

MOTIVATION IN STUDENT RETENTION: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF NON-
TRADITIONAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN ONLINE LEARNING

by

Jasmine Reynolds

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology study was to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university in Virginia. The self-determination theory, which guided this study, explained the motivated behaviors of intrinsic and extrinsic needs that affect the determination in non-traditional students completing a task. Self-determination theory provided the theoretical framework to answer the central research question for this study as well as the sub-questions: (1) What are the lived experiences of non-traditional students while taking online courses at a public or private university in Virginia? (2) What influences non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to persist in online learning? (3) What motivates non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to attend online education? (4) What strategies would help drive non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to complete their online education? This study used a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design where two public universities and one private university were contacted, but due to the lack of participants from the public universities, all 13 participants came from a private university in Virginia. The data was collected through a screening questionnaire, questionnaire, semi-structured interview, and a journal prompt. The interviews were transcribed. The results provided four themes: self, online experiences, motivation, and strategies of non-traditional student's experiences with taking online classes at a public or private university in Virginia. The study's findings showed that there is a need for administrators and faculty to improve non-traditional students' online retention.

Keywords: motivation, non-traditional, online, persistence, student retention

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, sister, and my fiancé. They have pushed me through this journey!

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my chair, Dr. Shante Austin, for the support and encouragement through this challenging and lengthy process. I would also like to thank Dr. Justin Necessary for their support and assistance as well!

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List of Abbreviations

Charlie University (CU)

James University (JU)

Tree University (TU)

Learning Management System (LMS)

Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Technology has evolved education, and there is a growing demand for online learning and improving technology in higher education (Sublet, 2019). Institutions providing more online courses and programs increase student enrollment based on the flexibility to take the courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Sivo et al., 2018). Online learning does not have a set location, time, and it is flexible for students to attend school while being employed (Muljana & Luo, 2019). The population that tends to be more attracted to attending online learning is non-traditional students (Slover & Mandernach, 2018). Non-traditional students enrolled in online programs have increased by 35 percent from 2001 and 2015 (Stephen et al., 2020). Non-traditional students tend to excel in online learning than traditional students due to being more organized (Woods & Frogge, 2017). Even though online learning attracts specific populations of students, the dropout rates are high. Online courses' attrition rates are significantly higher than traditional face-to-face courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Sivo et al., 2018). Some students do not retain due to the lack of student support services while taking online courses (Travers, 2016). The lack of student support services can affect student motivation and their attitude towards taking online classes. The lack of motivation for students will decrease their persistence in their online classes (de Barba et al., 2016). This current study focused on understanding motivation in non-traditional students while taking online courses. Additionally, in this chapter, the background and the situation to self was discussed. The problem statement and purpose statement were addressed. The significance of the study was explained. Research questions and definitions were listed. Finally, this chapter ended with a summary.

Background

Online learning has become extremely popular over the years. According to Muljana and Luo (2019), online courses have a popular demand in institutions where the rapid growth in technology has increased enrollment for online learning. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2015) describes non-traditional students as single caregivers who are independent on their financial aid and attend school part-time while working full time. Additionally, non-traditional students transfer from different institutions or leave higher education, and re-enroll later (NCES, 2019). Non-traditional students tend to be the most significant number of students who attend online courses (Slover & Mandernach, 2018). There was a seven percent increase in enrollment in distance education from the Fall 2012- Fall 2014 (Allen et al., 2016). Many institutions are still growing by adding distance education programs, while traditional face-to-face institutions have declining enrollment (Allen et al., 2016). According to Lederman (2019), 34.7 percent of students were enrolled in at least one online course in Fall 2018. Online learning provides positive benefits to students who can attend classes while having a life outside of school. Additionally, online learning provides students the flexibility of time, location, and using their computers to access the course (Scarpin et al., 2018; Sivo et al., 2018). The growing demand for online courses in institutions has increased enrollment but retaining student enrollment has created an issue.

Historical Context

Since the late 1800s, student retention and persistence have been an ongoing issue for institutions (Boston et al., 2019). There have been research studies on student retention since 1926, and publications on student retention have increased since the 1970s with various researchers such as Tinto (Boston et al., 2019). When students did not stay in school, they were

considered less motivated, and they failed themselves, not the institutions (Tinto, 2007). During the 1970s, the view of student retention changed, where it was the institution's environment causing the students to choose to stay in school or leave school (Tinto, 2007). Tinto's (1975) book and article were one of the first to discuss the longitudinal model to show connections between social systems and academics in institutions (Tinto, 2007). Sorensen and Donovan (2017) and Stephen et al. (2020) investigated student retention with non-traditional students. According to Meyer et al. (2019), student retention in online programs is affected by the institution's environment. Online programs have high enrollment, but students dropped out due to personal reasons and technical problems with taking online courses (Meyer et al., 2019). Some other reasons students dropped out from online programs were due to time restraints from work and other obligations, which tend to be non-traditional students (Meyer et al., 2019).

Social Context

Online learning has high attrition rates (Bawa, 2016; Hsu et al., 2019). Institutions with online learning have lower retention rates when compared to the traditional face-to-face classroom setting for students (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Distance and self-paced online programs tend to lack support for helping students complete their program and not drop out (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Older college students are more likely to take online courses than younger students (Sublett, 2019). Non-traditional students are projected to double the rate of traditional students by 2021 (Woods & Frogge, 2017). Non-traditional students tend to have high dropout rates (Bohl et al., 2017). To effectively complete online classes, students must have self-motivation and manage their time, typically found in non-traditional students (Travers, 2016). Additionally, non-traditional students have a different learning style than traditional students, where they need to know what they learn will benefit them or how it will apply to their lives

(Maxfield & Noll, 2017). Non-traditional students' learning style causes the teaching style to change in the online classrooms. Students change their learning habits by becoming more organized and managing their time to complete online tasks (Maxfield & Noll, 2017). Most importantly, the value and beliefs of students affect their motivation to complete a task (de Barba et al., 2016). In that case, this can lead to motivation affecting student retention for non-traditional students.

