# A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRADITIONAL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES' EXPERIENCES WHILE TAKING THEIR FIRST ONLINE COURSE IN COLLEGE

by

David Warner

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 phenomenological study was to understand the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking an online course for the first time. Many colleges and universities provide online courses as part of their regular instructional program. Some colleges and universities require students to take an online course early in their post-secondary education. However, there are a limited number of k-12 public-school districts in the United States that provide opportunities for high school students to take online courses as part of the regular curriculum. This phenomenological study was designed to investigate the perceptions of traditional high school graduates while taking an online course for the first time as university undergraduate students, related to the quality of the learning experiences, challenges faced, and learner satisfaction. Participants for the study included 11 undergraduate college students from a university in the Northeast. Data were gathered via a screening questionnaire, individual interviews, a single focus group interview, and reflective journals. Data analysis utilized NVivo software and included bracketing, open coding, and thematic analysis. Analysis yielded four major themes: (a) flexibility, (b) disconnectedness, (c) challenges of online coursework, and (d) learning preferences. The findings indicated that each participant had a unique experience during the online course. Findings also revealed important insights about online readiness, course interactions, and the strengths and challenges of learning in an online course for the first time. Finally, most participants expressed high satisfaction that the flexibility and convenience of the online course created balance in their busy lives.


*Keywords:* educational experience, online learning, phenomenology, public education, traditional classroom

**Copyright Page**

## Dedication

To Danielle, Olivia, and Francesca, who are my inspiration and the driving force behind all that I do. Danielle you push me to be better each and every day – as a husband, father, and friend. Olivia, you are the smartest person I know, and I hope I can keep up! Francesca, you are super talented and excel in anything you put your mind to. Each of you make me better in every way, and I am so grateful that I have you in my life.

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## List of Abbreviations

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA)

Higher Education Act (HEA)

Independent Study (IS)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS)

Learning Management Systems (LMS)

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

Online Learning Self-Efficacy Scale (OLSES)

Online Program Managers (OPMs)

Personal Learning Environment (PLE)

Quality Matters™ (QM)

Virtual Learning Environments (VLE)

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

## Overview

Chapter One includes an introduction to information related to online learning and the experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course in college. According to Saiger (2016), the number of online courses in colleges and universities has significantly increased in recent years. This trend has also been observed in the secondary school setting, where charter schools and private virtual academies have been offering opportunities for online learning over the past number of years. Recent research by Clements, Stafford, Pazzaglia, and Jacobs (2015) provided an overview of the trends in online courses in the United States and examined data from surveys of brick-and-mortar public high schools in Iowa and Wisconsin about online learning opportunities for their students; this study indicated that the majority of public high schools in the states of Iowa and Wisconsin faced significant challenges in implementing online learning programs. Recent research noted that the educational outcomes for students enrolled in online programs may vary according to the program type. Therefore, additional research surrounding the circumstances of how and why schools elect to use online learning may provide valuable information to educators, policymakers, parents, and students (Clements et al. 2015).

The information presented in Chapter One includes details for this transcendental phenomenological research. In this chapter, the problem and purpose statements are presented, along with the significance of the study. The subsections cite background information, which has been categorized according to historical, social, and theoretical contexts. Additionally, the researcher's situation to self is documented, which included my motivation and philosophical

assumptions. Finally, the research questions, term definitions, and summary of the chapter are presented.

## Background

Traditional brick-and-mortar institutions have been the foundation of postsecondary education in the United States (Knoedler, 2015). However, rapid advances in technology and access to information have prompted many colleges and universities to adjust the delivery of course material beyond the physical classroom and into the digital mediums available to students today (Clements et al., 2015). Universities have been at the forefront of offering online programs because they can reach more students, including non-traditional students, without having many of the financial constraints of a traditional program (Palvia et al., 2018, p. 234). As a result, universities all over the world have promoted the affordability and ease of working in the online environment as a means to provide open access to millions who cannot physically attend college (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014, p. 126). Gulosino and Miron (2017) outlined a broad continuum where, on one end, individual courses are delivered to students enrolled in brick-and-mortar schools. The middle of this continuum includes full-time blended programs and a combination of face-to-face and online coursework. At the other end of the continuum, full-time virtual schools exist to deliver content in a purely virtual environment.

According to Seaman, Allen, Seaman, and Babson Survey (2018), online learning programs in the United States have seen an increase in enrollments for the 14th consecutive year. The number of students taking at least one online course in 2016 has surpassed six million students, and nearly one-third of all postsecondary students are taking at least one online course (Lederman, 2018). In addition, reporting by the Commission on the Regulation of Postsecondary Distance Education (2013) indicated that seven million students utilized digital devices to access

postsecondary courses. Thus, the emergence of online courses has become a viable alternative and supplement to the traditional in-class university experience. With online education being offered by numerous institutions nationwide, it becomes important for institutions to discover the best practices to ensure the highest accessibility of online education to all students.

**Historical Context**

Online learning in the 21st century is a descendent of distance education, which, according to Caruth and Caruth (2013), began as correspondence learning. In the early 19th century, the Society to Encourage Studies at Home was established. This Society established one of America's first correspondence schools, which were able to provide learning opportunities conducted through the mail (Caruth & Caruth, 2013, p. 142). As time and technologies advanced, online learning has adapted and changed to meet the needs of various learners. Gemin, Pape, Vashaw, Watson, and Evergreen (2015) reported that the growth and development of online programs have increasingly become a strategy for traditional brick-and-mortar schools and districts. As the leadership of these schools has become more confident in the curriculum and with teaching and learning in the online environment, they are forming partnerships with state-run virtual schools and, in some cases, developing their own online courses (Gemin et al., 2015, p. 34). Beck and LaFrance (2017) reported that there are currently 24 state-run virtual schools in operation, serving approximately 460,000 supplemental students. The state of Florida has been a pioneer, having developed full- and part-time virtual options for all K–12 public school students. Virtual charter schools are another key player, operating in 25 states and serving about 275,000 students. For-profit organizations, such as K–12 Inc. and Connections Academy, also provide students another avenue for online learning. However,

roughly 60% of K–12 students in the United States live in states that do not have state virtual schools (Beck & LaFrance, 2017, p. 44).

A review of The Online Learning Annual Report from the State of Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction provided a table illustrating the leading reasons students take online courses. Leading reasons included: course not available at local school, credit recovery, scheduling conflicts, credit advancement, convenience, and other. The most prevalent use, 26% of students, cited that they took the online course because it was not offered by their school (Gemin et al., 2015, p. 27). In addition, Loveland (2017) cited dual enrollment programs, in which high schools partner with colleges, which offer high school and college credits as a motivating factor for attracting online students.

In higher education, modern online programs emerged in 1989 in connection with CompuServe, one of the pioneers in providing online content. The University of Phoenix leveraged the services CompuServe provided to start their own distance education program. Two years later, in 1991, the World Wide Web became available in the mainstream, allowing the University of Phoenix and several other colleges to begin using the internet to offer a variety of programs. However, it was not until about 1998 that the exponential growth of online education became widespread across institutions in the United States. (Kentnor, 2015). According to Allen and Seaman (2011), the demand for online education programs created increased enrollments in for-profit institutions of higher education and many traditional non-profit colleges began to market their own online programs to meet the needs of students.

**Social Context**

The present study focused on the perceptions of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course in college. According to Beck, Maranto, and Shakeel (2016),

technology has several positive influences on traditional public schools, including the potential to enhance and even supplement traditional instructional formats. Online coursework offers considerable flexibility and pacing options for students, allowing them to go at their own pace and, more importantly, to study anytime and anywhere. As online programs and coursework have expanded in higher education programs, many students have found college more attainable (Xu, Xu & American Enterprise Institute, 2019). The current trend clearly points to colleges adapting to offer online programs, which have had an enormous impact on higher education accessibility and enrollment.

Recent reports illustrate that institutions of higher education have made a significant investment in online programs to increase revenue and enrollment (The impact of online colleges, 2019). The investment into online learning has produced a social concern about the preparedness of students who may be required to take an online course as part of their program of studies. Students with no experience or exposure to an online learning environment must adapt quickly to an unfamiliar learning space. Often, students must change learning habits and strategies that garnered success in the traditional classroom but do not quite translate to the online learning environment. The transition from predominantly traditional learning to online learning may cause stress, anxiety, and poor performance the first-time students are enrolled in an online course (Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016). Additionally, Abdous (2019) reported that students who lack confidence and feel that they may lack the necessary skills to succeed in an online class often choose not to enroll. Bandura (1977) used the term *self-efficacy* to describe this phenomenon, which, in the online learning sense, describes an individual's perceptions of their abilities to successfully perform specific tasks required of online learners.

**Theoretical Context**

Mayer's (1997) e-learning theory explained how people learn in electronic learning environments. The science of e-learning relied upon three key elements: a) evidence; b) theory; and c) applications. E-learning combines two key areas: learning and technology. Learning is a cognitive process, and technology is a tool that provides support and access to the learner. Clark and Mayer (2003) define e-learning as instruction delivered via a computer intended to promote learning. Later definitions included the terms *digital devices* and *mobile devices*, which support learning. According to Aparicio, Bacao, and Oliveira (2016), three main components make up the theoretical e-learning framework. These were identified as people, technologies, and services. People are the driving component as they interact with the learning system. Technology provides connections that enable the direct or indirect interaction of users within a defined group or users in various groups. Technologies also provide tools that support the integration of content and collaboration tools and enable various forms of communication. E-learning services integrate all the activities and align them with instructional strategies and pedagogical models (Aparicio et al., p. 301).

Clark and Mayer (2011) explained that e-learning is not different from any other learning program. The goal of a learning program is to create lessons that are compatible with the human learning process so that the transfer of knowledge takes place. The e-learning theory takes a learner-centered approach by focusing on how people learn and adapt with technology to aid the learning process. The theory relies upon the cognitive science principles of dual channels, limited capacity, and active processing (Clark & Mayer, 2011, pp. 32-36). The present study examined the shared experiences of students while taking their first online class through the lens of the e-learning theory.

## Situation to Self

Specific philosophical perspectives guided this study. As the researcher, I acknowledge that I brought some inherent bias and assumptions about online coursework. According to Carminati (2018), qualitative research, aligned to an interpretivist tradition, relies upon the narrative accounts of the participants. The experiences and how they are perceived foster a structure of meaning in both the social and cultural context. In applying an ontological assumption to my research, I obtained an understanding of the reality of the experience of traditional high school graduates while taking an online course for the first time. Creswell (2013) explained that an ontological assumption acknowledges that each person in the study has an individual perspective and a unique experience. I believe each student's experience can be connected back to their preparation in high school. In addition, a social constructivism paradigm guided my research. Through this paradigm, the participants' unique views about the phenomenon are constructed through their lived experiences and interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My goal was to interpret the meanings the participants developed about the research phenomenon.

Ragusa and Crampton (2017) discussed the substantive changes happening in higher education as students shift from predominantly physical environments to increasingly virtual ones. Evidence of the shift toward online programs can be observed by conducting a simple Google search. The Google query illustrates that many of the mainstream brick-and-mortar schools across the country have started to develop or currently implement online programs. The success of these online programs is varied, but according to Shea and Bidjerano (2018), recent research indicates that performance and learning outcomes for students in the online setting versus the traditional classroom are similar at many higher education institutions. I have

witnessed students express concern about online course requirements in college and feelings of unpreparedness once enrolled. However, in my approach to this research, I acknowledged these concerns but reserved my beliefs and bias about online learning, allowing the participants to describe their experiences in their own words.

My interest in online learning was sparked when I took my first online college course at Liberty University in 2016. Before enrollment in an online course, I had preconceptions about the challenges of online learning and, thus, reservations about the platform. According to Islam, Beer, and Slack (2015), challenges for online learners could be categorized into five areas: learning styles and culture, pedagogical e-learning, technology, technical training, and time management issues. Additionally, I read several reports about the credibility and skepticism that seemed to exist related to online doctoral programs, as if they were somehow inferior to the traditional brick-and-mortar programs. I have been a traditional student throughout my educational journey, attending scheduled classes, meeting face to face with professors, and collaborating in groups in class, the library, or coffee shops. As a result of my experiences, I examined the unique individual perceptions of new online learners who participated in this study to inform future learners who will eventually be required to take an online course.

## Problem Statement

Rapid advances in technology and access to information have prompted many colleges and universities to expand the delivery of content beyond the physical classroom and into the digital mediums available to students today (Saiger, 2016). Universities have adapted by offering online programs because they can reach more students without having many of the financial constraints of a traditional program (Palvia et al., 2018). A recent survey by Allen, Seaman, Babson Survey, and Quahog (2016) examined the enrollment trends of over 2,800

universities and colleges and found that 38% of students, approximately 5.8 million in total, were enrolled in at least one online class. As post-secondary institutions forge ahead with online content, traditional public high schools in the United States have not kept pace, creating issues related to preparedness and performance when students are required to transition to online learning environments. The quandary is that traditional high school graduates may not be prepared to face the potential challenges of taking an online course once they are enrolled in college.

According to Zimmerman and Kulikowich (2016), research has indicated that individuals who feel they lack the necessary skills to succeed are less likely to enroll in an online course. Other qualitative studies have measured attitudes and perceptions related to online classes (Hedges, 2017). Although online education has been intensely researched, studies related to students who graduate from a traditional public high school without the opportunity to enroll and gain experience in an online learning community are limited. Therefore, there was a need for additional research to investigate the perceptions and preparedness of traditional high school graduates with regard to taking an online course. As a result, the problem of this study was the experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course at a university in the Northeast.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first-ever online course at a university in the Northeast. The study allowed me, as the researcher, to explore the perceptions, understandings, and feelings of those students who have experienced taking an online course for the first time. For this study, challenges faced by the students were defined as

(1) familiarization with the online learning environment; (2) transitions into becoming self-directed learners; and (3) online study and time management skills. The theory that guided this study was the e-learning theory (Mayer 1997), which, as a conceptual framework, explains how people learn using technology to access content, interact with their instructors, and collaborate with peers.

## Significance of the Study

This study contributes to and strengthens current research in online learning in colleges and universities. The e-learning theory serves as the theoretical framework explaining how individuals adapt to learning in an online environment. Aparicio, Bacao, and Oliveira (2016) presented that the e-learning systems theory framework was centered around people, technology, and services provided by the technology itself. Therefore, the use of the e-learning theory to describe the experiences and perceptions of traditional high school graduates taking an online college course for the first time contributed to the application of the theory in new learning environments that rely upon technology to deliver content.

This study also contributes to the ever-growing body of research surrounding online learning in higher education. Palvia et al. (2018) described how e-learning had changed the approach of higher education institutions to include a variety of delivery models to capture a broad range of learners. As a result, the growth of online enrollments has continued to impact the educational landscape. According to Allen and Seaman (2018), more than six million students in the U.S. were enrolled in at least one online course in 2016. The present study was focused on understanding the perceptions and experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course at a university in the Northeast. Location plays a key role in the context of the study. Traditional schools in the region have been recently identified as the

best in the nation by the Quality Counts 2019 report card of state education systems issued by the Education Week Research Center. Additionally, schools in the region spend a great deal on technology and resources, devoting 4.8% of their total taxable resources to education (Lloyd & Harwin, 2019). However, many of these students have never taken an online class, nor are they required to do so, despite the ranking and funding dedicated to technology. The present study contributes to the body of research regarding the perceptions and experiences of college online learners and may help new online learners who graduated from a traditional high school to navigate the e-learning environment. By examining the shared lived experiences of online learners, new and valuable data were collected and analyzed to inform university leaders and prospective students about the strengths and challenges of having no experience in taking an online course prior to college.

## Research Questions

In this study I explored the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first ever online course at a university in the Northeast. This transcendental phenomenological study included one central research question and three research sub-questions. The central research question was used to establish the description of the participants' shared lived experiences and the perceptions regarding learning in the online environment for the first time. The central research question was answered more specifically through the four research sub-questions.

### Central Research Question

What are the shared lived experiences of undergraduate university students who graduated from a traditional public high school and are taking an online course for the first time during their first year of college?

Current literature and research illustrate that advances in technology and the increased accessibility of the internet have created many opportunities for all students. These advances impact students attending traditional public schools, charter schools, schools for special needs, and students who may be homeschooled. Teaching and learning outside the traditional classroom have become more common as teachers and students have easy access to course content at their fingertips (Li & Irby, 2008). Distance learning, specifically online education, has gradually become an integral part of higher education (Lyons, 2004). According to Berry (2018), the way students learn has evolved as a result of digital advancements. These modern students have expressed dissatisfaction with the dynamics and learning environment of the traditional classroom; as a result, they may prefer the online course environment. However, traditional schools are not doing much to prepare students for the online class experience (Gemin et al., 2015). Therefore, the central question and subsequent sub-questions were developed to garner data from the students' personal experiences in online learning at the post-secondary level.

**Sub-questions**

**SQ1:** What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding their familiarization with the learning environment in an online undergraduate college course?

Sub-question one was designed to highlight individual learning experiences in an online environment. Literature indicates there remains a gap regarding traditional high school graduate experiences while taking an online course for the first time, and the experience of the teacher and learner may be extensive. Teachers and students have described factors that define high quality and successful online programs. Teachers cited social presence, instruction, instructor interaction, and learner interaction as vital components. Students mentioned the transfer of

information, knowledge acquisition, learner satisfaction, course design, and learner content as important aspects of online courses (Gómez-Rey, Barbera, & Fernández-Navarro, 2016). Sub-question one allowed me, as the researcher, to understand the lived experiences of traditional high school graduates taking an online course for the first time as undergraduate students.

**SQ2:** What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the interactions with their classmates and instructor during their online educational experience?

Researchers note online courses do not provide the same level of engagement and rigor as traditional face-to-face courses (Georgiou, 2018, p. 206). Hixon, Barczyk, Ralston-Berg, and Buckenmeyer (2016) conducted research that utilized a program, Quality Matters™ (QM), to track quality assurance of online programs. According to Fetzner (2013), retention rates of online students are considerably lower than their traditional course counterparts. As a result, institutions must make a concerted effort to ensure all courses are delivered with the same level of quality. Sub-question two assisted me, as the researcher, in understanding the perception of traditional high school graduates related to the quality of their online college course experience.

**SQ3:** What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the challenges of learning in an online environment?

Students who have never taken an online course or are unfamiliar with the online platforms used by different institutions may face different barriers and challenges than those with prior experience (Hixon et al., 2016). Additionally, Charbonneau-Gowdy (2018) described the range of challenges posed by online learning, explicitly highlighting student retention and interactivity issues. These authors sought solutions to the challenges higher education institutions face to better establish a successful online learning program. Sub-question three

assisted me in understanding the perceived challenges traditional high school graduates face while taking an online college course for the first time.

**SQ4:** What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the benefits of learning in an online environment?

Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, and Chang (2015) explored how many popular social media technologies were used to enhance the online course experience. Not only did they enhance the connectivity of students, but they also had a high potential to improve the teaching and learning experience. Sub-question four assisted me, as the researcher, to understand the perceived benefits traditional high school graduates experience while taking an online college course for the first time.

## Definitions

1. *Online instruction* – Instruction delivered at a distance through the use of technology and the internet, using a variety of media and a specific online curriculum (Rovai, 2002).
2. *Online learning* – The delivery of education that involves students and instructors in separate locations connected via technology or telecommunication systems. Interactions incorporate applications such as Web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration (Paulsen, 2002).
3. *Phenomenology* – The approach to qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of a lived experience within a specific group. The fundamental goal of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).
4. *Regular school program* – A traditional brick-and-mortar school setting in which the institution resembles a factory system and is a remnant of the industrial era (Horn & Staker, 2015).

5. *Traditional classroom* – The traditional classroom is where instructional pedagogy is directly delivered in a face-to-face encounter with the teacher (Allen et al., 2016).

## Summary

Online learning programs are highly regarded at many institutions of higher education and have developed into the fastest growing from of distance learning in both traditional and non-traditional college settings (Kentnor, 2015). The growth of online education has proved to be more than a fad or trend, causing almost all institutions to make online programs an essential part of their long-term strategic plans (Allen & Seaman, 2011). The present study examined the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course in college. Chapter One provided an introduction and description of this transcendental phenomenological study. The background of the problem was discussed, which included information regarding the historical, social, and theoretical context of online education. In addition, a problem statement was identified, and specific research questions were designed to gather information from participants. Chapter One concluded with the significance of the study as it relates to the e-learning theory's application to online education. This research provided additional insights into the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking an online course for the first time in college.

# CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

## Overview

In recent years, advances in technology, the use of the Internet, and other online tools have resulted in many postsecondary institutions requiring students to take courses in an online format. Universities have been at the forefront by offering online programs because they can reach more students, including the non-traditional student, without having many of the financial constraints of a traditional program (Palvia et al., 2018). Saiger (2016) discussed research about online learning which has mirrored the significant expansion of this delivery format. Many studies have considered online learning and specific segments of college students, such as special needs and limited English proficient learners (Beck et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2012; Wearne, 2016). Palvia et al. (2018) also reported additional research that indicated learning in an online learning or traditional classroom produced comparable results in terms of effectiveness and quality. However, few studies have explored college students who graduated from traditional public schools, which may lack curricula and technological capabilities that incorporate online learning. Chapter Two contains an overview of the literature and research on the in-depth use of online education and perceptions from multiple viewpoints.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study established the close connection between me, as the researcher, and my beliefs about the attainment of knowledge. The theoretical framework for this study also created the lens through which data was viewed, analyzed, and synthesized. Furthermore, it set the foundation for the purpose of the study, the development of the problem statement, and alignment of research questions (Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

Additionally, Abend (2008) discussed how theories are contrived to explain, predict, and understand phenomena. A theory should stand up to existing philosophies, expand current knowledge, and challenge typical societal assumptions. At its core, the theoretical framework introduces and describes the theory that explains why the research problem under study exists. Information in the present study contributed to the body of research regarding the perceptions and experiences of college online learners who are graduates of a traditional public high school. Recent research on student perceptions and experiences in online coursework is grounded in the theoretical models of Mayer's (1997) e-learning theory. For the present study, the applications of the e-learning theory helped in the examination and interpretation of the experiences of traditional high school graduates who were taking an online course for the first time.

**Cognitive Load Theory**

To gain a deeper understanding of the principles that make-up the e-learning theory, a review of the underlying theoretical premise is necessary. According to Sweller (1988), the cognitive load theory (CLT) is based around the idea that humans have limited resources to process information and, therefore, instructional strategies used during learning must be carefully focused to avoid cognitive overload. CLT has roots in the cognitivist theory and uses the term *cognitive load* to describe the amount of information working memory can hold at one time. Working memory represents the current processes that are happening in the mind. Many studies (Kalyuga, 2007; Paas & Sweller, 2012; Pass, Van Gog, & Sweller, 2010) have demonstrated the limited capacity of working memory; thus, the amount of information an individual can process must be considered when designing instructional methods and strategies (Sweller, 1998). CLT asserts that if the cognitive load on an individual exceeds processing capacity, they will struggle to complete the task or activity successfully (De Jong, 2010). As a result, the application of CLT

to online learning will help design courses that may reduce the demands on learners' working memories, so they learn more effectively.

Sweller (1988) explained that the measurement of cognitive load could be a difficult task, but successful measurement can be obtained using subjective methods, behavioral measures, and physiological measures for the three load types. According to Van Merriënboer and Sweller (2010), the three types of cognitive load are: intrinsic, extraneous, and germane. Intrinsic load is related to the level of difficulty of the content and can be influenced by prior knowledge. The extraneous load is framed in the presentation of the content. Germane load happens as learners construct schemas that assist information processing and attempt to connect new information elements to the things they already know (see Figure 1).

