A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF THE SHARED
PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE ADJUNCT FACULTY IN THE UNITED STATES
WHO HAVE A HIGH SENSE OF COMMUNITY

by

Tiffany LS Ferencz

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT
The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community within their respective university. Sense of community was generally defined as feelings of connectedness within the university community. The theories that guided this study were McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) sense of community theory and Herzberg’s (1968) motivation-hygiene theory. McMillan and Chavis’ sense of community theory suggests a sense of community is a powerful force that influences people. Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory is used as it identifies guiding principles for why people are motivated to work. The central question that guided this study was: What are the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community within their respective universities? The research began with the Sense of Community Index, version 2 (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008), an online questionnaire, to identify potential participants among online adjunct faculty who work for accredited universities in the United States and have a high sense of community. I also included focus groups and interviews conducted via Adobe Connect video conferencing to describe online adjunct faculty member’s perceptions of sense of community in the workplace. Using Moustakas’ (1994) approach, the data analysis focused on identifying shared themes experienced by online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community. An analysis of the data revealed that online adjuncts with a high sense of community initiate collaborative dialogue with other faculty members in order to ensure they are able to clearly support their students, but often see the leadership’s role to initiate the connections online.

Keywords: adjunct faculty, online education, sense of community, motivation, training, connectedness, collaboration, communication
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband, Brett. Without his unyielding support and love, this journey would never be complete.

I also dedicate this dissertation to our two daughters, Kaija and Aliz. While they may not have always understood why I needed to sneak away to study or work on this dissertation, I pray that as they grow they will be encouraged to pursue their own dreams with a steady focus and dedication.

Finally, I would like to thank my parents for instilling in me the importance of perseverance. This dissertation is also dedicated to both of you.
Acknowledgments

There are so many people who positively influenced me on my journey to completing my dissertation. I am incredibly thankful that Dr. Spaulding suggested I reach out to Dr. Collins to be my dissertation chair. Dr. Collins and I are both incredibly passionate about the online experience, and are also equally motivated in accomplishing our goals. Dr. Collins encouraged me throughout the dissertation process, particularly helping me set realistic goals along the way. She always had words of encouragement, even when life’s circumstances were not always bright. Dr. Collins and I were a perfect match from the beginning and I believe that much of my quick success was because of her.

I would also like to thank Dr. Patrick and Dr. Bass for their encouragement over the last year. They both provided me with reassurance and a fresh perspective as they helped me in this dissertation journey. I believe my study is stronger because of them.

Everyone always says that the time and energy that goes into the dissertation process is tremendous, but I really did not believe how much dedication and support from others it takes to cross the finish line. I absolutely would not have been able to finish my dissertation without the incredible support of my family. I cannot count the hours my husband, mother, mother in-law, and sister gave to me by allowing me to have some time alone to focus on my studying and writing. I cannot imagine how much longer this journey would have taken without their continued support. I will be forever grateful.
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List of Abbreviations

College of Nursing (CON)

Computer-Mediated Communication (CME)

Distance Education (DE)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Sense of Community Index (SCI)

Sense of Community Index version 2 (SCI-2)

United States (US)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The surge in distance education (DE) due to technological advances has encouraged many post-secondary institutions, both public and private, to offer online courses for their students. The focus of DE is on students having easy access to their education, as well as allowing universities to increase capacity without the constraints of time or space. The term distance education includes all types of alternative education forums, such as correspondence courses; satellite campuses, which are face-to-face experiences; and online learning (Gannon-Cook, 2010). However, online education specifically speaks to the experience of learning in a virtual world. According to Allen and Seaman (2014), in 2013 a total of 1731 post-secondary public institutions in the United States (US) offered online courses compared with only 20 post-secondary public institutions in the US that did not have any online offerings. Whether people support online education or not, institutions across the US have spent the last several years building their programs to encompass the online forum with support for students. In doing so, the jobs of faculty members have begun to shift as the need to facilitate online learning has become part of their responsibilities. The focus of this study was to understand the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community within their respective university. Chapter One provides background information, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, research plan, delimitations and limitations, and key definitions. The chapter ends with a summary.

Background

Recent research on faculty transitioning to the online setting highlights challenges with training (Bower, 2001; Gomez, 2015; Hewett & Powers, 2007; Lee & Busch, 2005; Lesane,
Additional research encompasses the student experience in the online setting and obstacles that must be overcome in online learning (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Of the current research, the need for students to overcome isolation and cultivate a sense of community in an online environment is acknowledged (Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005). Currently, research indirectly highlights feelings of isolation that online faculty experience, but little is understood on how online faculty cultivate a sense of community in the virtual world. McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Since adjunct faculty within universities make up the majority of faculty today (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014) and their experiences are unique when compared to full-time faculty, the focus of this research was on the experiences of online only adjunct faculty. The hope is that the insight from adjunct faculty could be transferred to full-time faculty whereas the reverse would not probably hold true. In addition, the focus was on those with a high sense of community to make sure awareness is on what people are doing to positively cultivate community in the virtual world and overcome feelings of isolation and disconnectedness. The current literature on online faculty emphasizes isolation, disconnectedness, and a need for community (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin, Valley, Welch, VuTran, & Lowenstein., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012; Lodhi, Razza, & Dilshad, 2013; Mann, Varey, & Button, 2000; Marshall, Michaels, & Mulki, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). By focusing on a high sense of community, I hoped to add to the
literature by positively reporting how some faculty are connecting with their university and other faculty in the online environment. Thus, I hoped to fill the gap in literature with this research by helping to understand how online adjunct faculty experience a high sense of community in the online work environment.

**History of Distance Education**

DE has evolved over the last few years. First, schools began offering distance education programs to cater to the needs of students who could not initially make it to the main campus. These programs involved correspondence courses via the mail, video courses, or even classes that met at remote satellite locations. While online education is a new phenomenon with the accessibility of the Internet, students have been taking correspondence courses for more than 100 years (Fuller, Kuhne, & Frey, 2010). Certainly, the format of DE has changed over the years from the utilization of the pony express 100 years ago to the Internet today increasing the opportunity to learn. The shift in the mode of DE to online education has created opportunities for students to engage in learning with the convenience of studying from a remote location and submitting assignments through an online platform.

Additionally, faculty have also benefited from the opportunity to work in a virtual environment and are able to teach many more students than a traditional classroom can handle, which is constricted by time and space. The focus on online education is significant for this study because the emphasis is specifically on those faculty members who are facilitating learning in the virtual world and do not have the possibility of connecting in a traditional face-to-face environment with students or colleagues that is possible with some distance learning courses. Several researchers have recently addressed the challenges students face in online education (Barnard-Brak, Lan, & Paton, 2010; Cohen, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Douglas, Wilson, & Ennis,
however, little has been done to address the faculty experience in the virtual world other than noting frustrations of isolation and a lack of support and training (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). Understanding how faculty address feelings of isolation and how faculty seek to develop a high sense of community within the online environment could help shed light on how to best support online adjunct faculty in their goals of engaging students in their online learning.

**Sense of Community**

McMillan and Chavis (1986) solidified the sense of community theory by examining how groups of people foster a sense of community in their environment, which includes feelings of belonging, significance, shared faith, and commitment. The significance of a sense of community is that those with a sense of community have a clearer defined purpose and feel empowered to accomplish what needs to be accomplished (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). With relation to student achievement and retention, a few researchers have examined how students perform in the online environment acknowledging that a sense of community is not as natural when compared to a more traditional face-to-face learning environment (Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). In one study \((N = 279)\), using multivariate statistical analyses, Rovai et al. (2005) determined “that online students feel a weaker sense of connectedness and belonging in both classroom and school-wide communities than on-campus students who attend face-to-face classes” (p. 1). While researchers have looked at the impact of students moving into
the online world of education, little has been done to help faculty transition to the online world of teaching. I hoped to use this study to fill the gap in literature by focusing on how online adjunct faculty experience sense of community.

**Faculty**

In order to support the growing number of students who are enrolled in online courses, the number of faculty who moved into the online realm has also increased significantly over the last several years, although no recent statistics could be located. These faculty members have frequently identified problems with moving into the online environment that included a lack of training, training that was not applicable to their online teaching, or training that was not hands-on (Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Bower, 2001; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Gomez, 2015; Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002; Hewett & Powers, 2007; Kang, 2012; Lee & Busch, 2005; Lesane, 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Orr et al., 2009; Paulus, et al., 2010; Richlin, Wentzell, & Cox, 2014; Wolf, 2006). Further frustration from online faculty included technology barriers or failures and inadequate compensation for the workload in an online environment (Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013). Another common theme addressed in recent studies is a lack of connectedness and community for online faculty (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005).

More specifically, several studies have addressed the nursing faculty shortage and how to ensure more nursing faculty remain in higher education (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015). In a descriptive exploratory survey research study examining why tenured nursing faculty (N = 1,171) decided to remain in higher education, Berent and Anderko (2011) found professional satisfaction with faculty identity, including a “sense of community with
academia and with other nurse faculty” (p. 205), were the strongest factors leading to the nurses’ commitment to higher education. This study highlights the importance of understanding how faculty members cultivate sense of community in the workplace so that administrators can encourage the sense of community for retention among faculty; however, research has not yet been conducted to understand how faculty cultivate a high sense of community in the online workplace.

**Situation to Self**

As a former social studies teacher who now works for an online university, allowing me to stay home with my young daughters, I have personally experienced the hardships of making connections in a virtual world and the longing for adult interaction as a stay-at-home, work-from-home, mom. I also come from a worldview that believes we were created to be in community with one another and encourage each other (1 Thessalonians 5:11, New King James Version). As many schools have moved to a virtual environment to provide opportunity for students to further their education, the online environment has not only impacted students’ experiences, it has also impacted how faculty members, like myself, interact with one another. I have experienced the feelings of relearning how to relate or communicate in an environment that sometimes hinders the natural interactions that are common in a face-to-face environment.

As a trainer for an online university, I often wonder how to motivate employees who do not interact physically, do not make regular eye contact, and do not have the benefit of seeing body language. Further, I am challenged with understanding how to ensure that adjunct faculty are connected to the university so that they are motivated to continue employment and work through potential trials rather than quit when the job becomes challenging. I believe that by understanding how online adjunct faculty members positively interact with a university and the
leadership, and by adjusting to these recommendations, employees’ satisfaction and job performance may increase.

As I approached this research study, I held a few philosophical assumptions that impacted the research. First, my ontological assumption was that there are multiple perspectives and realities. I worked to recognize themes as they arose in the research illustrating the multiple realities through the actual words of the participants. Second, my epistemological assumption led me to conduct the research as close to the participants as possible to uncover first-hand information. Finally, my axiological assumption highlighted the value of cultivating a culture of community in the online environment for faculty and positioned me within the study as a former part-time online adjunct faculty member who is now a full-time trainer of online faculty. Thus, the stories I gathered are interpreted through my own lens.

I approached this research from a social constructivist paradigm. According to Creswell (2013), “In social constructivism, individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experience – meanings directed toward certain objectives or things” (p. 24). As I approached this research, I hoped to make meaning out of online adjunct faculty’s experiences with community so that I can understand how to best cultivate a community in the virtual world.

**Problem Statement**

The recent rise in online education has shifted student learning from only face-to-face environments to the option of online learning. According to Allen and Seaman (2013), “There were 572,000 more online students in fall 2011 than in fall 2010 for a new total of 6.7 million students taking at least one online course” (p. 17). To serve the increasing online student
population, more adjunct faculty were hired to help support the escalating growth of the student population.

From fall 1991 to fall 2011, the number of instructional faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 84 percent. The number of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 42 percent (from 536,000 to 762,000) from 1991 to 2011, compared with an increase of 162 percent (from 291,000 to 762,000) in the number of part-time faculty. (NCES, 2014, p. 1)

Thus, because of the rapid increase in adjunct positions, it is evident that adjunct faculty have a significant impact on student learning. While the adjunct faculty experience is different than the full-time residential faculty experience, the online adjunct faculty experience is even more unique and may negatively impact student outcomes. For the purposes of this study, when the term adjunct is used, it refers to part-time online faculty. In one study ($N = 7,011$), student learning outcomes, including completion of a class, grade in a class, continued enrollment after the class, and satisfaction with their online experience, showed higher achievement when the faculty member was full-time online versus when the faculty member was a part-time online adjunct (Mueller et al., 2013). Examining student ($N = 314$) experiences in online learning, Rovai (2002) found a connection between student’s perception of their own cognitive learning and a stronger sense of community. If students perceive their own learning as higher when they are connected to a community, it is possible that faculty who work in an online environment have a parallel experience in the workplace. Understanding what influences online adjunct faculty to excel and connect may help university administrators motivate employees for effectiveness (Wolf, 2011). Researchers note that online faculty long for connectedness to their peers and their schools (Dolan, 2011; Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009; Jeswani & Dave, 2012;
Portugal, 2013; Sutton, 2014; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). However, there is no research giving a voice to online adjunct faculty’s experiences of their perceived high sense of community in the online work environment, a necessity to help understand how people positively connect in the virtual world.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how online adjunct faculty with a high sense of community cultivated their experience. Sense of community was generally defined as feelings of connectedness within the university community. The theories guiding this study are McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) sense of community theory and Herzberg’s (1968) motivation-hygiene theory. McMillan and Chavis’ sense of community theory suggests that a sense of community is a powerful force that surrounds the four elements: reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connection. Herzberg’s motivation hygiene theory identifies guiding principles for why people are motivated to work. These two theories work together to help understand how online adjunct faculty perceive community and how they are motivated to work when face-to-face encounters do not occur regularly. Participants included online adjunct faculty members who work in accredited universities in the US.

**Significance of the Study**

This phenomenological study was conducted with the intention to advance the understanding of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rovai, 2002) in the online education environment by understanding how online adjunct faculty experience community in the online workplace resulting in an increase in job performance and satisfaction. This research
adds to the body of literature by giving a voice to online adjunct faculty who do not work in a
face-to-face environment.

In addition, this research extends current studies that focus on student achievement in the
online environment to the faculty experience (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010; Cohen, 2012; Dolan,
2011; Douglas et al., 2012; Finch et al., 2013; Mueller et al., 2013; Schutt et al., 2009;
Sockalingam, 2013; Sutton, 2014; Tervakari et al., 2012). By understanding the online adjunct
faculty’s experience, a large portion of the faculty population, this research adds to the
understanding of the best ways administrations can support online adjunct faculty to address
feelings of isolation.

Further, from this study I sought to understand the sense of community theory (McMillan
& Chavis, 1986) from the online adjunct faculty perspective. McMillan and Chavis’ (1986)
sense of community theory proposes that those with a higher sense of community have a higher
sense of purpose and influence within the community. Current research on sense of community
(Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005) focused on the students’ experiences in
the online environment. This research was conducted to understand sense of community more
through the eyes of online adjunct faculty as they, too, adjust to engaging in an online
environment.

Through this study I also sought to understand how Herzberg’s (1968) motivation-
hygiene theory relates in the online environment. Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory
surrounds two main elements: job attitude, which is the way a worker works, and hygiene, which
includes factors that influence a worker to work beyond the job itself (Herzberg, et al., 1993).
As faculty engage in the online environment, their motivation to work may be different than
those in a more traditional face-to-face environment. As a result of this study I hoped to
highlight how Herzberg’s motivation theory (1968) continues or falters as faculty are motivated in the online environment.

**Research Questions**

This transcendental phenomenological research was conducted to describe online adjunct faculty’s experiences with a high sense of community in the workplace. The following related questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community with their respective universities?

   High sense of community has been connected to positive student experiences in the online environment (Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). Faculty have clearly struggled with feelings of isolation in the online environment (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). The sense of community theory suggests that members with a high sense of community will have a higher sense of purpose and the ability to influence others within the community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Further, Herzberg’s (1968) motivation-hygiene theory establishes that job attitude influences behavior. Understanding how online adjunct faculty experience a high sense of community in the workplace could positively encourage other online faculty to overcome isolation and positively influence the virtual work environment.

2. In what ways are online adjunct faculty impacted by a high sense of community?

   Understanding, in the words of online adjunct faculty, the impact of a high sense of community in the online workplace will add to the current literature, which currently surrounds
frustrations with technology and other support struggles in the virtual world (Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Bower, 2001; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Gomez, 2015; Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002; Hewett & Powers, 2007; Kang, 2012; Lee & Busch, 2005; Lesane, 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Orr et al., 2009; Paulus, et al., 2010; Richlin et al., 2014; Wolf, 2006). By understanding why adjunct faculty members are motivated to work online could identify factors that influence the faculty members to engage in the online environment (Herzberg, 1968). Understanding how to encourage faculty to positively connect with others in the online environment by understanding why some faculty are successful could help increase adjunct faculty engagement online.

3. What challenges do online adjunct faculty experience?

The current literature highlights technology support (Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Bower, 2001; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Gomez, 2015; Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002; Hewett & Powers, 2007; Kang, 2012; Lee & Busch, 2005; Lesane, 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Orr et al., 2009; Paulus, et al., 2010; Richlin et al., 2014; Wolf, 2006) and feelings of isolation (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005) as struggles online adjunct faculty experience. Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory (1968) focuses on the motivation of employees and how employees overcome challenges in the workplace. Shared emotional connection is the fourth of four elements identified by the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which can be an obstacle in a virtual work environment where people are isolated in their home offices without face-to-face interactions. By overcoming similar obstacles, online adjunct faculty may foster a stronger sense of community. Through this study I sought to confirm and possibly
expand on these challenges to uncover additional ways online adjunct faculty could be supported.

4. What resources or practices do online adjunct faculty see as valuable to overcome challenges?

Understanding how online adjunct faculty with a high sense of community overcome their challenges and struggles while working online could further the current understanding of adjunct faculty experiences. These struggles could also encourage greater community within the workplace (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and strategies for overcoming challenges to be productive employees (Herzberg, 1968). Current research highlights a need for technology support and addresses feelings of isolation. Additionally, some research suggests what managers could do to provide support to faculty (Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Betts & Sikorski, 2008; Covington, Petherbridge, & Warren, 2005; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Mann et al., 2000; McLean, 2006; Sutherland-Smith & Saltmarsh, 2010; Wells & Peachey, 2011), yet little is known as to what the online adjunct faculty needs or wants to overcome any challenges.

5. From the online adjunct faculty’s perspective, how do universities offering DE degrees cultivate a sense of community with online adjunct faculty only teaching online courses?

Engagement between virtual employees and management is a theme highlighted in recent literature (Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Betts & Sikorski, 2008; Covington et al., 2005; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Mann et al., 2000; McLean, 2006; Sutherland-Smith & Saltmarsh, 2010; Wells & Peachey, 2011). Herzberg’s (1968) motivation-hygiene theory identifies how employers challenge the employees so they are motivated to work. Understanding how management could
engage online adjunct faculty from the faculty’s perspective could lead to better communication, understanding, and the retention of online adjunct faculty.

