student access to curriculum and allowable accommodations.

**Limitations**

Qualitative research comes with limitations due to reduced sample size, participant self-reporting, researcher bias and other issues that may weaken the study (Blomberg & Volpe, 2012;
Lack of diversity among participants is a limitation of this study. Among the 17 participants, two were African American and 15 Caucasian. I did not consider race to be a factor of concern in this study, but this lack of diversity is certainly a limitation. The ages of the participants ranged from 23-61 with a median age of 45. Since there were only two participants in their twenties, students of traditional college-age of 18-24 were under-represented in this study. However, the average age of online learners is typically older than traditional college-aged students.

All participants are studying in the fields of education, counseling, Christian ministry/theology at a university where over 100 major areas are available. Further, the majority of participants in this research were graduate students from the School of Education and the Counseling Departments which impacted the study because many of the students had very similar experiences that may be attributed to being enrolled in the same courses with the same instructors during their online degree programs.

Participants in this study were limited to online students with specific learning disorder (and ADHD) and all enrolled in the same faith-based university’s online degree programs. Results cannot be transferred to students who live on campus, or who do not have specific learning disorder (including ADHD). Student participants were self-reporting and may have misreported their experiences in the online degree programs. Student participants were self-reporting and may have misreported their experiences, age, disability diagnosis, and degree/major area of study. I interviewed participants via web-based software and by phone. If I had conducted interviews in person, there may have been different understandings and responses to the questioning.
Finally, the fact that research was conducted at a faith-based university is not necessarily a limitation, but the sample may not be truly representative of the general population. Based on participant responses, it seems that all participants are Christians. This is not a surprise, given the setting. Students with disabilities who identify as Christians may be more likely to choose enrollment at a faith-based institution when faced with a variety of choices for online education.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

When conducting purposive sampling during the recruiting phase of this research, I disqualified several students with visual and physical disabilities from participation. Future research may include all disability types or look to a different subset of disability types enrolled in online degree programs. For example, there are a large number of veterans returning to higher education who have TBI and/or anxiety disorders with depression. This can be an area of focus for future research.

There were differences noted between participants at the various degree levels between bachelor’s and post-graduate. In future research, it may be informative to focus on undergraduate students only for a different perspective. Also, a bounded case study of a small group of students from the same degree program may provide a different look at the phenomenon of online learning for students with learning differences. A quantitative or mixed methods approach to these research questions may yield even different results.

Future research may want to look at the specific problem of communications with instructional staff or obtaining instructional accommodations to flesh out the misconceptions and misunderstandings that exist in higher education from both the student’s and instructor’s perspective. As online degree programs for students with disabilities expand, it will be
interesting to research the issues related to access and equity of instructional programs, as well as student services and disability support services offered for this population of learners.

Additional ideas for future research include studying a broader sample of students with disabilities in online degree programs and looking at the problem from the perspective of faculty and instructional staff. A case study that explores the phenomenon from both a student and faculty perspective within the same department or the same university may yield even more useful information for practitioners. Finally, a suggestion for future research in the area of identifying the most successful instructors for students with disabilities in online degree programs and sharing their best practices and instructional strategies would benefit both students and instructors in the higher education setting. With the increasing numbers of students with disabilities enrolling in online programs of study there are many opportunities for increasing knowledge and conducting educational research to improve current practice.

Summary

This study filled a gap in the current research about online learning for students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD). Only a few studies have been conducted in recent years involving students with learning differences in online degree programs. Chapter five included a discussion of key findings and both theoretical and practical implications from the findings. Additional ideas for future research were suggested.

Bell and Federman (2013) predicted that more than half of all college-level students will be learning online in the year 2017. As online learning becomes the option of choice for more and more degree-seeking students, the way in which students with specific learning disorder (including ADHD) receive accommodations, access the curriculum, and successfully earn their degrees, may determine which online schools continue to grow in enrollment and popularity.
Participants in this study reported having mostly positive experiences in their online degree programs. Some of the positive reports included the intensive, on-campus, interactive experience of meeting fellow students and instructors. Other positive student reports included feeling a sense of community with other students during the discussion board posts using the BlackBoard™ feature of the course management system in their courses. Tom lauded his instructors, “My professors have truly been awesome and very adjusting to my individual needs,” (Interview, September 14, 2015). He said that making an early connection with the professors makes a positive difference for him every single time.

A few participants reported negative experiences, especially when it came to requesting and obtaining their allowable accommodations. Juanita shared about how even asking for the accommodation would put her into tears as she waited for the email response. She said that only two of her instructors had been empathetic to her requests for extended time on an assignment. “The last few have been . . . It’s almost like they’re telling me to suck it up,” (Juanita, Interview, September 17, 2015). Other participants reported feeling frustrated when they had to access their accommodations, because some instructors had forgotten that the student had a disability, or they misinterpret the extension of time accommodation and at times would not grant it when requested.