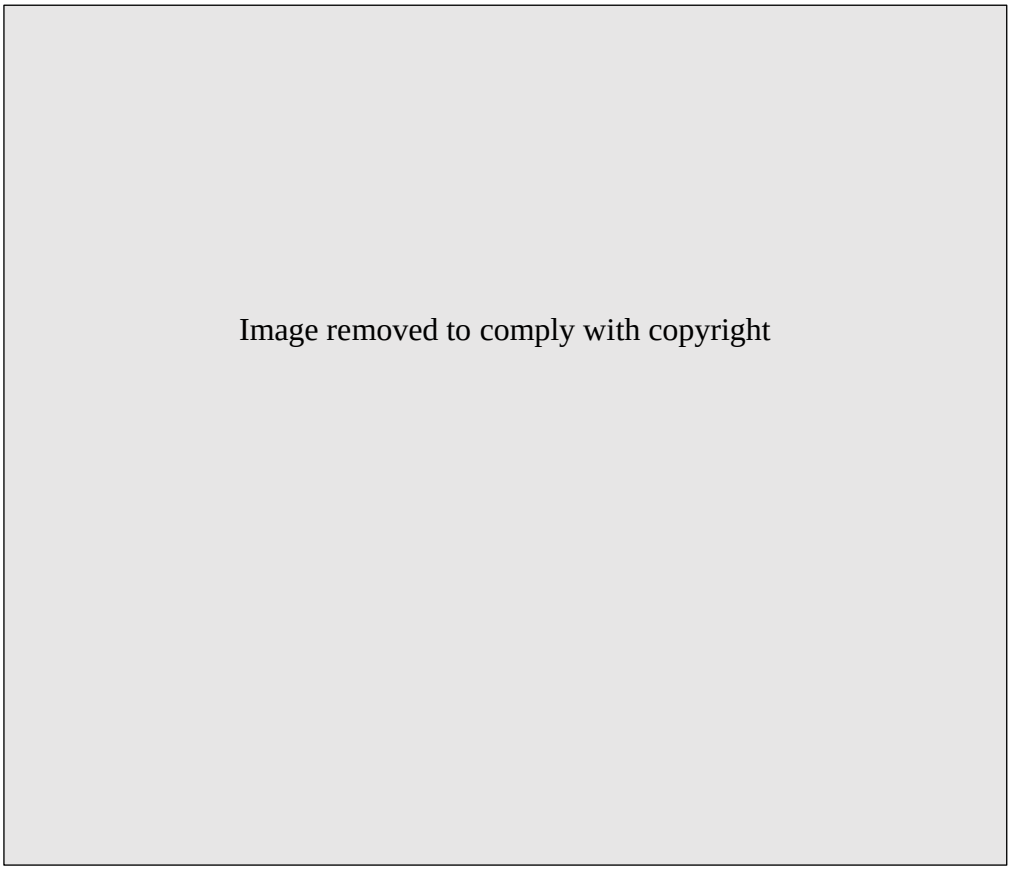


*Figure 1*. Framework of cognitive load theory.

Additionally, Paas, Van Gog, and Sweller (2010) explained the evolution of CLT in both practical and scientific senses. Since its inception, CLT has undergone scientific scrutiny at many layers and further responded to the challenges of contemporary education through its application in other disciplines, such as biology and neuroscience. The practical application of the CLT has generated a variety of successful instructional designs and procedures. One of the more recent applications of CLT has been in the field of online education. According to Kalyuga (2007), the role of CLT has been applied to e-learning environments. Interactive e-learning environments require approaches and techniques that rely upon both essential and non-essential cognitive processes. Thus, effective e-learning environments must factor in processes that both reduce and increase in cognitive load (Kalyuga, 2007).

Studies by Mayer and Moreno (2003) advanced the underpinnings of CLT into interactive environments that utilized multimedia. The work of Mayer and Moreno (2003) contributed a wealth of literature on an instructional design using multimedia, which was based on a set of principles that promote effective learning. The foundation for CLT of multimedia learning is based on the systems used by humans to process visual and verbal content. Through the practical design of multimedia instruction, Mayer and Moreno (2003) provided ways to reduce the chances of cognitive overload in any setting, but in particular, in online learning environments. In addition to multimedia instruction, the online learning environment seeks opportunities and learning experiences to interact, collaborate, and guide their learning. According to Kirschner, Sweller, Kirschner, and Zambrano (2018), collaborative activities in an online course can facilitate several positive outcomes. Improved student performance, greater engagement, active learning, shared knowledge, and a sense of community support may all be achieved through carefully crafted collaborative activities. Kirschner et al. (2018) described the

collaborative learning process as when two or more people learn or attempt to learn something together. Learners in the group may collaborate using online platforms or in a face-to-face setting. Each individual shares in the responsibility to contribute to the overall understanding of the content. The CLT and the CLT of multimedia learning led to the advancement of the e-learning theory. The e-learning theory, as discussed by Mayer (1997), consists of cognitive science principles that describe how electronic educational technology can be used and designed to promote effective learning. E-learning relates to electronic systems and applications within learning processes. Barriers to learning are reduced in e-learning environments because the process creates the potential for remote interaction between students and experienced instructors (Wang et al., 2010).

**E-learning Theory**

The e-learning theory, as discussed by Mayer (2003), is grounded in cognitive science principles used to improve learning through the utilization of digital devices and other electronic educational technology. The e-learning theory outlined three main architectures and assumptions, which have been defined as receptive, directive, and guided (Clark & Mayer, 2011). By engaging in the active construction of knowledge, learning from any one of the architectures is possible. Learning obtained using the receptive architecture best informs training goals, and multimedia platforms may help stimulate psychological activity. Directive architectures provide high-level practice opportunities and typically help the learner navigate the content in a step-by-step process. Guided discovery architectures happen when interactions that are built into lessons drive the construction of knowledge. Problem-solving is the basis of guided discovery in which the lessons require learners to apply the knowledge acquired to a new problem (transfer skills), therefore making this architecture more applicable to experienced

learners (Clark & Mayer, 2011). Additionally, Ali, Uppal, and Gulliver (2018) explained that e-learning relates to electronic systems and applications within various learning processes to foster more significant interaction between students and experienced instructors (see Figure 2).

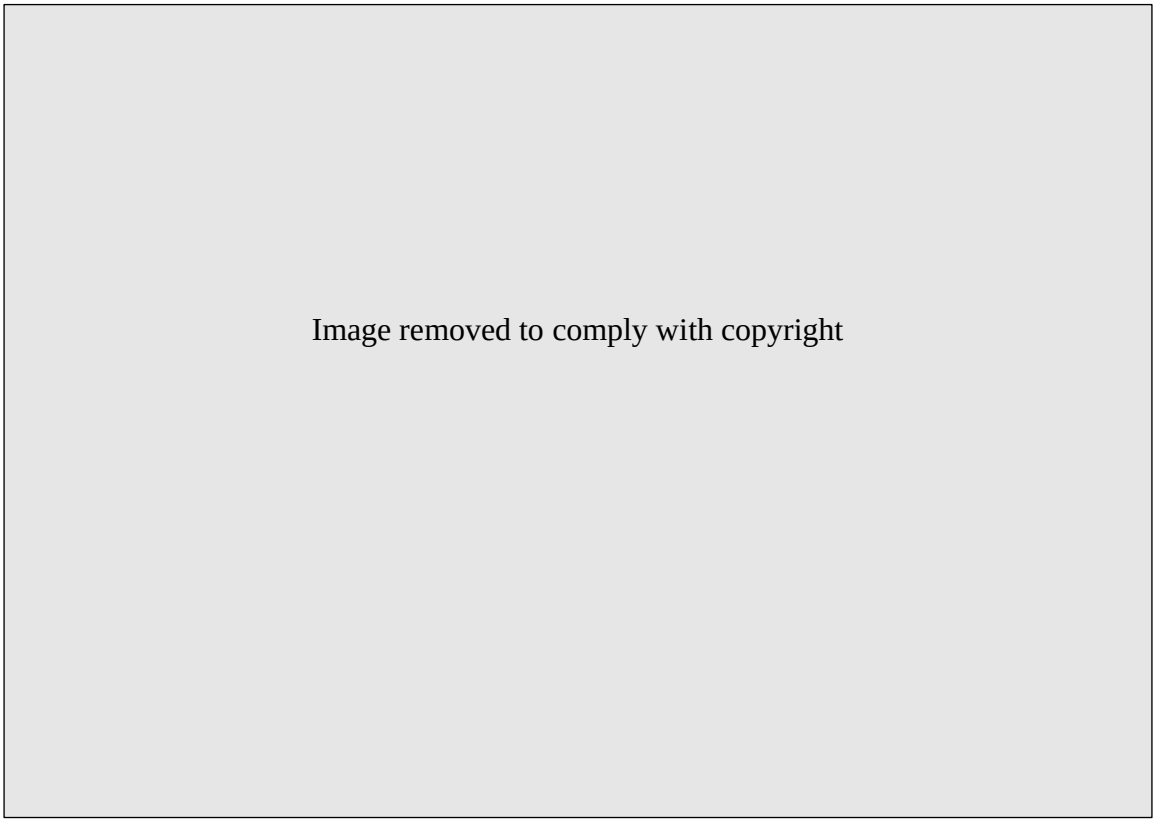


*Figure 2*. Types of e-learning interaction.

E-learning has revolutionized the workplace, teaching, and learning for several years by improving efficiencies, workflow, and collaboration (Palvia et al., 2018). New technology developments offer accessibility and flexibility, which allow complex education programs to be rolled out worldwide. Educational institutions have transitioned many programs that offer e-

learning as a means to improve education, expand to new learning spaces, capitalize on mobility, or to evaluate better the quality of teaching and learning processes (Rüth, 2017, p. 227). Casanova and Price (2018) discussed how higher education could use measures to improve the sustainability of online learning. Devices such as tablets and smartphones, in conjunction with social media platforms, learning management systems, and virtual learning environments, (VLE) have bolstered the utilization of online learning throughout all levels of academia. As a result, higher education institutions have found creative ways to leverage technology and, more importantly, to develop credible and sustainable programs to capitalize on the potential of e-learning programs. A report by the Commission on the Regulation of Postsecondary Distance Education (2013) indicated that 7,000,000 students utilized digital devices to access post-secondary courses. Thus, the emergence of online courses has emerged as a viable alternative and supplement to the traditional in-class university experience.

A study by Rüth and Kaspar (2017) introduced a model, the e-learning setting circle, that attempted to provide structure and standardization and guide diverse e-learning methodologies at the level of general research. The e-learning setting circle addressed the inconsistent application of the e-learning theory, because each dissemination of information and learning is different. As a result, e-learning approaches are greatly varied, because each situation has factors that require specific designs and implementation strategies to meet the needs of the learner (Rüth & Kaspar, 2017). The heterogeneous nature makes it very difficult to compare and contrast e-learning approaches. Therefore, Rüth and Kaspar (2017) desired to develop a more top-down model that employs deductive reasoning, which will hopefully standardize e-learning projects (see Figure 3). The e-learning setting circle would help to organize massive data, interpret relationships

between objects and processes, develop causal mechanisms, allow predictions, and guide interventions to barriers.

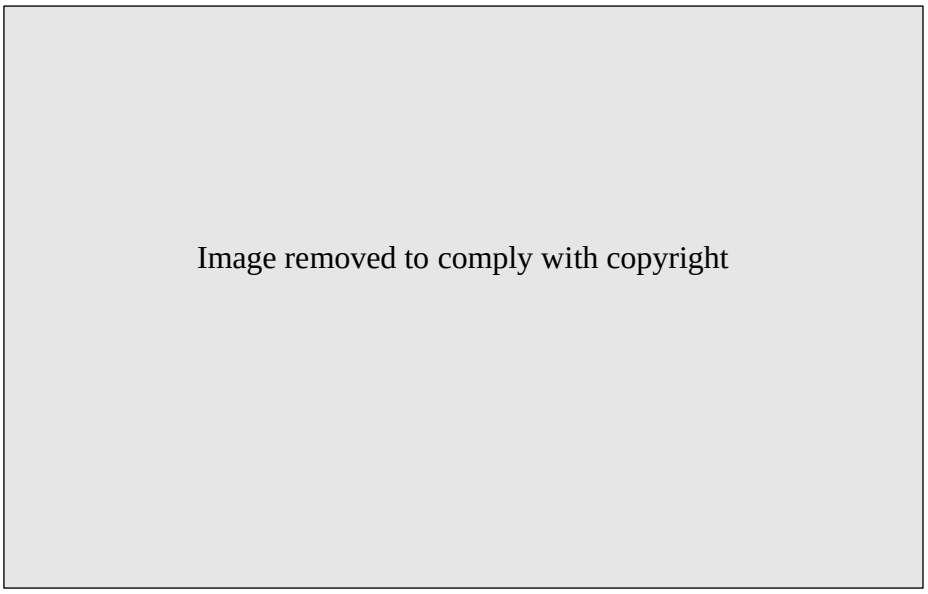


*Figure 3*. The e-learning setting circle for general research methodology.

As illustrated in Figure 3, the e-learning setting circle contains three clusters: context setting, structure setting, and content setting. Each individual variable is frequently encountered in e-learning projects, but when looking from the top down, they establish different approaches to be characterized by unique combinations of conditions and context factors. Therefore, the e-learning setting circle model provides various degrees of freedom to adapt for very diverse projects.

## Related Literature

The following literature review includes in-depth information about the current literature surrounding online education and various e-learning programs. Sources that were chosen for inclusion in this study are directly related to the body of knowledge necessary for understanding online learning and support the significance of the research study. Current trends in higher and

online education are influenced by funding, policy, and technology. Aside from educational policy, Casanova and Price (2018) explained that for several years, online learning has been viewed as an inferior educational experience in comparison with traditional face-to-face courses. However, modern technology and online learning innovations evolved to address the present needs of society, as well as to prepare for future challenges. As a result of new technology and advancements in online learning, this section provides evidence that outlines the need for a study that examines the experiences of traditional high school graduates taking an online college course for the first time. The areas of focus in this research study includes online learning in the United States, strengths and challenges of online education, college students and online education, educational policy, and future trends in online learning.

Much of the information and data regarding online education have been drawn from studies by the Babson Survey Research Group. For the past decade, the Babson Group researched and provided a wealth of literature related to secondary schools and higher education learning programs (McPherson & Bacow, 2015, p. 136). However, the literature reviewed in Chapter Two takes a comprehensive look at online education and e-learning and serves to inform this phenomenological study. The literature presented in this chapter has been carefully reviewed and screened to eliminate unrelated information for understanding this study. Literature for this study was identified using multiple library resources available at Liberty University. Internet searches, specifically Google Scholar, also assisted in identifying other vital sources. Secondary sources were reviewed to identify further primary sources related to online learning. The articles selected for the review of related literature provided vital information to better understand the experiences of students in an online course for the first time.

**Online Education in the United States**

Online learning in the 21st century is a descendent of distance education, which, according to Caruth and Caruth (2013), began as correspondence learning. In the early 19th century, the Society to Encourage Studies at Home was established. The Society to Encourage Studies at Home established one of America's first correspondence schools that were able to provide learning opportunities conducted through the mail (Caruth & Caruth, 2013). Kolomiiets (2018) examined the roots of independent distance study in the United States. At the turn of the 20th century and up until the early 1920s, many institutions, including Stanford University, relied upon direct lecture as the focal point of learning. However, there was a change of instructional strategies from 1921 to the 1950s. Instructors moved away from direct lecture and instead employed new strategies that utilized debating societies and independent study (IS).

In the late 1950s, Ch. Wedemeyer, a University of Wisconsin professor, published a report that described the correspondence education program the university initiated. According to Kentnor (2015), correspondence education is defined by the distance or separation of students from their teachers. Upon completion, the student typically mails lessons, assignments, and assessments, which are then returned via mail from the instructor with analysis, critique, and grading. Ch. Wedemeyer's program at the University of Wisconsin served students at different levels of schooling from high school to post-graduate education. The coursework and instructional design in Wedemeyer's program were tailored to the needs of the students at each level. The result of Wedemeyer's efforts established one of the first correspondence education systems, which led to Wedemeyer being called the father of distance learning (Kolomiiets, 2018). His ideas and foresight with regard to developing technologies, in addition to his open

education model, remain an influence of many distance educational programs in modern times (Kolomiiets, 2018, p. 90).

In the 1950s the introduction of the television had a dramatic impact on society in the United States. Aside from the entertainment value and contribution to pop culture, this new technology influenced distance education programs. According to Sun and Chen (2016), new technologies provided an opportunity for learners to connect with teachers across large geographic areas. Kentnor (2015) discussed how educators petitioned the FCC in 1952 to dedicate specific television channels for the exclusive use of educational purposes. As technological advancements continued to progress, the decades of the 1970s and 1980s experienced dramatic growth in distance education programs. In 1981 and 1982, the Western Behavior Sciences Institute implemented the first recognized online program. By the mid-1980s, a few universities initiated online undergraduate and graduate courses, and teacher shortages prompted K - 12 schools to explore and start distance programs (Sun & Chen, 2016).

As time and technologies have advanced, online learning has adapted and changed to meet the needs of various learners. At the K–12 level, Gemin et al. (2015) reported that the growth and development of online programs have increasingly become a strategy for traditional brick-and-mortar schools and districts. As the leadership of these schools has become more confident in the curriculum, there has been significant buy-in toward these programs. In many cases, high schools are forming partnerships with state-run virtual schools and, in some cases, developing their online courses (Beck & LaFrance, 2017).

A review of The Online Learning Annual Report from the State of Washington's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction provided a table illustrating the leading reasons for students taking online courses. These included: course not available at local school, credit

recovery, scheduling conflicts, credit advancement, convenience, and other. The most prevalent use, 26% of students, cited that they took the online course because it was not offered by their school (Gemin et al., 2015). Loveland (2017) also cited dual enrollment programs, in which high schools partner with colleges, offering high school and college credits as a motivating factor for attracting online students.

The current status of online programs and learning at higher education institutions in the United States illustrates that the once-maligned platform that garnered skepticism has rapidly become part of the fabric of learning at almost all institutions. According to Dunagan and Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation (2017), competition at higher education institutions has fostered the growth of online learning programs. Universities must now find ways to develop creative and complex ways to grow and provide varied educational opportunities for the modern student. To remain relevant, institutions have harnessed technology to enable greater accessibility to educational programs that are less expensive, easy to use, and transfer to the workplace. McPherson and Bacow (2015) explained that the US Department of Education had established reporting procedures for universities offering online programs. The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) is a federal survey that encompasses approximately 4,900 US institutions of higher education. Survey data from IPEDS provides information about the prevalence of online course enrollments throughout higher education institutions. Data from IPEDS indicates that more students are engaging in online coursework. In 2013, approximately 26% of students reported taking at least one course that was entirely online. In addition, about 11% were enrolled in programs that were totally online. (McPherson & Bacow, 2015).

Carey (2015) chronicled the trajectory and evolution of e-learning in higher education. Citing advances in technology and applications of artificial intelligence to learning, a new style of university has emerged – the university of everywhere. To maintain relevancy, Dunagan and Clayton Christensen Institute for Disruptive Innovation (2017) described that leaders of higher education are charged with developing sustainable business models that produce high-quality and affordable education in the 21st century. The authors identified several universities, including Arizona State University, Northeastern University, and Southern New Hampshire University as examples of successfully moving forward along the traditional growth trajectory using online learning programs.

**Strengths of Online Education**

Nguyen (2015) presented that online education has experienced exponential growth at multiple levels of education and has unlimited potential at higher education institutions. As a result, researchers must continue to examine the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the online environment compared to the traditional face-to-face format. According to Oliver (2014), the U.S. Department of Education has stated that online courses have shown to effectively reach learners. Reasons illustrated by Oliver (2014) included that, as compared to their face-to-face counterparts, online learners felt they were provided more activities and multiple resources. Therefore, they spent more extended periods in learning, which led to increased performance on assessments.

Swan (2003) discussed the skepticism that surrounded online education when it was first introduced, citing that most stakeholders in academia believed that learning in the online environment could never produce the results of the traditional face-to-face model. However, according to Swan (2003), research contradicted these opinions and noted that learning in the

online setting produces the same results as learning in the traditional classroom. Baker and Unni (2018) conducted a study that compared undergraduate students' preference and performance in traditional versus online delivery formats. The findings from this study reaffirmed the previous research, which illustrated that there is no significant difference in learning. Instead, the quality of learning may be much more attributed to other factors in the online environment. The course design and organization play a key role. In addition, instructors who are innovative, engaging, and are able to facilitate collaboration among students have a great impact on student performance (Baker & Unni, 2018).

According to Manning-Ouellette and Black (2017), the relevancy of the traditional classroom in higher education is slowly eroding. Advances and the reliance on technology at the university level have changed the undergraduate experience. Goralski (2017) asserted that the rapid pace at which online learning has evolved has surpassed the evolution of higher education itself. Therefore, the transformation of educational experiences for students relies upon higher education institutions continuing to compete and innovate within the online educational environment (Manning-Ouellette & Black, 2017).

According to Xu, Xu, and American (2019), online programs and courses can create cost savings solutions for universities. These savings can be passed onto the students in terms of lower tuition and may help address funding insufficiencies in higher education. In addition to its effectiveness and improved perception of learning, Nguyen (2015) discussed how the online format could combat the rising cost of college tuition. Friedman (2018) cited that, in 2018, students in the United States owed $1.5 trillion in student loan debt, and the average student from the class of 2016 has $37,172 in student loans. These financial figures lead many educators to believe that online learning may be a solution to rising tuition costs, because online programs

have the ability to reach a greater number of students. Costs related to traditional college programs are passed on to a limited number of students, whereas online programs are able to spread out these costs to tens or hundreds of thousands of students (Nguyen, 2015).

Ilgaz and Gulbahar (2017) described several motivating factors that drive students toward taking online coursework, which includes increased accessibility, independence, and lower tuition costs. Flexibility related to the anytime/anyplace aspects of the platform has benefitted both the traditional and non-traditional student (Ilgaz & Gulbahar, 2017). Research conducted by Vancell (2018) found that many adult learners exhibited high levels of motivation, because the accessibility and flexibility did not disrupt their daily lives and commitments to social, family, and work obligations. Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, and Chang (2015) explained that social technologies and media also lend support to the flexibility of the online learning environment. The applications allow information to be managed at a moment's notice by students and instructors alike, fostering accessible publication, sharing of ideas, course content, and commentaries on discussion boards. According to McNiff and Aicher (2017), another type of student may benefit from the flexibility of online coursework – the student-athlete. E-learning programs can meet the needs of student-athletes, who have demanding schedules and commitments that often hinder their ability to attend regularly scheduled courses. NcNiff and Aicher (2017) cited that the National Association of Academic Advisors (N4A) has established a coalition to monitor e-learning environments and identify best practices for student-athletes.

Student choice serves as another commonly referenced benefit of online learning. Technological advances continue to impact how teaching and learning take place in both traditional and online learning environments. According to Anderson (2016), providing choices to students to learn in ways that match their learning styles is a powerful way to boost

motivation. This type of differentiation allows students to connect with the content and self-regulate their progress to be appropriately challenged. Shen (2018) discussed research related to the personalization of learning strategies in higher education. According to Shen (2018), online learning harnesses emerging technologies and empowers learners by providing flexible and affordable access to the university curricula. As a result, learners have shown higher levels of engagement and improved digital citizenship in the online learning environment through the use of Web 2.0 tools. These methods and tools serve as an advantage to students in online courses.

Radovan (2019) additionally referenced that motivation could be traced directly back to student choice in their learning mode. According to Radovan (2019), free choice in the mode of learning involved the selection resources, the pace of the lessons, and time spent on the topics. Additionally, the learning style is taken into account. Students who are auditory learners may select the content that requires listening, visual learners could access videos, and kinesthetic learners may choose alternate hands-on approaches. Providing students control may alleviate student apathy and boost intrinsic motivation. The autonomy assists students identify and connect with their strengths and interests, which provides greater power and control over their work (Anderson, 2016).

Since the advent of distance learning, questions concerning virtual/online and blended schools revolve around the online culture and climate compared to their traditional school counterparts. A commonly cited benefit of online schooling suggests a large component of family-school choice is related to curriculum, worldview, or special needs. Gulosino and Miron (2017) reported that some parents favor choice in schooling arrangements. Parents who choose e-learning believe the online environment may maximize their child's development, acquisition of skills, and learning experiences. Berge and Clark (2009) discussed increased motivation,

extended access to educational opportunities, increased quality of learning options, and increased student skills and achievement related to online schools. Wearne (2016) conducted a study that examined why a family may have chosen an online or hybrid school program for their children. Several factors were identified as a result of this research. Four main reasons were identified, including religion, poor performing local public school, social or environmental issues at the local school, and specialized programs or special needs. Wearne (2016) also cited that parents reported that many online or blended programs deemphasized standardized testing. Additionally, parents typically indicated they valued school climate, discipline, safety, and class size.

Added benefits of online learning also included the opportunity for students to make up courses or engage in credit recovery coursework. Pettyjohn and LaFrance (2014) conducted a qualitative study to understand stakeholders' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of supplemental online learning courses taken as credit recovery. Students with special needs and Section 504 related disabilities may also benefit from online course work. These students have individual circumstances which, in order to achieve academic success, require some level of flexibility in their educational coursework. Thompson, Ferdig, and Black (2012) indicated that children who fall behind in their education because of health, behavioral, or other individual circumstances may be limited in their ability to learn in a traditional classroom setting.