Theoretical Context

The researchers have examined motivation through self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Self-determination theory can increase perceived competence and autonomy when the online learning environment supports the interests and choices of students (Alamri et al., 2020). Self-motivation and time management skills are necessary to complete online courses (Travers, 2016). Xiong et al. (2015) explained that there needs to be a high level of self-motivation to succeed in an online course. Students who lack motivation will have a decrease in persistence in their online classes (de Barba et al., 2016). Some current studies use self-determination theory to understand students' motivation persisting (Alamri et al., 2020; Sun et al., 2019). This study provided experiences of non-traditional students with taking online classes. This study benefits the faculty and administrators in institutions to evaluate their online programs to make improvements to address the needs of non-traditional students by expanding on the Deci and Ryan (1980, 1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000) theory on motivation.

Problem Statement

The problem is that student retention is a challenge for online learning (Boston et al., 2019; Sivo et al., 2018; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xing, 2019). Online learning has higher

attrition rates than traditional learning (Boston et al., 2019; Sivo et al., 2018; Xing, 2019). A small number of students persist to the end of their online courses (de Barba et al., 2016). Institutions and faculty are still having challenges in resolving why students drop out of online education (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). The attrition rates are still high for non-traditional students, even though enrollment rates are steady (Bohl et al., 2017). To complete online courses, students need to have self-motivation and time management, which are more likely found in non-traditional students (Travers, 2016). Some adults may not feel as confident with using technology, which can influence communication and motivation with online classes (Kuo & Belland, 2016).

Attitudes and beliefs of a student are correlated to accepting technology (Scarpin et al., 2018). Adult learners prefer using online classes but have low technology usage and skills, which they may feel unprepared to learn online (Bawa, 2016). Student motivation can be linked to their attitudes to learning and using technology based on the lack of available resources, support systems, and time to complete online courses (Bawa, 2016). Additionally, student's perception of not passing online courses discourages them from wanting to take or finish future online courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology study is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university. Understanding why students continue each semester may help administrators and faculty in online learning create strategies to improve online education and engagement (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Non-traditional students tend to have more intrinsic motivation and value the internal reward of learning (Woods & Frogge, 2017). Additionally, students satisfied with their

learning experiences can influence them to complete classes and increase student retention (Kuo & Belland, 2016). At this stage in the research, online student retention was generally defined as students who continue to enroll and participate in online courses each semester (Scarpin et al., 2018). The theory that guided this study was the self-determination theory by Deci and Ryan (1980). Deci and Ryan (1980) explained that motivated behaviors of intrinsic and extrinsic needs affect the determination of non-traditional students to complete a task.

Significance of the Study

In this study, the non-traditional students explained their experiences with persisting in online classes at a public or a private university. The findings in this study were significant because they can improve non-traditional dropout rates (Bohl et al., 2017). The results could provide more insight on non-traditional student populations and institutions meeting their needs (Bergman, 2016). This study better understood motivation to assist with persistence (Stephen et al., 2020). Finally, the results can provide institutions strategies to help them with improving their online programs through institutional support and faculty support (Glazier, 2016; Muljana et al., 2019).

Theoretical

The self-determination theory, which is the guiding theory for this study, examined motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The self-determination theory provides positive outcomes when psychological needs, such as autonomy, competence, and relatedness are satisfied (Hsu et al., 2019). Students that have self-determination can improve their learning outcomes and motivation (Hsu et al., 2019). According to Bawa (2016), accountability and motivation are correlated to online student retention. Motivation is one of the main factors contributing to low student retention and low learning outcomes (Hsu et al., 2019).

Additionally, self-determination theory can increase perceived competence and autonomy when the online learning environment supports the interests and choices of students (Alamri et al., 2020). The results of this study resulted in a better understanding of the experiences of non-traditional students completing their online classes.

Empirical

Online learning creates a flexible delivery method to access education for all students, but there is still an issue with dropout rates in online courses. The purpose of this study was to fill the gap in the literature on the problem that student retention is a challenge for online learning, and little research was presented on the experiences and perceptions of non-traditional students taking online learning (Boston et al., 2019; Maxfield & Noll, 2017; Sivo et al., 2018; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xing, 2019). Online learning retention rates are lower than traditional face-to-face courses (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). There are 36 million Americans that have postsecondary education and training but did not complete their degree (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). The current literature on non-traditional students reports that students drop out due to personal reasons, work responsibilities, or lack of financial and academic support. There is little research on the motivation of non-traditional students to persist in online classes. Results from this study can assist institutions of higher education with providing more effective strategies to assist the non-traditional students, which may include social engagement strategies, improving faculty rapport, and institutional support (Boston et al., 2019; Glazier, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Non-traditional students tend to take online courses and increase enrollment due to the convenience and benefit of their career and skills (Stephen et al., 2020). This study can offer guidance in meeting the needs of non-traditional students when taking online classes (Woods & Frogge, 2017).

Practical

Non-traditional students tend to have high dropout rates (Bohl et al., 2017; Stephen et al., 2020). Non-traditional students are less understood (Bergman, 2016). Additionally, non-traditional students have barriers preventing them from persisting, such as finances, family, and work (Johnson et al., 2016; Woods & Frogge, 2017; Xu & Jagers, 2014). Results of this study could provide support and receive feedback from students to assist them with improving their online programs (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Most importantly, student perception can change the effort and completion of students taking online courses. Student perceptions are related to the quality of how students view and represent themselves in an online environment, which can affect student retention (Ellis, 2016). The results of this study may suggest services and retention inventions to assist with academic performance for non-traditional students (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Additionally, students are more likely to re-enroll in public universities than private universities (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019). In that case, for this transcendental phenomenology study, the participants were focused on coming from a public or private university.

Research Questions

In this study, transcendental phenomenology was used to understand motivation in student retention for non-traditional students taking online courses. The central research question and the three sub-questions helped understand the motivation of non-traditional students and provide strategies to improve online learning.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of non-traditional students while taking online courses at a public or private university in Virginia?