Communication with advisors, ODAS support staff, and instructors, was identified as an area needing improvement by the participants. When students feel supported and connected to the learning community, they will generally persist to degree completion (Tinto, 1987; Tinto & Pusser, 2006). Students with learning differences are accessing and being admitted into online degree programs at an increasing rate. The results of this research point to a need for continued improvement in the areas of instructional staff training, advising, and disability support so that
students with disabilities enrolled in online degree programs are allowed accommodations in order to achieve their personal and professional goals.
REFERENCES


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APPENDICES

Appendix A IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 24, 2015

Seleth LeAnn Bunch
IRB Approval 2225.062415: Experiences of College Students with Learning Disabilities in Online College Degree Programs: A Phenomenological Study

Dear LeAnn,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

Fernando Garzon, Psy.D.
Professor, IRB Chair
Counseling

(434) 592-4054

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Appendix B Participant Recruitment Email

Date: [Insert Date]

Dear [Recipient]:

You are being contacted directly from [__________] Office of Students with Disabilities and your confidentiality as a student with disabilities has not been compromised.

As a doctoral student in the Education Department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Ed. D. in Curriculum and Instruction. The purpose of this research study is to understand the shared experiences of college students with specific learning disorder enrolled in an online degree program, and you are invited to participate.

I am seeking students for participation in my research who meet this criteria: Must have one (or more) of the following identified disabilities: Specific Learning Disabled (SLD) which can include: Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Auditory or Visual Processing Disorder, Language Impaired, or Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)and have completed at least one semester in an online program and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in a Discussion Board focus group and participate in an individual interview via online format. The focus group will take place online via Blackboard as a Discussion Board group over a period of no longer than 2 weeks. Individual interviews will be scheduled via online format or in person, if geographical distance allows and will last about 1-2 hours, at your convenience. Interviews will be video recorded by a technology specialist using web technology.

Anonymity cannot be provided nor guaranteed during the Discussion Board group participation phase of this study. You will be interacting with other voluntary participants responding to questions each week about your experience as a student with a disability seeking an online degree. However, your anonymity will be protected in the write-up of the research findings by using a pseudonym instead of your real identity. There is minimal risk for participation in this research because your identity will not be disclosed after the focus group and interviews have concluded. Records of these interactions will be kept securely locked in my files for a period of three years and then destroyed.

To participate in this research:

A consent document is located on the webpage: Please click on the survey link at the end of the consent information to indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

After data collection each participant who completes both the focus group Discussion Board AND the individual interview portion of the research will receive a $20.00 Visa gift card.

LeAnn L. Bunch, Ed. S.
Appendix C Screening Protocol

Participant Screening Questionnaire

These questions were available online via Survey Monkey™ web-based survey tool.

1. Are you over the age of 18? ___Yes ___No
2. Is English your primary language? ___Yes ___No
3. Have you completed* (passing or failing) at least one full (8 week) semester of online course work through the University’s online degree program? _____Yes _____No
4. Do you have a documented disability on file with the University’s Online Office of Disability Academic Support (ODAS)? ____Yes ___No
5. Please list the name of the documented disability on file with ODAS. (for example- Specific Learning Disability) ____________________________________________
6. Please indicate your current degree program. (for example: Bachelor of Science) ____________________________________________
7. Please list your email address- ____________________________________________

If you meet the eligibility criterion for this study, you will be contacted by the researcher via email to complete the required consent forms.
CONSENT FORM

Experiences of Students with Specific Learning Disorder (including ADHD) in Online College Degree Programs: A Phenomenological Study

Seleta LeAnn Bunch
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study to learn about the experiences of online students with disabilities in college degree programs. You were selected as a possible participant because you are currently enrolled in an online degree program and have a documented disability. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Seleta LeAnn Bunch, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand more about the experiences of online students with documented learning disabilities and ADHD in college degree programs. There is little research about online learning and students with disabilities in current educational literature.

Procedures:

First, you will read this informed consent information. If you choose to proceed, sign the consent form electronically and continue by answering the survey questions. Please include your email address!