At the post-secondary level, Deming, Lovenheim, and Patterson (2016) described the effect of online institutions on localized education markets. Essentially, the proliferation of the online market has created competitive pressure, because students no longer have a limited set of choices in which to enroll. Therefore, the monopolization by local universities is diminished, and they now must compete for students with a broader market of online options. Thus, the free

market competition has significantly reduced the power and influence of the local university and forced them to create a balance with online degree programs and other non-selective schools in the region (Deming et al., 2016).

## Challenges of Online Education

According to Nguyen (2015), several studies indicated positive impacts on learning outcomes in the online or hybrid format compared to the traditional format. These outcomes range from increased test scores, greater student engagement with content, and a stronger sense of community. However, online learning is considered untraditional and therefore faces many challenges. Aside from being unconventional, Beck and LaFrance (2017) discussed enrollment and attendance, money, quality assurance, and accountability as challenges for online learners. Recent research explored factors that drive the successful implementation of online courses and programs. According to Volery and Lord (2000), three critical factors influenced student performance and success: technology, the instructor, and the previous use of technology from a student perspective.

Poquet et al. (2018) explained that social presence is vital to the success and learning of students in online courses. McGuire (2016) described how interaction and social presence can impact the quality of online instruction. In a group setting, social presence is obtained through the engagement of individuals with one another. Individuals feel a sense connection and belonging, because they are respected and valued for their contributions to the group (Al-Dheleai & Tasir, 2019). However, the ability to engage learners in a social context remains one of the most considerable challenges in the online environment (Poquet et al., 2018). According to

Poquet et al. (2018), research has indicated that learning in an online environment may foster feelings of isolation, anonymity, and disconnectedness. McGuire (2016) asserted that students often do not share intimate information and are guarded about their personal lives. The lack of personal insights and connectedness can hinder motivation and performance. As a result, instructors must focus on the issue of social presence in online courses and seek the most effective strategies to create a climate of belonging. By supporting a sense of community, the instructor establishes a strong teaching presence that is necessary to build shared understanding (McGuire, 2016). Therefore, through establishing a safe online space where students share personal stories or feelings which have a connection to their study, all students enrolled can benefit (Al-Dheleai & Tasir, 2019).

Researchers often cite independence and self-direction as obstacles to which new online learners must adapt. According to Rappel (2017), online learning places many students into an unfamiliar environment that requires a high level of adaptability. A good number of these learners have been conditioned to rely upon strong instructor presence, face-to-face interaction and feedback, and the close oversight of progress. Rush (2015) cited research that illustrated that learners who engage in online learning are compelled to develop a great deal of autonomy and responsibility. Additional studies have shown that high levels of self-direction are necessary to be successful in online learning. Self-direction and autonomy are often barriers a learner must overcome. Additional barriers identified included: information overload, mind wandering, role ambiguity, inadequate coping skills, heavy workload, and inadequate writing skills (Kohan et al., 2017).

Zimmerman and Kulikowich (2016) added another factor that could provide valuable information. Previous online learning experiences that compared students with and without an

online background were examined. The authors created an instrument, the Online Learning Self-Efficacy Scale (OLSES), to measure online learning self-efficacy in the two groups. According to Zimmerman and Kulikowich (2016), information gathered from the OLSES extends beyond self-efficacy-related technology use and considers factors or time management and learning outcomes. Therefore, the OLSES may help identify several areas of student deficiency and guide interventions to improve online learning efficacy. In addition, Abdous (2019) discussed the need to examine students' feelings of anxiety about their level of preparedness as they took an online course. The author concluded that emotional reactions could be a predictor of success in the online environment.

Additionally, Islam, Beer, and Slack (2015) reviewed multiple sources of literature that discussed the challenges of the online learning environment. These challenges are categorized into five areas which include: learning styles and culture, pedagogical e-learning, technology, technical training, and time management. To better serve instructors and learners, institutions must gain a firm understanding of the technological capacity of instructors and students. Instructors should not have to provide technical support to their students; instead, they should be trained in new technologies that can foster thoughtful posts, integrate relevant videos, and provide guided tutorials to enhance the course. Student attitude and experience is also vital to the success of online coursework. If students are confident in using the systems in place, their experiences will most likely be more positive.

Finally, some scholars are concerned over the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of online courses and the problems adolescents may face in being separated from their teachers due to learning in a virtual environment. Waters et al. (2014) reported that online

learners may face problems with accountability, funding, poor grades, and high dropout rates as compared to learners in the traditional course setting.

**College Students and Online Education**

The majority of online courses at universities are designed to mirror the teaching, learning, and social interactions of the traditional brick-and-mortar classroom. Similar to the traditional classroom, an online class stresses the importance of setting course goals, learning objectives, and expectations in order to provide effectively engage students (Sun & Chen, 2016). Cavanaugh and Jacquemin (2015) reported that the annual growth rate of online post-secondary enrollment has slowed from a decade ago, but it is still increasing at a rate of over 9% every year. Future growth is bound to occur as approximately 70% of higher education academic leaders believe that online education is vital for their long-term growth strategy (Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015). Recent research has illustrated that public colleges experienced the most significant gains in enrollments for online programs over the period of fall 2015 and 2016. Growth at these institutions was estimated at 7.3%, which outpaced private nonprofit and private for-profit schools during the same time. Data also indicated that, in 2016, 56.1% of students who elected to enroll in an online course were in-state tuition students (Friedman, 2018). According to Friedman (2018), most college students chose online coursework because it was affordable, and it provided flexibility in their schedule compared to traditional schools. Wladis, Wladis, and Hachey (2014) also performed a study that examined reasons college students enrolled in online courses. When comparing enrollments of online versus traditional course enrollments, their research indicated that perceived course difficulty played a key role. According to Wladis, Wladis, and Hachey (2014), elective and lower level (100-level) courses were observed to have a greater likelihood of enrollment and retention, as opposed to core major and higher level (200-

level and above) coursework. Using the self-determination theory and motivation as the foundation for their research, Johnson, Stewart, and Bachman (2015) discussed the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that impacted student enrollment in online coursework. Intrinsic motivational factors firmly aligned to responsibility, enjoyment, improved grades, increased learning, and preferences for online interactions, while extrinsic motivation connected to factors related to time and life situations, such as work and family obligations. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation both play a role in completion rates of online learners. However, students who are motivated by extrinsic factors typically complete a greater number of courses (Johnson, Stewart, & Bachman, 2015).

According to Cavanaugh and Jacquemin (2015), the delivery format was once a key contributor for student performance, but recent research studies show this has changed. Cavanaugh and Jacquemin (2015) found that the online or face-to-face course format had little impact on student performance, refuting previous studies by Xu and Jaggars (2011; 2014). Hedges (2017) also studied course delivery options to a diverse group of college students. The first part of the study tracked performance outcomes using several different criteria: persistence and homework, quiz, and exam grades between delivery methods and across class status levels and programs of study. The second part examined how anxiety levels between delivery methods and genders impacted course performance. Unlike the findings of Cavanaugh and Jacquemin (2015), data from this study illustrated that online students experienced difficulty and had a significantly higher rate of withdrawal compared to the traditional face-to-face format.

As observed in the literature and discussed in the previous paragraphs, it is clear that online coursework has played an essential role for students in higher education institutions by providing programs that lower costs, establishing unrestricted access to content, and broadening

learning opportunities. However, Linjawi and Alfaddi (2018) explained that research related to perception, experiences, and students' satisfaction could provide beneficial insight for higher education institutions. According to Mather and Sarkans (2018), the mode of delivery — online, face-to-face, or blended — had a significant impact on how students viewed their performance, satisfaction, and level of achievement. Students enrolled in online courses emphasized that factors related to flexibility, accessibility, and convenience, as well as a desire to experience a different way of learning, assisted them in decisions about online learning programs. Perceived value has also been studied regarding online education programs. Toufaily, Zalan, and Lee (2018) discussed a conceptual framework of perceived value in an e-learning setting. The framework included perceived values related to experience with instructors, other students, technology, curriculum, social networks, and multimedia. A key finding of this study illustrated that students place value on several different attributes of online programs. Favorable factors related to quality are connected to brand awareness, track record, and the accreditation of the online institution (Toufaily et al., 2018).

While the growth and prevalence of online learning have expanded over the years, there remains limited research comparing the effect of student success in the online course versus the traditional face-to-face model. As a result, Bettinger, Fox, Loeb, and Taylor (2017) performed a study that tracked student achievement and progress in the two delivery formats. Data for the study was collected over four years and included approximately 230,000 students in 168,000 different course sections. According to Bettinger et al. (2017), taking a course online instead of in-person reduces student success and progress in college. These course sections, whether online or face-to-face, utilized the same syllabus, textbook, and other materials. Assignments, quizzes, tests, and grading rubrics were all identical. In most cases, class sizes were similar in terms of an

instructor to student ratio. The delivery format (i.e., mode of communication and interaction) was the main difference between the online and face-to-face courses. The researchers concluded that those students who took the online course in college experienced reduced success and progress. However, according to Bettinger et al. (2017), grades are not always a reliable indicator of student learning in a course. Narrowly focusing on grades may not illustrate a true picture of learning. Student comprehension, understanding, and growth are additional measures that may be considered to determine the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the online environment.

**The Impact of Policy and Politics on Virtual Learning**

Casanova and Price (2018) discussed the important checks, balances, and governance for online learning in higher education. The authors suggested that policy and practice in higher education need to reach a level of sustainability. According to Casanova and Price (2018), online education programs have made significant progress toward sustainability, and much of the criticism and resistance from academic staff, students, and administrators has subsided in recent years. However, inroads still must be made in equal access, inclusive learning environments, and affordability. On the institutional side, a firm financial, technical, and instructional backing will also improve levels of sustainability. Policy and Progress (2019) discussed recent briefs issued by three major technology organizations that have a hand in shaping policy. These organizations cited that existing regulations may be out of date and not aligned to the 21st-century educational practices of many higher education institutions and the needs of the modern student. Examples of misalignment in Policy and Progress (2019) were related to state and federal policies about certification programs and licensing boards.

As the educational landscape transitioned into the 21st century, the proliferation of educational technology and e-learning opportunities exposed educational policy concerns for various levels of institutions. In response, policies were crafted to grant funding for institutions that offer online learning programs. Funds were made available for new initiatives, increased integration of educational technologies, and the growth of existing e-learning programs (Roumell & Salajan, 2016). According to Gemin et al. (2015), government agencies in many states take on an essential role in oversight and support of online learning. Roles include oversight of the supply and access of online learning to schools, approval of online courses per state regulations, and in some cases, funding for coursework. Gemin et al. (2015) described that state agencies often act as facilitators between schools and suppliers to assist students in finding and enrolling in online courses. The authors note that district and regional service agencies may be localized at the school, while some state agencies delegate program oversight and leadership to the state-run virtual school.

An important role in policy development and implementation focuses upon privacy and consumer protection. According to Perry, Cochrane, and Institute for College Access (2018), the exponential growth of online learning programs poses distinct new challenges to states that must comply with the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), as well as for-profit institutions that may be unaccredited and lack regulation. Abilock and Abilock (2016) described that in order to stay competitive, many schools and institutions have partnered with online services without thoroughly vetting these third-party providers. As a result, student data may become compromised or shared due to a lack of standardized controls or protections.

Perry, Cochrane, and Institute for College Access (2018) explained the duty of state regulators to provide oversight of colleges and universities. In comparison, the Higher

Education Act (HEA) of 1965 is an example of a policy that mandated that any college receiving federal funding had to meet specific criteria outlined in the policy. However, much of the policy related to the HEA was centered on in-state schools and not programs offered in different states. Therefore, online education programs present a challenging dilemma for policy. According to Perry et al. (2018), students who attend online colleges in other states must have additional measures of protection to ensure the standards of the HEA are being met. Additionally, the Institute for College Access (2019) outlined the long history of the state of California's negative experiences with for-profit colleges. According to the Institute for College Access (2019), expanded oversight must be put into practice for out-of-state colleges seeking to enroll Californians. These consumer protections would make institutions publish various disclosures to prospective students.

State and federal agencies may serve as the primary catalyst for policy and oversight of online education programs, but Fredericksen (2018) described that additional leadership must come from the institutions themselves. According to Fredericksen (2018), presidents and provosts can take on leadership roles providing systematic oversight and coordinated efforts with other institutional leaders to inform policy and regulations. Fredericksen (2018) further outlined initiatives and goals that shape how online learning regulations could be implemented across institutions. University leaders should consider strategic goals that market the university, improve student recruitment and enrollment, and highlight the achievements of graduates. Additionally, institutional priorities must focus on staff development and training, providing student support, and strategies to grow online learning programs (Fredericksen, 2018).

**K-12 Online Education**

At the K–12 level, online learning options are becoming commonplace, and there has been rising concern about accountability by school leaders. Archambault, Kennedy, and Freidhoff (2016) described how the rapidly changing landscape of online education has caused various states to confront issues with policies aligned with traditional educational settings rather than online coursework. Therefore, many states have organized choice options that allow students and their parents to select approved courses. According to Bailey, Martin, Taylor, Leichty, and Palmer (2014), schools are responsible for ensuring coursework is offered to address college and career readiness for all students. Recent research indicates that schools often contract with third party providers to expand course offerings that meet the diverse needs of their students. These courses are aligned to the local curriculum and may be taken fully online or in a blended learning format (Bailey et al., 2014). Some schools may be restricted by enrollment, interest, or staffing to offer Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or electives related to STEAM or other higher-level computer programming courses. From their research, Archambault, Kennedy, and Freidhoff (2016) generated a list of eight recommendations that addressed accountability in K-12 online learning and safeguarded student learning and progress. These recommendations may have broad implications for research, policy, and practice.

Some state virtual schools can be created by special legislation or a state-level agency and can receive state funding (Waters, Barbour, & Menchaca, 2014, p. 384). The issue of funding has been politicized and has created policy issues at the state and federal level. Policy issues should be addressed from the beginning of online schooling, according to Beem (2010). In California, a significant concern emerged when private companies, which received public funds, began to develop virtual schools. Politicians and the general public were incensed that

these schools reaped the benefits of funding for operating public schools with few facilities and a smaller staff. A similar situation happened in Pennsylvania, causing the state's legislature to pass *Public School Act 88,* which explicitly defined online charter schools as public schools, and which required that they be granted charters only by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (Waters, Barbour, & Menchaca, 2014). According to Gemin et al. (2015), as online education evolves even further, politicians have increasingly looked at educational reform through the lens of online learning.

While several studies have addressed the impact of policy on K-12 and higher education, there has been limited research on how online education policy affects students with disabilities. According to Kim et al. (2015), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) establishes reporting procedures on educational environments for students with special needs, but currently, there are no requirements that exist for online educational environments. A review of policy at the state level revealed that there are not specific guidelines about the collection of data and information in online education programs. Therefore, policies vary greatly from one state to another (Kim et al., 2016).

**Trends and the Future of Online Education**

The rate at which technology is evolving has created a dramatic shift in how education is accessed and delivered. It is also clear that rapidly changing technology is having a significant impact on the workforce and economy. Ally (2019) described the importance for educators to project and make assumptions about the future to determine the appropriate path for current students to best navigate, thrive, and serve the society of the future. Jobs and industries of the future may not exist in the current marketplace because of emerging technologies, data profiling, and the changes brought upon by the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Ally, 2019). According to

the World Economic Forum (2017), the Fourth Industrial Revolution represents a new chapter in human development marked by significant advancements in how technology becomes embedded in society. As a result, an individual's knowledge base and skill set must continually grow and be refreshed to maintain relevance in the school and work setting. According to Vrba and Mitchell (2019), to meet the needs of the modern college student, institutions of higher education must change the way they recruit, teach, and engage learners to stay relevant in the future. As institutions of higher education adapt to market demands, an emphasis on new technologies in the classroom is required, both in face-to-face and online environments. New explorations and implementation of technology such as streaming services, podcasts, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality for students may better serve the growing population of digital learners (Vrba & Mitchell, 2019).

According to Reyes and Segal (2019), recent trends and attitudes toward online education and higher education as a whole have shifted over the past decade and will continue to evolve in the future. Sertu (2018) described how the current traditional university will set the foundation for the university of the future. One will not triumph over another; instead, the university of the future will stand on the shoulders of its predecessors to provide the educational needs of society. The shifting of attitudes toward the modern institution of higher education has seemingly taken on a neoliberal world view. Neoliberalist attitudes, which prescribe a cost-benefit analysis, have directly affected public funding and financial aid opportunities across higher education. The neoliberalist viewpoint considers the supply and demand of the educational and business marketplace. If the job market demands specific skills or knowledge, then students should have the option to choose how to acquire the tools necessary for success (Reyes & Segal, 2019).

This new narrative has forced institutions to raise tuition rates and enroll more significant numbers of students, which, in turn, creates more opportunities for online learners (Reyes & Segal, 2019). Busta (2019) explained that Online Program Managers (OPMs) have emerged as viable partners to help colleges bring online education to the market. OPMs often can support more significant enrollments than other online programs and respond to colleges' desire for greater flexibility to stay mission-driven while also increasing revenue.

As learners move into the third decade of the 21st century, several new trends will influence their educational experience. According to Anshari et al. (2016), the extraordinary amounts of data collected from multiple sources can provide new opportunities for online learners. Big data can not only provide customization and personalization of content, but it can also be used to predict academic success. Analytics and the use of big data analysis have the potential to predict which students have the potential to pass the subject or course (Anshari et al., 2016).

Key players in data and analytics are Learning Management Systems (LMS), which serve as the platform in which coursework is delivered to students. Little (2015) cited the growth of the LMS market and explained how the platform could improve the online learning experience. Through an LMS, institutions capture statistical data that describes a student's strengths, weaknesses, habits, and learning profile. In turn, this establishes a system that can track a learner's journey through all levels of the learning experience and develop an accurate personal learning environment (PLE). According to Little (2015), there are numerous benefits of incorporating analytics in education. Data analytics and predictive modelling have the power to transform an institution by changing the way which courses are marketed, curricula are structured, and students are monitored or supported in e-learning environments.

As institutions move toward more personalized education programs, the role of the individual student becomes vital to the design of coursework. According to Castaño Muñoz, Redecker, Vuorikari, and Punie (2013), learners will be tasked to create their learning ecology that identifies specific needs, individual goals, and a collaborative network that provides support and resources. Chatterjee (2018) described the limitations and restrictions of the traditional classroom, stating that future classrooms must be focused on establishing connections between key stakeholders. These connections should leverage new technologies to help shape the future of education. In addition to personalization, educational fluidity will be a necessary skill. Castaño Muñoz (2013) described this process as the ability to move between educational contexts and settings to maximize educational opportunities. Selingo (2018) referenced how e-learning programs could learn from e-commerce companies that utilize small brick-and-mortar spaces to improve sales and customer loyalty. New blended programs could benefit from small meeting places that allow students to navigate between the virtual learning environment and physical learning interactions that truly harness the power of people.

The most prevalent trend and shift in teaching and learning in higher education is artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. According to Magliozzi and Renick (2019), higher education leaders are grappling with the quickly evolving applications and the best ways to leverage them for teaching and learning. AI refers to the ability of computing systems to simulate human intelligence and mimic their actions. Traits associated with artificial intelligence include learning, adapting, and problem-solving (Popenici & Kerr, 2017). In another recent study, Ocaña-Fernández, Valenzuela-Fernández, and Garro-Aburto (2019) stated that the goal of AI is to simulate the intelligence capabilities of the human brain. According to Ocaña-Fernández et al. (2019), analytical learning, intelligent interactive technologies, and accurate personalization

of learning are currently being used, but they will ultimately be substantially improved in the future. Goral (2018) explained that advances in AI allow the system to learn from the learner. An example provided by Goral (2018) illustrated that in the learning process, there are often several pathways an individual learner may take in order to demonstrate understanding or exhibit mastery of a skill. The role of AI is to navigate the learning process, make rational decisions, and take actions to lead the student toward the best chance of achieving the learning goal (Goral, 2018). The ability of computers or machines to think and learn has the potential to transform education. According to Kucak, Juricic, and Đambic (2018), machine learning is a component of AI. It involves the use of statistics and algorithms that enable computers to learn autonomously. The application of machine learning to the online educational environment aims to improve the efficiency of instruction, employ predictive analytics, and revolutionize assessment (Kucak et al., 2018).

## Summary

Chapter Two of this study included an examination of an extensive body of research related to online learning, from its infancy, to future trends and applications. The body of literature also included a wealth of information about the e-learning theory, which served as the theoretical framework to guide research. The growth of online enrollment at the secondary and post-secondary levels in the U.S. has increased for the 14th consecutive year. Factors such as tuition rates, economy, and declining enrollments have not curbed online programs (Palvia et al., 2018). According to Popovich and Neel (2005), online programs may increase university enrollment, improve profits, reduce costs, eliminate over-crowding, and tap into professors across the country. However, with all of the positive opportunities and outcomes, there are significant hurdles that online learning must overcome. One of these barriers is the preparedness

of secondary students as they enroll in post-secondary institutions and are required to take an online class for the first time. According to Dron and Anderson (2016), future online learning programs will be focused primarily on the individual learner through the implementation of adaptive pathways, social networks, and personalized assessment. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of traditional public high school students while taking their first online course in college. Although online education has been widely discussed in literature, there are limited studies related specifically to students who graduate from a traditional public high but did not have the opportunity to enroll and gain experience in an online learning community. Since the field of online education is continually evolving, it is vital for school leaders at every level to understand the experience of students in these environments.

# CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

## Overview

According to Saiger (2016), online course offerings in colleges and universities have dramatically increased in recent years. In addition, researchers note many charter schools and private virtual academies have also been at the forefront of online learning at the secondary level. However, Schorr and McGriff (2011) noted that traditional public high schools have been left behind in providing online learning opportunities. As a result, students who graduate from a traditional public high school may feel unprepared to use online platforms, may lack social skills in the online environment, and may not perform as well as students who have previous experience in self-directed courses.

In Chapter Three of this study, the methodology is presented for this transcendental phenomenological study of traditional high school graduates' experiences while taking their first online course in college. This chapter also explains the rationale for the research design and includes a description of the participants and acknowledgement of the researcher-participant relationship. The chapter concludes with descriptions of the data that was collected and the methods that were used for analysis. Finally, the chapter addresses the steps that were taken to ensure trustworthiness as well as ethical concerns.

## Design

This study employed a qualitative design that used a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the experience of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course in college. According to Patton (2015), phenomenology aims to describe a lived experience, rather than quantify or explain the experience. In phenomenological studies, data are gathered through a process of in-depth interviews to gain a deep understanding of the individual

and shared meanings of the phenomenon. Phenomenology in the present study documented the lived experience from the perspective of the participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), transcendental phenomenological research seeks to discover how individuals construct meaning from the human experience and serve as a guiding influence in the development of this dissertation. Tenets of phenomenology were intertwined throughout my research design to ensure appropriate representation of the lived experiences of those being investigated. Demonstrating the essence of the respondents' perspectives improves accuracy in representing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

The qualitative research methods used for this study are described further below. They included purposive sampling, open-ended interviewing, and systematic and concurrent data collection and data analysis procedures. Considering the various qualitative approaches, phenomenology is designed specifically to study lived experiences of phenomena from the perspective of those who experience them (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). A phenomenological design was the most suitable for this study because it provided a clear process for setting aside the preconceptions about the phenomenon of traditional high school graduates experiences while taking their first online course in college. In addition, Patton (2015) discussed the two key components of a heuristic inquiry. The first requires a researcher to be experienced and interested in the phenomenon. The second requires that others associated with the study share an intensity of experience with the phenomenon.

This study aimed to understand the actual experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking an online course for the first time. The phenomenon may uniquely impact the experience of each individual participant and can provide beneficial information and understanding of the perceptions traditional high school graduates have while taking an online

course for the first time. By examining the lived experiences along with past traditional educational experiences, fundamental meaning may be garnered. According to van Manen (1990), many scholars have discussed the various ways in which phenomenological reflection may be understood. Lived experiences should not be analyzed as they happen; instead, van Manen (1990) suggested examining an individual's experiences using reflective practices to gain a deep understanding of the meaning or significance.

Although transcendental phenomenological methods were used to guide my research study, a case study design was explored as an alternative approach. According to Yin (2014), a case study examines a phenomenon within its real-world context. Case study research uses multiple sources of evidence and offers numerous methods of data collection and analytical techniques. Case studies are most often applied when the research addresses descriptive or explanatory questions to determine what happened, how, and why. Like phenomenology, case studies establish a research problem and develop techniques to collect and analyze data. However, unlike phenomenology, a case study serves as an investigation to create a deep understanding and in-depth description of an issue in a bounded system, using the case as the basis for understanding (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My study was not focused on the description and analysis of an issue, but rather examined traditional high school graduates' experiences while taking their first online course in college. The focus on the participants' lived experiences and not the understanding of a real-world case made a transcendental phenomenological approach more appropriate to my study.