**Research Plan**

A qualitative research design is the most appropriate approach for this topic of this study as I sought to understand the collective experiences of community for online adjunct faculty. The goal of this study was to understand how online adjunct faculty experience a high sense of community within the workplace. As such, I interpreted the perceptions of a sense of community as described by online faculty. Denzin and Lincoln (2011) acknowledged:

*Qualitative* research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. Qualitative research consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including fieldnotes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

The chosen method was a transcendental phenomenological study because through this research I sought to understand the phenomenon of sense of community as experienced by online adjunct faculty members. According to Moustakas (1994), “In phenomenological studies the investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection” (p. 47). Thus, my hope was to discover how online adjunct faculty experience a high sense of community in the virtual workplace. A transcendental
phenomenological study is conducted to understand the “appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49), which made this the perfect approach for this study seeking to understand how online faculty achieve a high sense of community in the virtual world.

Through this study I looked to uncover community experiences of online adjunct faculty members. The setting of the study was online adjunct faculty members who are employed by universities with DE programs that are nationally and regionally accredited where adjunct faculty do not have the opportunity to interact in a traditional face-to-face manner. I sought to gather information from faculty members who are online adjunct faculty and do not interact face-to-face with students, coworkers, or the leadership of the university. I attempted to find at least 100 potential participants through snowball sampling. Forty-five adjunct faculty agreed to participate in this study and completed an online questionnaire. Twenty-one of those who completed the questionnaire had a high sense of community in the online workplace. Using this questionnaire to select the study participants, I invited all 21 with the highest sense of community to participate in four focus groups. Fourteen people agreed to continue their participation as co-researchers and signed up for one of the four focus groups that occurred over a week’s time. The data was collected first through a questionnaire that identifies strong trends of community with the potential participants by using the Sense of Community Index version 2 (SCI-2) (Chavis et al., 2008) combined with questions about demographics. Next, four small focus groups of two to five co-researchers, conducted with Adobe Connect video conferencing, were created to understand the adjunct faculty experience in an online environment. Personal interviews, also utilizing Adobe Connect video conferencing, were conducted after the focus groups with the desire to uncover a deeper understanding of the individual experience of online adjunct faculty.
As such, a qualitative study was an appropriate choice since the focus was to look at how online adjunct faculty are experiencing the study phenomenon of community in a virtual environment.

**Delimitations**

Since the focus of this study is on sense of community with online adjunct faculty, there are several delimitations. “Delimitations are conditions or parameters that the researcher intentionally imposes in order to limit the scope of the study” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 8). The delimitations for this study included sampling only online adjunct faculty members who work at universities that offer DE programs across the US and do not typically interact face-to-face with students or peers. While the study is limited to the US, the hope was that the potential participants would be located across the US in several geographic regions to transcend geographic uniqueness. Additionally, adjunct and not full-time faculty experiences were desired to see how they experience community in an online workplace and connect with the university, particularly in the virtual world.

**Definitions**

The following are a list of terms used throughout the study:

1. *Adjunct* – a faculty member who is either “employed on a per term basis with no guarantee of being hired for the next academic year or term” or “one who teaches from term to term and year to year literally becoming a “permanent” part-time faculty member” (Pearch & Marutz, 2005, p. 30).

2. *Asynchronous online classes* – “are those that students can log on to and work on even if no one else is logged on at the same time” (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p. 93).
3. **Co-Researcher** – A term used in transcendental phenomenological research to signify a collaboration of the participants with the main researcher in the gathering of research (Moustakas, 1994).

4. **Distance education** – Education that is “electronically delivered education, either through the Internet or through televised delivery using cable- or satellite-transmitted, or interactive television and video (ITV)” or “telephone-delivery and books by mail.” Distance education may include “face-to-face instruction in remote locations” (Gannon-Cook, 2010, p. 9).

5. **Face-to-face** – interchangeable with “traditional course format” where students study on campus (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p. 94).

6. **Full-time online faculty** – are faculty members who work a traditional 8-hour work day 5 days a week, but do not have any obligations for service or research (Mueller et al., 2013, p. 344).

7. **Online classes** – “courses that are delivered completely on the Internet” (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p.94).

8. **Sense of community** – “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

9. **Synchronous online classes** – are classes “offered in such a way that all students are online and communicating at the same time” (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p. 93).

10. **Traditional course** – “Course with no online technology used – content is delivered in writing or orally” (Allen & Seaman, 2008, p. 4).
Summary

Online education is transforming education practices across the United States, yet little is understood as to how faculty who facilitate online learning for students connect to their university of employment in the virtual world. This chapter looked at trends in student achievement and retention in the online environment in relation to sense of community. Additionally, the clear retention issues found with nursing faculty highlights a need to engage and connect in the workplace. Research has predominately focused on student outcomes and experiences in the online environment, but with this study I hoped to fill in the gap in understanding how to create connections for online faculty in the US to address feelings of isolation in the virtual work environment.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The popularity of online education continues to grow, but the growth of the online student population is outpacing the research surrounding the impact of online learning. The purpose of this literature review is to uncover the increasing trends in online education, which is distinguished from distance education (Gannon-Cook, 2010). Instead of focusing on the students, the focus of this review is to look at how faculty have been impacted by the shift to online education and how faculty members are beginning to respond. The theoretical framework discussed highlights the significance of the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg, 1968). The literature review includes some current approaches to learning online, the rapid increase of adjunct faculty members over the past few decades, and some online experiences of faculty members. Finally, research is uncovered in this chapter that describes motivation and job satisfaction among faculty members as well as how faculty members interact with management, are trained and mentored, communicate in an online environment, and faculty views on community.

Theoretical Framework

The focus of this research study surrounded two theories: sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and Herzberg’s (1968) motivation-hygiene theory. The sense of community theory is the basis of this research, focusing on how online adjunct faculty experience community in the online environment through membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory influences this study as I sought to understand how faculty are motivated to work in an online environment. It is through these two theories that the framework for this study is founded to help
understand how online adjunct faculty members who work in an online environment cultivate a
sense of community and are motivated to work virtually.

**Sense of Community Theory**

The sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) surrounds four elements: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Each of these four elements can be unpacked to reveal qualities that allow people to feel part of something bigger than themselves. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), the first element, membership, identifies an exclusivity quality as there are people on the inside and there are people on the outside who are not a part of the community. Part of the element of membership includes emotional safety, the sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, and a common symbol system. The second element of community is influence, which is seen as both the member influencing the community and the community influencing the member. The third element is integration and fulfillment of needs which is a reinforcement and motivator of behavior. When members have shared values, they join together and become integrated into the community. Finally, the last element, shared emotional connection, highlights the need for a shared history to unite the group. It is through this uniting that members interact, which is a key quality of community. The Sense of Community Index version 2 (SCI-2), which was the focus of the research questions, questionnaire, focus group questions, and interview questions, is an instrument created based on the sense of community theory. The original Sense of Community Index (SCI) (Chavis et al., 2008) included 12 items whereas the second version (SCI-2) includes 24 items with four subscales. “The reliability of the overall 12 item scale has [been] adequate, however it consisted of four subscales whose reliability were inconsistent and generally very low” (Chavis et al., 2008, p. 1). The SCI-2 was created to revise the original SCI and overcome
concerns of limitations. Regardless of the concerns, in one study \((N = 1,736)\), which focused on Brazilian children, Sarriera et al. (2015) used the original SCI to verify its validity on use with children. Sarriera et al. found that all items were reliable with the use of children (Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .78\)). In another study \((N = 312)\), Abfalter, Zaglia, and Mueller (2012) sought to determine if the SCI-2 was a valid measure in a virtual community. Their initial hesitation was based on the understanding that “online communities overcome limitations such as synchronousness, physical proximity, or spatial cohesiveness needed for face-to-face interaction” (Abfalter et al., 2012, p. 401). While the original SCI was not considered to be reliable in virtual settings, Abfalter et al. (2012) found that the SCI-2 was a valid measure of a sense of virtual community, which supports the use of the SCI-2 in this study. The SCI-2 was also used in a study \((N = 100)\) focused on Egyptian college students after the January 25th Egyptian revolution (Carrillo, Welsh, & Zaki, 2014). Carillo et al (2014) looked at family influence and friend involvement with sense of community. The purpose was to “explore how personal attitude, personal involvement, family influence, and friend involvement in civic activities after the January 25th Egyptian revolution relate to [psychological sense of community] at a specific moment in Egypt” (Carillo et al., 2015, p. 110). The SCI-2 was found to be very reliable (Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .91\)) and the study indicated a “positive relationship between family influence and [psychological sense of community] at a specific moment in time” (Carillo et al., 2014, p. 116). The SCI-2 has also been used to measure sense of community within adolescent sports communities. Warner and Leierer (2015) also found the SCI-2 to be reliable (Cronbach’s \(\alpha = .97\) for the pretest and \(\alpha = .98\) for the posttest) in their study \((N = 28)\), which looked at how sense of community grows over time with sports. “The results demonstrated that adolescents in a small community-based sport program reported increases in their level of sense of community over the course of a three-week program (Warner
& Leierer, 2015, p. 91). The SCI-2 has been used by more than 40 researchers worldwide since 2011 within a variety of communities (Measuring sense of community, 2015). The sense of community theory is the foundational theory for this study. Little is known about the faculty experience in the online world. Understanding how community is cultivated for online adjunct faculty will provide insight into the virtual experience of online adjunct faculty with a high sense of community with their universities.

**Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory**

Herzberg’s (1968) motivation-hygiene theory highlights ways that organizations can motivate employees for greater success. The goal is to challenge employees so that they are motivated to work through their own responsibilities and not through limited incentives, such as pay raises. Herzberg argued that incentives, such as changing tasks or pay raises are finite in their influence and are considered “job loading.” In other words, these types of incentives are not constant in their influence, but must be increased over time. According to Herzberg, job loading produces the opposite in employees than the employer desires. Instead of motivating the employee to increase job performance, employees are actually less motivated to work. An example of job loading is increasing production that is required of an employee in a day. Instead of horizontal loading, such as the increase in job production, Herzberg encouraged vertical job loading. Some examples of vertical job loading are increasing responsibility and highlighting personal achievement through recognition as well as allowing employees to grow and learn in their job. Understanding ways people are motivated and adjusting policies accordingly could help increase job performance and success in a company. Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory connects to this study in highlighting best practices for motivating employees to increase job production. In a virtual world, clear motivating strategies may be challenging since employers...
and employees do not meet physically. This study’s third and fourth research questions specifically focus on Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory by looking at the challenges online adjunct faculty members face and how they are motivated to overcome these challenges in their daily job responsibilities.

**Related Literature**

Online education is a fast growing movement that is helping students throughout the world gain an education on their own time and in the comfort of their own home. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2015), “In fall 2012, there were 21,147,055 students enrolled in distance education courses at Title IV institutions” (p.1). With the growing availability of technology more students are engaging in online education today than ever before. In conjunction with the rising student population in distance education, faculty are needed to support students in their education endeavors. Recent research has focused on the student experience, but little research has been done that highlights the faculty experience as schools move into the online format.

With the increase in the online student population, online faculty are needed to effectively engage students and facilitate learning in a whole new environment. The role of faculty in the online environment varies from school to school, which leads to an inconsistency of an approach to training and support by administrations. For example, some schools use online faculty with the expectation that they will teach in the same sense as face-to-face faculty with the only change in the mode. Other schools have shifted the focus altogether by disaggregating the faculty model where there are two types of faculty. Some of the faculty work with students through the virtual environment or over the phone with their learning and others evaluate the work that is done without directly interacting with students. This model shifts the faculty time
and resources to focus on the student instead of dividing time instructing with research (Mendenhall, 2012). Since there are a variety of ways to teach online, it is not surprising that Batts, Pagliari, Mallett, and McFadden (2010) found that “administrative leaders might conclude that there are a variety of methods to provide online instruction, and faculty may prefer training that is initiated by their institution” (p.28). Regardless of the approach to teaching online, institutions are likely to be more successful when they intentionally plan the best method of teaching for the students and training for the faculty. A major benefit to online learning is that teaching online does not have to follow the traditional brick and mortar ways, but is flexible so that the needs of the students and the needs of the faculty are met effectively.

Recruiting and retaining the right faculty for the online teaching environment is essential to the success of any university. Understanding the needs of online faculty before recruitment takes place will save administration time, energy, and money during the process. Although “the information on national attrition rates [of adjunct faculty] is sporadic and has been subject to some inconsistencies over time because of differences in data collection and sampling methods” (Borman & Dowling, 2008, p. 400), universities need to intentionally recruit for retention to ensure that the students’ success at the university is addressed in the best possible light. Online adjunct faculty are a large part of the employment population for online universities. Understanding the experiences of current online adjunct faculty including their motivation to work in an online environment, how to best train online faculty, the importance of communication, and the influence of community in the online workplace, will provide relevant information that will foster university administration with the ability to recruit with intention and reduce the loss of faculty attrition.
Adjunct Experiences

Adjunct faculty are a large part of the university system and are increasingly becoming a larger part of the university since they are more affordable than full time faculty who require other costs to the university, such as benefits, office space, or a graduate assistant. Across the country, the number of adjunct faculty members have been increasing over the last few decades.

From fall 1991 to fall 2011, the number of instructional faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 84 percent. The number of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 42 percent (from 536,000 to 762,000) from 1991 to 2011, compared with an increase of 162 percent (from 291,000 to 762,000) in the number of part-time faculty. (NCES, 2014)

In order to facilitate the learning of an increasing student population, institutions have had to increase employment. Unfortunately, this increasingly large population of adjunct faculty does not always have the same experiences as full-time faculty. In Kelly’s (2006) descriptive study (N = 134) on nursing faculty experiences “part-time [nursing] faculty were not as involved in their roles as full-time faculty” (p. 9). In addition, “statements made by part-time participants indicated the need for improved opportunities for collegial dialogue and sharing in program development” (Kelly, 2006, p. 9). Not only do adjunct faculty long for experiences that are shared with the full-time faculty, but they also realize that it is even more important for the adjunct faculty to be comfortable with technology (Lee & Busch, 2005) since they do not have the same support as full-time faculty.

Although universities may not offer full-time benefits to adjunct faculty, they are certainly an integral and indispensable part of the university. More importantly, understanding the needs for online adjunct faculty will provide even greater insight on a community of workers
who do not have traditional interaction. According to Wolf (2011), “university administrators lack the understanding of what motivates an instructor to teach online on a part-time basis” (p. 9). Wolf (2011) looked at “motivational factors of online adjunct faculty” and the research gained “may help in the institutional effectiveness of the online classroom at the postsecondary level” (p. 5) by understanding the differences between male and female online adjunct intentions to teach online. Wolf’s (2011) study (N = 204) found that male respondents were less concerned with negative comments about DE, a lack of professional prestige and status, a lack of support from a dean and chair, a lack of grants for materials/expenses, and a lack of ability to own course materials. Unfortunately, the study did not reveal motivations to continue teaching in an online environment part-time.

**Online Experiences**

As online education increases, it is essential to understand the online adjunct faculty experience. One of the significant aspects of distance education is establishing the quality of the online faculty. As online programs have been created, faculty of distance education institutions are perceived to be of lower quality instructors as compared to faculty of more traditional roles (Larrreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). While this is an older perception, understanding how online faculty connect and interact is still unknown. Online faculty, whether they are full-time or part-time, do not interact with each other in the same manner as faculty in traditional brick and mortar universities. Appropriately cultivating an online work experience for online adjunct faculty could impact the motivation and work experience for online faculty. According to Dolan (2011),

It is not uncommon [for online faculty] to encounter feelings of frustration in the absence of the social cues that occur in face-to-face environment. This has an impact on
motivation, trust, reciprocity, and ultimately job satisfaction with many remote employees citing plans to leave their jobs or at least expressing a lack of interest in organizational outcomes. (p. 67)

University administration could investigate ways to support online faculty from feeling anxiety, isolation, or frustration with the online experience and work to cultivate a positive work environment, even though it is remote. A major frustration among some online faculty is that the lack of face-to-face interaction with colleagues means that there is little casual dialogue on how to increase effectiveness as an educator (Dolan, 2011). Professional conversations are essential to faculty growing in their position and need to be more intentionally conducted with remote employees. University administration can foster opportunities for faculty members to interact both virtually and face-to-face to facilitate stronger engagement and connection to the university. Dolan (2011) observed,

> Isolation resulting from physical distance seems to be a huge obstacle for nurturing meaningful, rewarding, and personalized relationships. Feelings of disconnection from issues and policies affecting students, as well as from the overall organizational culture, appear to impede efforts in training and development along with coaching. (p. 66)

Working to overcome some of the barriers of the online community, such as the feeling of isolation, could help motivate the retention of online employees. In one early study on remote management, Morgan and Symon (2002) looked at the concerns of remote employees ($N = 40$) and their teleworking experience in London. Four major concerns arose: information overload, difficulties of remote access, lack of thought, and attachment and belonging (Morgan & Symon, 2002). While not directly identified by Morgan and Symon, the feeling of isolation may lead to the four concerns. In another article, White (2014) noted the importance of trust, engagement,
achievement, and membership in virtual (non-faculty) teams. Further, veteran teachers, who transitioned online after 25+ years of experience in a traditional setting found that they “missed the collegiality of peers and the stimulation of interacting in person with students” (Stewart, Goodson, & Miertschin, 2010, p. 3). While other studies do not directly identify sense of community or isolation, Berent and Anderko (2011), Bucklin et al. (2014), Carlson (2015), Lloyd et al. (2012), Lodhi et al. (2013), all recognize on some level the importance of connectedness, institutional culture, regard for other employees, and community as positively significant factors that impact faculty, which aligns with Dolan’s (2011) research, that looked at faculty connectedness as a motivator for loyalty in the online environment. Virtual employees, whether they are faculty or otherwise employed online, clearly go through an adjustment as they move online. Understanding how faculty adjust and successfully adapt to the virtual environment is essential in understanding how to best support online adjunct faculty.

Not only do faculty struggle to engage in an online environment, but institutions also fail at successfully launching an online program. Rovai and Downey (2010) suggested that many distance education programs fail due to one or more of seven factors: planning, marketing and recruitment, financial management, quality assurance, student retention, faculty development, and online course design and pedagogy (p. 142). A major factor with relation to this study is the importance of faculty development. Rovai and Downey acknowledged that “many faculty development programs are designed as a one-size-fits-all solution” (p. 145); however, this is not an effective approach to training faculty to transition into the online forum as faculty are not one-size-fits-all employees. Faculty development programs should go beyond technology support and provide a more expansive development program that advances the school’s culture and “a sense of collegiality” (Rovai & Downey, 2010, p. 145). The faculty development programs
should also take the opportunity to mirror student experiences so that faculty understand how information is received in the online environment.

As faculty transition to online teaching, not only are faculty tackling technology differently, but their role as a teacher is also shifting from the role of teacher to facilitator. A facilitator is someone who supports the students in the learning process and does not necessarily teach in the traditional sense (Bower, 2001; Dykman & Davis, 2008). Dykman and Davis (2008) note

Teaching online is very different from conventional teaching and it is not easy. Planning online coursework is much more demanding and student-teacher relationships, much more complex. Once mistakes are made, it is really difficult to recover fully in an online environment. (p. 14)

Not only is the workload greater in the online environment, but the stress is also greater. “Self-imposed expectations about performance and achievement” from online faculty members (McLean, 2006, p. 4) leads to huge faculty stress in the online work environment.