Online students have various factors that influence students to drop out of colleges, such as disability issues, mental health, and first-generation college student (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). There is a low persistence rate with students taking online courses due to low motivation (de Barba et al., 2016).

Sub-Question One

What influences non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to persist in online learning?

The first question is to figure out different factors that influence non-traditional students to retain in online classes. Online retention is influenced through self-efficacy, internal and external factors (Gaytan, 2015).

Sub-Question Two

What motivates non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to attend online education?

The second question is trying to discover the motivators of non-traditional students to want to take online classes. There are benefits to taking online courses, such as flexibility of time and location (Scarpin et al., 2018). Online courses attract students to enroll because of the ability to choose courses and to lower time constraints to commuting (Travers, 2016).

Sub-Question Three

What strategies would help drive non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to complete their online education?

Finally, the last question is trying to figure out the improvements that online courses and institutions can make based on the perspective of the participant. There are various institutions

trying to resolve challenges by finding the best strategies to engage students in online learning to improve retention (Dodson, 2017).

Definitions

The terms used in this study include:

1. *Motivation*- Motivation is a goal-directed activity initiated and achieved (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018).
2. *Non-traditional*- Non-traditional students range from 25 to 50 years old attending higher education, including full and part-time enrollment, and delayed postsecondary enrollment (Stephen et al., 2020).
3. *Online learning*- Online learning is a flexible combination of internet learning, e-learning, virtual and web-based learning, communication technologies, and electronic media (Muljana & Luo, 2019).
4. *Persistence*- Persistence is the willingness for students to continue with their courses (Jung & Lee, 2018).
5. *Self-determination*- Self-determination is an action from an individual's free will and mind that is not influenced by external situations (Bawa, 2016).
6. *Student perception*- Student perception is the quality of the learned experiences and satisfaction in a course (Kuo & Belland, 2016).
7. *Student retention*- Student retention is the continued participation in courses each semester to complete the course and program (Scarpin et al., 2018).

Summary

This chapter discussed the topic of motivation in student retention for non-traditional students taking online classes. A summary of the related research literature, theoretical

framework, and research questions was described. The research focused on discovering strategies to assist non-traditional students who persisted with online classes. The results described the experiences of non-traditional students and created themes to understand the meaning of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The problem is that online student retention is still a significant challenge (Boston et al., 2019; Sivo et al., 2018; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xing, 2019). Additionally, non-traditional students have high attritions rates (Bohl et al., 2017). Furthermore, this study is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university. In chapter two, there is a discussion of the literature review. In chapter three, the methodology was presented. In chapter four, the findings of the research study are described. In chapter five, the conclusion, implications, and future recommendations are explained.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The literature was reviewed on understanding motivation in student retention for non-traditional students taking online courses at a public or a private university. Student retention is a challenge with online learning (Boston et al., 2019; Sivo et al., 2018; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xing, 2019). Some research focuses on traditional students and their persistence in a traditional face-to-face college setting. There is little research on non-traditional students and their motivation to continue taking online classes. This chapter provides a literature review on motivation in student retention for non-traditional students taking online classes.

The purpose of this literature review is to examine the research that was conducted on motivation in student retention on the experiences of non-traditional students taking online courses at a public or a private university. Self-determination theory guided this study and assisted with understanding motivation in non-traditional students. The order of this chapter began with research on the self-determination theory. There was a synthesis of literature about the motivation in non-traditional students and what encouraged them to continue being enrolled and taking online classes. Some of the experiences in the current literature can be utilized with non-traditional students at a public university or private university (Kuo & Belland, 2016; Sivo et al., 2018; Slover & Mandernach, 2018; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Woods & Frogge, 2017). Future research suggested more understanding of student retention and institutions to provide strategies for improving student retention (Bawa, 2016; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Lastly, the chapter concluded with a summary of the problem, a gap in the literature that was identified, showing a need for this current study.

Theoretical Framework

The self-determination theory guided this study (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory explains the drive and motivation that influences students to persist through online courses. This theory assisted with forming the central research question and the sub-questions to discover the experiences of non-traditional students taking online courses at a public or a private university. The data analysis was influenced by the self-determination theory, which explained students' motivation to continue taking online classes through the next school year. This theoretical lens and the related literature explained motivation and the experiences that encourage student retention in non-traditional students taking online classes in an undergraduate program.

The online environment connects students with their peers to create a learning community where knowledge is shared (Goldie, 2016). Non-traditional students are 25 to 50 years old and are enrolled part-time or full-time at an institution (Stephen et al., 2020; Woods & Frogge, 2017). The population of non-traditional students has increased enrollment in online programs (Bohl et al., 2017; Stephen et al., 2020; Woods & Frogge, 2017). Non-traditional students have high attrition rates (Bohl et al., 2017; Witkowsky et al., 2016). Travers (2016) believed that self-motivation is necessary for online students. Zhang et al. (2019) explained that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation are predictors of student engagement and retention. Additionally, using the Deci and Ryan (1980) self-determination theory provided insight on motivation and the experiences of non-traditional students taking online courses.

Self-Determination Theory

The thoughts, motives, feelings, and attitudes of a person are all related to behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Deci and Ryan (1980) argued that the brain has an important function that affects

the body, causing all emotions and feelings to unleash, while the mind figures out the different behaviors, such as motivated behaviors. Deci and Ryan (1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000) discussed that motivation is derived from the energy and direction of a behavior. Motivation explores the needs and structures of people, while motivational theories organize the explored needs and structures (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Deci and Ryan (1980) explained that one of the motivational theories is self-determination, which provides two types of motivated behaviors: intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is a person being self-determined, where a person chooses consciously, while extrinsic motivation is when a person is having automated behaviors, where a person chooses unconsciously (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Ryan and Deci (2000) believed that people could be motivated through valuing an activity, interest, or external reward. Self-determination provides different types of motivation where each affects student learning, which is well-being, personal experiences, and performances (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Student-motivated behavior is guided by self-determination when their psychological needs, autonomy, relatedness, and competence are fulfilled (Alamri et al., 2020; Hsu et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2019). Once a person's psychological needs are fulfilled, their wellness, psychological interest, and development are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Learners' autonomy is correlated with self-determination, affecting a student's online course success (Lloh, 2019). Additionally, fulfilling psychological needs will enhance self-motivation and well-being but decrease motivation and well-being if the needs are not fulfilled (Liu et al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Autonomy is one's action that comes from oneself, where one can freely choose their actions (Liu et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2019). Autonomy operates with a feeling of integrated and volitional that is associated with it (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Competence is a sense of confidence, where one shows their capacities (Liu et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2019). Competence is an important