In addition, Yin (2014) and Stake (1995) suggested that data collection methods for a case study include observations of the phenomenon within the everyday environment. Stake (1995) further asserted that case study data analysis encapsulates the impressions of the

researcher through observations. Contrary to case studies, transcendental methods rely upon interviews to serve as the main data collection in order to provide me, as the researcher, a firm understanding of the essence of the lived experience (Moustakas 1994). To support the transcendental phenomenological approach, the research questions of this study were crafted to provide textural descriptions of students taking an online course for the first time and the subsequent structural descriptions outline the students' experience of the phenomenon. The central research question of this study established structures of meaning so I, as the researcher, firmly document the way in which the participants understand the world.

Finally, the limitations and shortcomings of the case study approach were a determining factor in the decision to employ a transcendental approach, as opposed to a case study. Case studies are highly criticized in the realm of social science research and, according to Yin (2014), case studies have often been considered to lack rigor and provide little basis for generalization. Furthermore, Yazan (2015) explained that many methodologists cite that lack of consistency on the design and implementation of case studies. As a novice researcher, the transcendental phenomenological approach provides clear procedural steps and methods to conduct a study. In addition, I hope results from my study can be used to drive future research in the area of online learning. Online learning has grown exponentially over the past few years, and it has reshaped the educational landscape from higher education to K–12 public schools. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), research conducted using a case study approach lacks the ability to be replicated, which I feel is vital to the growth and analysis of online education.

## Research Questions

This study of the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates who took an online course for the first time in college was guided by one central research question and

four research sub-questions. The central research question was used to establish the description of the participants' shared lived experiences and the perceptions regarding learning in the online environment for the first time. The central research question was answered more specifically through the four research sub-questions.

**Central Research Question**

What are the lived experiences of undergraduate university students, who graduated from a traditional public high school, in taking an online course for the first time in college?

**Sub-questions**

**SQ1:** What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding their familiarization with the learning environment in an online undergraduate college course?

**SQ2:** What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the interactions with their classmates and instructor during their online educational experience?

**SQ3:** What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the challenges of learning in an online environment?

**SQ4:** What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the benefits of learning in an online environment?

## Setting

The setting for this study was Montgomery State University (MSU - pseudonym). Montgomery State University is a large public research university located in the Upper Montgomery section of Montgomery, New Jersey. MSU has a diversity student and faculty population at the undergraduate course levels. The university draws a significant number of out-of-state students in addition to the in-state student population, and it is known for a strong online degree program. MSU provides one of the largest offerings for online courses within

postsecondary institutions in the United States. Moreover, the University offers several online bachelor's degree programs.

According to its most recent published data, MSU has over 110,000 students enrolled in online and residential programs, and 30,000 are active military. Approximately 42% of the total enrollment are male and approximately 58% are female. The university holds regional accreditation and the School of Education is accredited under the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). MSU has a well-established structure with deans who oversee individual colleges within the university structure. The colleges and schools organize and conduct academic programs within their units (Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral and Certificate Programs), and work cooperatively to offer interdisciplinary programs. MSU was selected for this study based on the diversity of online courses offered to students during the first year of enrollment, and a large number of students enrolled at the university attended a traditional high school.

## Participants

Creswell and Poth (2018) explained that the number of participants used in phenomenological studies should stay within ranges of three to four or 10 to 15 participants. For this study I targeted 12 to 15 participants, with 10 as the minimum limit. Ultimately, 11 participants who experienced the phenomenon were selected to be part of the study. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) and Patton (2015) discussed the rationale for purposeful sampling and indicated that participants be selected who best align with the goals of the research. In addition, Creswell and Poth (2018) described that phenomenological studies often utilize sampling strategies that require a narrow focus, which is accomplished through criterion sampling. Therefore, a criterion-based, purposive sampling method was utilized. All student participants were selected

based on their fit within a set criterion. A screening questionnaire was used to capture demographic data and academic standing. Participants were undergraduate students who were 18 or older and currently enrolled in an online course at the university during the time of the study. The undergraduate student population at MSU is 40% White, 29% Hispanic or Latino, 13% Black or African American, 6% Asian, 3% Two or More Races, 0.233% and 9% Other. In addition, females make up 61% of the student body and 39% are male. Therefore, selection criteria for participants focused on a diverse population and were not limited by race or gender. An effort was made to solicit a representative sample of the student body to participate in my research study. Finally, the participants were graduates of a traditional high school from various geographic locations who were taking an online course for the first time.

## Procedures

After a successful proposal defense, my first step was to obtain Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A). Upon being granted IRB approval for the study from Liberty University, I obtained permission from the research site to solicit volunteers from a sample of students who met the criteria outlined in the previous section (see Appendix B). The identification and selection of participants was done by gathering information from the research site. In order to identify and select participants, I compiled a list of online courses that are taught to first- or second-year students at the institution. I then contacted the Institutional Review Board of the university to grant access to the instructors of these courses to inform them about my research and ask for assistance in identifying potential students who may wish to participate (see Appendix C). Additional efforts to recruit participants was also done through the School of Education at the university. Permission to use students from the School of Education was obtained, after successful completion and review of the Qualtrics approval form.

Once identified, the participants were sent a consent form via email that explained the purpose, procedure, timeline, and all other aspects of the study (see Appendix D). In total, 11 students were selected to participate in this study. The participants' names, email addresses, and cell phone numbers were collected in order to conduct a brief pre-interview screening. The phenomenological research methods illustrate that data should be collected from multiple participants and then streamlined into themes or patterns (Moustakas, 1994). To collect this data, researchers must undertake in-depth interviews with subjects who have directly experienced the phenomenon, as opposed to second-hand accounts (Patton, 2015).

Additional email correspondence within the last two weeks of the semester or online course term established protocols and instructions on how to complete a one-on-one interview (see Appendix E). At the end of the semester, another email was sent asking four or five participants to attend a virtual focus group interview, which allowed them to discuss their perceptions and experiences in an informal setting (see Appendix F). The interviews and focus group session were digitally recorded and transcribed for further analysis. Participants were also asked to provide any relevant documentation, such as private memos or journal entries. In order to gain deeper insight into the phenomenon, participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences using a written narrative prompt toward the conclusion of the study. I analyzed the interview, focus group recordings, and narrative reflection to reveal common themes or trends. According to Moustakas (1994), coding for emergent themes or clusters is vital to categorizing the core themes of the experience. Finally, memoing and journaling was done to take notes as a complete observer. The findings are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four.

## The Researcher's Role

As the researcher in this study, I served as the sole instrument of data collection and analysis to uncover the emerging concepts and patterns. Therefore, I acknowledged that my personal and work background could influence the interpretation of data. During my career as an educator I have observed and lived through the impact technology has had on teaching and learning. As a result, I feel the traditional high school student has been left behind in the online learning platform due to political, legislative, and state education association efforts. I do believe brick-and-mortar schools should make up the fabric of the public education system, but technology and the quality of online education have made dramatic advances that can benefit all public-school students. Through my coursework at Liberty University Online I have become intimately acquainted with the online learning environment and understand many of the differences between an online class and a traditional face-to-face class. However, I worked diligently to ensure that my own experiences and perceptions toward online learning did not impact the study or analysis of data.

The research for this study took place at a university in the Northeast at which I am a doctoral student. The selection of the site was based on several factors. Location was a priority because it eased access to the participants. In addition, a university that offers a broad range of online courses for undergraduate students was necessary in order to provide an appropriate sample size. The selected research site offers a broad range of online courses and programs to all students. Finally, I believe that the chosen site provided information and data that best informed me, as the researcher, about the research problem and phenomenon investigated in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confidentiality was a concern because of my connection to the site.

As a result of my connection, I exhibited great care to ensure transparency and confidentiality throughout the research study.

## Data Collection

Data collected for this study included a screening questionnaire, semi-structured individual interviews, a single focus group interview, and reflective participant journals. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted using a virtual conferencing platform. The virtual conferencing platform captured video and audio recordings of the interviews. These recordings were then transcribed using transcription software. I stored all data on a password-protected laptop and backup files were stored on a portable flash drive.

### Screening Questionnaire

Prior to the individual interviews, participants were screened using a questionnaire. IRB guidelines were followed to protect the privacy of the participants and the confidentiality of information collected about them. Screening questions were designed to provide me, as the researcher, with background information about each participant. Data collected from the pre-interview was only reported for descriptive purposes, and participants were advised that they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to answer (see Appendix G).

Program of Study / Major:

1. What year are you currently in?

a. Freshman

b. Sophomore

2. How many credits have you earned so far?

a. 0-15 credits

b. 16-30 credits

c. 31-45 credits

d. 46-60 credits

e. greater than 60 credits

3. What is your current GPA?

a. 3.5 or above

b. 3.0 - 3.49

c. 2.5 - 2.99

d. 2.0 - 2.49

e. Below 2.0

4. How many online courses have you completed?

5. In how many online courses are you currently enrolled?

6. Do you attend full-time or part-time?

7. Gender: Female Male Neutral

8. Race/ethnicity:

a. American Indian / Alaska Native

b. Asian

c. Black or African American

d. Hispanic

e. Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander

f. White

g. Two or more races

h. Prefer not to respond / Unknown

**Individual Interviews**

Individual interviews served as the primary method of data collection. The interview process allowed data to be gathered directly from the participants in a one-on-one setting. The purpose of a research interview is to collect information from an individual who has lived through the phenomenon being studied. Data garnered from the interview process helps me, as the researcher, interpret and establish meaning from the descriptions provided (Kvale, 1983, p. 4). Each participant was asked the same interview questions, in the same order, and using the same probes. Additionally, Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) introduced a semi-structured interview process in which the first question asked for a description of a situation in which the participant remembered something emotional from early childhood.

For this study, I gathered data using semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, which resulted in the acquisition of information about how the participants perceived the learning environment while enrolled in an online course for the first time in college. Patton (2015) explained that questions related to age, gender, education, and other standard background questions identify important characteristics of the person being interviewed. According to Patton (2015) responses to interview questions provides data that allows me, as the researcher, to compare research participants. Additional information was collected on how they believe they could become better acclimated and therefore more academically successful in the future (see Appendix H). The interviews provided an opportunity to gather verbal feedback through direct interaction with the participants. The use of semi-structured interviews offers flexibility and the ability to garner the most in-depth responses (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2010). The following questions were used for the individual interviews.

1. Describe how and why you decided to take an online course.
2. Before enrolling, what aspects of an online course were you excited or worried about?

3. Before enrolling, what aspects of an online course did you think would be beneficial or detrimental to your overall learning? (If so, what?)
4. Describe your experience taking your online class(es). (SQ1)
5. Describe your experience with the online technologies that you utilized. (SQ1)
6. What are your perceptions about the interaction with your classmates and instructor while enrolled in your online course? (SQ2)
7. How would you compare your online course(s) to your traditional face-to-face course(s)? (SQ2)
8. What difficulties (if any) did you experience in your online course? (SQ3)
9. How do you perceive your unfamiliarity impacted your experiences with your online course? (If yes, then how?). (SQ3)
10. Describe how well you were prepared for your online class. (SQ3)
11. Describe any benefits you experienced by taking an online course?(SQ4)
12. What are your overall perceptions and/or feelings about taking an online for the first time in college? (CRQ)
13. What else about online coursework would you like to add?

The semi-structured interview questions were formatted in a style Patton (2015) termed *the standardized open-ended interview process*. Question one provided me, as the researcher, with key information about how the participant was enrolled in their first online course. Saiger (2016) reported that advances in technology have expanded the delivery format for many colleges and universities. Many universities have attracted more students to online or blended courses because they can reach more students (Palvia et al., 2018).

Questions two and three were used to illuminate the experience while taking the online class and how it has compared to coursework they have taken in the traditional format. These questions were designed to build upon current literature by developing an understanding of their experiences while enrolled in an online course. Participants' shared experiences also may be used to conceive new teaching and learning strategies to promote student success (Oliver, 2014).

Interview questions four and five were used to collect feedback pertaining to the experiences the participants had with the technology or applications while taking the online course. Zimmerman and Kulikowich (2016) noted that familiarity and perceived skillsets are determining factors that impact whether or not a student enrolls in an online course. Hedges (2017) also discussed how technology and the delivery options of online courses may create anxiety, which negatively affects course performance.

Questions six and seven helped inform concerns related to the quality of the interactions in online coursework. Ragusa and Crampton (2017) discussed the role of technology in higher education and the ability to serve students with quality programs. Their research indicated there are ongoing debates regarding what defines a quality higher education experience. Many of the early concerns about distance education noted social isolation, lack of meaningful interaction, and poor communication in comparison to the traditional face-face delivery format (Ragusa and Crampton, 2017, p. 1210).

Question eight explored the challenges and difficulties faced by the participants when enrolled in the online course. Several studies have been highlighted by researchers regarding the use and success of e-learning in higher education. Islam, Beer, and Slack (2015) outlined five different areas online learning communities face in the current climate: learning styles and culture, pedagogical e-learning, technology, technical training, and time management challenges.

Questions nine and ten delved into the feeling of preparedness and familiarity students experience while enrolled in an online course. According to Berry (2018), students who venture into online learning courses have many similar concerns as they would in a face-to-face classroom. However, the unknown aspects of the e-learning environment, virtual communication, and use of new technology creates added concerns. Additionally, other factors may also influence the online learning experience, such as students' demographics, prior experience, and sense of preparedness, all of which may contribute to online students' anxiety levels, confidence and motivation (Abdous, 2019).

Question 11 examined the perceived benefits of taking an online course in college. The online class experience can be very different from the traditional classroom environment. Over the past decade there has been extraordinary growth in online learning, resulting in a great alternative to face-to-face classes. Current research indicates there are some enormous advantages to online classes. The two most prevalent explanations involve cost and convenience. (McPherson and Bacow, 2015). Furthermore, social technologies and applications have evolved tremendously and can also be used to support teaching and learning in various areas of higher education (Hamid, Waycott, Kurnia, & Chang, 2015).

Question twelve explored the overall perceptions students have about the online learning experience. Each individual had a unique experience and therefore walked away from the course with unique feelings about taking an online course for the first time. Brown, Hughes, Keppell, Hard, and Smith (2015) explored the experiences of first-time online learners through a collection of stories. The goal of the research was to document, in the student's own words, what truly happens to students once they are immersed into the online learning environment.

These stories have contributed to the improvement of learning support services and resources available to students enrolled in an online course for the first time.

The final interview question required students to describe their perceptions as first-time online learners. This question was designed for students to state an opinion. Patton (2015) explained that opinion and values questions allow participants to state what they think about an experience.

**Focus Group Interview**

Palmer, Larkin, de Visser, and Fadden (2010) described means by which individual lived experiences can be preserved within a group context. The authors stated that focus groups are congruent with phenomenological research, and they extend this argument further by proposing that group interviews in phenomenology are actually beneficial, because they stimulate discussion and open up new perspectives. According to Patton (2015), focus groups may provide valuable data from multiple perspectives that can be used to establish clear patterns and themes. Additionally, data garnered through the focus group interview assisted in the triangulation of data during analysis. Select participants attended the focus group interview at the conclusion of the interview process (See Appendix I). Questions that were asked in the focus group session were aligned to and addressed all four research questions. The following is a list of the focus group interview questions.

1. Talk about your experience while taking your first online course. How did most teaching and learning take place? What were your feelings toward online classes at that point in time? (SQ1)

2. Recall the time before you had to take your first online course. What things did you consider before taking the course? What course did you take? Tell me about your expectations of the course.
3. What factors or challenges would prevent you from taking an online class again while enrolled in college? (SQ3)
4. How would you describe the benefits of taking an online course as compared to a traditional face-to-face course? Were there any skills or personal characteristics that you feel made you successful? (SQ4)
5. How do you feel your coursework in high school challenged you to succeed in an online course? (SQ2)
6. Suppose you had to take an online course in high school as a graduation requirement. Tell me how you think that would have impacted your experience of taking your first online class? (CRQ)

The first question in the focus group discussion was designed to invoke feelings or an emotional response. Patton (2015) described that these types of questions tap the affective dimension of a lived experience. Responses may be related to specific feelings, such as anxiety, nervousness, or confidence.

Question two for the focus group provided crucial information, as the participants' experiences have the potential to inform post-secondary instructions of the thought process students go through in their course selection. Nguyen (2015) cited multiple factors that impact the learning outcomes students favor in the online format. These outcomes range from increased test scores, greater student engagement with content, and a stronger sense of community among students. When students go through the application process in high school and finally get

admitted into college, it does not necessarily mean they are prepared for college. Many first-year students are not ready or prepared to learn or excel academically (Tinto, 2006).

Questions three and four were based on the assumption that students provide the most valid reasoning and illustrative anecdotes for explaining their academic choices, confronting challenges, and finding ways to persist in any course delivery format. The final focus group question asked students to recall and think about their high school experience and preparedness for college courses—specifically, an online course. Abdous (2019) discussed how students may initially feel nervous and apprehensive about transitioning from face-to-face classes to an online learning environment. The unfamiliar learning environment was a change to their typical educational experience, and data gathered from this question provided significant insight into the thoughts of students with no online course experience.

**Reflective Journals**

Creswell (2018) suggested that researchers be innovative in their approach to designing qualitative research projects that use new and exciting methods of data collection. The use of a written reflective narrative provided an opportunity to gain insight into the journey of a student while taking an online course for the first time. In order to hear the voices of the students, they were given the chance to express their thoughts through the use of images and text. Patton (2015) discussed that narrative data can be gathered using several different methods such as interviews, observation, diaries, visuals, and written documents. In addition, the narrative approach should tell a story with a beginning, middle, and ending. For this study, participants were asked to a create personal story using an image, picture, or meme that most closely represents the participants' experiences in their first online course.

Participants were asked to find one image, picture, or meme for each phase of the

experience: before starting, at the midpoint, and at the end of the class. For each visual selected, participants were asked to write a brief synopsis explaining why they felt the image, picture, or meme was the best reflection of their experiences and/or feelings during each stage of the online course. The visuals selected by the participants were considered outside of the project's context, which aligns with Polkinghorne's (1989) suggestion to gather data from depictions of the experience. This type of personal documentation may provide the participants with a fun way to tell about their online course journey and illuminate many things that cannot be observed (Patton, 2015). These narrative prompts were administered electronically toward the end of the online course (see Appendix J). In the last week of the course, the narrative reflective prompt, which contains specific instructions to complete the task, was emailed to each participant. Participants were required to use the internet to find and download the visual representation in an image format (JPEG, GIF, PNG). The participants were instructed to paste the image into the narrative prompt document and complete the written prompt. Once completed, the participants emailed the document back to me as part of the data collection process.

## Data Analysis

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), there are three analysis strategies in qualitative research. Each of the qualitative research strategies involves a variation of organizing data, utilizing a process of coding for emerging themes and, finally, representing data in figures and/or tables. For this study data from the individual interviews and focus group interview were transcribed using software obtained from the Otter.ai transcription service. The participants then member checked the transcripts to confirm accuracy. Moustakas (1994) explained that phenomenological data analysis procedures should begin with bracketing or the epoche. After bracketing, data goes through the phenomenological reduction process. Following the reduction

process, data may then be coded and clustered into themes. The present study on the perceptions of online learning incorporated the data analysis procedures of both theorists.

In the first step of data analysis, Moustakas (1994) emphasized the epoche. The epoche process is utilized so the researcher can put aside his or her own ideas about the phenomenon in order to ensure that no position whatsoever is taken; every quality has equal value (Moustakas, 1994). This process is accomplished through the use of bracketing. Bracketing for the present study was accomplished through my ability to differentiate my knowledge about online learning from what the data presents in regard to online learning. According to Moustakas (1994), the focus of the study is put inside brackets, which ensured the research process had clear and unbiased data. Epoche also required me to eliminate any preconceived ideas about online coursework, the participants, and any other information relevant to this study.

Following epoche, the phenomenological reduction process of horizonalization was used to analyze each type and piece of data collected (Moustakas, 1994). Horizonalization is the process in which interview transcriptions, focus group transcriptions, and narratives are read repetitively in order to lift out key statements that directly relate to the phenomenon being studied (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), repetition allows the researcher to approach and perceive data with a fresh outlook each time it is reviewed. Through this process, textural qualities emerge that can be identified and coded. For the present study, horizonalization was completed by assigning equal value to pieces of data related to perceptions of online learning. These values were arranged and analyzed to provide preliminary information about the perceptions, understandings, and feelings of those students who have actually experienced taking an online for the first time.

The third step of data analysis was to establish themes. Moustakas (1994) stated that

themes or clusters can be categorized to form core themes of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). By clustering the horizons, the researcher identifies common themes or essences to provide relevant meaning to the structure of the experiences. This process allowed me, as the researcher, to understand a specific experience through the lens of those who had experienced learning in the online environment for the first time. Creswell and Poth (2018) also discussed that emergent themes can then be discussed with respect to the research questions supporting this study and referenced by their similarity or dissimilarity to the reported literature. This process provided the textural description of the online students' experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

The final step of the data analysis process was to integrate the structural and textural themes together. NVivo software was used to analyze data and identify codes and themes. According to Creswell (2018), structural descriptions provide details and insights into how the experience happened for the participants. Moustakas (1994) explained that in order to obtain a complete description of the phenomenon, both textural and structural themes must be integrated together. For the present study, the formulation of textural and structural descriptions guided me in understanding the essence of traditional public high school graduates' experiences while taking their first online course in college. Once established, the essence of the phenomenon may improve the transferability of the findings to similar situations.

## Trustworthiness

The concepts of validity and reliability are not commonly used in the field of qualitative research. Therefore, in order to increase the trustworthiness of the study's findings, I implemented strategies suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) illustrated that the quality of a research study may be confirmed by establishing credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Additionally, Creswell and Poth (2018) cited

that trustworthiness could be established through the triangulation of data. This study collected information from multiple sources, using various methods to maintain the trustworthiness of the data.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. Credibility depends on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In addition to triangulation, member checks were utilized in this study. Member checking is a technique for exploring the credibility of results in qualitative research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) explained that member checks may be used as a quality control process to enhance the accuracy of what has been recorded or documented during a research interview. For this study, member checks were completed post-interview and post-analysis to further establish credibility.

Peer review was also used to provide credibility to the research process. A peer review, or debriefing, is where a peer provides an external check of the research process (Creswell and Miller, 2000). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), honest and accurate interpretations of the participants' experiences are vital to credibility. The job of the peer reviewer is to analyze and question the researcher to ensure research processes are followed. By seeking out the assistance of peers, I added credibility to the present study.

**Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability and confirmability are validity checks that enabled me, as the researcher, to demonstrate that the findings were consistent (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the present study, dependability and confirmability were attained through developing rich, thick descriptions of the findings (Creswell, 2013). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described that dependability includes the

aspect of consistency. Dependability involves the ability to trace the researcher's decisions and the process utilized to obtain the findings, ensuring that they are consistent. Bitsch (2005) described how dependability relies upon the stability and/or consistency of the findings over time. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2011), participants who are responsible for evaluating and interpreting research findings must make sure any analysis or interpretation is supported by the data garnered from the participants of the study. To ensure a high measure of dependability for this study, I employed sound research methods and data analysis techniques described by Moustakas (1994).

Confirmability required that appropriate steps be taken to demonstrate that the findings emerged from the research data rather than from any predispositions I brought into the study (Shenton, 2004). Through the epoche process described by Moustakas (1994), the confirmability of my study remained free of bias. The use of reflexivity strengthened the trustworthiness of the study through bracketing (Guba, 1981). According to Shenton (2004), reflective commentary via memoing and journaling may reduce any predispositions or assumptions about the phenomenon being studied (Shenton, 2004).

**Transferability**

Throughout this study, descriptive data about the phenomenon being examined were collected and meticulously documented. Transferability was achieved by using rich, thick, descriptions in order to document the participants' experiences about taking an online course for the first time (Creswell, 2013). Once transferability was established, the study's findings about online learning experiences could be applicable to other contexts, situations, times, and populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This may allow other researchers to compare this study in similar contexts in order to contribute to the understanding of the phenomenon examined (Guba,

1981). Furthermore, Shenton (2004) asserted that in order to truly examine the value and impact of the findings, similar projects should be conducted in different environments.

## Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues are an important aspect for researchers to consider as they conduct their study. Well-planned studies anticipate potential problems that might arise and have measures in place to address unexpected issues. According to Nichols (2016), the federal government must require institutions to analyze the risks and benefits of the human subjects that participate in research studies. The potential risks or benefits must be disclosed, acknowledged, and documented through the use of an informed consent. To safeguard all stakeholders, I obtained IRB approval to reduce risks, protect participants, and maintain confidentiality. This study examined the perceptions of preparedness of university students who graduated from a traditional high school, which may reflect poorly upon the public schools that prepared these students and the quality of the university students. Therefore, I felt it was important to utilize pseudonyms and employ other measures to maintain anonymity. Data collection for this study—including consents, interview recordings and transcripts, and analyzed data—was kept secure and confidential. Every effort was made to protect the participants' identity in any published reports. All data collected for this study will be deleted three years after the completion of my doctoral program.

## Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first ever online course at a university in the Northeast. Chapter Three of this study described the methods and procedures that were used to investigate traditional high school graduates' experiences after taking their first

online course during their first year of college. This study was based on the e-learning theory and used phenomenological methodologies such as: purposive sampling, open-ended interviewing, systematic data collection and analysis in order to understand the lived experiences of the participants. The significance of e-learning to the study was aligned to the belief that the Internet and access to digital content changes the essential nature of knowledge. Data sources included a screening questionnaire, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and reflective journals. Data analysis for this study was conducted using procedures advanced by Moustakas (1994) and began with bracketing, followed by the reduction process, and then they were finally coded and clustered into themes. A phenomenological approach was implemented, and as the researcher, I served as the primary research instrument. What the researcher brought to the investigation from his/her own background and identity was completely addressed in the role of the researcher. In addition, trustworthiness and ethical considerations were outlined. Finally, the goal of this study was to examine and understand the lived experiences of traditional high school graduates as first-time online learners. Data collected and analyzed may help shape online learning programs and courses for the traditional high school graduate once enrolled in their first online course in college. The results of the data analysis are presented in Chapter Four.

# CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

## Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course at a university in the Northeast. The focus of Chapter Four is to provide a description of each participant in the study, report the results of the data collection, and explain how the data were analyzed to establish themes of the phenomenon. The data for the study were obtained using individual interviews, a single focus group interview, and a narrative reflective journal activity. In the participant section, pseudonyms were used to label each participant, and a subsequent interview summary presented to briefly describe the participant. The results revealed the shared lived experiences of the participants and provided a deeper understanding of the perceptions of traditional high school graduates taking their first online course. Through the research process, data were analyzed, coded, and organized into clusters to establish themes. The themes were centered around and aligned with the research questions for the study.

## Participants

This study examined the shared lived experiences of 11 participants while taking their first online course at a university in the Northeast. Each participant was a graduate of a traditional high school who had enrolled in an online course for the first time. Data were collected from a screening questionnaire, individual interviews, a single focus group interview, and a narrative reflective journal, which explored the perceptions, understandings, and feelings of those participants who had experienced taking an online course for the first time. Inclusion criteria were established to ensure participants possessed the knowledge and experience needed to best align with the goals of the research.

A brief description of each participant was provided, along with a summary of information gathered from the interviews, reflective journal, and the focus group. The summary illuminated the perceptions and feelings of taking an online course for the first time in college. Additionally, the summary provided an accurate account of the lived experience using rich, thick descriptions of the phenomenon. Quotes from the interviews were cited to provide me, as the researcher, with a deeper understanding about the experiences of each participant.

The following participant descriptions provided information garnered from the screening questionnaire, individual interviews, and the focus group interview. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy and ensure the confidentiality of the participants. Participants were freshmen and sophomores. Each identified as Caucasian, and each was enrolled in at least one online course (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

| Name | Gender | Ethnicity | Number of online courses enrolled | Focus group participant |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Alana | Female | Caucasian | 2 | No |
| Anton | Male | Caucasian | 1 | Yes |
| Charles | Male | Caucasian | 1 | No |
| Eileen | Female | Caucasian | 2+ | Yes |
| Isabel | Female | Caucasian | 1 | Yes |
| Jen | Female | Caucasian | 2+ | Yes |
| Paul | Male | Caucasian | 2+ | No |
| Ryleigh | Female | Caucasian | 2+ | No |
| Sara | Female | Caucasian | 2+ | Yes |
| Sydney | Female | Caucasian | 2+ | Yes |
| Tracey | Female | Caucasian | 2+ | Yes |

**Alana**

Alana was a sophomore and attended school on a full-time basis. At the time of the study, Alana was enrolled in two online summer courses earning grades in the range of 3.5 and above. Alana was excited to enroll in an online course, because she thought "it would be easier, and I could do it on my own time and own pace." However, she expressed that she was nervous about understanding the content while working on her own. Alana described herself as a visual learner and was used to the way professors explained things in a traditional class. Alana discussed how her initial thoughts about online coursework being "easy" quickly changed once she started the course. She stated, "It's definitely harder to juggle than just going into a class for me, versus doing it online." She felt that the lack of face-to-face interaction made learning more difficult. Throughout the online course, Alana said she felt "stressed" and not well prepared.

**Anton**

Anton was a freshman and attended school on a part-time basis. At the time of the study, Anton was enrolled in one online course earning grades in the range of 3.0 to 3.49. He was working while attending school and was looking for flexibility in a school program. According to Anton, he did not initially think that online coursework would be a good fit for his learning style. He described himself as a "hands-on learner" and in second grade, he was diagnosed with ADD/ADHD. At that time, he exhibited behavior problems and a lack of focus and organization in school. He expressed concerns about not being physically present in a classroom and in front of a professor. However, he decided to enroll in an online course on the advice of a friend. He stated, "I wasn't sure about online, in the beginning, but I talked to a friend of mine who was doing online. He said, you know, it's pretty good in terms of being flexible." Anton described his online experience as very positive and said that he learned a great deal. He did make

adjustments after some initial difficulties. Anton stated, “I think that I realized to [sic] kind of, what was important and what wasn't. Sometimes it was good to look at a four-minute presentation, if I didn't have time to read all 30 pages in a chapter.” Anton especially enjoyed the interaction and the diverse make-up of students in his online course. According to Anton, “It was cool to kind of see people doing different things in their life and being at different points.”

**Charles**

At the time of the study, Charles was a sophomore who attended school on a full-time basis. Charles was enrolled in one online course during the summer session earning grades in the range of 3.0 to 3.49. He had recently switched to an online program because of the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated, “I felt like I should enroll in an online course because of everything happening with the pandemic and the uncertainty (of school).” Charles described himself as a person who did not need to be in a classroom to learn, and he felt that his needs would be met by having a course that “in some ways it is self-paced and there is a syllabus that that tells me what I need to do.” Charles was very task oriented. He mentioned the syllabus several times during the interview and how it guided him through the course modules. Although the structure of the online course benefitted Charles, he did not like the interactions with his classmates and professor. He described the class interactions as follows: “It just feels more fake than usual; sometimes in a regular class you feel like you’re not getting the real person, and it kind of feels even more that way when you're doing on the computer.” A major adjustment for Charles in the online course was the manner in which discussions took place using the discussion boards. He was apprehensive of fully engaging in the posts and revealed, “The part I am the most unfamiliar with was responding to people in writing and then not wanting to offend or write something wrong. It’s easy for people to read tone into text messages and emails.” However, aside from

his dissatisfaction of interactions in the course, Charles felt that he had a good experience and was excited to continue his online coursework.

**Eileen**

Eileen was a sophomore attending school on a full-time basis. At the time of the study, Eileen was enrolled in more than two online courses earning grades in the range of 3.5 and above. When asked why she decided to take an online course, she mentioned that a friend recommend that she try online coursework. Eileen was very upbeat and positive while discussing the benefits of online coursework. She felt it greatly fit her lifestyle and the way she learned. She is very driven and has always been successful in school, and the online class met her expectations. She stated:

> It definitely is more of what I expected from college, having to be self-sufficient because there's nobody telling you like, Oh, you should really do this assignment now or oh you should read over these notes or like look at the textbook, you have to figure it out for yourself for the most part.

She benefitted from having access to videos, PowerPoint presentations, and other course materials at her fingertips. However, Eileen quickly explained that while online coursework provides freedom and flexibility, it also requires a great amount of self-sufficiency and discipline. Eileen had to adjust how she communicated with her professor in the online course and in the early stages of the course, she felt disconnected. She stated:

> I definitely think I was more hesitant to try to reach out to the instructor, because I didn't know them, I didn't get a feel for their personality or anything. So, it's obviously online and your, your contact with them is limited.

**Isabel**

At the time of the study, Isabel was a sophomore attending school on a full-time basis. Isabel was enrolled in one online course during the summer session earning grades in the range of 3.0 to 3.49. Isabel had concerns and reservations about online coursework before enrolling. She stated, "I was definitely worried about the workload, and then if there was going to be too much due on one day or week." Additionally, taking courses from home presented some challenges for her overall approach to learning. In the early stages of the online course, she also had an adjustment period to the platform. It took her some time to figure things out, but eventually, she became familiarized with the course interphase. She described this by saying, "The first couple of weeks, it was just hard to figure out, and navigate my way through like all these different platforms."

Isabel also thought she spent more time completing her online coursework as opposed to work in a traditional class. The amount of material involved and having to complete it on her own was a challenge for her. When asked about the difficulties she experienced, she responded, "Definitely, it was getting through the material in a timely manner. I would take much longer to get through it, just because, I guess, I'm being thorough." Isabel does feel that she learns better in the traditional classroom but is looking forward to additional online coursework after this experience.

**Jen**

Jen was a sophomore attending school on a full-time basis. At the time of the study, Jen was enrolled in more than two online courses earning grades in the range of 3.5 and above. Prior to enrolling in an online course, Jen explained that she really did not know what to expect. She spoke to family and friends who had taken online courses and received mixed reviews. She

revealed, “So, before taking the online course, I had heard a bunch of things that it's really easy or it's really hard, and I really wasn't sure how it was going to play out for me.” Jen’s initial reservations were put aside because she was very intrigued by the flexibility that the online course provided. She stated, “I was excited about what my sister and friends told me–that it would allow me time to do other things that I needed to, including work.”

From the very beginning, Jen felt very confident and prepared to take her online course. She had a firm grasp on her learning style and on what would help her perform well in an online course. She stated:

> I felt prepared for my online class, because I've always been someone who has done well learning on my own on and being able to use resources on the internet to teach myself. And so, I felt prepared going into the online course, that if I had to do some of that or a lot of that, I would be okay.

**Paul**

Paul was a sophomore and attended school on a full-time basis. At the time of the study, Paul was enrolled in more than two online courses earning grades in the range of 2.0 to 2.49. Paul expressed that he gravitated to online coursework because he is “not a morning person,” and the flexibility of the online course schedule allowed him to sleep in. He stated, “I don't have to wake up early for class. That's a good benefit.” Paul also discussed how working at his own pace and within the structure of the online course improved his grades. He found it easy to follow along and complete the assignments and discussions in his online course. He described this process as follows: “So everything just lined up right there. So, it wasn't too hard and it's pretty easy once you get the hang of it.” However, Paul felt that he would not be as successful in taking courses like math and science online. He discussed how the content in those subject areas

was more difficult for him, and he said he would need the direct attention and assistance of his professor. He felt that the level of engagement of the professor in his online course would be a problem in more difficult courses. Regarding the interactions with his professor, he stated:

> It was just really like what I said, discussions, that was really the only interactions besides the professor saying like, Oh, this is due here and whatever. Other than that, just the discussions like on the topic of the week. That's really the only interactions I have had.

Finally, Paul discussed how a balance of online and traditional coursework would work best for him. Choosing which classes, he could take online and which he could take traditionally would be optimal. He stated, "If I could do one or two hours per semester online. Because that's like perfect."

**Ryleigh**

At the time of the study, Ryleigh was a sophomore attending school on a full-time basis. Ryleigh was enrolled in more than two online courses earning grades in the range of 3.0 to 3.49. Ryleigh recently returned to college after a long absence from her studies, because she took time off to start a family. Taking online courses allowed her to dedicate time to her children and work and, hopefully, to obtain a degree. Before taking an online course, Ryleigh was concerned about the workload and balancing her life with school. She had heard from other people that "Online courses have the reputation of being more work, so that kind of made me nervous." However, she described her experience and how she felt it fit her needs at this point in her life. She stated:

> For me it was a great idea, you know, I went to college in person when I was younger. When I was 20, I went to the university and I did it face-to-face at that time. I wasn't successful, because I was a spoiled brat who wasn't paying for it myself.

However, she did admit that she missed some of the traditional classroom dynamics in her online courses. Specifically, she missed the interaction with her classmates and the learning environment in a face-to-face setting. Ryleigh stated:

> You don't interact with your classmates, you do it, you do your discussion board, if you really go back and read what your classmates post. You're not required to. Therefore, maybe they reply to you, but you don't have to reply back to their reply, so you missed that piece.

Even though Ryleigh had been out of school for some time, she felt prepared for her online course because she took a tutorial offered by the school. She strongly believed that this tutorial should be mandated, because it made her feel comfortable before starting her online course. According to her, the tutorial "really set me up for success from the start, and I think that should be required of all students."

**Sara**

Sara decided to take online courses, because she admittedly did not fit into the traditional school setting. Sara stated, "After high school I went to a community college and didn't have a good experience. It seemed like I didn't belong there, and I wanted a change." At the time of the study, Sara was a sophomore attending school on a full-time basis. Sara was enrolled in more than two online courses earning grades in the range of 3.0 to 3.49. Sara described herself as a "procrastinator" with regard to her schoolwork, but in some ways, she feels that helps her. She stated:

> I am a severe procrastinator. Like today is Monday, I will get all of my assignments done by tonight at 11:15. So, that is my downfall to a tee. But at the same time, it helps me because it helps me stay on track with my assignments, and that's what's been a good

thing for me.

Sara explained that she worked a lot, and the time she needed to dedicate to her studies and work while in the traditional school setting was difficult for her. It also created anxiety and concerns for her overall mental health. Sara discussed how she felt free and less stressed while taking an online course. She liked how it provided time for her to work and see her family and friends more often.

**Sydney**

At the time of the study, Sydney was a freshman and attended school on a full-time basis. She was enrolled in more than two online courses earning grades in the range of 3.5 and above. Initially, Sydney was concerned about taking an online course because it was new, and she missed the face-to-face interaction that a traditional course affords. As the course progressed, she adjusted and found the platform quite similar to her traditional coursework. She stated, "I think I had pretty low expectations of how it would be going in. I found it better than I thought it would be." She also liked that the course and material could be accessed from her phone, as well as from her laptop. Accessing the course from her phone provided her with the flexibility to complete schoolwork at random times during the day, and all of the course content was posted for her to access. She stated that if she missed a class in the traditional setting, access to the class presentations was often difficult. In her online course, being able to view and read the presentations several times really helped her to understand the content better. Overall, Sydney had a good experience, and her online course performed up to her expectations. Sydney described her experience stating, "I found that I was able to do the class in a way that I was comfortable with and I thought that I was succeeding in."

**Tracey**

Tracey was a sophomore and attended school on a full-time basis. At the time of the study, Tracey was enrolled in more than two online courses earning grades in the range of 2.0 to 2.49. Tracey is outgoing and often likes to try new things in life. She decided to take online courses because she became frustrated with the inconsistency of the traditional face-to-face coursework and frequent cancellation of classes. Tracey stated:

> Okay, so I took an online course in college, because I just felt like, um, when I did it, like in person classes and stuff, I was always teaching myself how to do the material, and they would cancel classes a lot, so this way, like I was mostly getting my money's worth.

She liked the fact that the online course was flexible, and she perceived the professor to be more understanding. The structure of the online work was easy to follow for her and when she needed additional time or extensions, the professor was willing to "extend deadlines." While this was helpful, she admitted that part of the difficulty of the online class was staying disciplined. She discussed how it was easy to forget about the class, which would put her behind, and she would have to ask for the deadline extensions. She felt that taking an online course for the first time helped her to get to know herself a little better and to understand where she needed to focus her energy to improve.

## Results

The following section includes the results of this transcendental phenomenological study of the experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking an online course for the first time in college. Phenomenological data analysis was used to capture the lived experiences of participants in the online learning environment for the first time. Data were collected from a pre-screening questionnaire, individual interviews, a focus group, and a narrative reflection journal.

Methods of coding and reduction, according to Moustakas (1994), were applied to analyze data and establish themes. According to Saldana (2016), codes are terms or phrases that a researcher assigns to a piece of data, which capture the essence of meaning in a short descriptive manner.

Following Moustakas' (1994) coding, methods were used to establish subthemes prior to the development of the major themes. The major themes were the final step of the coding and data analysis process. The essential themes were the foundation for the descriptive and interpretive analysis of the lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking an online course for the first time in college.

Table 2: *Themes*

| **Major Themes** | **Subthemes** | **Codes** |
|---|---|---|
| Flexibility | | |
| | Balance of school and life | Fits better (28), work (26), beneficial (25), flexible (16), convenient (10), family (8), less stress (5) |
| | Time management | Own time (13), self-paced (11), anytime (4), deadlines (4), free to do other things (3) |
| | Learning environment | Phone (15), access (10), comfort of home (6), anywhere (3) |
| Disconnectedness | | |
| | Student-to-student interaction | Interaction with classmates (23), lack of dialogue and discussion (10), feeling isolated (3), class participation (3) |
| | Student-to-instructor interaction | Interaction with instructor (24), communication (7), discussion posts (6), engagement (3), supports (3) |
| Challenges of online coursework | | |
| | Difficulty adjusting | Unfamiliar (16), unsure (13), distractions (6), assignments (5), due dates (5), grades and assessments (3) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | No difficulty experienced | Easy (17), prepared (15), adjustment (11), performed well (8) |
| Learning preferences | | |
| | Comparison to traditional courses | Traditional vs. online (21), self-directed learning (9), friend influence (8), learning in new ways (7), not for everyone (5), high school (5), positive (4) |
| | Satisfaction | Feelings toward online (16) Satisfaction (10), advice (9), worried (8), doubts (3) |

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

The themes were fundamental to the experience and understanding of the entire phenomenological examination presented in this study. A discussion of the major themes, in a narrative format, are presented in the following subsections below.

**Major Theme One: Flexibility**

The first major theme that emerged from the data was the theme of flexibility. During the interview and data collection process, I asked the participants to discuss their perceptions of the benefits of taking an online course. The discussions centered around the overall flexibility offered by learning in the online environment. The "anytime, any pace, anywhere" access to the online course environment was viewed as a highly positive benefit, which created the freedom to schedule learning around work, family, and other lifestyle commitments. For example, Anton worked several nights a week and stated it was "difficult keeping up with classes." Therefore, "being able to do things later at night or off hours was really going to help." Sara explained that between work, family, and school, she often did not have time to do the things she enjoyed, which created a drain on her mental health. Thus, being able to do the things she wanted "helps me like keep sane most of the time." The balance of school and life, time management, and the learning environment served as subthemes to the major theme (see Table 3).

The subtheme of the balance of school and life included the participants' feelings, thoughts, and statements about the unbounded and convenient nature of learning online, the benefits of a flexible schedule, and the reduced stress in their lives related to learning online. The time management subtheme included data in which participants described learner autonomy within the online course structure. In addition, participants made specific statements about learning on their own time and self-paced assignments. The third subtheme, the learning environment, included descriptions related to the appeal of learning in the comfort of home, using their cell phones to access course content and resources, and the ability to complete schoolwork anywhere they pleased.

Table 3

*Major Theme One: Flexibility*

| Subtheme | Code |
|---|---|
| Balance of school and life | Fits better (28), work (26), beneficial (25), flexible (16), convenient (10), family (8), less stress (5) |
| Time management | Own time (13), self-paced (11), anytime (4), deadlines (4), free to do other things (3) |
| Learning environment | Phone (15), access (10), comfort of home (6), anywhere (3) |

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

**Balance of school and life.** The first subtheme of the major theme of flexibility was the balance of school and life. During their interviews, all participants discussed the critical importance of being able to balance school with the responsibilities of their daily lives. The ability to engage in schoolwork around their other commitments was mentioned by all 11 participants as well as by the focus group. A quote from Eileen characterized the way many participants felt: "I thought that it would be more beneficial that I could have a more flexible

schedule. So, I wouldn't have to feel like anxious to make it to class on time. So, I can go whenever I want it." Jen described how learning online helped her become more organized:

> I felt that it worked really well for me in a lot of different ways. Like I said before, especially with my time, it was really convenient, and it made me better at organizing my time and where to focus at certain times during the week.

In the focus group, Jen discussed how a friend influenced her into enrolling for online coursework. "They were telling me how it was good and convenient. And they could get work done on their own time and lead their lives and go to work and basically be able to do their schoolwork anytime." Several members of the focus group explained that they, too, were influenced or given advice by friends and other students in regard to online coursework.

Five participants felt strongly that they "fit" into taking classes in the online environment, even though they had been traditional students throughout their educational upbringing. Sara noted:

> So, I had that time where it was a little awkward, because I was still a lot younger than people, but then even when I graduated high school and took traditional courses, I was still, I felt like I didn't fit in and so when I did online courses, I felt like, that's where I've needed to be.

Ryleigh explained during her interview that being a mother and having significant family obligations limited her ability to take any traditional coursework. Therefore, she felt as though she fit the profile of an online learner, because the flexibility of online courses allowed her to go to school, work, and support her family's immediate needs.

Four participants, as well as some in the focus group, described the stress of being able to balance everything in their lives. During the focus group, Sara shared:

> After I started, I felt a lot less stressed when I started taking online classes, because I was able to be a lot more. I guess you'd say, active kind of, I was able to do a lot more stuff like I was able to go with friends more. I was able to, you know, I was able to work a lot more and earn some more money.

Tracey explained that stress, especially in the current COVID 19 pandemic, is having an impact on various aspects of her life. She stated, "It's stressful right now, and the stress created by everything, including school, is bigger. So, having access to online courses makes things a little less stressful."

**Time management.** The second subtheme related to the major theme of flexibility was time management. Students must learn to master the time-management skills that allow them to take advantage of the convenience of online learning. Effective time management provides opportunities for students to maximize their learning and to maintain flexibility. Nine of the eleven participants, as well as the focus group, mentioned time management during the interviews. For example, Isabel explained:

> I would say like managing time is important. You're able to do your work on your own time. I was able to still kind of work before everything got really bad during the pandemic. So, you could do your work on your own time, which I really liked.

Paul cited the importance of getting a handle on time and admitted, "I wasn't like the most prepared, I just had to get like the time management. Once you get that down, I think it's pretty smooth from there." Three participants discussed how deadlines influenced their attention to schoolwork and time. The following quote from Alana described some of the anxiety related to deadlines: "I was excited about it was going to be easier because I could do it on my own time, on pace, just had to make the deadlines, but nervous that, I wasn't going to." However, Tracey

explained that, in her online course, the professor seemed to be more flexible with due dates and allowed extensions on assignments. She stated, "The deadlines were a lot more extended, so I have more time to do things." Participants also expressed that self-directed learning was a necessity and something that required some adjustments to the way they have learned in the past. Sara stated:

> I was excited about having my own schedule. I was excited about doing it on my own time, but I was also worried about that at the same time, because I knew that I would have the time constraints of like having to get it done by a certain day because I am a severe procrastinator.

In the focus group, Tracey explained, "It was definitely lots [to] get used to, time management was very different, especially because I'm more of like a face to face person." The focus group agreed that time was a finite resource and if not managed wisely, assignments and tasks would not be completed.

**Learning environment.** The third subtheme connected to the major theme of flexibility was the learning environment. Six participants, as well as the focus group, discussed how they preferred not being bound to a physical class session for their online course. Participants specifically noted that all resources and materials are posted during the course, so they easily accessed them from the comfort of home. Isabel commented, "So, we were able to learn like your own surroundings, like from the comfort of your own home was really great. Paul echoed, "I just couldn't really wake up for class and it just gives me more time to just answer questions whenever, do the homework. I just don't really personally like leaving the house to go to class." Sara agreed saying, "All I need is my computer and a good Wi–Fi connection. And it's great, and

I sit at my kitchen counter. And with my cup of coffee and I'm set, so I love my online classes, I really do."

In the focus group, discussion touched upon the ability to complete school work anywhere as one of the benefits of taking an online course versus a traditional course. The focus group appreciated the use of mobile devices to access their online courses and learning management systems. Jen explained, "I use my laptop and phone a lot to access the course. Especially times when I had breaks at work." Sydney stated:

> From a technological standpoint, I think most people, especially my age, are so comfortable with using their phones for everything. So, it was nice to access the class and everything from my phone and even be able to complete some assignments.

Sara described how she and a friend used a local coffee shop as a place to learn and complete schoolwork. "We had a Starbucks that was like, it was like 10 minutes from my house and like 15 from hers. So, we'd go set up there, we hook up our phones and we'd knock stuff out, get it done."