Understanding the factors that are involved in faculty transitioning online and ways to alleviate some unnecessary stress could provide support to faculty members in the online work environment.

Recent studies provide insight into how the online university experience is different for students, but little information exists on the experience of faculty who teach online. Some of what has been explored on the student regarding how students learn in an online environment may shed some light on the faculty experience. As faculty are trained to either transition to an online environment from a face-to-face environment or simply begin a new profession online, faculty members must learn how to successfully facilitate student learning. “Anecdotal research
indicates that the most successful online students are highly self-regulated learners who require little in the way of formal lesson design” (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p. 109). Since faculty are essentially students learning to teach in the online environment, it is reasonable to think that successful online faculty-learners need to have some of these same qualities as students of their profession. Although online faculty are motivated differently than students, the feeling of isolation in conjunction with only being adjunct members of an online university are elements that could be addressed to present a more positive online experience for the employees and the university, which might increase the motivation to remain at the university.

**Teacher Retention**

The ability for schools to successfully retain qualified teachers is critical for the success of the students; however, understanding the best practices for retaining teachers is not always understood. Schools must first create an environment where teachers are motivated to remain in a school and motivated to teach so that student learning is maximized. In addition, schools must understand how to encourage job satisfaction for the employees to help maximize teacher retention. Finally, cultivating a solid relationship of support between the teachers and management is essential in the creation of an environment where teachers are encouraged to flourish, which will also benefit the students.

**Motivation.** Understanding how teachers are motivated to continue to work with an institution is critical to the success of the institution and the success of the students. Teacher recruitment and retention is a critical aspect that directly impacts the success of every academic institution whether at the elementary, secondary, or postsecondary level. Motivation for faculty and teachers to continue in their position and to help avoid high attrition rates is essential for
institution success and a topic of recent discussion and research. Bucklin et al. (2014) suggested that

because substantial institutional resources are used for recruitment, and early losses may represent an even greater negative return on the institutional investment, institutions should regularly assess rates of attrition to create greater awareness and implement timely measures to reduce them. (p. 6)

Hobbs, Weeks, and Finch (2005) found in their descriptive study (N = 68) that the average cost to fill full-time faculty positions was an additional $10,000-$20,000 per position thus providing a rationale for the surge in adjunct faculty positions. For medical faculty, Schloss, Flanagan, Culler, and Wright (2009) found that the “average annual cost of turnover for the departments of medicine and surgery exceeded $400,000” (p. 34). While not all departments may have the staggering costs of turnover that is found in some medial departments, the cost of turnover is a major consideration in understanding how faculty are motivated to remain within an institution.

Betts and Sikorski (2008) identified a combination of direct costs, opportunity costs, and indirect costs associated with online faculty turnover, which highlights economic reasons to retain quality faculty. Online adjunct faculty, who are not physically near colleagues may be motivated differently than other faculty and perhaps they are even more challenging to motivate because of the lack of visual cues that occur in traditional face-to-face interactions.

Motivating adjunct faculty, who work in a face-to-face environment or in an online environment is essential to the success of the institution. Carlson (2015) noted in a study conducted with adjunct face-to-face nursing faculty (N = 553), that nursing programs that provide “good communication and the encouragement of inclusionary, not exclusionary, policies” (p. 45) may be able to foster an environment that inspires adjunct faculty to stay.
Berent and Anderko (2011) suggested that a positive work environment “that supports the importance and value of the nurse faculty role” (p. 207) could also increase faculty motivation to stay. In Meyer’s (2012) study of faculty members ($N = 10$) teaching online, personal (including the enjoyment of change and flexibility) and professional (such as serving students at a distance and professional recognition) reasons were included when describing motivations to teach online. Cultivating environments that foster good working conditions for adjunct faculty may encourage teacher retention.

Motivating nursing faculty for retention has also been challenging in higher education. Berent and Anderko (2011) addressed the issues with nursing faculty retention and the problem with vacant nurse educator positions. Professional satisfaction with faculty identity, resource management skills, and research satisfaction were three factors the research identified as areas of needs to help retain nursing faculty (Berent & Anderko, 2011). To address the nursing faculty attrition problem from another perspective, Bucklin et al. (2014) encouraged institutions to “regularly assess rates of attrition to create greater awareness and implement timely measures to reduce them” (p. 6). Unfortunately, attrition rates, particularly for adjunct faculty members, are not carefully tracked as adjunct are classified as active or inactive. Several studies highlighted the longing for a sense of community and connectedness by nursing faculty (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015); however, there are no studies were found that addressed faculty in different disciplines.

**Job satisfaction.** Job satisfaction was found to be another key element for the retention of teachers. The impacts of interacting in an online environment for students have been studied, but little is researched to demonstrate how adjunct faculty who work online feel about their job. As teachers transitioned to the online environment they noticed a “change in interpersonal
relations” (Bower, 2001, p. 1). This change could directly impact their job satisfaction if it is not harnessed correctly. Kukla-Acevedo’s (2009) descriptive research study looked at the reasons teachers ($N = 3,505$) left, moved, or stayed in their position. Ultimately the teachers felt that if the behavior climate within the school was improved, more first year teachers would remain in their positions (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009). Dolan’s (2011) grounded theory qualitative study looked at the performance of online adjunct faculty and determined that a significant aspect of employee’s satisfaction surrounded their “sense of affiliation with their organization and from the feeling that they are trusted and personally valued by their employers” (p. 63).

Unfortunately, in an online environment communication between faculty and administration may not be natural due to the asynchronous virtual environment. The same study concluded by saying

> the absence of face-to-face meetings apparently does not decrease faculty’s loyalty and motivation. However, the presence of such events is likely to increase loyalty and motivation for the simple reason that these meetings would allow instructors to enrich their skills and consequently serve their students better, which most adjuncts identify as the ultimate object of their commitment. (Dolan, 2011, pp. 73-74)

A few other common themes in increasing job satisfaction with a virtual team are the establishment of trust (White, 2014; Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002) and cultivating a group identity in the virtual world (Yu & Young, 2008). One Harvard study ($N = 4,500$) found that junior professors were more concerned with professional collaboration and quality of life compared to a pay check (Fogg, 2006). It is possible that intentional collaboration with other faculty and interaction by administration with faculty members could increase job satisfaction and motivation to continue employment.
Management engagement/interaction. The importance of management responsibility was also identified in a few studies that looked at retaining faculty. The importance of how leadership within an institution interact with faculty cannot be overlooked. “The odds of a teacher leaving his or her current post were reduced by 16.9% for every standard deviation increase in perceived support from the schools’ administrative staff” (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009, p. 448). Whether faculty have the opportunity to meet face-to-face or not, “management must create opportunities for all stakeholders to share their ideas regarding the ongoing improvement of the institution’s services and reputation. This in turn will provide students with more positive and fulfilling experience” (Dolan, 2011, p. 72). Management must determine the best practices for communicating with virtual faculty. “A major challenge for managers is their inability to physically observe their employees’ performance, which leads to physical disconnect” (Kurland & Bailey, 1999, p. 3). On the same note, employees have a difficult time interpreting management behavior in the virtual world, which could also highlight communication issues. Ultimately leaders must be connected to their employees and trusted to communicate, inspire, motivate, and provide appropriate support systems (Tipple, 2010).

Another study determined that “to enhance retention of tenured faculty, universities must consider strategies to create a positive work environment that supports the importance and value of the nurse faculty role” (Berent & Anderko, 2011, p. 207). While this study specifically looked at tenured nursing faculty, the implications may apply to other areas of postsecondary faculty, particularly those who work online. Several studies (Covington et al., 2005; Kukla-Acevedo, 2009; Mann et al., 2000; McLean, 2006; Sutherland-Smith & Saltmarsh, 2010; Wells & Peachey, 2011) highlighted the need for management to provide continued support to the virtual
employees, and should include an understanding of the additional responsibilities, like checking email, which is so vital, yet time consuming, in the virtual world.

Managing virtual teams is not a process limited to online faculty, but also exists in the business world. Marshall et al. (2007) looked at perceptions of isolation of virtual employees (N = 435) in business. Their findings indicated that those in the business world long for a greater work-based social support from managers (Marshall et al., 2007). Mann et al. (2000) suggested that managers should try to reduce potential social isolation of teleworkers. . . . ensure that any teleworking initiative is backed up with technical support. . . . and devise a tele-working policy document that would cover issues such as expectations regarding working when sick, hours to be worked, management by distance, responsibility for hidden costs (such as electricity) and non-hidden costs (such as postage), etc. (pp. 683-684)

The need to clearly and carefully articulate expectations in the virtual world is essential for effective communication among virtual team members. In addition, management should implement support for success for faculty transitioning to online teaching and it should include administrative support, peer reassurance, and professional development (Covington et al., 2005). The establishment of management support may not necessarily be intuitive for managers. Sutherland-Smith and Saltmarsh (2010) acknowledged that faculty perceived management to want to encourage faculty to move online, but were not willing to invest in the support needed once the faculty moved online. Providing the right support for virtual team members could increase their satisfaction and motivation to thrive in an online environment. Herzberg (1968) stated that “job enrichment will not be a one-time proposition, but a continuous management function” (p. 62). Therefore, it is vital that the management of any online program engage in the
experiences of the faculty members to understand the best ways to encourage and motivate employees for retention. McLean (2006) suggested that faculty be included in institutional process to feel more connected. In addition, creating experiences for faculty that will enhance their ability to positively impact students may also encourage faculty to remain with the university.

**Training and Mentoring**

Creating quality training and mentoring is essential in helping faculty transition into and within the online environment. As faculty transition, intentional administrative support is critical to the success of the faculty experience. Beyond pedagogical support for teachers working in the online environment, technological support is also pivotal in their experience. Schools must engage and provide ongoing training to ensure faculty are privy to changing technology so that frustrations with technology do not overtake the workplace. While initial training with pedagogy and technology are critical to faculty members transitioning, ongoing training and support are also essential to the successful experience of faculty online, which could also be fostered through mentoring programs.

**Administrative training and support.** Training is vital to the success of online faculty and therefore the success of the students engaging in online learning, yet little has been done to determine the best methods for training to facilitate learning in a virtual world. “Well trained faculty can reduce student attrition”, but the faculty working online need formal training, computing skills, an understanding of the course delivery system, an understanding of the online pedagogy, ongoing support, and the motivation to work online (Wolf, 2006, p. 61). Successful training and support could go beyond the student influence and also have a positive impact on the faculty experience, which could encourage faculty members to remain in their position, yet
the training must be effective and adequate (Bower, 2001; Portugal, 2013). However, training for online faculty is not always about the technical aspects or pedagogy, but it focuses on the expectations. There is also a need for training faculty in the online cultural experience, which goes beyond technical aspects so that the flexibility of working online does not become a constraint since “the computer or phone is always available” (Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002, p. 243). Batt et al., (2010) noted that “it is vital that administrators develop an infrastructure which assures faculty receives the resources and support necessary to deliver high quality online instruction” (p. 28). The leadership within an institution needs to be in touch with the needs and experiences of the members who are employed. While the information over the past several decades provided administration suggestions on how to enhance in-service professional development and teacher preparation programs (Borman & Dowling, 2008), little has been done to understand how this translates to the online environment.

**Online environment and technology.** Another challenge with online faculty retention is that there are many different types of institutions that facilitate online learning with a lack of technology support for faculty (Maguire, 2005). Some are hybrid models that are merely virtual replications of brick and mortar experiences. Others are truly online and hire employees that never interact in a face-to-face environment. Thus, the training for each institution may need to be different, and perhaps always changing, to cater to the needs of the faculty members. Many college professors do not have the proper training to teach, let alone teach online (Richlin et al., 2014). As faculty move online, technology can be seen as a barrier initially, but later it often becomes a tool that could be used to effectively teach in distance environments (Paulus, et al., 2010). One thing is for certain, if faculty members are not comfortable with the equipment needed to teach in the online environment, the students may suffer; however, the more faculty
are comfortable with using the online technology the more they will be willing to participate in
online instruction and do so successfully (Lee & Busch, 2005). Some research has been done
that skirts the surface of the importance of training, but little has been discovered on how faculty
members would prefer training and support to be conducted. For example, Calvin and Freeburg
(2010) explained that to better assist learners, instructors should provide clear instructions,
provide examples of time management, and provide specific technical training that will provide
support to their online experience (p. 70), yet information on how to support the faculty members
in these aspects was not included. Further, it is not only online faculty who struggle with
learning new technologies. Those in the business world who are telecommuters also find
technology support to be a major issue (Mann et al., 2000). Kurland and Bailey (1999)
suggested that “telecommuters may need to be more technically savvy than their office peers,
since support services are not accessible on-site” (p. 6). Technical skills are foundational for all
virtual employees to engage in their positions successfully. The need for “continuous training of
both students and faculty members on the most effective use of online technologies” has been
identified, but the how to provide the support in learning or using online technologies has not
(Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p. 111). In addition, while technology appears to be an issue for
motivating online faculty,
it is not clear whether perceived barriers to online teaching vary among faculty groups
and what role previous experience with online education might have on faculty
perceptions, which has obvious implications on training and implementation strategies at
institutions of higher learning. (Lloyd et al., 2012, p. 3)

Once again, there is a need to understand the online faculty experience so that stronger support
can be provided to faculty members, which will benefit the student experience (Mueller et al.,
This research study seeks to fill some of the gap in understanding online adjunct faculty members’ experiences.

**Growth and development.** Another way training could be used to support faculty is by providing opportunities for growth within the university, which could lead to further retention of employees. Currently, training is geared towards initial training and not ongoing support. A need for a professional support staff to adhere to the needs of the online faculty throughout the experiences is vital to the success of an institution (Orr et al., 2009). Training is critical when faculty are transitioning from the traditional teaching environment to the online environment (Hewett & Powers, 2007), yet it is still needed as educators develop in their profession. Lesane (2013) noted that “online instructors need ongoing training and support to be effective” (p. 1) and training cannot be passive, but must be a continuous effort. For faculty to continually be successful in the ever-changing online environment, faculty need to continuously grow and develop in their skills. In Dolan’s (2011) study of online adjunct faculty at one university, it was noted that many faculty members favored creating opportunities to increase knowledge or skills through study, travel, research, seminars, workshops, or courses, as well as social events and other activities aimed at creating a stronger sense of community. All participants appeared to unanimously agree that such events would be helpful for instructors to bond and learn from one another. (p. 71)

Training through interaction and the ability to foster a community, in spite of the virtual environment, appears to be something that could positively impact faculty retention online. However, training needs to be applicable to the needs the faculty members (Kang, 2012). Faculty prefer training that is easy to use and uses a hands-on approach, rather than handouts on
technology they should incorporate (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Cultivating a learning environment for online faculty to learn how to be most effective and providing support could lead to a better experience for the students and faculty may also decide to remain in the position knowing that they are properly trained, developed, and supported.

**Mentoring.** Another theme when looking at training is the availability of mentoring programs for teachers when they enter a new institution. Establishing a mentoring program could alleviate some of the stress of transitioning to an isolated online position. Online adjunct faculty have a need for a “live” interaction with initial training so they will feel a “sense of connection” (Gomez, 2015, p. 4). This live interaction may not be intuitive for some online programs, but may also help transition faculty online if they have someone intentionally designated to help them along the way. Guarino, Santibañez, and Daley (2006) and Carlson (2015) both noted the significance mentoring programs played in teachers and nursing faculty’s decisions to remain in a job. The Florida Community College at Jacksonville highlighted the importance of mentoring programs by creating a “Virtual Adjunct Mentoring program . . . to provide personalized, collegial support for a specified number of new online adjunct faculty” (Puzziferro-Schnitzer & Kissinger, 2005, p. 40). The purpose of this mentoring program was to pair full-time and part-time faculty to overcome barriers between the two groups and help the part-time faculty feel less isolated (Puzziferro-Schnitzer & Kissinger, 2005). The ability for teachers to interact directly with a senior teacher and make connections within the school potentially has a significant impact on the retention of teachers, which may be even more critical for online faculty who do not naturally communicate as easily in a virtual world as compared to face-to-face.
Communication

Communication is another potential challenge with online experiences, both for students and online faculty. The importance of communication in the online environment is acknowledged in several studies (Bower, 2001; Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002; Morgan & Symon, 2002; Nordin & Anthony, 2014; Simmons, Shumack, & Carpenter, 2011; White, 2014); however, it is not clear how to best communicate effectively in an online environment. For example, electronic communication may convey information, but it is not the same as a face-to-face conversation or even a telephone call, due to the lack of tone or body language. Unfortunately, online communication appears more flat and matter of fact. “Face-to-face communication remains a richer media than e-mail” (Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002).

Communicating online is quick and easy and may be seen as the most efficient way to communicate virtually; however, students and faculty could benefit from more intentional communication that occurs in real time. Ironically, “despite the technology available to bridge the communication gap, people do not communicate as well with each other in a virtual environment as they do in the traditional office environment” (Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002, pp. 244-245). One part of this reason is the loss of emotions, verbal and physical cues that are part of face-to-face communication. Thus, it is critical that administrations seek to ensure remote employees are engaging appropriately and the institutions are utilizing the best mode possible for the communication (Morgan & Symon, 2002).

Little research has been done on how faculty respond to online communication; but there are a few studies that identify the importance of feedback in the student online experience. Tallent-Runnels et al. (2006) argued that “Students wanted more instructor feedback and auditory stimulation; they wanted to listen to, rather than read about, historical material” (p. 98).
The same study further acknowledged that students saw the formation of small groups, with faculty collaboration, as a means to help communication and faculty were given the opportunity to model good communication (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Ultimately, “improving communication would likely satisfy an intrinsic need among the university’s adjunct instructors to make a positive difference in their students’ lives” (Dolan, 2011, p. 73). Part of the need to be a part of an institution includes the ability “to see the value of organizational membership, a high level of contact is required between management and employees, as well as between employees and their peers” (Dolan, 2011, p. 66). In one survey of online faculty ($N = 380$) at one institution in the southwest US, Nordin and Anthony (2014) found that online faculty feel a strong desire to communicate, connect, and share with other faculty. While faculty have identified the desire to communicate and connect, it is not clear the best method for these connections in spite of online faculty noting the importance of communicating in multiple forums was also shared (Nordin & Anthony, 2014). In the online environment where direct real time communication is not natural, institutions may need to intentionally adjust communication styles and procedures to ensure faculty are connected in spite of geographic distance.

**Community**

The importance of community must not be overlooked in the faculty experience, both in the traditional setting as well as the online setting. Within the field of education, sense of community has been identified with students, but it has also been indirectly identified with faculty. Understanding how faculty connect, particularly in the online environment, could strengthen the online experiences of faculty members. In addition, once faculty are able to truly connect in the online environment by sharing in a sense of community, faculty could be more
likely to engage in collaborative efforts to develop programs and experiences within an institution.