role in motivation, where one feels they need confidence to effectively operate their life (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Having confidence helps strive and energize motivated behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Relatedness is being in a secure community with others, where one can feel acceptance and support from others (Liu et al., 2014; Sun et al., 2019). People can experience the sense of belonging and relatedness if they show kindness or contribute to a group that they are a part of (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Liu et al. (2014) found that the anxiousness from having poor academic grades can be resolved by enhancing one's need satisfaction through autonomy support. Online learning environments provide autonomy, where technological expansion is correlated with competence, and social interactions through computer media relate to student's relatedness (Durksen et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2019).

Self-determination promotes positive outcomes when students experience the capability and connections with others to complete a task (Hsu et al., 2019). Non-traditional students tend to adapt to learning tasks and setting goals to master the content, which focuses on competency (Johnson et al., 2016). Johnson et al. (2016) suggest that non-traditional students tend to have more intrinsic motivation than traditional students due to students taking instructors' advice more seriously and finding education more useful. Instructors can help encourage intrinsic goals if they help their students view the long-term personal growth of the activities (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). For example, a student will be more engaged in a learning activity, and fully understanding it will help build their competence. If there is an extrinsic goal, it will increase students' rote learning, and it will be a short-term goal that will decrease persistence and interest in the activity (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Extrinsic Motivation

Extrinsic motivation affects a person's attitude towards an activity and why they are conducting the activity (Deci, 1971). Sun et al. (2019) and Ryan and Deci (2017) described extrinsic motivation as an activity done to obtain a separable outcome. Ryan and Deci (2017) explained that extrinsic motivation can be a social approval, external reward, or an outcome that is valued. According to Deci and Ryan (1980), extrinsic motivation is based on acquired needs and drives, such as status or money. The reward is separate from the effect and behavior, where the external reward is the motivation for one's behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Extrinsic motivation varies in relative autonomy, such as a student does their homework because they value their chosen career or a student does their homework to follow their parents' orders (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Intrinsic Motivation

Deci (1971) described intrinsic motivation as innate or learned and that a person can be innately motivated to perform or do an activity. Intrinsic motivation can be an experience, enjoyment, or interest, where one will receive no external reward, only the activity that provides satisfaction (Deci, 1971; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). The biological basis of an intrinsically motivated activity is development and learning (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). Engaging in activities that allow people to feel personal causation, effectance, and competence are intrinsically motivated (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). According to Deci and Ryan (1980), some behaviors are based on the intrinsic need for self-determination and competence, such as climbing a mountain or practicing basketball. This causes an intrinsic satisfaction (Deci & Ryan, 1980).

Deci and Ryan (1980) and Ryan and Deci (2000) found that students tend to have less intrinsic motivation when educators teach with a controlling approach. Students have more

intrinsic motivation when teachers are more autonomy-oriented (Deci & Ryan, 1980; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Teachers that listen, ask questions, and allow students to work on assignments independently increase intrinsic motivation (Liu et al., 2014). Additionally, students having a voice and choice can be increased when teachers are autonomy supportive (Durksen et al., 2016). Ryan and Deci (2000) argued that deadlines, evaluations, and rewards decrease intrinsic motivation, which showed locus of causality, while self-direction and choice increased intrinsic motivation showing the feeling of autonomy. Intrinsic motivation influences those who have self-organized behaviors than extrinsic motivation (Sun et al., 2019). Sun et al. (2019) found that intrinsic motivation and building quality relationships predict the psychological engagement of students in an online course. Additionally, promoting intrinsic motivation in students can encourage students to stay in school (Sun et al., 2019; Xiong et al., 2015).

Amotivation

Ryan and Deci (2000) added a third motivational subsystem of self-determination theory called amotivation where people act without any intent. According to Deci and Ryan (1980), amotivation is a belief in a non-relationship of the outcome and behaviors, characterized by nonactivity instead of intrinsic and extrinsic behaviors. An example is that a depressed person would not act but believe or feel of hopelessness (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Amotivation is when one goes through the motions, not valuing an activity or not feeling competent to fulfill an activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Amotivation deals with consistency within a behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1980). For example, having consistency with motivation and self-esteem with a more controlled teacher, students have less intrinsic motivation and less self-esteem (Deci & Ryan, 1980).

In that case, the self-determination theory was used to understand the motivation of non-traditional students when taking online courses at a public or a private university. Online learners

have various reasons why they partake in online courses, such as meeting their needs by being self-determined (Bawa, 2016). There is little research on self-determination theory in online environments (Hsu et al., 2019). Ryan and Deci (2000) have focused their self-determination theory on students in the classroom and adults at the workplace. They believed that fulfilling autonomy, relatedness, and competency will effectively motivate people who want to motivate others to be committed and have high-quality performances (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Sun et al. (2019) explained that students are more intrinsically driven to share knowledge and participate with others in online classes.

Additionally, self-motivated, independent learners tend to do better in online classes (Glazier, 2016). The self-determination theory can increase the perceived competence and autonomy when the interests and choices of students are supported in online learning (Alamri et al., 2020). Using self-determination theory can provide more insight and understanding of the experiences of non-traditional students completing their online classes.

This literature synthesis discussed student motivation in student retention and non-traditional students taking online classes. This study provided more understanding of Deci and Ryan's (1980, 1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000) self-determination theory. Furthermore, the experiences of non-traditional students taking online classes at a public or a private university were examined.