**Major Theme 2: Disconnectedness**

The second major theme, disconnectedness, addressed areas in which the instructor and other classmates would interact and engage with the participants and one another. A connection or disconnection between students and between instructors and students was described very differently by participants. A few participants explained that there were high levels of interactions, which made them feel connected, while many others expressed their dissatisfaction with their interactions, which made them feel isolated and disconnected. For example, Sara stated, "I've actually had some really great interactions with my classmates and instructor because we have a separate discussion board where it's like our community discussion board that

we can talk to each other and actually get different opinions." In opposition, Ryleigh expressed her disappointment with the overall class interactions. "I think that the content is the same. The expectation is the same, but you just missed that interaction."

Two subthemes were associated with disconnectedness. The first subtheme, student-to-student interactions, addressed how well students communicate with one another to enhance their engagement in the class and effectively construct their knowledge. The second subtheme, student-to-instructor interactions, focused on the ways in which the instructor communicated, interacted with the students, participated in discussion board posts, and provided guidance or support (see Table 4).

Table 2

*Major Theme 4: Disconnectedness*

| Subtheme | Code |
|---|---|
| Student-to-student interaction | Interaction with classmates (23), lack of dialogue and discussion (10), feeling isolated (3), class participation (3) |
| Student-to-instructor interaction | Interaction with instructor (24), communication (7), discussion posts (6), engagement (3), supports (3) |

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

**Student-to-student interactions.** The first subtheme related to the major theme of disconnectedness was student-to-student interactions. All eleven participants, as well as the focus group, discussed their interactions and connections with other students in the course. However, nine of the participants perceived their connection to other students in the class as limited and unsatisfying. Charles stated:

> So far, surprisingly, I have missed the interaction in a normal class more than I thought I would. There are other perspectives and ideas that are out there that I might lose out on. I miss that level of contact with other students in the online class."

Ryleigh shared a concern about the class environment by saying, “I think the classroom piece, it it's not as bright or for a lack of better words.” Tracey described a complete lack of connection, stating, “Um, well, there was really no interactions with the classmates.” The focus group described wanting more opportunities to work together, help one another, and engage in greater dialogue. Jen spoke about learning opportunities that were missed due to the lack of discussion and dialogue. “So, I wouldn't get the same understanding or different perspectives as I would in the regular class.” She further described the dissatisfaction with the discussion board:

> Sometimes people would respond, but they really wouldn't say much in that response. And it was kind of just like they were responding, just to respond, and be nice. So, it was kind of disappointing that it wasn't more of a back and forth kind of discussion, but rather these random responses just put on my discussion post.

Sydney pointed out that being isolated from class members and not getting to know them face to face created greater disconnection. She noted:

> You don't really know the people that you could be in that class with and it becomes hard to communicate sometimes when you need them to, whereas in an actual classroom it's a little bit easier to get everyone involved.

Two participants expressed that they were very satisfied with their connection and interaction with other students in the class. To achieve a high level of positive student-to-student interaction in an online course, students need to be provided opportunities to build rapport. Sara described herself as very active on discussion boards with her classmates in order to build a rapport, and that often led to greater connections. She noted, “Discussion boards, that’s where we can find out different information and get viewpoints on different things. I think it's really cool how the discussion boards work, and we can even exchange emails and like email back and

forth." Anton explained that a group project was assigned in his class, which increased social rapport and led to exchanges of personal information. Anton stated:

> I think I might have had more interaction in the online course with people. On the one project, I think we had, we had to have a group that was like a two-week thing. And like we had no problem. We assigned different tasks to everybody. We gave each other our cell phone number. So, we were texting back and forth.

Anton's and Sara's perceived student-to-student interactions influenced their satisfaction in learning and also made them feel as though they were productive members in the online environment.

**Student-to-instructor interactions.** The second subtheme related to disconnectedness was student-to-instructor interactions. This subtheme described ways in which participants' interaction with their instructor impacted their satisfaction, performance, and connection in the online environment. All 11 participants, as well as the focus group, provided accounts of their interactions and connections with the instructor of their online courses. Similar to the previous subtheme, the subtheme of student-to-instructor interactions generated varied responses. Some participants described high levels of interactions and communication, which made them feel connected, while others expressed dissatisfaction with their interactions, which made them feel less engaged and as though they were left to figure things out on their own. Tracey cited, "With the professor, the interaction with her was, you know, introduce yourself and make it known that like you're in the class and stuff or else there really was no interaction at all." Paul echoed, "In one class, the teacher didn't really show too much, like didn't really like help out too much. It's like I would email them then it would take them like a week to reply." The focus group

discussed how the asynchronous nature of the class made learning from the professor difficult. Jen described:

> In a regular class, the professor's usually standing in the front of the room and facilitating the discussions and other people jump in to give their opinions and thoughts and that help me understand things sometimes. In an online class, that wouldn't happen.

In his interview, Charles explained, “I'd like to see the professor be more active overall to make the course more engaging and interesting.”

Two of the participants perceived that the instructors were very busy and had other commitments that impacted their ability to interact, which often led to delays in responses and support. Sara stated:

> It's been harder getting in touch with a lot of my teachers because they teach a lot of other classes, or they teach classes at the college too. So, like, they would teach classes during the day and then be an adjunct professor for an online class. So, they would do like the online class during the weekends and answer questions during the weekend. So, I'm like, maybe I can get in touch with them here.

Three participants described positive interactions and communication with the instructor. Sydney mentioned, “The professor kept it engaging, despite some concerns I had about how that would work online. I found that the relationship you could have with the professor was actually pretty good considering.” Anton also stated that the instructor in his online course was responsive and made an effort beyond the class structure. Anton noted, “I had to call the instructor once because I had a problem with an assignment, and he told me to call him. So, that was that was good.” Even though Sara mentioned that her instructor’s response time with regard to emails was unsatisfactory, she enjoyed the interaction on the discussion board. She revealed,

"One professor, she answers on discussion boards, which I think is a really cool thing because I get to see what she thinks on the discussion boards and I'm like, oh, well that's different."

**Major Theme 3: Challenges of online coursework**

The third major theme of this study that emerged from the data was the challenges of online coursework. Taking ownership of learning in the flexible, self-paced, and comfortable online learning environment was cited as a benefit by many of the participants. However, these aspects were not met without challenges or problems. As a result, the third theme, challenges of online coursework, was comprised two subthemes. The first subtheme, difficulty adjusting, included issues with regard to how students navigated and adapted to the structure of the online course. Assignments, grades, technology, distractions, and the unfamiliarity of the online environment were codes attributed to this subtheme. The second subtheme, no difficulty experienced, related to preparedness and how easily a participant adjusted to their online course (see Table 5).

Table 5

Major Theme 3: Challenges of online coursework

| Subtheme | Code |
|---|---|
| Difficulty adjusting | Unfamiliar (16), unsure (13), distractions (6), assignments (5), due dates (5), grades and assessments (3) |
| No difficulty experienced | Easy (17), prepared (15), adjustment (11), performed well (8) |

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

**Difficulty adjusting.** The first subtheme of the major theme of challenges of online coursework was difficulty adjusting. Seven participants explained that they experienced various levels of difficulty in their online course. Tracey described how the flexibility and unstructured nature of the course was a challenge for her. She stated, "Definitely the difficulty I faced was

making the time to not forget about the class because it's very easy just to forget about the class because online, you don't meet there is no due dates for certain things." Isabel discussed how easy it was to be distracted at home as opposed to being in a physical classroom:

> I definitely thought that there some distractions, especially in your own surroundings. In class I'm never on my phone, and then at home I was worrying about that I would be on my phone. I tried not to, but it was just always right there.

Eileen noted that submitting assignments was often difficult and confusing. She explained, "I experienced difficulties in submitting using the correct file type. Some professors might not have the same software me. So, I have to try my best to make it so that they're seeing what I submit." Due dates for assignments were also mentioned by participants as a challenge. Isabel remarked, "You really have to figure out, coincide with other classes, and see when everything's due because a lot of the classes have assignments due on the same day, like Sunday midnight. Which was kind of difficult."

Additionally, one of the greatest differences between online and face-to-face learning, concerns the adjustment students must make to taking online assessments and inconsistencies that can occur in the evaluation of student work. Two participants described difficulties adjusting to grading in their online course. Alana mentioned, "Tests and grading, because now it's a whole new rubric and I had to get used to that." Jen echoed, "The way the assignments were graded was a little bit different. And it was difficult, at times and was something that I had to get used to." Isabel described how she initially submitted work that received below average grades, which was not typical of her academic performance. However, she was able to thoroughly review the grading criteria and made adjustments. She shared "I felt a little bit unprepared for the grading, but then I really started looking at the rubric and making my assignments match

what was on there." Paul mentioned, "Sometimes I would just get back the grade sheet with the grade and no other feedback." Sara explained her initial approach to the online assignments and tests, sharing "I wasn't really prepared. I kind of just, just went in winging it." Furthermore, she noted, "taking timed tests was a new and hard to get used to for me and at first I didn't finish some, but the professor gave me a retake."

Ten participants mentioned that unfamiliarity with the online learning environment had an impact on their experience. Jen remarked:

> I think being unfamiliar with Blackboard and how everything was laid out in the online course impacted me. When I first started, I had to like go in there and click around and see where everything was posted and how to access the videos and material.

In response to the question of how this unfamiliarity impacted their experiences with their online courses, Sydney discussed the "unknown" factor and mentioned, "Being that I was unfamiliar, I didn't really know what to expect, so I kind of went into it not knowing what I was going to get out of the experience." Isabel stated, "So, I would definitely say it made it more time consuming, and also you're doing it on your own time, which is good, but it's also bad because you really have to figure out everything." Finally, Eileen described feeling very uncertain of her role in her online course, and at times, she took a passive attitude. She stated:

> In this online class format, so, I wasn't really sure how much I wanted to contribute to the class. Like how much effort I wanted to put it into a class where I didn't really have any, you know expectations to uphold because I didn't know the professor. So, I think that's been the one thing that stood out the most.

**No difficulty experienced**. The second subtheme that emerged in connection with the challenges of online coursework was no difficulty experienced. Four participants described how

they quickly and easily transitioned into the online course environment. They felt that they were prepared and confident in their ability to adapt. Ryleigh said, “I don't think I've had a lot of difficulty. I feel that the university has a really good program for online learning and the supports have been put in place if you choose to take advantage of them.” Ryleigh further explained that she found her job assisted her with transitioning into online learning:

> I'm a paraprofessional for my daily job so luckily, I didn’t have to adjust too much to computer learning because we do a lot with online learning for students at school. So, doing work online wasn't a big change to my normal daily life.

Charles simply stated, “I didn't really have many difficulties in the online course.”

The focus group revealed that there was an adjustment period in the beginning of their online courses that was not described as a difficulty. However, according to Isabel, “I would say after like the two- or three-week adjustment, like everything was okay.”

Anton described how the learning management system assisted him throughout the course: “Blackboard is more user friendly, and it is nice in that way, because everything's laid out for you keeps very organized, there's a built in to do list which I appreciate very much.”

Performance in the online course was also mentioned frequently by participants in relation to difficulty. Paul admitted, “I did better than online, actually. My grades were better somehow, but they were, I got better grades and online than the normal traditional class.” Anton echoed, “I did really well in my class. My experience was a good experience and I was happy, and I really think I learned some stuff and my grades were good.”

**Major Theme 4: Learning preferences**

The fourth major theme dealt with learning preferences. Participants discussed their learning preferences in relation to experiences in their online course and to traditional

coursework in the past. They were very forthcoming during the interview and focus group about the things they liked and disliked about their experience. The first subtheme related to the major theme of learning preferences was the comparison to traditional courses. This subtheme included valuable insight into traditional versus online formats, learning in new ways, self-directed learning, and influences from friends. The second subtheme related to the major theme of learning preferences was the satisfaction of the online learning experience (see Table 6). The codes in this subtheme included satisfaction, overcoming doubts, advice, worry, and feelings about the overall experience in the online course.

Table 6

*Major Theme 4: Learning preferences*

| Subtheme | Code |
|---|---|
| Comparison to traditional courses | Traditional vs. online (21), self-directed learning (9), friend influence (8), learning in new ways (7), not for everyone (5), high score (5), positive (4) |
| Satisfaction | Feelings toward online (16) Satisfaction (10), advice (9), worried (8), doubts (3) |

*Note.* Numbers in parentheses indicate code frequency.

**Comparison to traditional courses.** The first subtheme related to the major theme of learning preferences was the comparison to traditional courses. As a result of taking an online course for the first time, many of the participants developed feelings about the experience and subsequently discussed how their online courses compared to traditional courses they have previously taken. All 11 participants discussed, in some manner, how the online course was different or similar to their experiences in a traditional class setting. Five participants explained that the influence of friends led them to taking an online course as opposed to a traditional course. Tracey stated:

So, I talked to a bunch of other people and they were telling me that it is not as hard, you

> have all the material in front of you study at your own pace. And it's not like a certain time, you don't have to go to class, so I liked that more.

Anton mentioned, “My friend John helped me a lot. That was the guy. He was the guy that told me about taking a class online and how I might like it better.”

Four participants described minimal differences between learning online versus the traditional setting. Jen remarked, “There really wasn't a lot of differences between the online course and my traditional courses. I mean, the syllabus was clear, and we basically followed that. They stuck to the schedule, and I knew when things were due.” Anton also had similar sentiments and mentioned, “I guess I could capture everything I've said already, my perceptions are, it's very similar to a traditional course.” Charles further elaborated, “I think that I am just as good with it as I would be with face-to-face. I feel there are positives and negatives to both and depending on where I am and what I'm doing.” Access to the resources and course presentations were viewed favorably in the online course by Sydney, who stated:

> It's kind of, a lot of it, I would say there's some similarities because a lot of the face-to-face courses have a lot to do with technology stuff with presentations. I don't see much of a difference in presentations in person versus presentations online.

Seven of the participants and the focus group mentioned a preference for learning in a traditional classroom and said that online coursework may not be a good fit for everyone. Isabel revealed, “I definitely learned better in person. I think it took me longer to get the material, when it was online. So, I definitely do like the traditional, in person classes better.” Alana described her disappointment: “I didn't like it. I felt like I didn't really get like the same experience in person. The professor and his response time and things like the interaction with you, it was

definitely shorter in the online class." Paul discussed how the course content could make taking an online course more difficult than traditional courses. He intimated:

> But for some classes like math and stuff like that I'd rather see that in person. And like the professor like show me on a board and going through each step for like equations and everything. I think it's easier to learn that way with certain classes.

In the focus group, Eileen suggested that students all need to take an online course "to see if it [is] for you" and then make decisions on the type of coursework to take after that. She added, "If you're not oriented into studying or learning that way, that's when it becomes a little bit challenging." In the individual interview, Ryleigh compared her experience in taking an online class to her experience in a traditional class setting:

> It's definitely what you make of it. If you are the type of person who can learn a bit on your own there are more than enough ways to do so in an online class. As far as the class, you could either be as involved or not as involved as you would like.

**Satisfaction.** Prior to enrolling in an online course, all 11 participants revealed that they had concerns and even doubts about taking classes online. While enrolled, these thoughts and feelings evolved as they lived the experience. Therefore, the second subtheme to emerge was the satisfaction of the experience the participants had in their courses. Three participants described their perceptions about online courses. Ryleigh explained, "Online courses have the reputation of being more work, so that made me nervous. The more reading required and things like this, but I was excited for the overall experience." Sydney also had concerns and remarked, "I had heard mixed reviews about online courses, but I don't always believe what others have to say and I like to experience something first before deciding whether it's good or bad." Tracey felt worried about the "on your own" aspect described to her by friends. She admitted, "I was

definitely worried that like I wouldn't, I would basically, I thought if I took it online class like I would fail it. I wouldn't understand anything, I couldn't teach myself."

Ten of the participants and the focus group discussed their satisfaction with taking an online course for the first time. Charles commented, "My experience with this course was pretty good. I think I would take it again. Overall I felt comfortable and had a positive experience and I would definitely do it again." Ryleigh added, "I have had a great experience. Wonderful professors, the coursework has been manageable, only running into like science, maybe it's been harder online, but overall it's been a great experience." In the focus group, Jen discussed her satisfaction and how the course helped her in other aspects of her life. She noted:

> I also learned a lot about myself and keeping deadlines and using a calendar and just being on top of things more than usual. And I think that helped me in other parts of my life really becoming more organized. And also communicating by email a lot more. I text a lot. But emailing in the online course, I didn't want to put it in like a text. So, it made me I write emails a little bit differently.

While discussing their perceptions and feelings about their experiences, many of the participants offered suggestions and advice for their courses and/or other online learners. Sara had this advice for students who were unsure about taking a class:

> I would definitely recommend that people take online classes, even if it's not their thing. I would recommend that someone would take at least one, just to see how it is, even if they don't like it, even if it's not their thing.

Sydney noted, "It's something that I think if people felt that they were struggling in a face-to-face setting of a class that this could be an option for people." Tracey echoed, "I definitely think taking an online class, everyone should try it. I really think it's beneficial." Anton suggested that

interaction could be increased by using a conferencing platform. He mentioned, “I would say that, so there's nothing really to add except you know, listen, I think the online, maybe like an optional like zoom, so you could actually like interact with the people.” Three participants felt that students should make sure they understand the structure and workload in an online course. Ryleigh warned, “But I think for a first-time student, I would caution them about online, unless it's like a 4.0 super driven student.” Eileen wanted potential online learners to know that the content of the course may impact their experience: “You shouldn't really be taking a math class online unless you really know what you're doing, because it might benefit you to be sitting in a classroom.” Tracey recommended, “The first semester, definitely take in-person classes, it might be easier [to] learn that way. But after that, you should explore options, because some people do better online.” Ryleigh summed up her feelings and added:

> I think if you have the right motivations, the right support system behind you, you can be successful in online learning. But I think that is like anything in life. If we have the right supports, the right circumstances, we can be successful.

## Research Question Responses

This transcendental phenomenological study included one central research question and four research sub-questions. The central question focused on the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates who took an online course in college for the first time. Data collected from individual interviews, a single focus group interview, and narrative reflections

were used to answer the central research question and each of the sub-questions. This section provides connections between the research questions and the results of the study.

**Central Research Question**

The central research question of this study was: What are the shared lived experiences of undergraduate university students who graduated from a traditional public high school in taking an online course for the first time in college? The central research question was used to establish the description of the participants' shared lived experiences and the perceptions regarding learning in the online environment for the first time. Individual interviews, a focus group interview, and a narrative reflection were used to build an understanding of how traditional high school graduates perceived and experienced taking an online course for the first time in college.

The participants' narrative accounts of their lived experiences while taking an online course for the first time suggested that learning in online environments created a boundless schedule which allowed the participants to attend school while keeping up with the responsibilities in their lives. The flexibility of learning online significantly impacted the experiences of the participants (Major Theme 1). For example, one research participant articulated that online learning removed many of the limits and constraints on her time. Isabel shared, "It fit better with my schedule and I really liked the idea of just having it there when I had time. I was able to focus on my work in private." Furthermore, on the narrative reflection, participants provided visual representations and summaries of how they felt at various points in their online courses (see Figure 4). At the start of their courses, the imagery depicted an uncertainty and uneasiness about their learning experiences. Images selected to describe their feelings at the midpoint illustrated that participants had made adjustments and showed that the

flexible nature of completing assignments fit their needs. At the end of the courses, many of the participants selected images that expressed a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.



*Figure 4*. Narrative reflection imagery.

On the narrative reflection, Eileen shared:

> Toward the end of the course, I was pleasantly surprised at how quickly it went and at times I didn't even realize how much work I had already completed. This motivated me to take the class week by week and I found myself liking the format.

Participants also discussed their learning preferences and made comparisons between taking an online class verses a traditional class (Major Theme 4). A summary of responses about learning preferences could best be described by stating that students missed some aspects of the traditional setting for their courses, but they also found positive learning experiences in their online courses. On the negative side, participants desired more direct instruction and personal communication from the instructors, and the lack of class discussions had an impact on their understanding and learning. They also believed that courses such as math and science would have been easier to learn in a face-to-face setting. When discussing her learning preferences and how it compared to the traditional class setting, Eileen remarked, "It's definitely structured differently to account for the fact that you're not sitting in a classroom, and that there's not someone leading a discussion or presentation." Alana mentioned, "In a regular class, you have like the lecture board and a teacher to write notes over the overhead and explain things." Paul described his preference based on content and said, "I think it just depends on the class. Like for me I need to look at a professor going over stuff, for certain like classes like math. Other participants had no issues with the online course in relation to their learning preferences. Charles stated, "I can learn fairly well on my own and have decent takeaways from what I'm reading or about what I'm hearing." Jen felt her personal online activity would be helpful in her online course. She explained:

> I was also happy about learning in a new environment. I tend to be online a lot, on social

> media and reading different sites. And so, I was excited that online coursework might keep me engaged, where a regular class wouldn't.

Finally, participants also indicated that although the flexibility and self-directed learning aspects created benefits and advantages, challenges remained in their online courses (Major Theme 3). In the early stages of their online courses, participants described an adjustment period during which they felt confused and overwhelmed. Sydney stated, "The first two weeks made me stressed because I was trying to do all the coursework but then trying to figure out everything else. I adjusted to it by I think like the end of the second week." Paul shared:

> It would like take me a little bit to get used to. I wouldn't get things done. So, I, At first, I missed a couple assignments, because I realized I need to start like actually looking checking every day, or else I'm not going to pass this class.

**Research SQ1**

The first research sub-question was as follows: What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding their familiarization with the learning environment in an online undergraduate college course? Each participant's experience with the online learning environment was unique; therefore, individual responses related to this sub-question were varied. However, two issues were consistently referenced by the participants. The first was their lack of familiarity with the learning management system (LMS) and navigation within the course itself. Participants who have not taken an online course through a learning management system (Blackboard) begin their first online experience with learning required for both subject content and course format literacy. During the interviews, participants frequently indicated it took them time to adjust to the LMS. These data directly led toward the development of Major Theme 4:

Learning preferences. Sara noted a common theme among participants with regard to familiarization with the learning environment in an online course:

> So, I mean yeah, I'd say my unfamiliarity did hinder me a little bit, but also once I got into it, like once that first couple weeks like calmed me down a little bit. I was able to get into it and just focus on the class and not where to go for everything.

The second issue related to familiarization with the learning environment was the adjustment to the online course structure as opposed to the traditional setting. A summary of responses to this research question indicated that students missed many aspects of the traditional setting. They desired more dialogue and discussion with peers, greater engagement and communication from the instructors, and they believed that some content is easier to learn in a face-to-face setting. The participants were unfamiliar with some of the asynchronous teaching and learning techniques; therefore, they wanted a traditional feel from the course in an online setting. Alana explained:

> Generally, as a student, I am one of those kids who sits in the front, comment a lot, and keep the discussions going. I ask questions to my teachers, and bring up things I've learned from other classes into class. My favorite part of going to class isn't the reading or the assignments, and that's how much of my online class works.

Anton discussed his thoughts about a more hybrid approach. "I think you have to have a blend. But, you know, maybe I'm wrong, but I definitely missed the immediate reaction or feedback I would get in a regular class." Anton went on to describe how his learning experience online could have benefitted from a virtual conferencing platform. He noted, "I think the online, maybe, maybe like an optional like Zoom conference, so you could actually like interact with the people. Especially like now that that Zoom is so big."

**Research SQ2**

The second research sub-question was as follows: What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the interactions with their classmates and instructor during their online educational experience? This question resulted in the development of Major Theme 2: Disconnectedness, as well two subthemes. Data connected to this research question indicated that participants' ability to interact and make connections with other students (Subtheme 1) as well as their connection and interaction with their instructors (Subtheme 2) had been limited and unsatisfactory in their online educational experiences. Specifically, the majority of participants felt that the interactions between students and instructors limited their ability to understand the material at a deeper level. Ryleigh remarked, "I think you glean so much from a professor being in the room with them." The instructor was viewed as a key component of how the overall class functioned and interacted. Charles felt as though some of the instructors were more adept than others at fostering interaction. Charles mentioned, "As far as the instructor, I think they're struggling through understanding how to make connections themselves and how to effectively interact with the class." Jen noted that her professor did attempt to engage with class: "The professor did participate in these discussion posts. And she communicated each week at the beginning of the week would look like and what to do and always seem to be available if I needed her."

The lack of interaction also limited learning from the experiences or viewpoints of other students. Discussion boards did provide a medium for interaction, but the participants perceived them to be a poor substitute for actual face-to-face discussions. Jen noted:

> The interaction with my classmates was just okay. There really wasn't much interaction other than the discussion board posts, which were required that we had to do one and

> respond to a couple others by like, Wednesday of that week.

Isabel echoed, “A lot of people weren't participating in discussion posts unless it was mandated. Even then, many of the students did the bare minimum.”