**Sense of community among students.** Sense of community, which includes “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9) is a powerful force among students, particularly those who are engaging in online education. Many students are already engaging in online social networks before joining an online degree program and are used to communicating in a virtual environment (Heiberger & Harper, 2008). Rovai (2002) determined that students ($N = 314$) engaging in online classes felt less isolated and had a greater sense of satisfaction when their sense of community in the online environment was elevated. However, in another study, ($N = 279$) Rovai et al. (2005) discovered that students who engaged in a more traditional setting felt a stronger sense of community when compared with students who engaged in online learning. While these studies provide foundation for how students experience a sense of community in the online environment, other studies have also been conducted that highlight a need for connectedness or feeling of affiliation with the institution and colleagues. Turner and West (2013) in their study ($N=59$) of online video assessment and feedback in higher education determined that student engagement was stronger when feedback was conveyed in a video format compared with written feedback on assessments. Making connections through a video exchange may prove to be a stronger means to communicate in an online environment.

**Sense of community among faculty.** Adjunct online faculty may also be motivated by a sense of community in the workplace.
Strong communities are those that offer members positive ways to interact, important events to share and ways to resolve them positively, opportunities to honor members, opportunities to invest in the community, and opportunities to experience a spiritual bond among members. (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 14)

Communities are also seen as places that help faculty understand what they need to know when working online (Richlin et al., 2014). While sense of community with faculty has not been directly examined by researchers, the significance of sense of community has been evaluated in the online student experience as well as feedback provided by faculty not directly linked to sense of community. This is particularly true of adult learners. “Adults want and need to feel that they are included in a community of learners with whom they can share their ideas, their struggles, and their successes. Creating a sense of community helps to keep students focused and motivated” (Sutton, 2014, p. 6). Students who feel they are a part of something, are encouraged by others to work and accomplish their tasks. Within the research conducted on faculty, it seems that they, too, are motivated, at least in part, by a sense of community or connection with the university. For example, Paulus et al. (2010) looked at the willingness of nursing faculty (N = 25) to teach online and found the major desire was to maintain the sense of community that is present in face-to-face classes. While these nursing faculty transitioned to teaching online they desired to carry with them the sense of community found in the traditional face-to-face setting into the online environment. Babinski, Jones, and DeWert (2001) determined that “sense of community” was the most frequent topic in an online forum of first year teachers (N = 24) once again highlighting the significance of being connected to something. Babinski et al. found in their experimental research of beginning teachers (N = 24), “that both new teachers and faculty
spent a considerable amount of time fostering a sense of community” (p. 167). Dolan (2011) noted

If instructors do not feel positively connected to their peers and school management, their commitment to the team, including their determination to ‘not let people down,’ will be negligible, perhaps even nonexistent. As a result, these faculty members will not put much energy into performing well, which cannot help but affect their students’ learning processes significantly. (p. 64)

The significance of having a sense of community is once again indirectly highlighted. Determining best practices to cultivate a sense of community in an online setting has not yet been determined. While educators in the online environment may not know how to foster community, “The issue of community continues to be an element of concern for faculty as they contemplate how to provide a quality learning experience in a distance education setting” (Bower, 2001, p. 4).

**Faculty connectedness.** Although sense of community and connectedness have not been the focus of recent research of online faculty, the common themes of feeling disconnected and isolated in the virtual world have appeared in several studies (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). An interview of eight virtual high school teachers identified a sense of disconnection from students, from teaching, and from fellow teachers. The struggle to learn from other teachers in the virtual environment as compared to the more traditional environment was also identified in the same study (Hawkins, Graham, & Barbour, 2012). Teachers are naturally susceptible to feelings of isolation in the workplace. Feelings of isolation are linked
early on in the teaching experience due to the nature of teaching away from other teachers (Babinski et al., 2001). Teaching in the virtual world only exacerbates these feelings of isolation for teachers especially. However, feelings of isolation are not limited to those in the online teaching profession. The number one disadvantage to telecommuting found in Mann et al.’s (2000) study of non-managerial customer service employees ($N = 14$) was the feelings of isolation. The study also found a diminished “social comparison effect” (Mann et al., 2000, p. 678) in the virtual world where employees no longer found it possible to get a sense of how they were doing based on others around them. Thus employees felt isolated and also felt uncertain about their job performance, which makes for an unstable work environment. Isolation is not a feeling that is limited to the faculty experience, but truly part of the culture of working in a virtual environment.

A challenge with working virtually is that the type of community that faculty need may vary based on the type of university and program. For example, in a study investigating doctoral student retention at two online universities, students ($N = $ unidentified) were found to “appreciate the opportunities to be a valued member of a learning community that is flexible and asynchronous with vast and flexible learning resources, and authentic assessments” (Sutton, 2014, p. 21). It is unclear if adjunct faculty who work online are motivated by the same type of situations. In fact, it is possible that online universities may not foster a sense of community at all for the online faculty. Portugal (2013) wrote that “someone who needs to feel a strong connection or affiliation with other faculty or to the university campus may not do well as a stay-at-home online instructor” (p. 20). However, from the alternative perspective, other studies have found that some online faculty will do well if the institution facilitates an environment where
people can connect. For example, when looking at part-time nursing faculty, Carlson (2015) discovered that

Fostering a culture of support and respect can be facilitated through good communication and the encouragement of inclusionary, not exclusionary, policies. Nursing programs that support such a culture will demonstrate to part-time clinical nurse faculty that they are valued, and these programs may be better able to retain these part-time faculty. (p. 45)

Helms and Raiszadeh (2002) and Nordin and Anthony (2014) also noted the importance of socialization and connecting with other faculty. Thus, it is critical for the administration to intentionally establish a community for online faculty, even though it is not as traditional as face-to-face situations.

**Faculty collaboration.** Another way faculty foster community is through collaboration. In their qualitative study \(N = 12\), Orr et al. (2009) noted, “One common thread from the faculty members in this study was their desire to share their online teaching successes and methodologies with others” (p. 264). While the desire to collaborate may be natural to some faculty, how to collaborate in the online environment is not always intuitive. As lessons transition from a traditional face-to-face classroom to an online forum, teaching is also transitioning from private practice to something very public. Collaborating with other teachers to maximize student engagement is essential to the success of the online mode of instruction (Roberts, Thomas, McFadden, & Jacobs, 2006). It is through professional learning communities that allow for instructors to “work together to learn, to grow, and to support one another” (Lesane, 2013, p. 2), thus avoiding a tendency to feel isolated. Further,
management of the educational institutes needs to formulate strategies enhancing the positive climate of being social, making more friends and spending more time in social situations. Management should motivate their faculty members to behave in a more friendly, courteous and helpful manner, and have pleasant and satisfying relationships with others. (Jeswani & Dave, 2012, p. 263)

While Jeswani and Dave’s (2012) findings are limited, positive interactions with colleagues could motivate faculty to remain in their positions, which could further enhance the learning experience for students. Smith and Ingersoll (2004) looked at beginning teachers’ likelihood to leave teaching since teaching is mostly an isolating profession with teachers working directly with students and not necessarily directly with colleagues. They found that successful teaching experiences had a mentor with a common field and planning time as critical to the success of the new teacher’s experience. In addition, all support that was successfully implemented was not done in isolation, but in collaboration. Additional information is needed to identify the best practices for collaborating in an online environment.

**Summary**

As progressively more courses are available in an online learning environment, it is essential that university administration consider the best practices for retaining the growing population of adjunct faculty, particularly those who work online. Administrations must embrace the online environment by cultivating a work experience that is conducive to faculty retention. Understanding the adjunct faculty experience and finding ways to motivate long-term retention and commitment to the university will benefit the university and students by having consistent faculty working who understand the needs of the students in the online environment. Cultivating an environment for online adjunct to connect, train, and be supported will likely
encourage a positive work experience and could perhaps increase faculty retention. Finally, fostering communication and a sense of community between colleagues, leadership, and faculty members will also work to create a solid work environment that will motivate those that are adjunct to not only remain, but also grow in knowledge and understanding of the best practices for facilitating online learning. More research is needed to highlight the online adjunct faculty experience, including what motivates online adjunct faculty to teach outside of student interaction, understanding how to support online faculty to avoid anxiety and isolation, understanding how to foster good working conditions that could lead to greater job satisfaction and commitment to the institution, the faculty response to online communication, and the types of training needed to help the faculty experience, to enable universities to foster the best learning environment for a growing online community of students.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to gain an understanding of experiences of online adjunct faculty members with a high sense of community in the workplace. The research was conducted to understand the experiences of these faculty members by first utilizing a questionnaire that includes the SCI-2 (Chavis et al., 2008) to identify potential participants with the highest sense of community. Those who were chosen from the initial questionnaire and agreed to participate, were considered co-researchers during the focus groups and personal interviews. Co-researcher is a term that is used to signify a collaboration of the participants with the main researcher in the gathering of research and it is used in transcendental phenomenological research (Fraelich, 1989; Moustakas, 1994). Following the online questionnaire, I organized four focus groups with two to five co-researchers who demonstrated a high sense of community in the workplace. Next, I conducted personal interviews with co-researchers who participated in the focus groups. I conducted both the focus groups and the personal interviews using Adobe Connect video conferencing. More detailed information on the design, research questions, co-researchers, and the procedures that were conducted during the research process are provided in this chapter.

Design

Qualitative research is ideal when “a problem or issue needs to be explored” (Creswell, 2013, p. 47). Qualitative research was used for this study because I was looking for a deeper understanding of the online adjunct faculty’s experience with community in the workplace. Dolan (2011) suggested
when educational institutions increasingly make use of adjuncts, they must strive to attract and retain the best instructors in order to perform well against the competition. School administrators must go beyond good intentions, and listening to what adjunct faculty members have to say could help their organizations become employers of choice. (p. 71)

Understanding the experience of the adjunct faculty will allow administrators to understand how they can adjust to meet the needs of these faculty for retention as well as the possibility of developing adjunct faculty to improve effectiveness in their teaching. Qualitative research allowed me the opportunity to uncover the lived experiences of current online adjunct faculty and how they are motivated in order for this research to address feelings of isolation in the virtual environment and how it may impact job performance.

The design I chose for this study was phenomenology because I looked to explore what online adjunct faculty experiences are with community in an online working environment. Phenomenology focuses on exploring a phenomenon that occurs within a group of people (Creswell, 2013), which makes it an appropriate design for this study as it looked at the experiences of online adjunct faculty.

Transcendental phenomenology was the approach for this study because it provides procedures for a researcher to bracket out his or her experiences, which was necessary for me because I have experiences and assumptions from being a former part-time online adjunct faculty member, which may have interfered with the research. As I engaged in this research, I practiced *epoche* as described by Moustakas (1994). I set aside my experiences as a former online adjunct faculty member and listened to the co-researchers and their experiences cultivating a high sense of community. I listened and thought about the experiences of the co-researchers without
prejudging their experiences. Bracketing my own experiences ensures that the focus of the research is on the “topic and question” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97) and not on the emotions of the researcher. According to Moustakas (1994),

Phenomenology, step by step, attempts to eliminate everything that represents a prejudgement, setting aside presuppositions, and reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness, a readiness to see in an unfettered way, not threatened by the customs, beliefs, and prejudices of normal science, by the habits of the natural world or by knowledge based on unreflected everyday experience. (p. 41)

Transcendental phenomenology looks to analyze for themes to help the researcher gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon, which is why I choose transcendental phenomenology as my approach. The purpose for using transcendental phenomenology was to gain a better understanding of how online adjunct faculty members experience community.

**Research Questions**

Through the proposed research, I sought to describe online adjunct faculty’s experiences with a high sense of community in the workplace. The following related questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community with their respective universities?
2. In what ways are online adjunct faculty impacted by a high sense of community?
3. What challenges do online adjunct faculty experience?
4. What resources or practices do online adjunct faculty see as valuable to overcome challenges?
5. From the online adjunct faculty’s perspective, how do universities offering DE degrees cultivate a sense of community with online adjunct faculty only teaching online courses?

Setting

The setting is purposeful in a phenomenological research study. According to Creswell (2013), “the participants may be located at a single site, although they need not be. Most importantly, they must be individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon being explored and can articulate their lived experiences” (p. 150). The setting for this study included online adjunct faculty members who do not engage with students in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment. The final setting included two universities that have an online component where students and faculty do not engage in face-to-face learning experiences, but where the learning takes place online over the Internet. It is particularly important that the faculty in this setting do not also engage in face-to-face learning environments, as their experience with community may be different than those who are purely online. The reason this study focuses on online universities, is that online adjunct faculty’s experiences with interacting with students and peers will be different than those who work in a more traditional environment where face-to-face interactions occur every day.

Participants

The selection of the participants was purposeful. According to Creswell (2013) “the researcher needs to determine which type of purposeful sampling will be best to use” (p. 147). The purposeful sample of potential participants initially included 45 university faculty from nine institutions throughout the US. The goal was that the final sample would include university faculty members who work in an online environment without face-to-face interactions and have
a high sense of community. The SCI-2 questionnaire was used to identify the faculty members with a high sense of community. There are 72 possible points on the SCI-2 and those adjunct faculty members with the highest scores on the SCI-2 were considered for the focus groups and interviews since these will include faculty with the highest sense of community. Study participants were university faculty who work in an online environment without face-to-face interactions and are not considered tenured. Potential participants were gathered initially through a convenience sample. I began with faculty that I already knew within my current and past workplaces. In addition, I used my Facebook account and message boards to recruit additional potential participants and then I used the snowball technique for additional participants. I hoped to have a minimum of 100 potential participants who would take the initial online questionnaire and then be able to filter the potential participants into three or four focus groups of four or five co-researchers. However, in the end, I was happy to have 45 potential participants who filled out the online questionnaire. Of the 45 potential participants, 21 study participants indicated a high sense of community and were then asked to participate as co-researchers. Of the 21 study participants, 14 co-researchers, who were all adjunct faculty members, agreed and participated in one of four focus groups and personal interviews based on a high sense of community in the online workplace. The majority of the 14 co-researchers resided in the Southeast US and represented two universities. The 21 study participants were first notified using a recruitment letter via email, through Facebook, or through an online message board (See Appendix B and Appendix C). The link to the online questionnaire first had a consent page that only opened to the actual questionnaire if the possible participant agreed to the study (see Appendix D). If potential participants gave their consent, the potential participants filled out an online questionnaire that focused on sense of community in their workplace (see
Appendix G) as well as provided some background demographic information. While the recruitment of the initial sample of potential participants was more open-ended, the selection of study participants for the focus groups and interviews was narrowed. To be selected as study participants, adjunct faculty members could only teach online, have no interaction in a face-to-face environment with their students or other faculty members, and have a high sense of community. The purpose of the focus groups was to have the co-researchers engage with other faculty who have successfully cultivated a high sense of community in the workplace. By engaging in a collaborative conversation with other adjunct faculty members the hope was that additional conversations might be stimulated during the personal interviews that would allow me to gather more in-depth information on the experiences of these same faculty members.

While my initial sample size from the online questionnaire included 45 potential participants, I was able to create four focus groups and personal interviews with 14 faculty members who agreed to be co-researchers and have the highest sense of community within the workplace, which is considered an appropriate size for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013). The co-researchers also allowed for a variation in age and number of years of experience in an online environment. By conducting the initial questionnaire using the snowball sampling, the goal was that maximum variation will occur as the questionnaire is distributed among a number of faculty members who work in a variety of online locations throughout the United States. The 14 co-researchers who participated in the focus groups and personal interviews worked for one of two universities and were from various states throughout the US, although the majority resided in the southeast.

**Procedures**

Specific procedures were followed as the research was conducted for this study.
Guidelines for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from Liberty University were strictly followed. IRB approval was obtained before any research was conducted. The first step after receiving IRB approval was to conduct a pilot study with four individuals who would not be included within the study. These individuals were online faculty who do not work directly with students in the traditional face-to-face environment. The purpose of the pilot study is to practice my interview skills, to see if the study is viable, and to unearth any unseen problems that may arise in the data collection process (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). During the pilot study I was able to practice my interviewing skills and became comfortable asking the questions in a professional manner. I was also able to ensure that I could successfully record the sessions so that they could be transcribed at a later time. The pilot study revealed that I needed to ensure my iPad (second recording device) was disconnected from wifi and my Outlook mail was closed so incoming messages were not distracting. Once the pilot study was completed and the adjustments were made, the recruitment of potential participants began.

Individuals who could serve as potential participants were initially recruited through a convenience sample. I began with faculty I already knew in my current and past workplaces. In addition, I used my Facebook account and other messaging boards to link individuals to an online questionnaire. The email, or online messaging recruitment letter, was initially sent to contacts I have and then I disseminated to additional potential participants via snowball sampling procedures. The recruitment letter explained the research, and if the individuals were willing to participate they then were able to access the questionnaire via a link. The link took the individuals to a Google Form. The first page of the Google Form was the online consent form. If individuals were not willing to consent, they responded “no” and then received a note that said, “Thank you for your consideration to participate.” If the individuals were willing to
consent, they responded “yes” and signed their names electronically. This electronic signature then took the potential participants to the online questionnaire to participate in the study.

The questionnaire was facilitated through a Google Form after consent was given and consisted of two parts. The first part included background information about the participants. The second part of the questionnaire was the Sense of Community Index version 2 (SCI-2) (Chavis et al., 2008) (see Appendix G).

The SCI-2 (Chavis et al., 2008) questionnaire was used to select willing potential participants who have the highest sense of community to engage in one of four online focus group conversation as a co-researcher with one to four other online faculty members. The focus groups were conducted using Adobe Connect video conferencing and co-researchers were identified by first names or a name they were comfortable using.

Following the focus groups, online personal interviews were conducted to gain a more personal understanding of the co-researchers. The interviews were also conducted using Adobe Connect video conferencing. The interviews were transcribed and coded for themes. Rich description was used in the data analysis.

**The Researcher's Role**

In qualitative research, the human researcher is considered an instrument and cannot be separated from the research (Creswell, 2013). As an online faculty member, who has worked for the same university for more than six years and who struggled to find an initial connection, I brought to the research a passion for understanding how to bolster a community in the virtual world so that other faculty members will feel more connected in their work environment. While I have worked for the same online university for more than six years and have been full time for more than three years, in my initial three years of employment, I was part-time and never met
another employee. In addition, after my initial training, it was six months before I received a
phone call from someone within my institution. Shortly before becoming full-time, I was able to
participate in a local event where I met the first person from the University; the University
President. Today the University does not continue to make it typical practice to allow employees
to work in isolated spaces without direct connection from supervisors; however, it was my
experience.

In addition to working as a faculty member for an online university, I have also engaged
in online learning as a student. Several of my classes were taught asynchronously through online
workspaces. However, some of them are taught in a face-to-face environment. My favorite
courses, by far, are the ones that allow me to meet and engage in the face-to-face environment.
After such an experience, I am typically energized in a way that does not usually happen in the
virtual classroom.