Related Literature

The Deci and Ryan (1980, 1985) and Ryan and Deci (2000) self-determination theory provided a theoretical framework for this study, and the related literature review provided the background for this study. Different experiences are highlighted in this literature review on non-traditional students using motivation to complete their online courses. Each student's experience

relates to fulfilling the psychological needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competency.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), fulfilling psychological needs is essential. One cannot thrive without fulfilling all their psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Motivation is crucial to student persistence in online learning (Zhang et al., 2019).

Non-traditional students are one of the underrepresented groups in higher education (Witkowski et al., 2016). There is an increase of non-traditional students attending higher education, and compared to traditional students, academic achievement is more significant in non-traditional students (Johnson et al., 2016; Woods & Frogge, 2017). Older non-traditional students tend to outperform traditional students in online courses (Woods & Frogge, 2017). Online learning provides more opportunities to students, such as flexibility of taking the class self-paced, location, and cost-effective (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018).

Non-Traditional Students

Since the mid-1800s, non-traditional students have been enrolled in higher education (Remenick, 2019). In the 1920s, normal schools, later called teacher colleges in 1940, focused on forming quality teachers (Remenick, 2019). The normal schools consisted of older adults with low socioeconomic status and family and work obligations and enrolled part-time for school (Remenick, 2019). Additionally, normal schools supported non-traditional students by enhancing leadership skills, building community, and engaging in college activities (Remenick, 2019).

Non-traditional students, also called adult learners, are 25 years and older students enrolled part-time or full-time at an institution (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019; Stephen et al., 2020; Woods & Frogge, 2017). Additionally, non-traditional students are characterized as students who balance life, family, work, and attending school (NCES, 2015; Turner et al., 2018; Zerquera et

al., 2018). Non-traditional students outperform traditional students when taking online courses because they are well-organized and flexible (Woods & Frogge, 2017).

Non-traditional student enrollment is rapidly increasing in higher education (Renirie, 2017). According to Remenick (2019), a quarter of the student population in college is traditional. The non-traditional student rate is projected to double by 2021 compared to traditional students (Johnson et al., 2016; Woods & Frogge, 2017). Another 11 percent of the non-traditional learners will increase by 2026 (Stephen et al., 2020). There are 74 percent of undergraduate students in the United States of America are classified as non-traditional (Guidry, 2018). However, non-traditional students have high attritions rates than traditional students (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Bohl et al., 2017; Stephen et al., 2020; Zerquera et al., 2018). First-year adults have a higher drop-out rate than traditional students (Renirie, 2017). Additionally, non-traditional students tend to have more financial hardship, higher levels of stress-related to academic success, and more outside commitments that cause lower graduation rates and higher attrition than traditional students (Zerquera et al., 2018).

Non-traditional students are less understood, even though they have an increasing percentage of student enrollment in colleges and universities (Bergman, 2016). Non-traditional students are driven to attend higher education to expand their career options and achieve a degree due to unemployment or illness (Renirie, 2017). Older students are more likely to attend a university to accomplish a dream, or they may have had negative experiences from attending school, which are powerful influences on retention (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). There are challenging barriers for non-traditional students, such as finances, family, and work (Johnson et al., 2016; Woods & Frogge, 2017; Xu & Jagers, 2014). Additionally, non-traditional students' background affects them, such as handling multiple roles and responsibilities in their lives

(Remenick, 2019). Non-traditional students can feel lonely or marginalized when faculty and staff expectations are not flexible and supportive of fitting the needs of non-traditional students (Remenick, 2019). Non-traditional students who continue taking classes each semester can provide more insight into improving student retention in online programs for non-traditional students.

Traditional Students

Traditional students are classified as students under 25 years old (Woods & Frogge, 2017). Traditional students depend on their parents financially, enroll directly into college from high school with full-time credits, and continue to graduation without interruptions (Remenick, 2019; Zerquera et al., 2018). Additionally, traditional students live on campus (Remenick, 2019). Traditional students are more likely to persist than non-traditional students (Baugus, 2020; Bergman, 2016).

Some research has shown a difference in persistence. Ellis (2019) found that non-traditional students are more likely to persist than traditional students. Additionally, Ellis (2019) found that non-traditional students were more willing to participate in the study and courses than traditional students. A reason non-traditional students have more willingness than traditional students is based on their academic growth in the courses (Ellis, 2019; Grabowski et al., 2016). Non-traditional students tend to be motivated by their curiosity in their academic course activities (Bergman et al., 2014; Ellis, 2019). Traditional students are becoming less of the norm, and more students in the United States' colleges and universities enroll in college after 24 years of age, commute, and attend multiple institutions (Remenick, 2019).

University and College

There were 17.5 million students in the United States enrolled in colleges and universities in postsecondary degrees (Barbera et al., 2020; Kena et al., 2015). The undergraduate population is projected to increase to 20 million by 2024 (Barbera et al., 2020). The growing demands for colleges and institutions have increased nationwide based on the college degree needs and cultural perspectives (Barbera et al., 2020). Colleges and universities are having little success in increasing student retention (Bergman, 2016; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xing, 2019). Tinto (2012) explains that institutional attrition is higher in students' first year and will continue to decline. Public and private four-year universities and colleges have 38 percent of first-year students drop out and 29 percent the following year (Tinto, 2012).

For-profit institutions were the early providers of adult higher education, and they have provided poor-quality degrees and unfair recruitment practices (Bergman, 2016). Increased accountability is providing more positive results for non-profit and for-profit institutions (Bergman, 2016). Additionally, for-profit, and non-selective public institutions use online courses aggressively for their students (Bettinger et al., 2017).