There were two participants who shared positive experiences about the level of student-to-student interactions and student-to-instructor interactions in their online courses. Anton explained his experience:

> Anytime I sent an email, the professor would get back to me. I wasn't really sure how involved the other students would get, but I thought there was a lot of interaction in the class, you know, people were interested in what I had to say.

Sara described her connection to her instructor, “I feel like it's more personal than when I went [to] traditional college. I can call up my online professor and be like, hey I have a question, and they'll say, oh okay, yeah I'll answer that for you.” She also described her satisfaction with her interaction with classmates. “So, and I think it's really cool how we can connect with all these different people in class. It’s been really great.”

**Research SQ3**

The third research sub-question was: What are traditional high school graduates’ perceptions regarding the challenges of learning in an online environment? This question resulted in the development of Major Theme 3: Challenges of online coursework and the associated subthemes. Most participants perceived that learning in an online course environment presented some challenges as compared to what they had experienced in a traditional face-to-face setting (Subtheme 1). While only a few participants in the study viewed learning in an online environment as having a low difficulty level (Subtheme 2). The first issue related to the challenge of learning online was the self-directed learning that was required due to the

asynchronous nature of the course. Participants appreciated that the asynchronous format allowed them to access the course content, complete assignments, and initiate or respond to discussions with the instructor and their peers when it best suited their schedule. However, many participants needed to take greater ownership of their learning and to become much more self-directed than they were accustomed. Eileen mentioned, "I've definitely noticed that I needed to really learn on my own, be more disciplined. If this is not how you learn then online classes aren't for you and that's one of the main challenges." Paul explained the self-discipline, initiative, and motivation a student must have or develop in order to be successful. He benefitted from the independence and freedom of his course but was challenged by those very same attributes. He stated:

> You know there's not like a certain time, like you don't have to get things done right away, you could just like give it like a couple days to get it done and while that's helpful, it can really hurt if you're not focused on what you need to be doing

Anton remarked that he had trouble "staying ahead and reading," which led him to adjust his approach to the pace of learning he followed. In order to keep pace, Anton said, "I just would try to stay a week ahead of when things were due and that helped me, but it also made it a lot harder in some ways."

The second challenge to learning in an online environment centered around the structure, organization, design, deadlines, and workload the participants experienced. Isabel described the reservations she had prior to starting the online class. "I was definitely worried about the workload, and then if there was going to be too much due on one day." Likewise, Alana revealed her difficulties. "We didn't have the same like structure that we would in a regular class. Professors should definitely make due dates more manageable. It was like everything was due at

like Sunday at 11." Charles cited that the amount of work would change from week to week. He remarked, "Much of the time we were working on our own within the weekly modules. The workload was intense some weeks." At times, the directions or expectations in the posted assignments seemed unclear to students, which led to difficulties. Tracey mentioned:

> There were times when things weren't clear, and we had no idea what to do. So that was definitely a problem, a few times, and a bunch of us had to email the professor. That set me back for the week and I had to ask for an extension.

Sara echoed that if she had an issue with an assignment, she was reluctant to reach out. She explained, "That's a major thing for me; like I'm kind of prideful a lot sometimes. And so, it takes me a minute to actually ask for help."

The final challenge to learning in the online environment was related to a lack of guidance and support, especially toward the early stages of the course. Participants noted that they were reluctant about enrolling in an online course because they were unsure about their ability to succeed in a new learning environment. The participants were used to the traditional classroom environment, where they followed structured schedules. The traditional setting offered immediate supports because they were surrounded by the teacher and their classmates. In the online course, the format required them to venture off on their own, set a schedule, and take on a more active role in their learning. As a result, the remote learning environment was viewed as an unknown entity and somewhat intimidating. Anton shared "I wasn't sure about online in the beginning." Sydney mentioned, "I didn't really know what to expect, so I kind of went into it not knowing what I was going to get out of the experience." Therefore, many of the participants sought out advice and guidance from family and friends. The initial information and feedback from the family and friends served to establish a line a of support and dependability for the

participant to survive and thrive in the new online context. An informal mentorship relationship emerged. Anton explained "My friend John helped me a lot." He further explained that at certain times he would check back in with his friend and mentioned, "He kind of told me on how to use the library. How to do the searches, because I didn't realize there was a big difference between advanced search and a regular search." Jen suggested that "anyone thinking of taking an online course should to talk to some other people who have done it." Jen emphasized the confidence gained from the guidance and support that comes simply with knowing that somebody that already had the experience and that they available if there are difficulties. She further elaborated, "So being able to talk with somebody with experience is definitely a good resource." These findings reveal that learners new to online learning may struggle on their own, but be supported by a trusted person who can share their experience, foster discussion, and model the role of a successful online student.

While most of the participants expressed that they faced challenges and difficulties learning in an online environment, there were a few participants who experienced minimal to no difficulty. These participants referenced their preparedness as a factor that led to their ease of learning in the new platform. Ryleigh explained, "I felt prepared and valued my investment in my education. I understand for me, as a mom, someone who is older and experienced, this is a hundred times easier." Eileen revealed, "It was pretty self-explanatory, taking an online class, everything was kind of laid out for me. Once I signed on, it was very easy." Charles articulated, "I was able to work with the other students in the class and work with the professor. I don't really think that there were too many issues being able to learn there. I felt pretty well prepared."

**Research SQ4**

The fourth sub-research question was: What are traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the benefits of learning in an online environment? This question resulted in the development of Major Theme 1: Flexibility, as well three subthemes. The balance of school and life (subtheme 1), time management (subtheme 2), and learning environment (subtheme 3) each were connected back to the flexibility that the online learning environment afforded the participants. The benefit of flexibility in online courses emerged as one of the main reasons students were drawn to online coursework. Online courses provided the participants with opportunities to work at a time and place that was compatible with their busy lives and learning needs. Anton remarked, "At work, we don't know our schedule until the week before or even the week of. So, having that kind of work schedule with going to school makes it really hard to do both."

In addition, the majority of participants felt that the flexibility created a learning environment that allowed them to learn on their own in a more productive manner. Jen explained:

> I think the benefit to online course is the idea of it being a little more flexible. Also, you are able to learn, I think, a little bit more at your own pace than you would be in a classroom and you can be more focused.

Flexibility of learning also means that students can re-watch recorded sessions or videos to deepen their learning or to review content prior to an exam. Students can likewise re-read threads in discussion boards long after those discussions have taken place. Eileen mentioned, "Instead of having to lose some of the meaning of what your professors [are] saying, through your own notes, the online resources capture the essential information and PowerPoints, so you

have unlimited access to it." Eileen further articulated that this aspect "has been a big help with managing my time." The ability to learn in a familiar and comfortable environment was also a benefit of the flexibility the online course provided. Sara noted, "With traditional schooling, you go to class in someone else's room, you're going by their time, in their space. With online learning you're going by your own time, you're doing it at home or somewhere that is convenient."

## Summary

Eleven individuals participated in this transcendental phenomenological study by sharing their perceptions of their experiences while taking an online class in college for the first time. Chapter Four included an introduction of the study participants with a brief description and summary snapshot that provided a window into their lives and personalities. The focus of the study was to understand the shared lived experiences of taking an online course in college for the first time. In-depth descriptions were presented, which served as the starting point of data analysis. Data analysis was performed following Moustakas's (1994) recommendations for phenomenological data analysis. The first step toward the development of themes was open coding. Codes were assigned to phrases and statements each participant made during the individual interview, focus group, and narrative reflection. Subsequently, codes were grouped according to patterns observed in the data. Similar codes were linked, tallied, and categorized as part of the reduction process. Categories were thoroughly examined and, eventually, themes emerged from the data, which were used to address the central research question and the four sub-questions of this study.

# CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

## Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course at a university in the Northeast. A group of 11 students participated in the study, which included an initial screening questionnaire, individual interviews, a focus group, and reflective journal activity. Narrative accounts from the research participants' lived experiences while they were engaged in an online course for the first time were collected and analyzed to provide insight into the learner experience. Data analysis revealed the perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and understandings of the participants regarding taking an online class for the first time in college. The data obtained from the participants were analyzed using methods proposed by Moustakas (1994) and assisted by the use of NVivo 12® qualitative analysis software. Chapter Five includes a summary of the study's findings. In this section, the central research question and sub-questions are examined with regard to the study. Next, the theoretical and empirical literature findings are presented, followed by a discussion of the practical implications. Finally, delimitations and limitations of the study are presented, and recommendations are made for future research about traditional high school graduates taking an online course for the first time in college. Chapter Five culminates with a final summary of conclusions that have been garnered from the study.

## Summary of Findings

Research findings for the study were presented as narrative accounts of the lived experiences of the participants that illuminate the perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and

understandings of traditional high school graduates taking an online course for the first time in college. The central research question for the study was as follows: What are the shared lived experiences of undergraduate university students who graduated from a traditional public high school in taking an online course for the first time in college? To gain insight into the experiences of taking an online course for the first time, 11 participants shared their personal experiences through the use of an initial screening questionnaire, individual interviews, a focus group discussion, and reflective journal activity. The subsequent data analysis provided a deeper understanding of the perceptions of traditional high school graduates taking their first online course. The individual interviews served as the primary source of data collection and were conducted using an online video conferencing platform. The video conferences captured both audio and video, which were recorded and then transcribed, coded, and analyzed in order to identify the emergence of four themes. The focus group interview was comprised of seven of the participants and provided additional insight into the lived experiences of traditional high school graduates taking an online course for the first time in college. The reflective journal activity further revealed data related to the participants' experiences by creating personal stories using images, pictures, or memes, which illuminated how they felt at different points during their first online course. As all data were analyzed, codes were organized into categories, categories were combined to form subthemes and, finally, major themes were identified. Major themes were explored more fully during the focus group interview, which was also captured using an online conferencing platform to record video and audio. These were also transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The four major themes that emerged from data analysis included (a) flexibility, (b) disconnectedness, (c) challenges of online coursework, and (d) learning preferences.

The central research question was used to explore the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates taking an online course for the first time in college. Each participant had unique perceptions and experiences while enrolled in an online course for the first time. Data provided by research participants revealed that most students were drawn to taking an online course because they led busy lives and needed a school program that provided the flexibility to attend school while working or dealing with family obligations (Major Theme 1). All participants indicated they enrolled in the course because of the convenience it afforded their lifestyle. Data also illuminated the learning preferences of the participants, making several references to similarities and differences from traditional courses to online courses. Participants discussed the benefits and challenges of taking an online course for the first time and the various aspects of their learning styles (Major Theme 4). In addition, the data indicated that participants experienced challenges while taking an online course for the first time in college (Major Theme 3). The ability to navigate the online learning platform and adjust to the learning structure were identified as significant challenges by most participants. However, some participants indicated that they were able to adapt quickly to the new learning environment, experiencing a low level of difficulty or even no difficulty at all. Finally, data identified that participants felt disconnected from their classmates and instructors while taking an online course for the first time (Major Theme 2). While discussing their interactions in the course, most of the participants expressed that they were dissatisfied and that improvements should be made regarding how students interact with one another and with the instructor of the course.

The first research sub-question addressed the traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding their familiarization with the learning environment in an online undergraduate college course (Major Theme 4). Interview participants noted that their

unfamiliarity with the LMS and navigation of the online platform during the first few weeks of the course presented a challenge. Participants described having to learn how the online platform worked in addition to having to learn the course content, which led to feelings of anxiety and stress. However, many participants noted that after the initial confusion and uncertainty, they were able to adjust and effectively navigate the LMS. Additionally, participants mentioned that the teaching and learning methods in the asynchronous format were unfamiliar to them. A much greater emphasis on self-discipline and self-directed learning was required in the online course. This finding from the data illustrated that participants missed the direct instruction and interaction from a traditional course setting. Students who were able to take greater ownership of their learning in a self-directed manner adjusted faster to the online course environment than students who struggled with the independence of learning.

The second research sub-question addressed the traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding interactions with their classmates and instructors during their online educational experiences (Major Theme 2). Data showed that the lack of interaction with instructors influenced the participants' satisfaction in their courses and negatively impacted their online educational experiences. The participants missed the opportunity to interact and ask questions to the instructors while reviewing course resources and completing assignments. The majority of participants were accustomed to teaching strategies that included direct instruction from the teacher. The asynchronous nature of the online course eliminated the opportunity for live, real-time feedback to help the participants understand and apply learned concepts or skills. Data also revealed that response times to emails and discussion board posts varied widely from course to course. Some instructors answered correspondence quickly, while other instructors' response times were longer. In addition, participants also believed that the limited interaction

students had with one another negatively impacted their online educational experiences. Participants felt the discussion boards were a poor substitute for an actual class discussion in which students could orally express their ideas and understanding of the course content and listen to other students' ideas and comments. Data indicated that the discussion boards could provide meaningful dialogue, but many students put minimal effort into posts and did not effectively use the medium. The overall lack of interaction left the participants feeling disconnected during their online educational experiences.

The third research sub-question addressed the traditional high school graduates' perceptions of learning challenges in an online environment (Major Theme 3). This sub-question illustrated that most of the participants experienced challenges in learning in an online environment. The flexibility afforded by taking online courses allowed them to focus on essential things in their lives, but it also highlighted the need for strong time management and organizational skills. Participants also described challenges posed by grading and how they were assessed. In addition, participants cited that they were uncertain about their level of participation in their courses. They explained that it was easy to become distracted; therefore, deadlines were easy to miss. However, despite the challenges and difficulties faced by the majority of participants, there were a few participants who transitioned to the online environment seamlessly and experienced minimal to no difficulty. These participants expressed that they felt confident in their ability to learn and work on their own. Online coursework provided these participants with an environment in which they could thrive academically.

The fourth research sub-question addressed the traditional high school graduates' perceptions regarding the benefits of learning in an online environment. (Major Theme 1). This sub-question revealed the most consistent participant responses and subsequent data. The

importance of flexibility and convenience was regarded by the participants in this study as the greatest benefit of learning in the online environment. Data indicated that flexibility was the major factor leading to the participants' taking an online course in college. Participants also expressed that their friends and family members who had taken an online course influenced their decisions by citing the benefits of flexibility in their online courses. The anytime, anyplace, and any-pace aspects of the online course afforded the participants the ability to create a balance between school and life. For some participants, this meant providing opportunities for work or social lives, while others required this benefit because of family obligations. The flexibility and self-paced workflow also reduced stress and anxiety for several participants. In addition, participants cited that completing schoolwork in a convenient and comfortable learning environment was a benefit. Most participants indicated that taking the course from the comfort of their own home positively affected their online experience. The participants who worked while taking their courses expressed that performing schoolwork during work breaks was an added benefit.

## Discussion

The findings of the study provided support for the theoretical and empirical literature that was presented in Chapter Two. A review of the empirical literature suggested that online education has grown exponentially, and many graduates of a traditional high school were enrolled in online courses in college. The theoretical framework for this study was Mayer's e-learning theory (1997), which is grounded in cognitive science principles used to improve learning through the utilization of digital devices and other electronic educational technology. The e-learning theory-related literature demonstrated that traditional high school graduates taking an online course for the first time could construct knowledge from various multimedia

platforms and stimulate psychological activity. In the following subsections, the theoretical and empirical literature outlined at the beginning of the study will be reviewed and examined regarding the findings of the study.

**Theoretical Literature**

The theoretical framework for this study was Mayer's (1997) e-learning theory. The e-learning theory is grounded in cognitive science principles, which posits that digital devices and other electronic educational technologies may be used to improve learning. The e-learning theory states that a learner's performance may be considerably enhanced and improved through multimedia platforms that use visuals along with textual information (Mayer & Moreno, 2003). When text and images are presented simultaneously, learners process the content in a manner that enables them to construct mental schemas and create connections between the two (Mayer, 2000). The 11 study participants confirmed that they utilized the e-learning approach in their online courses because they were exposed to text and visual content, represented in various multimedia platforms, which enhanced or influenced their learning and educational experiences. Isabel stated, "I used my laptop and phone to take the course. On Blackboard there were several other platforms that I used to access the content and material." Sydney also noted, "I often used my phone to watch the videos and scroll through the PowerPoints in the class."

For decades, the e-learning theory has been applied to educational research, the development of information technology, and workplace efficiency (Palvia et al., 2018). This study connected the e-learning theory with how the participants utilized the electronic media and applications in their course to advance learning in an online environment. As described by Ali et al. (2018), the e-learning theory places the access of content at the center of the learning process. Students can access the content in an asynchronous or synchronous format by navigating

multimedia platforms such as search queries, video tutorials, e-books, virtual simulations, discussion boards, and games. These various platforms facilitate and promote the acquisition of knowledge through students' interaction with the media content, with one another, and with the instructor. Data from my study indicated that participants' experiences and perceptions were influenced significantly by the interaction with the LMS, digital material, multimedia resources for the course, and interactions with students and the instructor. Alana explained, "At first I couldn't find where everything was and then how to submit assignments was a little confusing." The participants in this study expressed that they needed to navigate several multimedia platforms and work on their own to discover how to connect with the content and interact within the course community. Jen stated, "Being unfamiliar with Blackboard and how everything was laid out in impacted me. I had to like go in there and click to see where everything was posted and how to access the videos and materials." The use of text and video in the course assisted them in this process. They shared that they had experienced times when the technology and multimedia were clear and useful, but at other times, a lack of experience with the technology and multimedia presented challenges. Anton shared, "I don't normally like to do trainings or tutorials, more learning on the fly for me. So, there were times that I had to spend more time because I'm not the most technical technological person."

**Empirical Literature**

This study contributes to the current research by examining the shared lived experiences and student perceptions while taking an online course for the first-time in college. Findings in my study provide important insight into the experiences of undergraduate college students in the online environment. This new and valuable data can be used to inform university leaders and prospective students about the strengths or challenges of a lack of experience in taking an online

course before college. As the role of universities evolve and respond to new technologies and ways students connect, an emphasis must be placed on the balance between tradition and openness to change (Volungeviciene, Tereseviciene, & Ehlers, 2020). Although online learning has been widely researched and discussed, there was minimal literature related to the experiences of traditional high school students taking an online course for the first time. According to Archambault et al. (2016), many state policies are aligned to the traditional class setting and do not address the rapidly growing landscape of online education. Therefore, students in a number of states lack choice and opportunity to take online coursework. Additionally, recent research has focused on courses that are taken for credit recovery or enrichment rather than on courses aligned to the local curriculum (Pettyjohn & LaFrance, 2014).

Previous research documented the birth and growth of online education in the United States. Caruth and Caruth (2013) described that online education initially started as correspondence learning; then, through advancements in technology, it evolved, using new strategies that utilized emerging technologies. Online education continued to grow in the 20th century, accelerating in the 1990s, due to the creation of the world wide web and the early internet. The internet led to rapid advancements in learning platforms and greater use in higher education (Carey, 2015). As colleges created programs and more and more students enrolled in courses, the research identified strengths in online education and cited potential benefits (Nguyen, 2015). According to Ilgaz and Gulbahar, benefits that led to increased enrollments included increased accessibility, academic freedom, and lower tuition costs. As a result, previous literature illustrated a considerable amount of research related to the benefits of taking courses online. The literature frequently cited flexibility and convenience as benefits for students who had taken an online course. According to Volungeviciene et al. (2020), flexibility,

in terms of time and place, is an increasingly preferred form of learning for the modern college student. Students who work, study part-time, or live in remote areas have come to rely on the opportunities online programs provide. In the present study, most participants reported that flexibility was a significant reason they took online courses. This reason connects to the findings that students appreciated and benefitted from the unbounded nature offered through the online learning environment. Participants in this study reported that they benefitted from the flexibility and convenience of the online setting. All participants discussed how the flexibility of their course created a positive balance between school and other obligations in their lives. Anton stated, "It just comes down to the flexibility being really important. My job is part-time, but sometimes it's almost full-time with the hours." Paul shared, "I just like being home, it's less stress, and I get to be around my family and friends more."

In addition to strengths, previous research also identified and discussed challenges related to learning in online courses. According to McGuire (2016), students taking online courses struggled with social presence and interactions with one another and instructors. Many participants in the present study reported that they were dissatisfied with interactions with other students and the instructor while enrolled in their online courses. For example, Charles mentioned, "There really wasn't much interaction at all and when we did interact with others in the class, it seemed forced and unnatural. Recent literature illustrated that students are more satisfied when engaged with classmates and instructors are responsive (Franklin, 2014). Participants in the present study noted that class interactions were minimal and that they missed the dialogue and discussion they experienced in the traditional face-to-face classroom setting. Previous literature supported the fact that students wanted the online learning experience to feel more like the traditional face-to-face classroom (Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2012). In previous

research, Rappel (2017) also described that many students had been conditioned to rely upon strong instructor presence, frequent face-to-face interaction and feedback, and the close monitoring of progress.

Previous research illustrated that students who engage in online learning must develop a great deal of autonomy, self-discipline, and responsibility (Rush, 2015). Participants in the present study reported that it was essential to be able to work and learn on their own and stay organized. Jen reported, "I learned a lot about myself and keeping deadlines and using a calendar and being on top of things more than usual. And I think that helped me in other parts of my life really becoming more organized." Some participants noted that their learning styles were more suited to taking and performing well in an online course. They were confident that they could learn independently, be self-directed, and complete their online course. Charles explained, "I can learn fairly well on my own and have decent takeaways from what I'm reading or about what I'm hearing." The literature noted that intrinsic factors such as motivation, confidence, and responsibility were vital to the success of students in the online environment (Johnson et al., 2015). Studies have also shown that prior experience with online learning also factors into how students feel in their online courses and how well they perform (Zimmerman & Kulikowich, 2016). Data from present study supports those findings. Many of the participants reported that the first few weeks of the course were spent having to learn how to navigate the online learning environment in addition to learning the course content. Participants in this study expressed that their unfamiliarity led to feelings of stress and anxiety. Recent research explained the importance of feeling comfortable and familiar in an online environment. For example, Abdous (2019) found that many new online learners developed stress related to their preparedness and concluded that these emotional responses could impact student success.

Finally, data from this study also supported empirical literature related to trends and future applications in online learning. Recent literature demonstrated that trends and attitudes toward online education have shifted toward establishing online learning as a positive alternative to the traditional brick and mortar university (Reyes & Segal, 2019). Participants cited that they had reservations about enrolling in an online course, but many were influenced by the positive experiences of friends and family. Additionally, interview data reflected that participants developed strong preferences related to their online learning and communicated suggestions and advice related to improving the online experience. Previous literature reported that innovation and emerging technologies influence and shape pedagogy at all levels of education (Ally, 2019). The present study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced institutions across the world to deliver education in an online or remote manner. As a result, technologies changed and adapted quickly to address the needs of educational institutions. Participants witnessed how platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Meet were being used to deliver instruction in K – 12 and other universities. Applications such as Jamboard, Flipgrid, and Edpuzzle also became widely used. Therefore, many participants discussed how those platforms and applications could be used to enhance their experience, especially related to class interactions, which seemed to draw the most criticism.

## Implications

Online coursework offers the promise of access to learning regardless of where students live or the time they can attend, potentially redefining educational opportunities for students who may not fit into the structure of traditional coursework. The results of this study, which examined the lived experiences of traditional high school graduates taking an online course in college for the first time, could inform administrators, educators, and students about best

practices for teaching and learning in the online environment. Previous research provided information about online education in the United States, including strengths, challenges, trends, and future applications in online courses. The present study reports findings which have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for traditional high school students who have taken an online course for the first time in college. The theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for this study are explicated in the following sections.

**Theoretical Implications**

The research in my study has presented several implications for educators, school leaders, and students who are involved with online education programs. The guiding framework for my study was Mayer's (1997) e-learning theory. The e-learning theory addressed how digital devices and other electronic devices and media are used to improve learning in the online environment. Previous research focused on a variety of aspects in online learning, including strengths, challenges, higher education applications, and the future of online education. Researchers noted that a learner's performance could be enhanced considerably through multimedia platforms that use visuals and textual information (Mayer & Moreno, 2003). The present research adds to the existing body of literature surrounding applying the e-learning theory to online education. However, the present study targeted traditional high school graduates who were enrolled in an online course for the first time in order to gain more of an understanding of how students with no background in online education experienced learning in an online environment. As they shared their lived experiences, participants described components of the e-learning theory and how it impacted their overall experience in taking an online course. For example, Alana explained, "The online textbook had a bunch of different features I liked to access. There were widgets on the site and my course used a simulation video which reacted to

choices I picked." The e-learning theory provided a valuable framework for understanding how students who were new to online learning perceived their experiences. The experiences they shared included information about their interaction with the course content, the instructor, other students, and the learning management system. The participants also shared the perceived benefits and challenges of their online courses.