Data Collection

Triangulation is a vital part of data collection in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013). In
this research, I used a questionnaire that included descriptive information of the potential
participants as well as the SCI-2, which was created and validated by Chavis et al. (2008).
Following the initial questionnaire, four focus groups were formed and included two to five co-
researchers each. Third, personal interviews took place with a semi-structured format.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was used to gather background information on the faculty who were
willing to participate in the survey. I created questions in the background part of the
questionnaire to elicit data that would help me differentiate between full-time and adjunct
faculty, as well as those who only teach online and those who have some face-to-face
interactions. The second part of the questionnaire utilized the SCI-2 (Chavis et al. (2008) to obtain information on feelings of community in the workplace. The Sense of Community Index was developed from McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) sense of community theory and focused on their four elements of sense of community: membership, influence, meeting needs, and a shared emotional connection (Chavis et al., 2008). The original Sense of Community Index consisted of 12 true-false questions and the second version has been further developed to include 24 questions on a Likert like scale. While the original was deemed reliable, improvements were suggested. The SCI-2 was found reliable (coefficient alpha = .94) within a survey of 1800 people and the subscales (reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connection) were also proven reliable (coefficient alpha scores of .79 to .86) (Chavis et al., 2008). After collecting the online questionnaires, 21 faculty members who met the demographic criteria of online adjunct faculty and had the highest sense of community, were invited to participate in the focus groups and interviews.

Focus Groups

Focus groups provide an opportunity for co-researchers to interact with each other and the questions (Creswell, 2013). The purpose of the focus groups within this study was to have faculty from several different universities engage in a video conference call via Adobe Connect to discuss ways they have experienced community within their institution including how their leadership has or has not fostered community in the virtual environment. The video conference call was recorded within the Adobe Connect program and a backup recording was saved with my iPad. Co-researchers were notified with a letter via email to affirm that they were chosen as co-researchers for the focus groups and interviews (See Appendix E). The questions for the focus group concentrated on addressing feelings of isolation, motivation in a virtual environment and
job performance, institution or management support, and training. Focus group questions were first reviewed by three full-time online faculty members with doctoral degrees to determine face and content validity of the questions. Adjustments to the questions were made based on the reviewers’ suggestions. The number of focus group questions was limited to twelve to allow for more discussion and interaction between members of the group. I prodded for additional information when some of the questions did not gather responses initially (See Appendix H).

Focus Group Questions

1. Please share how you were able to cultivate a feeling of connectedness with colleagues and/or the institution in your online workplace.
2. What are some ways you’ve tried to cultivate community with others in your virtual workplace?
3. What initially motivated you to foster community in the online workplace?
4. Do you think that it is important to cultivate community in the online workplace? Why or why not?
5. As an online adjunct faculty member, what are some benefits in cultivating a community in the online workplace?
6. What are some challenges in trying to foster community in the online environment?
7. What are some ways your managers have tried to help create connections within your virtual environment?
8. What resources or practices in a university setting would be helpful in establishing a sense of community for an online adjunct faculty member?
9. What are some ways you prefer to communicate with colleagues in the virtual world?
10. Previous research indicates that many faculty members feel isolated working in the
online environment. What suggestions do you have for faculty members who feel isolated?

11. What else is there that you would like to share about your experience cultivating community in an online work environment?

The purpose of the focus group questions was to gain a stronger understanding of the co-researchers’ experiences with sense of community in the online workplace. As such, I created questions that surround McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) four elements of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Questions 1 through 6 were created to provide further insight as to how online faculty members experienced a sense of membership in the online work environment. A sense of belonging is needed to overcome feelings of isolation in the online workplace (Dolan, 2011) and the lack of belonging (Morgan & Symon, 2002) working at a distance may encourage. These focus group questions corresponded to the first research question. Questions 7 and 8 were crafted to focus on the significance of influence sense of community has on individuals. Adjunct faculty are not always as effective in their role when compared to full-time faculty (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006). Understanding influences in the adjuncts’ life is key to detecting motivation and helping the individuals have a greater connection within the environment. This is particularly true in the online environment where social cues are more difficult to understand (Dolan, 2011). These focus group questions corresponded to the second research question. Focus group questions 9 and 10 were developed to examine how sense of community was integrated into the faculty experience and how it led to the fulfillment of the faculty member’s needs. Administrators do not necessarily understand what adjunct faculty need in the online environment (Wolf, 2011). Discovering the best ways administrations could help meet the needs of adjunct faculty in the
online environment is the purpose of these questions. These questions directly corresponded with research questions three and four. Finally, question 11 sought to understand how the online faculty encountered a shared emotional connection in the online work environment, which was the basis for research question five. Connecting with other members within the workplace is essential to overcoming the tendency to feel isolated (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013).

**Interviews**

Personal interviews allow for the researcher to gather information that is specific to each of the co-researchers as long as they are not hesitant to speak and share their ideas (Creswell, 2013). The goal of the personal interviews within this study was to uncover additional insight as to how online adjunct faculty experience a high sense of community in the virtual workplace. These personal interviews also took place through Adobe Connect video conferencing and were recorded within the program. Additionally, I used my iPad to create a backup recording. The questions were semi-structured and focused on individual experiences and were crafted to parallel further development of the focus group questions. The questions were open-ended and by asking them, I hoped to uncover how the co-researchers overcame feelings of isolation to increase job satisfaction and performance. Finally, I asked the questions in order to uncover the importance of community for the faculty member and to understand how a sense of community connects to their experience as an online adjunct faculty member. I included 22 interview questions, which is an appropriate number of questions for an interview (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012) that covered the four subscales of the SCI-2. The interview questions further developed the information gathered during the focus groups. I also included reflective notes of the interviews. As with the focus group questions, the interview questions were reviewed for face
and content validity by a panel of the full-time online faculty with earned doctorates. Adjustments to the questions were made based on their recommendations.

*Interview Questions*

1. Please tell me about your initial experiences with colleagues working in the online workplace as an online adjunct faculty member.

2. What individual or individuals helped you connect in the online workplace and how did they influence your experience?

3. What motivated you to foster community in the virtual workplace?

4. As noted during the focus group, previous research notes that faculty members may feel isolated working in the online environment, how do you feel about this research and how does it relate to your personal experiences?

5. How did you create a sense of community or connection with colleagues in the online workplace as an adjunct faculty member?

6. Was the sense of community/connection quick or was it triggered by some particular experience that evolved over time?

7. What needs of yours are met because you feel like you are part of the online community?

8. What are some values that you hold and share with your colleagues in the online work environment?

9. How did you come to understand your shared values with colleagues in the online work environment?

10. If you have a problem, how does the community in the online work environment help or hurt your process?
11. How, if at all, do you know that you can trust people in your online work environment?

12. What are some of the goals you share with your colleagues? How do you communicate or know you have similar goals?

13. Please tell me why being a part of this community is important to you.

14. How important is it to you to be part of a community in the online work environment?

15. How does fitting in and being a part of this community impact your identity?

16. How do you engage with others in a virtual work environment? Does this differ from your experiences in the traditional face-to-face work environment if you have also worked in the traditional setting?

17. How are important events in your life or related to the life of the university shared with members of the online work environment?

18. How do you see the future of this community evolving over time?

19. What are some ways you feel like you can influence the community and the community can influence you?

20. What recommendations do you have for other online adjunct faculty members beginning a career in the virtual world?

21. What would you recommend for those in leadership or places of influence to ensure employees can cultivate a sense of community or connection to the institution?

22. What else is there that you would like to share about your experience cultivating community in the online work environment?

The purpose of the interviews was to gain an even deeper understanding of the co-researchers’ experiences with community in the online work environment as online adjunct
faculty. The questions for the interviews were also created to surround McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) four elements of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Questions 1, 2, 13, 14, and 15 focused on membership and how the sense of community influences the co-researchers. A sense of belonging and membership is a key element in feeling a part of a workplace (White, 2014). The interview questions supported the understanding of the first research question. Interview questions 20-22 focused on the significance of influence found within the community, which was the basis for the second research question. One way that online faculty are influenced is through their need for training (Bower, 2001; Portugal, 2013). Training and mentoring programs could lead to a greater “sense of connection” (Gomez, 2015) in the workplace. Interview questions 3, 4, 7, and 10 focused on examining how sense of community was integrated into the faculty experience and how it led to the fulfillment of the faculty member’s needs. One of the greater challenges to working online is combating self-imposed stress in the virtual environment if needs are not met (Dykman & Davis, 2008; McLean, 2006). Understanding how online faculty members’ needs are met in the virtual workplace could benefit the quality of life for other faculty members, which may include job flexibility (Meyer, 2012). These questions supported the third and fourth research questions. Finally, interview questions 5, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 16, 17, 18, and 19 focused on shared emotional connection, which supported the fifth research question. Job satisfaction (Bower, 2001) and support from administration (Kukla-Acevedo, 2009) could lead to a greater shared emotional connection in the online work environment. Understanding how these connections are made in the virtual environment is essential in understanding best practices for supporting adjunct faculty who work online.
Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) stated that phenomenological research methods need to “develop individual textual and structural descriptions; composite textural and composite structural descriptions, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences of the experience” (P. 182). The analysis of the questionnaire (See Appendix K) included the calculation of points based on the scoring of each question and allowed me to differentiate those who are engaged with a strong sense of community in the online environment and those who have a weak sense of community in the online environment. By using the SCI-2 I was able to differentiate those that have a high sense of community in the online workplace from those who do not. Further, within those who have a high sense of community, I was able to determine if co-researchers had the highest sense of community through the subscales: reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, shared emotional connection. Using the questionnaire also allowed me to eliminate any faculty members who were full-time employees at their university. For the focus groups and the interviews, I created thick descriptions of the information provided from the participants.

The questionnaire was analyzed by grouping information and experiences to determine which participants would be part of the focus group. The criteria to continue in the remaining phases of data collection in this research study included those who held an online adjunct faculty position, did not interact with students or administration in a face-to-face setting, and had a high sense of community based on the SCI-2 (Chavis et al., 2008).

Moustakas’ (1994) process of analyzing data was carefully followed throughout the focus groups and personal interviews, I began by listening to the co-researchers describe their experiences and then immersed myself in their stories and experiences. I then made sure that I gave equal credence to each aspect of the experience that is described by the co-researchers. I
also took reflective notes during each of the focus groups and personal interviews. I repeatedly reviewed the information conveyed through the transcripts as well as all my reflective notes. I set aside time for active “reflective mediation” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89) on the information conveyed. Finally, I ensured that I was receptive to the truths that were conveyed by the co-researchers, setting aside any personal bias. The information gathered from the focus groups will be classified into codes and themes. Atlas ti, a qualitative analysis software program, was used to manage the data gathered. The data was interpreted by what happened and how the online adjunct faculty members experienced community in their work environment.

I considered horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) as I looked for themes from the focus groups and personal interviews, treating each statement with equal value. From the horizons I clustered and grouped the themes into common categories with the use of Atlas ti. From these categories I developed “textural descriptions of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118) provided by the co-researchers. Structural descriptions were incorporated to foster meaning that described the essence of the phenomenon of a high sense of community online adjunct faculty members have in the workplace.

**Trustworthiness**

Ensuring that the research and representation of the results is trustworthy gives rise to the validation of the study (Creswell, 2013). To ensure that the research is trustworthy, the information was validated through a systematic process to increase the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

**Credibility**

Credibility is used to parallel internal validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The credibility of the research was established through triangulation of data by incorporating a questionnaire, focus
groups, and personal interviews. I ensured that the data presented is clear and accurate with the use of member checks of the information gathered through the transcripts of the focus groups and interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which ensured what I represent is true to the co-researchers’ experience. The purpose of member checks is to ensure that the study’s findings are accurate and the information is not being misrepresented by the researcher (Ary et al., 2006). Co-researchers were contacted and provided transcriptions of the focus group conversations and personal interviews. This provided the co-researchers an opportunity to clarify any information that they provided. In addition, thick descriptions of the data were included to ensure that some of the data was not trimmed and eliminated unintentionally.

**Dependability**

Dependability goes beyond reliability because it takes “into account both factors of instability and factors of phenomenal or design induced change” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 299). To ensure dependability of the data, an external auditor, who has no connection to this study, was used to check the coding and themes particularly as used in the transcriptions of the focus groups and interviews. An external auditor examined “whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). The external auditor holds a doctorate degree and is familiar with qualitative research analysis.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability utilizes “external check on steps taken in relation to credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 323). An external auditor was used to establish confirmability. In addition, prolonged engagement with the co-researchers through the use of focus groups and then personal interviews also helped to establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
Transferability

Transferability is having the understanding about one sample and how it can be representative of another sample population (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The sample population was pulled from two universities across the United States to allow for some transferability of the findings and maximum variation in transferability. Thick, descriptive, narratives were incorporated into the study to increase understanding of transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 359).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are an essential part of any research study. Creswell (2013) acknowledged that researchers need to intentionally consider “ethical issues that surface during data collection” (p. 174). During the data collection process, my personal experience, obtaining IRB approval from Liberty University, obtaining consent from the potential participants, ensuring confidentiality, and securing the data are all ethical considerations.

My personal experience as a faculty member for an online university, both part-time and full-time is a key aspect of my research. While my experience leads to a passion for this research study, it is essential that I practiced epoche so that my personal experiences and feelings did not interfere with the data collection process. In addition, obtaining IRB approval from Liberty University before beginning any research was essential for a quality study. Next, informed consent from the potential participants was obtained through the questionnaire. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were free to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality is also a critical part of any qualitative research study. As it is possible that faculty could complain about their employment through this study as they talk about strengths and weaknesses of community in the virtual environment, it was essential that confidentiality
was guaranteed. Pseudonyms were used for the participants and any schools that were included in the study. The focus groups will allow everyone to know each other’s voices and possibly see faces, but the usage of the video was up to the discretion of the co-researchers so they could conceal their identity if they so desired. In addition, to help with maximum variation, co-researchers could independently select when they participated in the focus groups to ensure they did not participate in a focus group with someone from their university that may have led to an awkward situation. Finally, the security of data was essential to maintain confidentiality for the participants. Any information gathered in electronic format is password protected on my computer and will be purged once it is no longer needed. Physical information collected is locked in cabinets and securely protected.

**Summary**

Chapter Three highlighted the design of this transcendental phenomenological research study that was conducted to understand how online adjunct faculty members experience a sense of community in the virtual workplace. The research questions used to guide the study as well as the setting and a description of the co-researchers was also included. The procedures, including how the data was collected through an online questionnaire followed by focus groups and personal interviews conducted via Adobe Connect video conferencing, were also discussed. The data gathered during the focus groups and personal interviews was analyzed following Moustakas’ (1994) process. Finally, the chapter concluded with a discussion on the importance of trustworthiness of the study and any ethical considerations in conducting this type of qualitative research study.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the shared experiences of online adjunct faculty with a high sense of community. By focusing on those with a high sense of community, I hoped to understand how faculty members who work in a virtual environment positively connect in the online workplace. In this study I identified 14 co-researchers who all worked online without face-to-face interaction with students, yet had a high sense of community as indicated by the SCI-2 (Chavis et al., 2008). Through four focus groups and personal interviews, I was able to gain an understanding of their shared experiences working in the online environment as adjunct faculty members. Their stories are shared throughout this chapter through a brief narrative, which highlights the co-researchers’ experiences and perspective on sense of community in the online environment. Within the results section, the themes that arose from our conversations are organized as they relate to each of the five research questions. Throughout this chapter pseudonyms were used for all co-researchers to ensure confidentiality. A summary of the results and a chapter summary concludes this chapter.

The research questions were designed to understand the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community and how their high sense of community impacts their job performance and satisfaction. Additionally, in this study I sought to understand how those with a high sense of community are equipped to respond to the challenges of working online. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community with their respective universities?
2. In what ways are online adjunct faculty impacted by a high sense of community?
3. What challenges do online adjunct faculty experience?

4. What resources or practices do online adjunct faculty see as valuable to overcome challenges?

5. From the online adjunct faculty’s perspective, how do universities offering DE degrees cultivate a sense of community with online adjunct faculty only teaching online courses?

Potential participants were contacted throughout the US to engage in a ten-minute online questionnaire that measured sense of community as it relates to working online. From the pool of 45 potential participants who completed the online questionnaire, 21 study participants were selected to participate in the study. Of the 21 study participants selected to participate in the study, 14 co-researchers agreed to participate in the focus groups and personal interviews.

Participants

This research began with an online questionnaire focused on identifying adjunct faculty with a high sense of community who worked in an online environment without face-to-face interaction with faculty or students. From this questionnaire, 21 study participants with the highest sense of community were selected to continue their participation as a co-researcher in focus groups and personal interviews. In transcendental phenomenological research, the term co-researcher is used to signify a collaboration of the participants with the main researcher in the gathering of research (Fraelich, 1989; Moustakas, 1994). Of the 21 study participants selected, 14 agreed to participate in focus groups and personal interviews as co-researchers over the course of three weeks. Of the 14 co-researchers, 13 participated in one of the four focus groups. Lucy was unable to make one of the focus groups due to a scheduling conflict. Lucy was still able to add valuable insight through the personal interview, so I have included her in the results.
Thirteen people were also individually interviewed. Rebecca, could not make an interview due to time constraints, but her participation in the focus group was valuable and so her information is included in the results.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Sense of Community Score</th>
<th>Years Working Online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stuart</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patricia</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie</td>
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<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following includes brief narratives about each of the co-researchers as well as why they were motivated to foster community online. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality. All quotes from co-researchers are presented verbatim, which includes verbal ticks and grammatical errors in speech and writing. This format serves to capture the authentic
shared, lived experiences of the co-researchers with the phenomenon of sense of community in the online environment.

**Amy**

Amy had the highest sense of community score on the initial questionnaire. She has been working in the online environment for the past two and a half years. When asked what motivated her to foster community online, she said:

Because it feels good. To be happy. You know. Um. I guess I am social and like connecting with people and it just feels really good. I think most of the people are happy because they love the flexibility and working from home. It just makes it more fun to have people to talk to. (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)

**David**

David is an administrator in a k-12 school in addition to working online for the past three years. Throughout his interview it was apparent he was always motivated by the students. When asked what motivated him to foster community online he shared,

Um. If you want students to be successful, then you need to create that sense of community. They are not going to be successful if they feel like they are an island and there is no one that really cares whether I learn this material; there is no one that is willing to answer our questions. Because fostering community doesn’t mean waiting until 6:30 when I get home to have community with students. If I am watching a ballgame after school or walking down the hall and I get a text message from a student, I know the curriculum and I know the material, I will text them right back and give them the answer. It is important because their schedule may not be the same as mine. (David, Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)
Rebecca

Rebecca has been working online for the past seven years, but when she first began teaching she had someone intentionally mentor her and connect with her in the online world. Rebecca reflected,

So, when I first began teaching that course - was one of the first ones that I taught - so he kind of took me under his leadership and shared so much with me about being an instructor, but then shared grading comments and helpful tips and things to expect in the course. It has a practicum so he gave me a lot of information about that and shared his experiences and really up until the last year he would send me things each week. I would send him things. I also participated in some of the accreditation groups like interviewing and things like that for the accreditation visits. I completed a few written things from them. All of these things have helped me to create a sense of community even though I am online. (Rebecca, Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

Victoria

Victoria has worked for two different online universities as an adjunct and had two distinctly different experiences. Victoria shared,

Well, initially when I worked at [University one] I had really no contact at all with other adjunct. There was no. Um. Nowhere really to go to even chat until I had been there a few years so there was really nothing. Totally different story [at University two]. With just the meetings that we have, like last night’s meeting . . . .At [University two] we have a lot of contact. Just using the Adobe Room. Even with the training. The training was much more collaborative. Then once I got out of the training I have frequent contact with my [leadership] and then as I mentioned a second ago, our meetings, which are every
month. And my team recently has even created a mini-meeting for about 30 minutes every month that focuses on something. It’s just wonderful. At first I thought, when I first started working at [University two], oh my gosh. Meeting, meeting, meeting. This is going to get tedious. And it is so not true. . . . So in two years it hasn’t seem tedious at all. I embrace it. I enjoy it. Being able to collaborate. And to have active discussions.