Next, you will receive an email from the researcher. If you do not meet criteria for participation, you will be informed and your involvement in the process ends. If you are eligible for participation, you will be informed and given further instructions.
Chosen participants will be enrolled into a Blackboard focus group for a period of ten days. Days 1-5 you will be asked to briefly respond to a discussion board thread and engage in discussion with other participants. Days 6-10 you will be asked to review the discussions and add any final thoughts or comments. You may also respond to other participants as often or as little as you feel comfortable. Next, you will be asked to participate in an individual interview. Interviews should last about 60-90 minutes. If possible, the interview will be done in person and audio recorded. Most interviews will take place using online web-based technology such as GoToMeeting or Skype. You will use your computer to video chat or audio chat with the researcher. The interview will be recorded. You can decide if you prefer having the web cam on during the interview or just doing an audio recording. After the interview, you may be asked to read over the transcript from your interview to check for accuracy. At that time, your participation in the study will be concluded.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

The study has minimal risk for participants, no more than you would encounter in everyday life. During the study, the researcher may offer academic, spiritual, or counseling resource information if it is believed to be needed by participants. If you would like referrals for additional resources, they will be provided to you through the university’s support services.

There are no direct benefits for participation in this research study.

**Compensation:**

If you participate during both the Blackboard focus group and the individual interview, you will receive a $20 Visa gift card as a thank-you for your investment of time.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym for the final reporting of my findings. The findings will only be used for educational purposes. The recordings
and transcripts will be stored in separate, locked file cabinets in the researcher’s office. Transcripts and reports will be protected on locked computer hard drives and thumb drives, which are password protected. There are some limits to the confidentiality. Participants will be interacting with other participants during the focus group phase of research. It is not possible to assure that all participants would maintain the confidentiality or privacy of others. However, all students enrolled in the focus group are other students with documented disabilities in an online degree program, which may provide a sense of support and community.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:**

If you decide to withdraw from the study, notify the researcher by email or phone and you will be withdrawn from the study and your data will not be used in the dissertation. Any data collected from participants who withdraw from the study prior to completion will be destroyed.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Seleta LeAnn Bunch. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at (904) 537-9132 or spollard3@liberty.edu or contact the faculty advisor for this research, Dr. Deanna Keith at dlkeith@liberty.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1837, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

*You may print a copy of this information to keep for your records.*
Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me for this study.

The researcher has my permission to video-record me for this study.

Signature: ___________________________________________ Date: ____________

Signature of Investigator: ________________________________ Date: ____________
Appendix E Researcher Journal Excerpt

9/10/15
This morning I interviewed Terrell. He’s a 42-year-old African-American graduate students in the professional counseling program at the university. His disability is ADHD. And he struggles with balancing home and family responsibilities with his schoolwork. T has difficulty with time management. He shared that his wife resents the time he spends on school assignments. He shared that he spends time with his children when he should be completing schoolwork. He often completes schoolwork late at night.

I also interviewed Joshua who is a 61-year-old graduate student in the master’s program for professional counseling at the university. He has a bachelor’s degree in psychology. He also has an M. Div. Degree. J is very articulate and intelligent. He has worked as a professional hypnotist for many years. He is knowledgeable as a communicator and a business person. J shared many ideas about improving the counseling program and marketing the program at the university. He was not diagnosed with attention problems until just two years ago. He became very depressed and sought help from a psychiatrist. He wondered why he was always last to finish and never felt like he was as smart as other students. J said he has struggled with these feelings for years and through two other degree programs. J shared frustration about receiving accommodations for his coursework and gave specific suggestions about how to improve this process.

I also interviewed Buddy who is a 53-year-old, retired from the Army, wounded warrior. He is using his wounded warrior benefits to pay for his bachelor’s degree in religion at the University. Before he left the Army, he had over 100 hours of college training in the area of engineering. His 31 year career in the Army was in the area of engineering, working for the Army Corps of engineers. He returned from Afghanistan and Iraq with severe injuries which caused him to have a short-term memory deficit learning disability. Buddy has struggled throughout his degree program and has never used an accommodation. When I asked him if he had received an accommodation plan he replied, “Yes, I got a letter from the office of disabilities”. However, when I asked him about receiving extra time to complete assignments or to take tests and quizzes he said he never asked for those things. He admitted it took him three attempts to pass the class on the book of Acts, before he finally passed it. He also had to take a church history course multiple times before passing. He shared that using extra time on tests and quizzes was not always guaranteed without confrontation with the instructor. He said the timer on the test site was always on and he never really knew if he would be penalized for going over on his time. So, he always pushed to finish in the allotted time. Buddy sounds like a very timid and soft-spoken man. Even though he is older than me, he answered me by saying, “Yes ma’am”. I was glad to hear that he is almost ready to graduate. He is in his last semester.
Appendix F Audit Trail for Data Collection

Data Collection

Online Focus Group
- 5 day facilitated, discussion board with prompts
- Printed transcripts

Artifacts
- Participant Emails
- Responded to emails; asked questions.
- Printed emails and saved.

Semi-Structured Interviews
- Google Voice™
- Skype™
- Conducted 17 individual interviews via Google Voice™ phone or Skype™
- Audio/Video recorded using software; transcribed each recorded interview.
Appendix G Audit Trail for Data Analysis