Private four-year colleges enroll one-third or higher of adults, and adults make up 27 percent of the undergraduate population nationally (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019). Less than one-third of non-traditional students attend four-year public institutions (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019). According to Woods and Frogge (2017), nearly half of part-time enrollment is consisted older adults at the age of 25 and older at four-year colleges and universities. Part-time enrollment will grow faster than full-time enrollment, where non-traditional student populations will increase (Woods & Frogge, 2017). Non-traditional students attending a four-year college are likely exposed to an environment that is set up for traditional students that have enrolled in college directly from high school, compared to students in the community college setting (Kamer &

Ishitani, 2019). Institutions with two- and four-year degrees tend to follow policies that favor traditional students (Rabourn et al., 2018).

Institutions provide flexible evenings, weekends, and online classes to accommodate non-traditional students (Berman, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019). The challenge is that accelerated degree programs provide a 40 percent graduation rate, and 60 percent of non-traditional students are still dropping out before they graduate (Bergman, 2016). Some private universities have graduated about 90 percent of their students, while some public universities have graduated less than 30 percent (Tinto, 2012). The institutions that are more selective in enrolling their students, such as students having high grades, college-educated families, and test scores, tend to have higher graduation and retention rates (Tinto, 2012).

Online Learning

Online learning has increased in popularity in higher education (Dodson, 2017; Glazier, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Online learning is accepted worldwide by various universities in the United States and Internationally (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Online education increases access to higher education to various communities and students, contributing to institutional leaders' popularity to use online learning (Lloh, 2019). Online learning has been a growing trend since 2015, and 67.8 percent of students prefer to take online programs at four-year universities (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Over 31 percent of students enrolled in Fall 2016 postsecondary education took at least one online course (Lloh, 2019). The rapid growth of technology has led institutions enrollment to expand for online programs (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Institution's value online learning due to helping reduce costs (Edmonds et al., 2021). Additionally, the internet has grown to influence distance education for two decades (Lansing, 2017). Distance education encourages institutions to use multiple systems to fit a diverse

population of students taking online courses, such as introverted students (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Technology enhances the learning methods in traditional classrooms. Non-traditional students tend to take online courses due to the restrictions of taking courses in a traditional classroom (Slover & Mandernach, 2018). While traditional classroom settings are advancing, this encourages online learning to become famous using various online Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as Blackboard and WebCT (Sivo et al., 2018). Online learning is still advancing with technology, and has some advantages, such as flexibility (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Additionally, online learning allows students to choose their own time, day and use their computers or electronics to take online courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Scarpin et al., 2018; Sivo et al., 2018). Online learning is formatted through online courses and has various online tools to communicate with instructors and classmates, such as discussion boards and emails (Sivo et al., 2018). The online tools may make it easier for students to be creative with technology and more efficient in completing their work.

The flexibility of learning online encourages students worldwide to want to take online courses and have a job outside of school (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Scarpin et al., 2018). Online learning is beneficial to students because it allows them to attend school for convenience and financial benefits (Kuo & Belland, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019). The benefit of institutions having online learning is that it will increase enrollment into online programs and institutions, which is cost-effective (Perna et al., 2014). Online learning allows students more time to study at their own pace and schedule (Lloh, 2019). Learning online provides an opportunity for students to be self-directed and disciplined in their learning (Covelli, 2017). Most importantly, instructors have more flexibility where they do not need to make campus visits, lowering travel costs and

reducing disruptions of emergencies and weather (Covelli, 2017). Additionally, online learning provides students the skills and competencies to work in 21st-century workplaces (Lloh, 2019).

Online learning has its positives of obtaining many students taking online courses, but institutions have low completion rates (Glazier, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019; Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Bawa (2016) explained that online learning has low student retention compared to a traditional classroom setting. Muljana and Luo (2019) explained that the dropout rates are higher in online learning than in traditional classroom learning. Students face challenges of taking online classes caused by the student's characteristics and online environment (Edmonds et al., 2021). Students taking online courses tend to be older adults who are employed and have dependents which leads to struggling with balancing courses (Edmonds et al., 2021). Understanding online learning and how non-traditional students are affected will provide strategies to improve student retention.

Non-traditional students exposed to taking at least one online course will be exposed to asynchronous and synchronous delivery methods through online platforms and online student interaction (Bergman, 2016). Asynchronous classes are online classes with due dates for assignments, exams, and start and end dates for the classes, but do not have a set day and time to meet as a class (Edmonds et al., 2021). Asynchronous requires students to be self-motivated and manage their time (Edmonds et al., 2021). According to Baker et al. (2017), an asynchronous setting does not create a structured environment to manage time. Students having the flexibility to take online classes causes more demand on the students' self-regulatory skills to plan for learning (Baker et al., 2017). Asynchronous and synchronous are effective delivery methods to help online students with student interaction (Banna et al., 2015; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Online learning is increasing in popularity, and students are taking more online courses such as blended learning.

Blended Learning

Blended learning, also called hybrid learning, is another educational method where a LMS uses the curriculum, course materials and is blended in a traditional classroom setting (Steyn & Van Tonder, 2017). Blended learning's effectiveness comes from the ability of the online environment to engage students (Cundell & Sheepy, 2018). Some online engagement activities are videos, discussion boards, and students can collaborate with interactive conversations (Bonafini et al., 2017; Cundell & Sheepy, 2018; Kuo & Belland, 2016). Blended learning is flexible, interactive, and increases the quality of learning for students (Steyn & Van Tonder, 2017). Cundell and Sheepy (2018) found that students were motivated to enroll in blended learning due to the flexibility of taking the courses at any time and fitting the coursework into their schedules. Students in blended learning tend to have more sense of community due to the instructor's presence and motivation (Levy, 2017).

MOOCS

Millions of students enroll in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS), which is growing in popularity (Evans et al., 2016; Sun et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2019). MOOCS can revolutionize and provide easy access to higher education in online learning across the nation (Chang et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2016; Jung & Lee, 2018). MOOCS is a new type of online learning where an unlimited number of students can have free access to course content anywhere worldwide (Durksen et al., 2016). Using MOOCS is cost-effective and can accommodate many students by providing online courses to students with minimal registration requirements (Evans et al., 2016;

Perna et al., 2014). Some institutions strictly have more MOOCS that benefit students who cannot afford to come to a traditional classroom to interact face-to-face (Hone & El Said, 2016).