(Personal Interview, May 12, 2016)

Emily

Emily has been working online for the past three years in a part-time capacity in addition to her full-time, face-to-face, position at a different institution. When asked why she fostered community in the online work place she said:

It goes back to a sense of belonging. You are in this virtual world and a lot of times it can get monotonous and you feel alone. Is anyone else out there kind of thing? It is just nice to connect with people sharing or having similar experiences. (Personal Interview, April 29, 2016)

Lucy

Lucy was unable to participate in a focus group, but our time together during the personal interview was valuable. Lucy has been working online for the past seven years. In response to my question about fostering community, she said:

I wanted very much to do a good job and I realized that. And I have been doing this for almost seven years for [the University]. I wanted to do a good job from the very beginning and I knew that especially with [leader] that if I followed her direction, I would do a good job. So what initiated my sense of community with [leader], I wanted to use
her as a model for, um, being efficient and getting the job done well and getting it done.

(Lucy, Personal Interview, May 5, 2016)

Carol

Carol has been working online for 12 years and has seen tremendous changes throughout her experience. When asked how she fostered community online she reflected back on her years of experience,

I think for me and because of my previous administrative duties in getting to know [Mentors] and getting to know adjuncts, it is easy for me and I do frequently send messages to them [faculty] with the same kinds of things I was talking about I like to communicate with my [Mentor] who is a great... When we were in the Chattanooga area, we would get together for meals from time to time from the Atlanta-Chattanooga area. About 15-16 of us got together. (Focus Group, April 26, 2016)

Jennifer

Jennifer has been working online for the past year and a half while also still working a full time job at a k-12 school. Jennifer showed great enthusiasm about working online and when I asked her about what motivated her to foster community online she replied,

I don’t know that I am fostering anything. I ask questions and people answer. I try to be polite. I guess that is fostering. At Christmastime I send everybody a Merry Christmas email, but I don’t know that I am fostering anything. Initially, new on the job, loved [University], was a [University] student and I so believed in [University]. The world desperately needs good [University] people in as many places as we can get plugged in. At first I was so afraid of asking the dumb question. What if this is the dumbest question any [online professor] ever asked. This would be so embarrassing when I go what is the
difference between this and that. And they never made me feel like it was the dumbest, even if it was the dumbest question, then I got bolder and bolder. I guess I was just blessed to have good people that wanted me to be successful whenever I talked to anybody. The response was don’t ever hesitate to ask. When you stop asking questions you make mistakes. . . . I do feel like if I need to ask a question, it is safe to ask it. If you have a question then it is a safe place to ask. (Jennifer, Personal Interview, May 3, 2016)

**Stuart**

Stuart began working online nine years ago after completing his degree at the same University. His response to my question about what motivated him to foster community online was,

> I needed help! Back nine years ago I think of dear friends like Patricia. [She] just happened to sit next to me in a graduate statistic class. If it wasn’t for her and her help, I wouldn’t have finished that class or the program. Then we had a few other [face-to-face, week-long classes] together. Since graduating, she has called me. I have become really good friends. She is the best examples of good outcomes in creating community. You need to export her. Obviously she didn’t just start doing that when she was teaching online, she did that when she sat next to me. She is a bigger encourager. Whereas if she hadn’t opened up the discussion when she sat down, I wouldn’t have known her name. I would never have asked. (Stuart, Personal Interview, May 2, 2016)

**Patricia**

For the past seven years, Patricia has been working online in addition to her full-time job in a K-12 setting. She began working online after finishing her doctorate. When I asked her how she fostered community online she said,
Now we are to contact our [Mentor]. Our [Mentors] are very very important. They are the ones that answer any of the questions that we might have and they have been trained.

So they know all the answers and if they don’t know the idea, they know where to go find it. I like going to my [Mentor] because sometimes I will get an email from a student that is downright mean. Some emails, I can’t answer right away. I bounce ideas off my [Mentor] and she sometimes helps me calm down and make sure I word the email in a professional way. She is someone that I trust. They are very very important. (Patricia, Personal Interview, May 4, 2016)

Brenda

Brenda began working online three years ago after retiring from the k-12 setting. When I asked her about the motivations for fostering community online, she said,

Just because the position itself is so remote and so much you don’t know – the procedures and the policies – it is so different if you have not worked in that environment. I am the kind of person that I want to do the right thing and I want to do a really good job. And if I don’t feel that I can do that, it gives me anxiety. Not that I have to be right all the time, I just want to do my best and follow and do what is expected of me. Sometimes when you are not clear about a procedure or policy. I think that is why it was really nice for me so that I could ask questions so that I could do my job. (Brenda, Personal Interview, May 3, 2016)

Maggie

Maggie has been working online for the last ten years at two different universities. When I asked her about fostering community, she said,
It absolutely stems from teaching online in the k-12 environment because I learned very quickly in that setting what I had to do as a supervisor to keep people engaged. Because if they are not engaged then they aren’t connected to their work. If they aren’t connected to their work then they aren’t the very best they can be for their students. It is just human nature. It is not a lack of intent it is a lack of understanding. It is very very easy to drop in and out in an online environment, because there is not the face-to-face connection. Even educators who work in a traditional brick and mortar environment who are introverted are forced to make eye contact and say hello as they walk to their classroom as before they close the door. There are very successful introverted educators, they just don’t crave the interaction. When you have that it is very easy to focus on the “to do” list as opposed to the “ought to do” list. The things you need to do to remain connected and engaged. Because it just takes time. Working in an online environment it can be easy to focus on the task at hand. It takes a lot of effort to do the things that need to be done to develop a working relationship. It is the chatting in the hall that you don’t get that has to be recreated. That requires almost schedule time to check in on people. (Maggie, Personal Interview, April 28, 2016)

Sarah

Sarah has been working online for the past nine years in addition to working in the k-12 setting. While one day she hopes to go full-time online, it will be after she retires from k-12 teaching. When I asked her what motivated her to foster community online, she reflected, I think as the policies and procedures changed and we were switching from tasks to lesson plans . . . you know the tasks I had been doing for years and could do with my eyes shut and then it turned over to, you know, hour and a half two-hour lesson plans that
were tedious and um daunting at times just second guessing myself. So it was really about collaborating with them. Hey, this is what I think about this, what do you think? I think when we shifted direction for student requirements. I don’t want to mess up with those students. I didn’t want to make a mistake. So having another set of eyes that was a common ground with me helped me check my work. Which probably would be where I reached out first. (Sarah, Personal Interview, May 11, 2016)

John

John has been working online for the past four years. When asked about how he fostered community online John replied,

The biggest help is that I can get nearly immediate response from my Dean with regard updating the course shell. I can get approval almost within minutes. I have never had any sense that I was out here alone. I always felt like there was a resource available. I have never been at a loss for gaining some help that I needed. (Personal Interview, May 2, 2016)

Results

The co-researchers were purposefully selected because their responses on the SCI-2 demonstrated a high sense of community as an online adjunct faculty member. Following the questionnaire, focus groups and personal interviews took place to gather a deeper understanding of their experiences. The results from the conversations during the focus groups and the personal interviews collectively highlighted themes associated with each of the five research questions. During data analysis, themes were drawn from both the focus groups and personal interviews that demonstrated shared experiences with community in the online environment for the co-researchers.
Results of SCI-2

Potential participants engaged in the online questionnaire and provided demographic information in the first part of the questionnaire as well as their responses to the SCI-2 (Chavis et al., 2008), the second half of the questionnaire. A total of 45 faculty members participated in the online questionnaire and 21 study participants with the highest sense of community were selected to engage in one of four focus groups and a personal interview. The results of the initial questionnaire are identified in Appendix K. The 21 study participants with the highest sense of community were contacted by email to sign up for a focus group and then a personal interview. Fourteen of the 21 study participants actively participated in one of the focus groups and personal interview as a co-researcher. Their scores are bolded in Appendix K.

Results of Focus Groups and Personal Interviews

Of the 21 study participants selected, 14 co-researchers participated in one of the four focus groups and personal interviews. During this phase of the data collection, 12 themes were identified as they answered the five research questions (See Appendix J). The following sections reveal how the research questions were answered through the shared experiences of the 14 co-researchers.

Research Question One

The first research question, “What are the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community with their respective universities?” was designed to understand the stories of those who are working online, but connected to their university. This question brought out two themes: supported and safe.

Supported. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, the importance of support from the university or leadership was readily apparent. In fact, all 14 co-researchers identified support
at one point as a significant factor leading to their sense of community in the online workplace.

Patricia reflected,

It helps when you feel that the administration is supporting you because there are a lot of online students at [University] like 90,000. So when you have a lot of students you have a lot more complaints than when you have 10,000 students. And I feel that [University] really keeps us informed and they ask for our side of the story if they get a complaint, they don’t assume the student is right. It is important for the administration to listen to us and then support us. (Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

Amy also described the personal impact of a supportive university in her own experience,

We do all have different personal needs and I think [they] are factors in what we are doing and you know with my [University]. I went through a separation in December, you know big hard stuff, but they were so supportive, but I did feel safe in sharing stuff. You know, my hours may be impacted today, but they are going to get done. I have never felt alone or I don’t know how to get help or what to do. I think that is because of the community that is established here. (Focus Group, April 30, 2016)

Of course, being supported is not always about going beyond the workplace, but being able to successfully accomplish what needs to be accomplished on the job. David realized that he was supported through his intentionally seeking help. David said,

I think I was supported, um, of course I tend to be the kind of person if I have a question I am not gonna let it keep festering. I am going to find out who I need to ask to help me with whatever might be occurring. So I either get assistance outright or I go looking for it. But I felt like I was supported in my efforts. (David, Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)
While not everyone intentionally seeks out connections at work whether online or not, the ability to feel confident looking for help and being supported were common to all co-researchers.

**Safe.** Another critical part of the co-researchers’ experience was the feeling that they had a safe place to ask questions or find answers. The co-researchers all experienced administrative support, which allowed for a safe place as they grew in their position. Jennifer reflected, “When I need anything I ask. Everyone is always helpful. When I felt lost and overwhelmed I asked someone and they are helpful” (Personal Interview, May 4, 2016). When Brenda felt the safe place to connect and ask other questions, she was bold enough to connect to others who came on board after her in the position. Brenda said,

> I think because I had a person really reach out to me in more than just a ‘hi, welcome to our team way’, that I tried to do that for new team members. I just know how I felt, and I just needed someone to ask, what might be stupid questions to and not feel like I should have read that or why didn’t I know that. I felt like I could now connect with someone that didn’t judge me. And I wanted to be that way for another person. (Personal Interview, May 3, 2016)

While working in a new position can be intimidating in any venue, the online workplace can be particularly isolating. Ensuring that adjuncts still had a safe place to ask questions and do their job was of particular importance for the co-researchers. Amy felt that the strength of the community then trickled beyond and into her personal life.

> I feel like that community, too, and the positive structure at [University] has really continued to my personal life. It has made my personal life so much better. You know, I was already a pretty positive person, but in my approach to so many things, it has affected my whole life in a really good way. I feel like my closest friends are who I
never met in person. Through my [Instant Messenger] at [University]. We support each
other a lot through personal things. (Amy, Focus Group, April 30, 2016)

While not face-to-face in the traditional sense, it is clear that the online world can still have a
positive personal impact on a person as well as foster a community that helps employees connect
with others in the workplace.

**Research Question Two**

The second research question, “In what ways are online adjunct faculty impacted by a
high sense of community?” was written to understand how people who are connected to their
university are changed by the experience. Throughout the focus groups and personal interviews,
four major themes were identified: ask questions and seek help, engage with others, loyalty and
pride, and student success.

**Ask questions and seek help.** All 14 co-researchers identified at one point the
importance of asking questions or finding help. The co-researchers, with a high sense of
community were empowered to intentionally look and find answers to their questions or find
help in a difficult situation. This is in stark contrast with the previous literature where online
adjuncts were feeling isolated (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015;
Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et
al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005).

Because these co-researchers cultivated community, they were able to find the answers to their
questions so that they could execute their job responsibilities in the best way possible.

When asked what advice they would give to someone beginning a career in the online
world during the personal interviews, the importance of not being afraid to ask questions was
repeated from one co-researcher to the next. Carol reflected, “I guess first would be, don’t be
afraid to ask questions. Find those people that can answer your questions. Communicate in every possible way. Again, I am thinking colleagues and students” (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016). Emily also shared,

Don’t be afraid to reach out and to still ask those questions. A lot of times in the more traditional environment you are learning by asking 100 questions. Don’t be afraid to still ask those 100 questions. You can find people to point you in the right direction to build that career and the right relationships with people who can then hopefully guide you throughout. (Personal Interview, April 29, 2016)

Jennifer replied,

The first thing that comes to mind, don’t be afraid to ask questions. Don’t be out there all by yourself because there are nice people who want to help you out. . . . Don’t be afraid to ask questions, because that is how you learn. (Personal Interview, May 4, 2016)

David similarly shared,

If I am looking to improve how students are performing on a particular assignment, well, I am going to contact the course designer and will say I see this kind of error occurring over and over and over. What can we do to see this turn around? I am going to go out and talk to different people, which a by-product of that is creating a connection with all these individuals. But not everyone is wired that way. (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)

During one of the focus groups Brenda explained why she initiated contact with her coworkers,

I think I did because I needed information and kind of relationships evolved from that. When you can reach out to someone when you have a question or don’t understand something. I think that through that you develop a personal relationship. At times. Not
always. Sometimes it is strictly business. But you know what, depending on how busy people are or the time they are more willing to talk more personally about themselves. (Focus Group, April 28, 2016)

During the same focus group Stuart responded to Brenda’s comment by saying, “I would like to second Brenda’s statement there. Most of the calls that I get or make to those friends, it is because I need help on something or they need help on a course that is branching out” (Focus Group, April 28, 2016). Victoria also agreed when she said,

To go back to what they were talking about, we need help. Sometimes things come up and you need assistance and if you don’t feel like you can reach out to someone you feel very isolated and you don’t know how effective you are when you can’t get help to ultimately better the instruction for your students. (Focus Group, April 28, 2016)

Regardless of where people work, people need help as they are learning a new position and this is still true online. In order to overcome feelings of isolation, online adjunct must be connected to people who can help answer questions and guide them forward in supporting students.

**Engage with others.** Once again, all 14 co-researchers agreed that online adjunct must connect with other faculty in some fashion. While all of the co-researchers believed in the importance of engagement, how they were engaged differed, as highlighted by Emily.

I think one of the biggest things is to find a way to become engaged. I think that goes back to what Maggie said about having different ways to reach out and engage yourself in whatever is most comfortable for you. (Emily, Focus Group, April 26, 2016)

Patricia reflected on the importance of connecting and communicating with other professors when she said,
It is and I try to communicate more with other professors who are teaching the same courses that I am teaching. Like I teach the reading and language arts courses so I do communicate with them. I have spoken via email with them. I have never met them, ever. But we have communicated a lot when we have questions like how do you grade this paper and I try to stay in contact with the developer of the course that I teach. So yes, it is important because we can answer each other’s questions. (Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

While faculty may initially connect and engage with other faculty to support their students, a benefit from these connections is a sense of loyalty and pride.

**Loyalty and pride.** One of the themes identified is that from the connection found within a sense of community, the co-researchers felt a loyalty or sense of pride towards the University. This loyalty and pride also led to their desire to do the best they could in all they were doing for the students. Lucy said it most succinctly when she said, “I don’t think that I would have continued for seven years if I didn’t have that connection or loyalty” (Personal Interview, May 5, 2016). When I asked Jennifer how fitting in and being connected impacts her identity, she responded,

Wow. What a question. I don’t. I guess you could continue to work at some place if you don’t make a connection, but I think that would be very sad. Gosh, I am really proud to be a [University] Professor, even a low-rung adjunct professor. I would say that my job doesn’t define me, but that would not be true. I like so much being connected to [University] and being a professor, and I do feel like the people I work for are glad that I work for them and I am glad I work for them. Sitting down to do my [University] work is always a labor of love. I want to do it so it must impact my sense of identity quite a
Lucy also reflected,

If I weren’t apart of this online community I would feel even more isolated and distant from the university. I don’t think my heart would be in it as much as it is. I don’t think I would work quite as hard as I do. I don’t think I would care as much as I care. It just promotes, a deep loyalty. (Lucy, Personal Interview, May 5, 2016)

The sense of pride also strengthens the ability to perform job responsibilities to support students succeed. Brenda stated, “I think across the board everybody wants to do a good job. I think everybody really wants to be there for students and to help them succeed” (Personal Interview, May 3, 2016). As faculty grow in their personal connections and loyalty to the university, they are empowered to ensure that their students succeed.

**Student success.** Throughout each of the focus groups and personal interviews, the co-researchers consistently demonstrated a strong passion for the well-being and success of their students. Ultimately, the reason the co-researchers connected directly related to their desire to provide support for the students. Thus, one way the co-researchers were impacted by their own sense of community was their ability to provide appropriate guidance, support, and direction to the students. David said, “Um. If you want students to be successful, then you need to create that sense of community” (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016). Jennifer also reflected on the importance of excellence for the students when she said,

I think we all hold a standard of excellence and we all want our graduates to be the best of the best and we want our students. We want our students to feel like they are the best of the best. (Personal Interview, May 4, 2016)

Stuart shared his values as they relate to cultivating community online.
I do the best I can for my students. That is the main thing. The reason they call me or the reason I call them is that they have the desire in our hearts to serve the students. Other shared goals. I am thinking. Very strong commitment to family and children. Our own children. I am pretty sure all of us have had conversations and have talked about our online students are our own children because we pour something of ourselves. I hope I am not the only one who said that. (Personal Interview, May 2, 2016)

When I asked him if he thought it was because his focus was really on the students, he responded:

Yes, absolutely! The reason I reached out was because of individual students I was reaching out to get answers to help. And the things I learned helped many other students in each of the classes since then. But it was initiated by one of my students that I didn’t know how to give them. That student had the good sense to ask. I know there are other students in every online class that should have asked, but didn’t. But they benefited because I put that information out there. I thought that if it is going to help one student, then it would help someone else. (Stuart, Personal Interview, May 2, 2016)

Student success was clearly at the heart of these 14 co-researchers who cultivated a high sense of community in the online workplace. Their desire to ensure their students could be successful in their experience clearly motivated them to connect and collaborate with others and provided evidence of their performance as an online professor and their job satisfaction.