Educators, school leaders, and students must be aware of the negative experiences and levels of dissatisfaction that some students encounter when taking an online course for the first time. Previous research has indicated that learning in an online environment fosters feelings of isolation, anonymity, and disconnectedness (Poquet et al., 2018). Participants in the present study affirmed this finding. According to the participants, the textual interactions in discussion boards were serviceable, but they could not replicate the dialogue experienced in a traditional setting. Participants mentioned that instructors must deliberately work to create an inclusive and engaging class environment. Many of the participants in the present study yearned for the dialogue and interaction that they had experienced in a traditional course setting. Isabel commented, "Discussion posts served their purpose, I guess, but I definitely do like the traditional, in-person class better." The participants described that they missed opportunities to learn directly from the instructor and one another because of limited interaction.

In addition to the dissatisfaction related to interaction and the discussion boards, educators, school leaders, and students must be aware of negative experiences related to the navigation of the online platform and LMS. Students new to the online environment often do not know how to navigate the systems in place. Students must become familiar with the system and build a level of confidence with it in order to navigate an LMS. During the first few weeks of the course, the participants described difficulty navigating the LMS and finding resources,

content, and other important course information. Several described this period as highly stressful and indicated that it impacted their performance in the class. A few participants explained that they had an easier time because they had attended or taken a tutorial session, which taught them how to navigate and engage with many multimedia platforms in their course. When participants were provided the opportunity to try out the applications and to have guided exploration, they developed high levels of confidence. According to Thorsett (2002), discovery learning begins with a time of initial frustration in which learners may feel overwhelmed, but this is soon followed by a key breakthrough in which they become comfortable and confident, because they recognize they are learning. This valuable revelation can assist new learners, but only if they attend such a tutorial.

**Empirical Implications**

Online learning has been widely discussed, and there is a considerable amount of literature surrounding the implementation of online learning programs at every level of education. The present study adds to the body of literature surrounding online learning in higher education. It may be one of a few qualitative studies that focus specifically on students who graduated from a traditional high school and took an online course in college for the first time. Many research studies have highlighted the strengths, weaknesses, and effectiveness of learning in an online environment. Lacking from the available literature was a rich description of the lived experiences of new learners in an online environment who had only attended traditional school and had little to no experience with online education. This study fills the gap found in the literature.

The interviews of 11 participants, who were traditional high school graduates, provided various perspectives and experiences from students who were new to the online environment and

had taken an online course for the first time. The participants shared similar views on the benefits of their online courses and reported that they had gravitated toward taking online courses because they needed to create time for school and their lives. Many of the participants sought out friends and family who had taken an online course for guidance and advice before enrolling. All of the participants described flexibility as a benefit of taking an online course, and they felt that they would be able to establish a positive balance between school and life. Anton shared, "A huge benefit for me was being able to take classes, work towards a degree, but still work and support myself." Eileen mentioned, "Between my family, friends, work, and school there is so little time, and so finding a way to do school in a flexible way really helped me manage my life." The participants shared their willingness to discuss their personal lives along with their experiences and ideas. Many participants shared suggestions for improving the online course experience and noted that an introduction or tutorial would help new online learners avoid the stress and anxiety they experienced in the first few weeks. Ryleigh suggested, "I think that all students should have to take a tutorial before they start their online class. It helped me a lot." The emotional reaction was related to their unfamiliarity with the LMS and the overall structure of their online courses. Participants described feeling lost and on their own as they learned how to navigate the course during the first few weeks. Paul shared, "At first I logged on and spent a good amount of time just clicking around. But then I was able to figure it all out."

Although many of the participants described their overall experience with their online courses as positive, they also reported dissatisfaction with the interactions with the instructor and other students in their courses. Franklin (2014) explained that it is vital for students to feel engaged and that the instructor meets their learning needs. The participants in the present study felt that their learning needs could have been met in the online environment if the instructors

were more proactive in engaging the class and were timelier in their feedback or responses. Participant responses in this study illustrated that some instructors did this very well, while others did not. The participants applied the same feelings of dissatisfaction to interactions with their peers in the course. The participants mentioned the lack of an actual discussion and dialogue hurt their learning experiences. Listening and responding in real time to others in the class was an aspect that they enjoyed in a traditional class setting, but it was absent from the online environment. The absence of dialogue confirms previous research regarding the lack of social presence and interaction in an online course environment (Poquet et al., 2018; McGuire, 2016).

Participants in this study expressed a desire for their online courses to have some of the educational structures and strategies of the traditional classroom. Lecture-based practices and class discussions were the most common aspects discussed by the participants. Participants felt they were missing out on the knowledge and experience of others because of the limited interaction and unsatisfactory use of the discussion board in their courses. Charles noted, "I have missed the interaction in a normal class more than I thought I would. There are other perspectives and ideas that are out there that I might lose out on." The participants explained that completing tasks and assignments as part of the course seemed more like work rather than learning. A few participants explained that some of the greatest learning moments they had in their educational journey came from classroom dialogue and interaction. In addition, several participants noted that specific courses might be better suited to a traditional setting versus an online setting. Math and science courses were frequently mentioned by the participants as courses that they preferred to take in person. Participants shared that in these more challenging courses, direct instruction and immediate feedback were highly preferred.

**Practical Implications**

This study includes an examination of the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates who had taken an online course for the first time in college. Analysis of the data revealed factors that led to a deeper understanding of the practical implications of this research in terms of the benefits, challenges, interactions, learning preferences, and the overall experience of students enrolled in online courses. The practical implications could inform school leaders, educators, and students about best practices for teaching and learning in an online environment. Online education continues to grow, and all stakeholders need to stay informed and implement the most effective research-based practices. The current state of online education has been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and many new technologies, applications, and resources have had a significant impact on teaching and learning in an online environment.

In previous literature, factors that influenced the successful implementation of online courses and programs were cited (Volery & Lord, 2000; van Rooij & Zirkle, 2016). Data from this study and Rappel (2017) indicated that unfamiliarity played a role in how students adapted to the online learning environment. As a result, the first practical implication is that school leaders and educators must develop tutorials or training to assist first-time online learners in navigating the LMS and structure of their online courses. Online student readiness must extend the students' ability to navigate technology and interact with the learning tools in meaningful ways. Participants shared that they were initially confused and left on their own to figure out the nuances of the LMS and how to find resources, submit assignments, post on discussions, and view important course information. This confusion led to added stress and anxiety during the first few weeks because they were focused on completing required work as well as learning the course interface. Participants explained that they were able to overcome their uncertainty, but it

did have an impact on their ability to learn and submit assignments on time during those first few weeks. They noted that a brief tutorial or introductory training might have alleviated many of the challenges they faced early in the course.

Another practical implication is for educators and school leaders to focus on strategies to improve and enhance course interactions. Both instructor-to-student interactions and student-to-student interactions were highly criticized by many of the study participants. The absence of a physical classroom or infrastructure limited the opportunities for face-to-face interactions in the online courses and emphasized discussion boards and other alternate forms of communication. While it is acknowledged that all of the participants appreciated the flexibility that the asynchronous nature of the course provided, it is crucial to recognize that face-to-face discussions, dialogue, feedback, and support were cited as aspects that they missed in the online environment. Data from this study indicated that the instructor can play a key role in the engagement and interaction of everyone in the course. As online programs continue to expand, there must be an increased awareness of the need to develop dynamic and competent online instructors. Communication skills are also paramount for effective instructor-student interactions online. The development of student rapport is very different in online contexts and establishing and maintaining rapport in online settings is not always easy for instructors. Participants in this study discussed clear and timely interactions using email, chat, social media, live class questions, and video conferencing platforms. Training instructors to effectively communicate, promote collaboration, foster a sense of community, and use social media should be a focus for administrators at higher education institutions that have online programs.

A third practical implication is for schools to create ways for students to share their experiences, serve as guides, and mentor potential new online learners. Many of the participants

in this study mentioned that they sought out advice and guidance from friends and family who had taken an online course. The advice allowed them to assess their readiness to enroll in an online course and gave them valuable insight from someone they trusted. Some online programs have students share their experiences through reviews, online threads, video testimonials, and social media posts. However, potential students may view these types of communication as biased, as advertisements, or even as unreliable sources of information. A more effective way would be for students to have trusted resources available to them. Mentors and experienced online learners could truly benefit new learners by providing information, resources, and support. The role of a mentor in an online course should be built around the understanding that learning online may be an adjustment for students who are accustomed to the traditional in-person course setting.

## Delimitations and Limitations

Although this research contributes to an increased understanding of how traditional high school graduates experienced taking an online class for the first time in college, there were limitations to the study that must be explicitly acknowledged. The design of the study utilized a transcendental phenomenological approach advanced by Moustakas (1994). This design allowed the phenomenon to be researched through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and a reflective journal that used images and text to discover an understanding of the essence of the event. This approach also allowed me to write about my experiences regarding the phenomenon to expose or realize research bias.

The first delimitation was the participant criteria. The participants had to be 18 years of age and a graduate of a traditional high school, and they had to be enrolled or had to have taken

at least one online course. This delimitation allowed me to research the phenomenon through data collected from participants who have experienced the same phenomenon.

The second delimitation was the site of the study. I selected the university because of the diversity of online courses offered to students in the school of education. In addition, a large number of students enrolled in the university's online programs had attended a traditional high school.

The first limitation of the study was in the generalizability of the findings. One cannot assume that an investigation of the individual experiences of the 11 research participants is representative of how other students generally experienced their online course, nor can it be concluded that one learner's experiences are representative of other learners' experiences in other contexts. Thus, the research findings presented here are not considered conclusive, nor may they be transferable to other online learning environments.

Another limitation was the similar nature of the participants' demographics. Eight of the 11 participants were female, and all participants identified themselves as Caucasian. The lack of diversity in the participant sample creates the possibility that minority students in a similar online environment may have a different lived experience than Caucasian students in this study.

The final limitation was the participant's willingness to answer honestly and openly during the interview and focus group process. During the recruitment process, participants were made aware that I was a doctoral student in an online program in the school of education at their university. As a result, some may have answered questions more positively, because they did not want to offend me or disparage the university. I used different methods to gain information from participants, yet some may have held back private thoughts on this subject. Some participants provided very detailed information, while others kept their responses very brief.

## Recommendations for Future Research

Online education programs continue to grow and expand throughout higher education in the United States. Seaman et al. (2018) reported that institutions offering online programs have seen increased enrollments for the past 14 consecutive years. The present study has provided useful information related to the perceptions of traditional high school graduates who took an online course for the first time in college. The findings support several areas worthy of further empirical investigation. The following recommendations would be helpful in fully understanding the experiences of students enrolled in an online course for the first time.

The first recommendation for future research would be to conduct studies related to the readiness of learners who had no prior experience in the online learning environment. A mixed methods or applied research study that utilizes an online readiness survey instrument could be helpful in providing data on the competencies necessary for student success in online learning. Participants in this study described a period of confusion, uncertainty, and stress at the start of their courses, because they were not familiar with learning in the online environment. Students who have not taken an online course begin their experience with learning required for both subject content and course format literacy. A great deal of their initial struggles was connected to the navigation of the LMS. Qualitative research should be conducted to examine if students can adequately assess their preparedness for online learning. This assessment should include an exploration of the pre-course familiarization with the learning environment in order that they may start right from the very first day of class. The present research could help these new learners focus on learning course subject matter without the distraction of learning the nuances of the LMS.

Second, many participants mentioned high levels of dissatisfaction with interactions in their courses. These extended to instructor-student and student-student communication and interaction. In both online and traditional courses, interaction is a critical component of fostering learning, yet learner isolation and disconnectedness are more likely to be an issue in the online environment. Participants in this study cited that the lack of dialogue, discussion, and immediate feedback had a negative impact on their experiences. As a result, additional research related to engagement and participant strategies should be conducted. A descriptive qualitative study could be conducted to further explore the concept of student engagement in the online environment. A descriptive study may provide data that describes the experiences and features of online learning that students find engaging. Additionally, this research can include an exploration of how social media and video conferencing platforms such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams can be leveraged to impact course interactions. According to Vrba and Mitchell (2019), explorations and implementation of technological innovations such as streaming services, podcasts, social media, artificial intelligence, and augmented reality for students may enhance the experiences of the growing population of digital learners.

Finally, this study was conducted during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which had a deep impact on all levels of education. COVID-19 forced most traditional K-12 schools and traditional brick-and-mortar universities in the United States and around the world to deliver instruction in a remote format. Before COVID-19, the growth and development of online programs was a strategy for brick-and-mortar schools at K-12 school districts and throughout higher education (Gemin et al., 2015). Beck and LaFrance (2017) reported that many high schools started forming partnerships with state-run virtual schools and, in some cases, developing their online courses. However, the serious and lasting effects of COVID-19 on

education delivery is an area of great interest and worthy of research. Participants in the present research study were enrolled in asynchronous courses for their online experience, but many had friends and family members who attended remote learning classes using synchronous or blended strategies. Remote learning was being conducted in many different formats – asynchronous, synchronous, blended models, and hybrid models. New technologies and applications were introduced in an unprecedented fashion. Both qualitative and quantitative studies on how universities, K-12 schools, students, teachers, parents, and school leaders were affected by COVID-19 could greatly benefit the body of empirical research. Specifically, a case study could be conducted to examine the ways universities and schools adapted to remote learning and to examine whether those institutions with existing online programs were better prepared to shift to fully online courses in all academic areas.

## Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the shared lived experiences of traditional high school graduates while taking their first online course at a university in the Northeast. The central question used to guide the research was: What are the lived experiences of undergraduate university students who graduated from a traditional public high school in taking an online course for the first time during their first year of college? The intent of this question was to provide stakeholders a rich description of the lived experiences of traditional high school graduates taking an online course for the first time, as well as to create an opportunity for participants to provide insight and feedback into online education as a whole.

This study included 11 participants who were graduates of a traditional high school and took an online course for the first time in college. Data were collected using individual interviews, a focus group interview, and a narrative reflective journal. Interviews were

transcribed, coded, categorized, and grouped for data for analysis. NVivo software was used to conduct the data analysis, which followed the recommendations and processes outlined by Moustakas (1994). Four major themes emerged from this study: (a) flexibility, (b) disconnectedness, (c) challenges of online coursework, and (d) learning preferences. The findings of this study corroborated previous findings from research related to online learning and confirmed that each participant had unique perceptions and experiences while enrolled in an online course for the first time.

The implications of this study can be aligned to theoretical, empirical, and practical applications. Theoretical implications of the findings were that students used digital devices, specialized technology applications, and media to improve learning in the online environment. Empirical implications added valuable information to the body of research about the perspectives and experiences of students who were new to the online environment and had taken an online course for the first time. Practical implications included ways for students to prepare for online courses, engage in the online environment, and share experiences to support new online learners. Finally, areas of future research are connected to online readiness, improved course interactions, and the impact of COVID-19 on online learning.

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which accelerated the creation of a brand-new generation of online learners. Children as young as five years old learned online and gained experience navigating online platforms and developing skills to become better self-directed learners during this health crisis. I believe that this historical shift toward online learning will have a significant impact in the future on institutions that deliver online programs. Educators must take of this opportunity to study, analyze, and understand the

lasting impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning across all platforms and capitalize on the new knowledge acquired.

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# APPENDIX A

## IRB Application

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 9, 2020

David Warner
Kenneth Tierce

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY19-20-176 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRADITIONAL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES WHILE TAKING THEIR FIRST ONLINE COURSE IN COLLEGE

Dear David Warner, Kenneth Tierce:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:
101(b):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*
Research Ethics Office

## APPENDIX B

### Student Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient]:

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. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of first-year or second-year college students who are taking their first online course at a medium sized college in the Northeast, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years old or older, graduates of a traditional public high school, and enrolled in an online class for the first time at a university. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in one individual interview (1 hour) and one focus group session (1 hour) and create a one-time reflective journal (1 hour). It should be noted that the individual interview and focus group may need to take place using a video conferencing platform due to the social distancing guidelines of the COVID-19 pandemic. It should take approximately three hours, in total, for participants to complete the procedures listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please click here to complete the initial screening questions. After I have screened all potential participants, I will email a consent document those that have been identified and accepted to take part in the study. Participants will be required to sign and return the consent forms to me. Signatures may be documented in one of several ways: by printing, physically signing, scanning, and emailing them back to me; saving a copy to your computer, typing your name and the date on the forms and emailing them back to me; or via electronic signature software, such as DocuSign.

Sincerely,

David Warner
Doctoral Student
[redacted]

# APPENDIX C

## Professor Email

Dear [Recipient]:

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. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of first-year or second-year college students who are taking their first online course at a medium sized college in the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic, and I am writing to ask for your assistance with this study.

I am currently looking for students to participate in my study, and I am asking that you post information via course announcements and/or email your students about my intended research. I have also attached a copy of my recruitment information, which outlines specific details about the study for your review.

If you identify students who may be interested in participating, please have them contact me at [redacted] to express their interest. In order to participate, candidates will be asked to read the consent form and complete initial screening questions. The consent document is attached to this email and contains additional information about my research.

If you have any questions for me after you have read the consent form, please do not hesitate to contact me at the email listed below.

Sincerely,

David Warner
Doctoral Student
[redacted]

# APPENDIX D

## Consent Form

Title of Study: *A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRADITIONAL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES' EXPERIENCES WHILE TAKING THEIR FIRST ONLINE COURSE IN COLLEGE*

Principal Investigator: David Warner

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Tierce

We invite you to take part in a research study of postsecondary students who graduated from a traditional high school setting while enrolled in online courses at Montgomery State University (MSU). This study seeks to identify and explore the perceptions and understandings of graduates from a traditional high school while enrolled in an online class for the first time. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. We urge you to discuss any questions about this study with our staff members. Talk to your family and friends about it and take your time to make your decision. If you decide to participate, you must sign this form to show that you want to take part.

I. PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH/PROJECT

You are being asked to participate in a research study designed to explore and understand the lived experiences of first- or second-year college students in college while taking their first ever online course at a university in the Northeast.

II. PROCEDURES

After signing this consent form, you will be asked to participate in one (1) interview (1 hour). This semi-structured, open-ended interview will result in the acquisition of information about how you perceived the learning environment while enrolled in an online course for the first time in college. A focus group session (1 hour) will also take place for all participants. Finally, participants will create a narrative reflective journal in which they will be asked to a create personal story using an image, a picture, or meme that most closely represented their experiences in their first online course.

III. Time Duration of the Procedures and Study

If you agree to take part in this study, your involvement will include two separate sessions that last around one hour each and the completion of a reflective journal (1 hour) for total time of three hours.

IV. Discomforts and Risks

There is minimal risk involved in participating in this study. The possible discomfort that you may experience be similar to feelings one is subjected to when completing other questionnaires or interviews. Safeguards to minimizing your discomfort will be that you are free to withdraw your participation at any time without any negative consequence.

V. BENEFITS

You will not directly benefit from taking part in this research study. However, your participation in the study will provide valuable information that may guide future improvements for students who graduate from a traditional high school taking an online class for the first time in college.

VI. EXTENT OF ANONYMITY AND CONFIDENTIALITY

The results of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Your name will be removed from the information you provide, and only a subject number will identify you during analyses. Your name will never be associated with this data. Furthermore, the interviews and observations will be digitally documented with a recorder, and the recordings will be reviewed by David Warner and destroyed after complete analysis has been conducted. Your research records that are reviewed, stored, and analyzed at [redacted] will be kept in a secured area in the primary investigator's home. In the event any publication or presentation results from the research, no personally identifiable information will be shared.

VII. COMPENSATION

No promise or guarantee of benefits has been made to encourage your participation.

VIII. RESEARCH FUNDING

The institution and investigators are NOT receiving any funding or grants for this research study.

IX. VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to participate in this research. If you choose to take part, you have the right to stop at any time. If you decide not to participate or if you decide to stop taking part in the research at a later date, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

X. Contact Information for Questions or Concerns

You have the right to ask any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints or concerns contact David Warner at [redacted] or via email at [redacted] Additionally, you may contact the primary investigator's Faculty Advisor, Dr. Tierce.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant or you have concerns or general questions about the research, contact the chair of the LU IRB. For more information about participation in the research study and about the Institutional Review Board (IRB), a group of people who review the research to protect your rights, please visit Montgomery State University's IRB web site.

X. SUBJECT'S PERMISSION

Before making the decision regarding enrollment in this research you have:

- Discussed this study with an investigator,
- Reviewed the information in this form, and
- Had the opportunity to ask any questions you may have.

Your signature below means that you have received this information, you have asked the questions you currently have about the research, and those questions have been answered. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated form to keep for future reference.

Participant: By signing this consent form, you indicate that you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this research.

_____ _____ _____ _____

Signature of Participant Date Time Printed Name

Person Explaining the Research: Your signature below means that you have explained the research to the participant/participant representative and have answered any questions he/she has about the research.

_____ _____ _____ _____

# APPENDIX E

## Interview Invitation Email to Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study *A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRADITIONAL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES' EXPERIENCES WHILE TAKING THEIR FIRST ONLINE COURSE IN COLLEGE*. Please reply and let me know which day and time during the next two weeks is the most convenient for you to meet to conduct your interview. After the interview has been completed, I will also make a request for you to send relevant personal documentation and other information that relate to the study. These documents will be analyzed and reviewed to help me understand how you reflected upon your experiences during the study.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

David Warner
Doctoral Student

# APPENDIX F

## Focus Group Interview Invitation Email to Participants

Dear [Recipient]:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in an on-campus focus group for the research study *A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF TRADITIONAL PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES' EXPERIENCES WHILE TAKING THEIR FIRST ONLINE COURSE IN COLLEGE*. The focus group will meet at TBD p.m. on TBD, at the address listed below. Please send me an email if you have any questions. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

David Warner
Doctoral Student

## APPENDIX G

## Pre-Interview Questionnaire

Program of Study / Major:

1. What year are you currently in?

a. Freshman

b. Sophomore

2. How many credits have you earned so far?

a. 0-15 credits

b. 16-30 credits

c. 31-45 credits

d. 46-60 credits

e. greater than 60 credits

3. What is your current GPA?

a. 3.5 or above

b. 3.0 - 3.49

c. 2.5 - 2.99

d. 2.0 - 2.49

e. Below 2.0

4. How many online courses have you completed?

5. In how many online courses are you currently enrolled?

6. Do you attend full-time or part-time?

7. Gender: Female Male Neutral

8. Race/ethnicity:

a. American Indian / Alaska Native

b. Asian

c. Black or African American

d. Hispanic

e. Native Hawaiian / Pacific Islander

f. White

g. Two or more races

h. Prefer not to respond / Unknown

# APPENDIX H

## Individual Interview Questions

1. Describe how and why you decided to take an online course.
2. Before enrolling, what aspects of an online course were you excited or worried about?
3. Before enrolling, what aspects of an online course did you think would be beneficial or detrimental to your overall learning? (If so, what?)
4. Describe your experience taking your online class(es). (SQ1)
5. Describe your experience with the online technologies that you utilized. (SQ1)
6. What are your perceptions about the quality of teaching and learning while enrolled in your online course? (SQ2)
7. How would you compare your online course(s) to your traditional face-to-face course(s)? (SQ2)
8. What difficulties (if any) did you experience in your online course? (SQ3)
9. Do you perceive that your unfamiliarity impacted your experiences with your online course? (If yes, then how?). (SQ3)
10. Describe how well you were prepared for your online class. (SQ3)
11. Did you experience any benefits by taking an online course? (If yes, what where they?) (SQ4)
12. What are your overall perceptions and/or feelings about taking an online course for the first time in college? (CRQ)
13. What else would you like to add about online coursework?

# APPENDIX I

## Focus Group Guiding Questions

1. Talk about your experience while taking your first online course. How did most teaching and learning take place? What were your feelings toward online classes at that point in time? (SQ1)
2. Recall the time before you had to take your first online course. What things did you consider before taking the course? What course did you take? Tell me about your expectations of the course.
3. What factors or challenges would prevent you from taking an online class while enrolled in college again? (SQ3)
4. How would you describe the benefits of taking an online course as compared to a traditional face-to-face course? Were there any skills or personal characteristics that you feel made you successful? (SQ4)
5. Do you feel that the coursework in the online class was academically rigorous and challenged you? (SQ2)
6. Suppose you had to take an online course in high school as a graduation requirement. Tell me how you think that would have impacted you experience taking your first online class? (CRQ)

# APPENDIX J

## Narrative Reflection Prompt

Directions:

Find or think of an image, a picture, or meme that most closely relates to your experiences in each of the stages of taking an online course.

• Please copy/paste the image in the appropriate stage listed below.

• Beneath each selected visual, please briefly describe how and why the selected visual most closely resembles your feelings of the experience. Please write as much or as little as you think is necessary to explain why you chose that visual.

1) Before taking the online course

2) The midpoint of the online class

3) Near the end of the online course