Students taking MOOCS create goals that affect their behaviors and perceptions (Li et al., 2021). Additionally, MOOCS learners' goal setting predicted their satisfaction and learning of the courses (Li, 2019; Li et al., 2021). MOOCS combine communication tools to form communication with the instructors and students (Zhou, 2017). MOOCS allowed students to connect and discover learning and discussion in a new way (Pursel et al., 2016). This new connection and collaboration with other students are called connectivism MOOCS (Pursel et al., 2016). According to Durksen et al. (2016), connectivism is where knowledge is expanded and used as a connection between learners. The year 2000 to 2007, technology and online learning expanded where the connectivism MOOCS was created to connect networks and knowledge from all over the world (Perna et al., 2014). Students sharing their ideas and engaging with the material learn their best (Durksen et al., 2016).

Learning engagement and motivation in MOOCS influence learning outcomes and performance for students (Jung & Lee, 2018; Li, 2019). A student with higher learning engagement is less likely to drop out of their online program (Sun et al., 2019). MOOCS has large numbers of students that do not continue the courses, causing low completion rates (Evans et al., 2016; Jung & Lee, 2018; Li et al., 2021; Sun et al., 2019). Xing (2019) argued that MOOCS had been criticized for low student performances, achievement, and high attrition rates. Sujatha and Kavitha (2018) explained that low completion rates in MOOCS are due to low motivation and the perceived value of the courses. Various researchers found factors contributing to students completing the MOOCS, but there is limited research on the influence of motivation on MOOCS completion (Zhang et al., 2019). Understanding MOOCS' engagement and

identifying the factors that influence student engagement will help institutions maintain learner engagement and improve student retention (Sun et al., 2019).

Motivation

Gaytan (2015) explained that self-determination motivates students to remain in school and perform well. Some researchers examined the lack of social engagement and motivation for why students do not retain in MOOCS (de Barba et al., 2016; Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018; Sun et al., 2019). Xiong et al. (2015) argued that students need to have a high level of self-motivation to take MOOCS. Motivation is the strongest predictor of engagement and performance in online learning (Xing, 2019). Researchers suggest that to be a successful student while taking online courses, and there needs to be more self-discipline, meta-cognitive skills, and self-regulation than a student would need to use in a traditional face-to-face classroom (Xu & Jagers, 2014). Travers (2016) argued that online students need to have a certain level of self-motivation and time management to learn independently, which are found in non-traditional students.

Motivators, such as internal and external factors, contribute to students dropping out of online courses (Xiong et al., 2015). Kizilcec and Schneider (2015) developed an Online Learning Enrollment Intention scale to capture learners' motivation. Kizilcec and Schneider (2015) found that motivation does help researchers understand online learners and that their behavior outcomes vary based on their internal and external factors. Some motivating factors are students' interests in the subject area, such as value, beliefs, earning a job, and completing a course to receive a certificate (de Barba et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). These factors are classified as extrinsic and intrinsic motivation.

Non-traditional students have more intrinsic motivation than traditional students (Woods & Frogge, 2017). Sun et al. (2019) argued that students are more influential with self-organized

behaviors and more likely to participate in online environments than extrinsic motivation. Non-traditional students tend to approach college with a more precise purpose, take instructors' feedback seriously, and have intrinsic motivation than traditional students (Johnson et al., 2016). Understanding motivation will motivate non-traditional students to pursue online courses and how non-traditional students persist in improving student retention.

Goal Setting

Setting goals are essential to students' learning and affects their behavior by using strategies to achieve their goals such as persistence, effort, and activities (Li et al., 2021). Goals are cognitive representations that influence one's behavior and motivation (Li et al., 2021). Students who set goals will more likely persist by putting forth effort into a task and encouraging them to achieve their goal (Li et al., 2021). Non-traditional students tend to be more goal-focused and show resiliency towards their academics, and deserve more attention to their needs (Ellis, 2019; Rabourn et al., 2018). Setting self-goals encourages a higher commitment than having goals assigned for a person (Li et al., 2021). Littlejohn et al. (2016) found that goal setting and motivation greatly encourage learner's perception of self-efficacy, task strategies, task interest value, and self-satisfaction. Overall, setting goals leads to a higher commitment to a task, especially when one is rewarded, or the goals are valued by people (Li et al., 2021).

Student Engagement

Student engagement is when a student interacts with the course, such as watching course lectures (Evans et al., 2016; Jung & Lee, 2018). Sun et al. (2019) described student engagement as behavioral and psychological factors, where student participation in in-class activities and their emotional and psychological response to the interaction. Student motivation is an essential factor to course engagement, and researchers have discovered that student engagement correlates

positively with student retention (Zhang et al., 2019). Martin and Bolliger (2018) explained that online learners have fewer opportunities to engage with their institution; therefore, student engagement is crucial in online learning. MOOCs have tools online for students to engage, such as videos, discussion boards, and students can collaborate with interactive conversations (Bonafini et al., 2017; Kuo & Belland, 2016). Providing engagement strategies encourages a positive learner experience using group work, presentations, reflections, discussions, and active listening opportunities (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Student engagement can resolve student isolation, graduation, and retention in an online environment (Banna et al., 2015; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Students that are academically and socially engaged with their peers and faculty will more likely succeed (Tinto, 2012). Having low interaction with online courses with peers and instructors will cause less engagement with the course and less satisfaction (Glazier, 2016; Kuo & Belland, 2016). According to Baugus (2020), student engagement is a predictor of student success, and traditional students have higher levels of student engagement than non-traditional students. Non-traditional students are less likely to be engaged in outside resources and student activities, leading to high attrition (Baugus, 2020).