**Research Question Three**

The third research question, “What challenges do online adjunct faculty experience?” sought to directly address the challenges that were discussed throughout the literature review to see if the challenges were the same. I identified two themes from this research question. The
first challenge identified was focused on understanding expectations and technology so that faculty can perform the job responsibilities. The second challenge identified was busyness.

**Understanding expectations and technology.** The co-researchers identified a challenge in knowing and understanding what was expected of them in their role as an online adjunct. The co-researchers also acknowledge that technological tools available to them were a challenge. The greatest challenges seem to stem from the ability to know where to ask questions or seek help since the online workplace can be isolating. Sarah lamented,

> I think for me a challenge to do that would be knowing where to go or knowing, because you can’t put a face with a name all the time. What am I trying to accomplish, where do I want to go with this? You don’t want to feel hokey. Just to do it for sake of doing it. It has to be meaningful. So trying to find something meaningful with someone you never met is a difficult thing in a virtual atmosphere, I believe. (Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

Stuart also reflected on the challenge of knowing how to connect or what is expected when he said,

> They [leadership] could mention the importance of it in their contact. I had so little contact with the associate dean. I did have contact and they told us about things that they would like us to know and do, but they never mentioned creating a group of people to help you. (Personal Interview, May 2, 2016)

Amy discussed the challenge of determining what to do when people do not respond to questions or understanding what a person may mean in an electronic message.

> I think another one is people are not responding to emails or [Instant Messenger]. That can be real hard because there is not a whole lot you can do about it because you cannot knock on their office door. And then there are some times when just reading an email I
wish I could see their body language. Are they upset? It leaves a bit of wondering the intent, but not too often. The challenges of responding to the huge amounts of emails.

(Amy, Focus Group, April 30, 2016)

While knowing and understanding job expectations was addressed as well as ensuring the intent was understood in asynchronous electronic communication, the challenge of understanding how to use the available technology to ensure that the needs of the students are all met, was also discussed in relation to connecting with students.

If you are not adept at using technology, you are going to have a whole lot of difficulty making those connections. It is one thing that I can do is sit here and make a video and upload it, but you have to think about those kids who may have a problem hearing. Well, what do you do for those kids? You need to put the words at the bottom. So you have to put together all those things to support the different types of students that you are trying to reach. I think what we need as online instructors is not just the ideas (do a video) but you also need someone to say, if you do that, then this is something you need to consider when you create that video. So in our hurried pace, we have a great idea that is supportive of some students, but maybe not all of them. You really need someone that is there that can guide you on what you should do if you use a video and just communicating over and over will help you develop that sense of community. (David, Focus Group, April 30, 2016)

While understanding the expectations and technological tools available to ensure students have what they need, busyness was also a major challenge for online adjunct who often were working multiple jobs.

**Busyness.** Several of the 14 co-researchers identified busyness or a time factor as a
challenge with working online. The nature of adjunct teaching is that many adjuncts often have other jobs or responsibilities that take up much of their time and they often feel constrained by what they can accomplish in the time allotted. Also, other responsibilities within the adjunct role, such as answering emails from students, tends to utilize other time that could be devoted to fostering community with colleagues. Rebecca reflected,

I think time is the biggest factor for me. In my head I have some really good intentions. Sometimes it actually works out and other times it doesn’t. Time is one of the biggest factors for me. I have had the opportunity to meet a number of the instructors that created the course that I teach the most and so I feel like I know him. I really feel like the time factor is the biggest thing for me. (Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

Patricia responded,

I agree Rebecca. First, let me say. I am so thankful that I have this job. I love this job. It does not pay enough though to be my first job, it is my second job. The time factor like you said, Rebecca, like I am working two jobs, I don’t have time to make two connections. . . . I think if teaching the course is all I did then I would have more time, but I already spent two hours responding to emails. I think if all I did was teach then I would have time to make the connections, but teaching is only about half of what I do. (Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

While many online adjunct faculty members may want to connect with their colleagues, the greatest challenge is finding the time to connect, which may be why much of their connections surround providing help to their students.
Research Question Four

Research question four, “What resources or practices do online adjunct faculty see as valuable to overcome challenges?” was designed to provide insight in how faculty may positively overcome the challenges that they do experience online so that they are still able to connect. Collaboration and dialogue was the major theme identified to answer how online adjunct faculty overcome the challenges in their workplace. Communication was a second theme that helped online adjunct faculty overcome challenges. Communication was equally popular with the desire for multiple ways to communicate including recreating face-to-face with video conferencing tools.

Collaboration and dialogue. Collaboration and dialogue was identified by all 14 co-researchers as something they had in the workplace but knew they wanted more. The benefits for collaboration and dialogue mainly surrounded helping students and growing professionally. David reflected on the benefits to collaborating with colleagues when he said,

I feel like I am better able to assist students. There are times that students may ask me questions and I can’t remember what the policy may be on that, but I can find it in a document somewhere. But then there are times a student might ask me something and I really need to speak with someone. An individual. (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)

Maggie also saw the benefits of collaborating when she explained,

Obviously, I am very extroverted and that’s sort of what feeds my levels of enthusiasm and energy and I find that I do my best work when I collaborate and partner with in thought processes and bounce ideas off of and um, I found a couple of other people to answer questions, but I think between time zones and the desire to ultimately be flexible and not tied to a certain schedule sort of undermines that. So it is sort of my own desire
and a little selfish to have people to play with in the sandbox. (Focus Group, April 26, 2016)

While Maggie identified her natural inclinations to be extroverted, Rebecca reflected that she was more of an introvert; however, she, too, desired to be connected through collaborating. During the focus group Rebecca said,

I would agree. I think it is also important. I feel more a part of the university when I am connected. There is times when sometimes anything will feel overwhelming, but I still think that is important, like Patricia said, I have some instructors that teach the same course. I will send or forward an email from a student and say this is how I would handle this situation, please tell me how you would handle that you know. So having that connectedness and being able to talk specifically about how these students wanted to do with that practicum. It helps to talk with people who talk to some students every day face to face and has the experience as the same assignments and in a course. I definitely think it is very important. (Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

Patricia agreed and acknowledged,

I like it when we share ideas. They did this for the first time in the last year. They used to group us by our last name, now they group us by our subject area, which is nice because we can share ideas. We can email each other things. Somebody says, you know I got this great reading strategy. You know we can share it with each other. So I really like that we are grouped according to our subject area because now we have more to talk about with each other and we make the time to talk to each other. (Personal Interview, May 4, 2016)
Other co-researchers reflected on the significance of collaborating through more intentional means like meetings and discussion boards. Brenda shared, “Our meetings were built around that and it was how I grew professionally – having contact with other people” (Personal Interview, May 3, 2016). Victoria agreed,

I know that when there are online discussion forums, it really helps to connect with your team mates. That is one way I like to reach out to have informal discussions. I know that you don’t always get to see or speak to people you work with, but you can write back and forth with them. . . . A time for faculty to come together and discuss ways to improve learning. Basically opportunities to collaborate would be the resource I would have. (Focus Group, April 28, 2016)

John and Carol both mentioned the significance of having discussion boards or forums where online adjunct could collaborate and exchange ideas and learn best practices. “For me, two things – best practices – in other words, the things that people are having great success with, I would love to know what they are and specifically how you accomplish it” (John, Focus Group, April 26, 2016). Carol stated, “I would love some of the things that you are saying to have that forum with colleagues that are not at [University]. Best practices, what are they doing as far as meeting the demands?” (Focus Group, April 26, 2016). Regardless of the venue, it is clear that online adjunct would like to at least have the option to connect and professionally collaborate and dialogue on some best practices to meet the needs of their students.

**Communication.** Communication was an equally popular theme during the focus groups and personal interviews with all 14 co-researchers identifying ways they enjoy or would like to do more with regard to communicating with colleagues and leadership. Much of the conversation with regard to communication focused on the desire for multiple ways to
communicate with students and colleagues and the significance of recreating face-to-face interaction with video conferencing tools. Carol shared, “I guess one is the importance for communication. Especially as some new professors come on board, that has not been in the online environment” (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016). While the importance of communication was identified by Carol, both John and Rebecca highlighted the need to conference with video conferencing tools. “I had one very good instructional mentor that used video conferencing. A regular video conferencing which is such a common tool that should be part of our toolkit” (John, Personal Interview, May 2, 2016). Rebecca also reflected, “I love Sarah’s idea that they have monthly meetings online. I think that is a great idea. Especially things and connectedness like this Adobe Connect, it is awesome because you can put a name with the face” (Focus Group, April 27, 2016).

Amy and John both agreed that encouraging faculty to communicate and talk with each other is something that some faculty will have to be required to do or the busyness of the days would provide an excuse. Amy said, “Somehow set something up where you are encouraging [Faculty] to talk with each other” (Amy, Personal Interview, May 7, 2016) and John emphasized, “There probably should be a forum for faculty, and it probably should be a required forum. I think a forum for faculty based on best practices alone” (John, Personal Interview, May 2, 2016). Emily experienced a different type of communication that allowed her to connect. Emily shared, I can say that it is through email, but every once and a while to foster that sense of community a package will arrive that is “happy birthday” we didn’t forget. Or you are doing a great job. Here is a gift card. We appreciate the job you are doing for us. That definitely helps to feel engaged and a sense of belonging. (April 29, 2016)
Regardless of the means, it is clear that communicating between colleagues and leadership is vital to create a positive sense of community in the online workplace.

**Research Question Five**

The final research question, “From the online adjunct faculty’s perspective, how do universities offering DE degrees cultivate a sense of community with online adjunct faculty only teaching online courses?” was designed to understand the influence leadership could offer to those who were not connecting in the virtual workplace. Intentional leadership and opportunities to connect were two themes from the focus groups and personal interviews.

**Intentional leadership.** Intentional leadership, the idea that those in leadership positions should intentionally connect with their virtual employees to create community, was the major theme identified from the focus groups and the personal interviews. Due to the nature of the virtual workplace, many of the co-researchers acknowledged that the university leadership needed to at least initiate or establish options to cultivate community with online adjunct faculty. While referencing those in leadership or mentoring positions designed to help support adjunct faculty, David suggested,

> Other than just mandating office meetings periodically; virtual office meetings periodically. You would just have to say I am available should you have any questions. Constantly remind individuals of that. Then you could do the periodic webinars as it relates to maybe grading issues or communication issues where [faculty] could log in at their leisure but then you could have it recorded so that if I couldn’t make the live session, I could see the recording. I think that would create a greater sense of I belong to [University]. I belong to this work. (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)

Maggie also reflected on the importance of intentional leadership. “Just like new students,
adjuncts need a lot of monitoring so they don’t fall off the grid. So almost a schedule of regular check-ins at the beginning until they know what they need or know how to ask” (Maggie, Personal Interview, April 28, 2016).

Patricia shared,

Strengths of my mentors. The fact that they do hold you accountable. That you do have to participate on discussion boards. Accountability is important. The fact that they seem human to you. And even though they are our superior, the good ones, don’t want you to feel like they are superior to you. They show they are human and they make mistakes, too. They are not scared to share. They will share their mistakes that they have made with you. I think it takes a strong spiritual leader. Like someone who knows how to connect by doing in certain situations. (Personal Interview, May 4, 2016)

Another co-researcher, John, also saw the significance of intentionally leading online adjunct not only to connect, but to do so in a simulated face-to-face manner.

I think there are so many opportunities there to add things that are personal, poetic. I think we can do that. I think if it becomes the intentionality of our communication and not just transactions. . . . Instead of doing some of these professional development, is there any way you can demand personal contact with other faculty members? Make it mandatory. Buddy us up and make us talk to each other. I have really enjoyed this talking with you. I enjoy seeing your smile. (John, Personal Interview, May 2, 2016)

When describing her initial experience in the online workplace, Brenda shared,

They [her colleagues] were very welcoming. A lot of people would email me and tell me something about themselves and it was very welcoming and they did make you feel at home. And then particularly I had one person that reached out and over time would check in to see how I was doing. And we really connected and developed a nice
friendship through that. And she was kind enough to reach out. Later I asked her, was it her job to do that or how why did she do that. If it wasn’t for her, I probably wouldn’t still be working for [the University]. She just helped me that much and to have that connection with someone. (Personal Interview, May 3, 2016)

The significance cannot be overlooked in reaching out and connected online, particularly for Brenda who felt that she would not have stayed at the university without someone intentionally connecting with her in the virtual workplace; however, if the leadership does not intentionally guide the connections, it will be difficult, particularly for newer adjunct to find ways to connect naturally. Stuart shared, “I find a little challenge with the time and the timing to get together with each other. So if the college doesn’t facilitate both ways, then it doesn’t work well” (Focus Group, April 28, 2016). Victoria also highlighted,

I think it could be really challenging to foster community if you are not supported by the university itself. I think the university has to make initiatives and provide opportunities to help us be more connected. If they don’t provide those opportunities, it won’t work out. I would like to say as I mentioned earlier that it really is up to the institution to set the community in motion. (Focus Group, April 28, 2016)

Thus, without the intentional leadership guiding the community online, it will be difficult for online adjunct to successfully cultivate community simply due to the nature of the online workplace.

**Opportunities to connect.** A strong desire for leadership to provide opportunities to connect was another theme identified from the focus groups and personal interviews. While the co-researchers unanimously agreed that community must start with the leadership, several co-researchers shared their desire for the leadership to provide multiple ways online faculty could
connect to overcome a one size fits all mentality. When asked what recommendations she would share with leadership, Lucy replied,

I would advise them to, offer more opportunities for collaboration between the teachers of the same courses. I think that is the one thing that is missing, the one element that would be helpful. I know we can do it alone and I have done it alone, but I do think it would be helpful to have someone besides the supervisor to help me with the answers. There are some things that are gray. They are not black or white when it comes to grading. So the one thing I would say is to have more collaboration between the teachers of the courses. (Personal Interview, May 5, 2016)

Maggie also described the significance of offering choices when it comes to connecting.

I think the main thing is that it is really critical to understand that trying to recreate the face-to-face setting is a fatal flaw. It is a jumping off point, but it is not the measure. Levels of measures of success is not always a measure of strength. It is really important to have a variety of options so that people can understand and choose what they need and what is good for them. (Maggie, Personal Interview, April 28, 2016)

Brenda also suggested, “Just to look. Provide some opportunities for that [community]. I think that Victoria said that nicely in the focus group, it really does have to start with those in charge” (Personal Interview, May 3, 2016). She went on to share,

I think this goes back to your own personal learning style. I do better when I can ask a question then reading through a lot of documents. I think it has a lot to do with the learning style and people have to figure out what is best for them. People have lots of ways to get their work done. (Brenda, Focus Group, April 28, 2016)

Maggie also shared,
I think it has to be a combination so that it is a variety. While having the cameras on and this is very engaging, I don’t know that the synchronous nature of it really fits so that again you have to have the short and quick drop ins so that people have a safety net so that people who are really really busy, four jobs busy, but then some areas and aspects that allow for a deeper level. So the quick fun polls or the high level newsletters. Almost having a landing zone, a page or space, where people can connect at a more consistent basis where people can connect if they chose to without judgment. (April 26, 2016)

Summary of Results

Working online can be an isolating experience, yet many online adjunct faculty members have successfully cultivated a high sense of community in the online workplace. Through the experiences of 14 co-researchers, it is clear that those with a high sense of community intentionally engage with other faculty to ask questions and seek help. These same faculty members often find ways to collaborate with other faculty and create a safe place for dialoguing all so they can ensure they are reaching their students in the best manner possible. The co-researchers reflected the importance of leadership intentionally cultivating opportunities for online adjunct faculty to connect and providing a variety of opportunities so that it is not a one size fits all approach. Ultimately, online faculty who have a high sense of community are comfortable reaching out to others to share ideas, ask any questions they may have, and dialogue so that their students have the greatest chance for success.

Summary

The findings of this research study are presented in this chapter. After providing a short description of each of the 14 co-researchers and providing some insight as to how they cultivated a high sense of community in the online workplace, I presented the results of the research by
focusing first on the five research questions that guided this study. Ultimately, the co-researchers found a place where they were deeply supported by colleagues and leadership and fostered a safe place to ask questions and seek help. The co-researchers intentionally engaged with other faculty to ensure they were best equipped to support their students in the online forum. While the co-researchers were challenged with understanding institutional expectations and technology tools, busyness also was a challenge that overcomes many online adjuncts that are working multiple jobs. Yet, it is apparent that overcoming these challenges through collaborating with colleagues and intentional leadership leads to a stronger sense of community and connectedness to the university, which empowers the online adjunct to succeed.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to give a voice to online adjunct faculty’s experiences of their perceived high sense of community in the online work environment, which is a necessity to help understand how faculty positively connect in the virtual world. This study reported the lived experiences of 14 co-researchers who are online adjunct faculty with a high sense of community in the online workplace. Chapter Five begins with a summary of the findings followed by a discussion and the implications. Limitations are also discussed as well as the recommendations for future research. A chapter summary concludes the chapter.

Summary of Findings

Through the questionnaire, focus groups, and personal interviews, each of the 14 co-researchers who participated in the study shared their experiences of working as an online adjunct, which provided answers to the five research questions. In addition to answers to the research questions, it was clear that there were three additional types of responses the co-researchers provided. The co-researchers who participated in this study all shared things they did, they also acknowledged what people did for them, and they shared desires for what they want in the future.

Each of the co-researchers, whether they considered themselves an extrovert or introvert, all did things to overcome the tendency of isolation in the online workplace. All 14 co-researchers acknowledged they were motivated to help their students succeed, which fostered their sense of community with other faculty within their university as they reached out and asked questions to provide support to their students. Because these faculty members were able to cultivate community online, not only were they able to help students succeed, but they also
increased their own performance as an online professor and their job satisfaction. These co-researchers, who had a high sense of community, did not necessarily rely on leadership to guide them to answers to their questions. Instead, they sought out the help they needed to ensure their success as an online adjunct. Thus, they were all very comfortable seeking the help they needed and found that they were not worried about asking the dumb question if it meant helping their students. The co-researchers all felt empowered by a safe environment and helpful colleagues, which also suggests an increase in job satisfaction.

Not only did each of the 14 co-researchers do things to help cultivate their community, they each had people in their network that helped create those connections. More than half (8 of 14) of the co-researchers had a previous connection with the university where they are currently employed, either from being a student or working with someone in a previous face-to-face environment. This previous connection helped establish a baseline of community that developed further as time progressed. For those who did not have a previous connection, they were quickly connected by someone, whether it was someone in leadership or a colleague, who helped them find the answers they would need as they began the new position. Regardless of the previous experience, all 14 co-researchers had one or more people who quickly reached out to them to establish new connections and create a safe, supportive environment for collaboration.

While all 14 co-researchers have established a strong sense of community in the online environment, their desire for more was also obvious. Through the focus groups and personal interviews, it was obvious that they desired more synchronous meetings or places to collaborate and dialogue. While the co-researchers acknowledged they were able to attain some of this asynchronously, they felt that something more could be attained if there were options for real-time connections that simulated face-to-face interactions, such as using video conferencing
technology. Finally, they also shared a need to create a network of faculty, which would be more than just a list of people who work for the university. This network would intentionally connect faculty with others who could support each other in achieving their goals for the students. A byproduct of this would be an increase in the performance of online professors, as well as their job satisfaction, because they would be able to meet the needs of the students.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to advance the understanding of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rovai, 2002) in the online education environment by understanding the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have cultivated a high sense of community. As online education continues to grow at a rapid pace, it is essential for universities to provide the best support possible to online adjunct faculty who are working virtually. This study was guided by two theories: sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and Herzberg’s motivation-hygiene theory (Herzberg, 1968). The sense of community theory was the basis of this study, to understand how online adjunct faculty experience community in the online environment through membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Through the voices of the co-researchers of this study, it is clear that those who have a high sense of community feel connected to their university through membership and pride and are empowered to influence colleagues and students. Further, the co-researchers with a high sense of community within this study acknowledged they were motivated to continue working for the university and felt they were part of something greater than themselves.

This study furthers previous research by identifying how faculty have overcome feelings of isolation and disconnectedness in the workplace (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al.,
2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005) by intentionally connecting with colleagues and leadership. Additionally, through this research I acknowledge ways those in leadership can positively increase the sense of community of online adjunct faculty by intentionally leading adjunct faculty to connect with colleagues and the institution. Finally, while the importance of collaboration is mentioned in previous research, this study continues to emphasize the need for collaboration between colleagues even when members are apart physically and working in the online environment.

Implications

In my study I sought to understand the experiences of current online adjunct faculty working online with a high sense of community. I also identified ways online adjunct are impacted by a high sense of community and are empowered to overcome challenges they might experience in the workplace. Through the experiences of the 14 co-researchers, this results of this study could provide encouragement to both new online adjunct faculty and those who are influential in leadership and administrative roles within the online environment. By developing community in the virtual environment, online adjunct faculty members would positively connect with their colleagues and those in leadership to ensure that they are supported and have the best resources to flourish in the remote environment, which includes supporting students.

New Online Adjunct

This results of this research has the potential to encourage new online adjunct faculty who are transitioning online. If new faculty want to avoid feelings of isolation, which can be prevalent and natural in an online environment, they should be encouraged to reach out to other faculty and initiate contact either for answers to specific questions or simply to start creating a
network of supporters. As many of the co-researchers suggested, new online faculty must be bold to ask questions to ensure they are best equipped to serve their students. However, ultimately new online adjunct would be best supported if the university’s leadership and administration initiated the contact.

**Leadership and Administration**

All 14 co-researchers overwhelmingly agreed that leadership and administrators within an online program have the greatest power to positively impact online adjunct, particularly as new adjunct transition on the job. The leadership must take action to cultivate an environment where online faculty are supported and have a safe place to ask questions. When faculty have a safe place to seek help, they will be empowered to ask the questions that will ultimately help them grow professionally, which impacts their job performance. While asking questions is a great place to begin a dialogue, faculty must engage with other faculty if they are going to grow and improve professionally. How people engage is up to the discretion of those involved; however, the co-researchers of this study indicated a desire for more imitation face-to-face when true face-to-face was not an option, such as connecting via synchronous video conferences. One of the benefits of intentionally connecting is the loyalty and pride that may arise for the faculty. The feelings of connectedness, loyalty, and pride can also positively motivate employees in the workplace.

Certainly the most critical reason for leadership to encourage faculty to connect is student success. Faculty must have a safe place to connect, collaborate, and ask the sometimes silly questions so they can grow in their role and ensure they are equipped to support their students. Without the opportunity to dialogue and collaborate, working online is isolating and the role of the adjunct has the possibility to get stale. Because some adjunct are busy working several jobs,
leadership must provide both synchronous (such as video conferencing) and asynchronous (such as discussion board) opportunities for faculty to connect and dialogue to build community in the online environment, which could improve adjunct faculty member’s job satisfaction.

**Limitations**

There were a few limitations of the study. “Limitations are external conditions that restrict or constrain the study’s scope or may affect its outcome” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 8). First, the sample of potential participants for this study depended on a convenience sample, followed by the snowball technique. While many resources were used such as personal contacts, Facebook announcements, and other discussion board posts, and nine universities were represented within the initial questionnaire, those with the highest sense of community only represented two different universities. The co-researchers resided throughout the US, but the majority were located in the southeast. In addition, since this study relied on the potential participants’ willingness to engage, the gender split was not equal and only three of the co-researchers were male compared with 11 female co-researchers. Age was also considered a limitation to the study, but the age ranges of the co-researchers ranged from 36 to over 50 with seven co-researchers in the 51 and over category. When studying the online environment where technology is essential, it is possible that the age of the co-researchers found within the study may limit the information due to the differences in life experiences with technology.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Much of the current research on the online faculty experience is riddled with stories of what is not working in the online environment. The purpose of this research was to provide a positive perspective of how some online adjunct faculty are overcoming isolation and creating a community in spite of the remote environment. I shared the stories of 14 co-researchers who are
successfully cultivating community, but more research is needed to add to this study providing additional participants’ experiences beyond these two universities. Another study, which specifically looks to identify best practices for cultivating community online would provide support to the growing online community. Future research is also needed to identify if there is a significant difference between male and female faculty members who enjoy community in the online environment and how gender might impact success as an online faculty member.

Future research could also look to those in leadership positions to first determine if those in leadership have a strong sense of community. If a strong sense of community is identified, future research could continue by seeking how those in leadership have established their community and how it impacts those whom they lead. Additional research is needed to then see how adjuncts respond to those in leadership who initiate developing a sense of community online. Finally, another significant future study would look to see how faculty member’s high sense of community impacts student success in the online environment.

**Summary**

Chapter Five highlighted the findings from this research study expressing what online adjunct faculty did to connect, what people did for them to create connections, and what they would like to see in the future with regard to community in the online environment. This chapter also highlighted how this research connects and adds to previous research and identifies the implications and limitations. I concluded the chapter with a discussion of recommendations for future research.
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March 25, 2016

Tiffany Ferencz
IRB Approval 2473.032516: A Transcendental Phenomenological Exploration of the Shared Perceptions of Online Adjunct Faculty in the United States Who Have a High Sense of Community

Dear Tiffany,

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,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971
Appendix B Recruitment Letter

Date: March 2016

Dear Adjunct Faculty:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in education. The purpose of my research is to gain an understanding of how online adjunct faculty members have cultivated a sense of community in the virtual work environment, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are an online adjunct faculty member who does not work face-to-face with students and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete an online questionnaire and potentially participate in a virtual online focus group and personal interview. The online questionnaire should take approximately 10 minutes for you to complete and the online focus group and interview should take approximately 1 hour each. Your participation will be completely confidential, and no personal, identifying information will be published.

To participate, go to the Sense of Community Questionnaire found here and click on the link to provide consent to participate in the study. The consent document contains additional information about my research. 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 survey. Once consent is given, indicated by typing in your name and the date, the website will immediately load the 10-minute, online questionnaire.

Sincerely,

Tiffany LS Ferencz

Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University
Appendix C Online Message Board Announcements (including Facebook)

Share your experience as an ONLINE ADJUNCT FACULTY member!

Are you an online adjunct faculty member who does not work face-to-face with students? Do you want to share your experiences with a sense of community in the online workplace? Are you willing to participate in an online questionnaire and potentially participate in a one-hour virtual online focus group and a one-hour personal interview? The purpose of my research is to gain an understanding of how online adjunct faculty members have cultivated a sense of community in the virtual work environment, and I am inviting YOU to participate in my study as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in education.

To participate, go to the Sense of Community Questionnaire found here and click on the link to provide consent to participate in the study. The consent document contains additional information about my research. 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 survey. Once consent is given, indicated by typing in your name and the date, the website will immediately load the 10-minute, online questionnaire.

Thank you for your consideration and I hope to hear from you soon!

Tiffany LS Ferencz

Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University
Appendix D Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has approved this document for use from 3/25/16 to 3/24/17 Protocol # 2473.032516

Consent Form

A Phenomenological Exploration of Shared Perceptions of a High Sense of Community in Online Adjunct Faculty in the United States

Tiffany LS Ferencz
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of sense of community in online adjunct faculty. You were selected as a possible participant because of your experience as an online adjunct faculty member. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Tiffany LS Ferencz, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how online adjunct faculty members have cultivated a sense of community in the virtual work environment. Sense of community has been linked to student success and positive motivation in the workplace. This study hopes to understand shared perceptions of a high sense of community among online adjunct faculty members in the hopes of being able to encourage other online adjunct faculty.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1.) Complete the confidential online questionnaire at the end of this form, which should take approximately 10 minutes.
2.) Potentially participate in a confidential focus group via an online video conferencing, which will take approximately 1 hour.
3.) Potentially participate in a confidential personal interview via an online video conferencing, which will take approximately 1 hour.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks involved in this study are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life. The focus groups and interviews will focus on positive experiences with sense of community in the online workplace.

The benefits to participation include engaging with other online faculty members who cultivate a shared high sense of community. In addition, you have the opportunity to share your successes that may help other online adjunct faculty adjust to working in the virtual workplace.
Compensation:
You will not receive compensation for participating in this research.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept private. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure participant confidentiality. 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. Recordings will be stored with password protection. I will personally transcribe the focus groups and interviews and will ensure the files are secure. Confidentially is limited within the focus groups due to the nature of the collaboration with other faculty members; however, any publications will not include any personal information.

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 choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is Tiffany LS Ferencz. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at tferencz@liberty.edu. You may also contact the research’s faculty advisor, Dr. Gail Collins, at glcollins2@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, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like 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.
The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________

Signature of Investigator: ___________________________ Date: ___________
Appendix E Co-Researchers Selection Letter

Date: February 2016

Dear [Recipient]:

Congratulations! You have been selected as a co-researcher to participate in a study on sense of community in the online workplace.

As a graduate student in Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in education. The purpose of my research is to gain an understanding of how online adjunct faculty members have cultivated a sense of community in the virtual work environment, and I am writing to invite you to continue your participation in my study as a co-researcher who would be part of an online focus group and online individual interview.

If you are still interested in participating, please take a moment to sign up for a focus group in the coming weeks. I anticipate the focus group taking approximately 1 hour. After all the focus groups meet, I may also be setting up an individual interview with you to further understand your experience working in the online environment. Your participation will be completely confidential, and no personal, identifying information will be published.

To continue your participation as a co-researcher, please go to [website] and sign up for a focus group that meets your scheduling needs.

Sincerely,

Tiffany LS Ferencz

Doctoral Candidate at Liberty University
Appendix F Permission to use SCI-2

Permission Granted to use SCI-2 in Dissertation
Kumbie Madondo
Fri 1/29/2016 5:21 PM
To: Ferencz, Tiffany LS
Cc: David Chavis

Dear Tiffany,

Thank you for filling out the SCI-2 Request Form we sent to you. After reviewing your request, we have decided to grant you permission to use SCI-2. As stated in the Request Form, please remember that we do not allow any changes without our prior permission.

We wish you the best of luck with your research and please feel free to contact me, should you have any questions.

Regards,

Kumbie Madondo, PhD
Analyst
Community Science
438 N. Frederick Ave., Suite 315
Gaithersburg, MD 20877
(301) 519-0722 ext.122 (office)
(301) 519-0724 (fax)
www.communityscience.com (Learn more about us) www.senseofcommunity.com (Resources and discussions on SOC)

8. Please use the space below to provide any additional information you wish to share about your intended use of the SCI-2 that you think would be important for us to know in determining whether or not to grant you permission.

I would like to use the SCI-2 as part of my doctoral dissertation research at Liberty University. I have proposed a transcendental phenomenological qualitative research study that begins with the use of the SCI-2. As such, I need written permission to use the SCI-2 as it would be included in my final dissertation that upon completion will be published digitally by the Jerry Falwell Library of Liberty University.

As a former online adjunct faculty member (I am now full-time) I know the importance first hand of cultivating community in the online workplace. Much of the current literature points to feelings of isolation experienced by adjunct faculty; however, I believe that there are stories out there that will help understand some best practices for cultivating community for faculty. I believe the use of the SCI-2 is a critical piece in finding those adjunct faculty members
Appendix G Questionnaire

Part I: Demographic Questions

1. Are you currently employed as a faculty member of an accredited university in the online environment in the United States?
   a. Yes
   b. No

2. Do you hold a full-time residential faculty position, an online only adjunct faculty position, or do you serve in both capacities?
   a. Full-time residential position
   b. Online adjunct faculty position
   c. I serve in both positions

3. Is your experience teaching online 100% virtual or a blended experience with some face-to-face interaction with either students or faculty?
   a. 100% virtual
   b. Interact with faculty and/or students in a face-to-face environment

4. Please briefly describe your experience teaching online in your own words.
   a. Open response

5. What are some joys and challenges associated with teaching online?
   a. Open response

6. Do you teach undergraduate students, graduate students, or both?
   a. Undergraduate students
   b. Graduate students
   c. Both undergraduate and graduate students
7. Are you male or female?
   a. Male
   b. Female
   c. Undisclosed

8. What age bracket do you fall in?
   a. 20-25
   b. 26-30
   c. 31-35
   d. 36-40
   e. 41-45
   f. 46-50
   g. 51+
   h. Undisclosed

9. How many years have you been teaching, including all grade levels?
   a. 0-1
   b. 2-4
   c. 5-10
   d. 11-15
   e. 15+

10. How many years have you been teaching in the online environment at the university level?
    a. 0-1
    b. 2-4
c. 5-10  
d. 11-15  
e. 15+  
f. Undisclosed

11. Are you willing to participate in the remaining parts of this research study as a co-researcher who will take part in an online focus group conversation with three or four other online adjunct faculty members and a personal interview also conducted online?  
   a. Yes  
   b. No

12. If you answered “Yes” to the question above, what is the best way and time (please indicate your time zone) to reach you? (E-mail, telephone, airmail, etc.)  
   a. Open Response

Part II:

Sense of Community Index version 2 (Chavis et al., 2008)

The following questions about community refer to: the online adjunct faculty work environment. If you engage in more than one form of teaching (online, residential, or blended), please only reflect on your online experiences.

How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?

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<tr>
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<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prefer Not to be Part of This Community</td>
<td>Not Important at all</td>
<td>Not Very Important</td>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Very Important</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
How well do each of the following statements represent how you *feel* about this community?

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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Not at All</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Mostly</th>
<th>Completely</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. I get important needs of mine met because I am part of this community.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Community members and I value the same things.</td>
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<td>3. This community has been successful in getting the needs of its members met.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Being a member of this community makes me feel good.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. When I have a problem, I can talk about it with members of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. People in this community have similar needs, priorities, and goals.</td>
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<td>7. I can trust people in this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. I can recognize most of the members of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Most community members know me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. This community has symbols and expressions of membership such as clothes, signs, art, architecture, logos, landmarks, and flags that people can recognize.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. I put a lot of time and effort into being part of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>12. Being a member of this community is part of my identity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Fitting into this community is important to me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. This community can influence other communities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. I care about what other community members think of me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. I have influence over what this community is like.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. If there is a problem in this community, members can get it solved.</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. This community has good leaders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. It is very important to me to be a part of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. I am with other community members a lot and enjoy being with them.</td>
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<tr>
<td>21. I expect to be a part of this community for a long time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>22. Members of this community have shared important events together, such as holidays, celebrations, or disasters.</td>
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<tr>
<td>23. I feel hopeful about the future of this community.</td>
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<tr>
<td>24. Members of this community care about each other.</td>
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</table>
Appendix H Focus Groups Questions

Focus Group Questions:

You’ve all been selected because you indicated a high sense of community in your position as an online adjunct faculty member. Sense of community is defined by McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). The purpose of this focus group is to gain an understanding on how you were able to cultivate a high sense of community in the online workplace. My hope is that through your insight, I will be able to share the best practices to successfully transition to teaching online and cultivating a sense of community in the virtual workplace.

1. Please share how you were able to cultivate a feeling of connectedness with colleagues and/or the institution in your online workplace.

2. What are some ways you’ve tried to cultivate community with others in your virtual workplace?

3. What initially motivated you to foster community in the online workplace?

4. Do you think that it is important to cultivate community in the online workplace? Why or why not?

5. As an online adjunct faculty member, what are some benefits in cultivating a community in the online workplace?

6. What are some challenges in trying to foster community in the online environment?

7. What are some ways your managers have tried to help create connections within your virtual environment?

8. What resources or practices in a university setting would be helpful in establishing a
9. What are some ways you prefer to communicate with colleagues in the virtual world?

10. Previous research indicates that many faculty members feel isolated working in the online environment. What suggestions do you have for faculty members who feel isolated?

11. What else is there that you would like to share about your experience cultivating community in an online work environment?
Appendix I Interview Questions

Interview Questions:

You have been selected because you indicated a high sense of community in your position as an online adjunct faculty member. As I mentioned during the focus group, sense of community is defined by McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). The purpose of this interview is to gain a deeper understanding as to how you were able to cultivate a high sense of community in the online workplace. My desire is that through your insight, I will be able to share the best practices to successfully transition to teaching online and cultivating a sense of community in the virtual workplace.

1. Please tell me about your initial experiences with colleagues working in the online workplace as an online adjunct faculty member.

2. What individual or individuals helped you connect in the online workplace and how did they influence your experience?

3. What motivated you to foster community in the virtual workplace?

4. As noted during the focus group, previous research notes that faculty members may feel isolated working in the online environment, how do you feel about this research and how does it relate to your personal experiences?

5. How did you create a sense of community or connection with colleagues in the online workplace as an adjunct faculty member?

6. Was the sense of community/connection quick or was it triggered by some particular experience that evolved over time?
7. What needs of yours are met because you feel like you are part of the online community?

8. What are some values that you hold and share with your colleagues in the online work environment?

9. How did you come to understand your shared values with colleagues in the online work environment?

10. If you have a problem, how does the community in the online work environment help or hurt your process?

11. How, if at all, do you know that you can trust people in your online work environment?

12. What are some of the goals you share with your colleagues? How do you communicate or know you have similar goals?

13. Please tell me why being a part of this community is important to you.

14. How important is it to you to be part of a community in the online work environment?

15. How does fitting in and being a part of this community impact your identity?

16. How do you engage with others in a virtual work environment? Does this differ from your experiences in the traditional face-to-face work environment if you have also worked in the traditional setting?

17. How are important events in your life or related to the life of the university shared with members of the online work environment?

18. How do you see the future of this community evolving over time?

19. What are some ways you feel like you can influence the community and the community can influence you?

20. What recommendations do you have for other online adjunct faculty members beginning a career in the virtual world?
21. What would you recommend for those in leadership or places of influence to ensure employees can cultivate a sense of community or connection to the institution?

22. What else is there that you would like to share about your experience cultivating community in an online work environment?
## Appendix J Enumeration Table

<table>
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<th>Open-Codes</th>
<th>Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets</th>
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<td>Opportunities to Connect</td>
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Appendix K Findings

Results of Sense of Community Index version 2 (SCI-2)

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<th>Participant</th>
<th>How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?</th>
<th>Total Sense of Community</th>
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<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>H</td>
<td>Very important</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>K</td>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Somewhat important</td>
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*Note: Co-researchers are identified with the **bold** font.*