Student engagement is vital to student retention (Pursel et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012). Additionally, Pursel et al. (2016) explained that student engagement is based on the geographical distance of the student, which affects how students interact with each other. According to Tight (2020), students are less likely to leave school if they are engaged in their higher education from the institution they attended. Social presence is a factor in social engagements and influences online interaction (Bhagat et al., 2016). Students who have learner-to-learner engagement,

learner-to-instructor engagement, and learner-to content engagement were highly valued by students and promoted engagement (Cundell & Sheepy, 2018; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Learner engagement is where a learner has an ongoing effort to learn and achieve their learning goals (Jung & Lee, 2018). Motivation, cognition, and emotions are factors that consist of learning engagement (Jung & Lee, 2018). For example, students asking questions and participating in the discussion is behavioral engagement. In contrast, emotional and cognitive engagement involves having positive emotions with peers or instructors and the student's cognitive effort toward content (Jung & Lee, 2018). Students' learner engagement can be measured through the number of quizzes taken, videos watched, or tasks completed (Jung & Lee, 2018). Engaging in online discussion boards impacts the sense of community for non-traditional students (Covelli, 2019).

Cundell and Sheepy (2018) found that learner-to-learner engagement does not stop when they leave the classroom for blended learning; students continue their studies with their instructor and peers and go home to review their content. Learner-to-learner engagement promotes reflection and deep understanding to allow students to not learn in isolation (Cundell & Sheepy, 2018). Learner to learner engagement provides activities to help students have a sense of community, feel connected, and prevent online students from isolation and boredom (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Students can build trust with their peers, and having a trusting relationship can motivate them to engage in activities in online learning (De Meo et al., 2017; Sun et al., 2019). The interactions from the learner to learner or learner to instructor engagement have more intensity to build a relationship with other learners and their community (Sun et al., 2019).

Learner to instructor engagement provides more learner engagement, and online instructors' interactions with their students can affect their learning outcomes (Martin & Bolliger,

2018). Faculty and student interaction increases student engagement and learning (Glazier, 2016; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Students building a positive, trusting relationship increases the need for relatedness or interactions with other peers or faculty (Durksen et al., 2016). Learner to content engagement is where students intellectually interact with content and can change their perspectives and understanding of the material (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Online instructors providing real-world applications to the assignments for students will encourage student engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Cundell and Sheepy (2018) suggested providing multiple ways to provide content of online material such as videos instead of reading to allow students to have a choice or different perspective in their learning of the content.

Student Perception

Students have different experiences and beliefs towards taking online courses. The different learned experiences and having satisfaction in a task or course is student perception (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Students' perception is influenced by student peers' interaction and the institutions' environment (Tinto, 2012). Student's satisfaction is correlated with their learning outcome (Li, 2019). Additionally, online courses' design and structure predict student's satisfaction and perceived learning (Li, 2019). Understanding students' needs and expectations allows institutions to create programs to empower students to achieve positive learning outcomes (Herny, 2020). Additionally, understanding students' experiences and perceptions can increase educational equity for students, improve the quality of instruction, and increase the value of online courses (Lloh, 2019).

Non-traditional students perceive more flexible education delivery methods, such as online and evening classes (Bergman, 2016). Non-traditional students perceive online learning to be more effective than traditional or other delivery methods (Ellis, 2019). Students can become

bored or isolated if there is less online interaction, such as discussion boards (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). Online interaction through discussion boards provides students an outlet to interact with their peers, and non-traditional students tend to be more motivated through participation in online discussions (Ellis, 2019). Students would persist and feel more satisfied if their experiences met their expectations (Herny, 2020).

Students perceive that the level of effort expected from institutions is correlated with the effort they put in to succeed in college (Tinto, 2012). Herny (2020) found that students expect a quality online learning environment with meaningful interaction with peers, instructor feedback, and academic support. Students need to engage and communicate through online platforms and activities to feel comfortable and valued when using online resources in class (Lin, 2019).

Students are more likely to interact if they have mutual trust (De Meo et al., 2017). Sun et al. (2019) explained that students who trust others tend to be more open and relaxed, promoting the willingness to interact and engage in online learning. Meeting online students' expectations in their motivation, ability, interaction, curriculum, environment, and circumstances will increase student retention and satisfaction (Herny, 2020).

Technology Acceptance

Educational technology enhances teaching, learning, and new opportunities (Cherrstrom et al., 2019; Covelli, 2017; Kinkead et al., 2016). Technology can make it easier to learn and communicate using various learning tools such as chatrooms, YouTube, discussion boards, and skype (Cherrstrom et al., 2019). Additionally, some students will feel more comfortable speaking through the internet, such as using a discussion board instead of traditional classroom participation (Cherrstrom et al., 2019). Non-traditional students with low technology self-efficacy affect their college outcomes (Cherrstrom et al., 2019).

Online learning may cause non-traditional students to struggle due to cognitive effort, time, and information technology (Ellis, 2019). Technology may intimidate older students, and they may have difficulty navigating online classes (Glazier, 2016). Institutions having technology with poor quality decreases student success for students taking online courses (Lansing, 2017). Dropout rates are six to seven times greater in online programs than on-campus programs (Boston et al., 2019; Gaytan, 2015). A few reasons students have low retention are due to a sense of isolation, disconnection, and technology issues (Terras et al., 2018). Studies have shown that increasing the satisfaction factors of the student will help decrease dropout rates (Pursel et al., 2016; Scarpin et al., 2018). Researchers suggested that a student completes online courses based on their attitudes and what they believe which correlates with technology acceptance (Scarpin et al., 2018).

According to Sivo et al. (2018), a technology acceptance model was used to predict students' usage and acceptance behaviors taking an online course. Findings were that attitude and behavior positively affect technology usage and acceptance (Scarpin et al., 2018; Sivo et al., 2018). Scarpin et al.'s (2018) study showed that technology acceptance factors such as performance acceptance and hedonistic motivation contribute to students completing their online course. According to Renirie (2017), providing technology training and help can improve adult learners' self-efficacy in taking classes online. Jung and Lee (2018) found that students perceived ease of usage with new technology such as MOOC affect their learning persistence and can be used to predict students' expectations and usage of technology.

Student Retention

Students who first enter an institution as freshmen and the institution retains and graduates are student retention (Tinto, 2012). In comparison, persistence is where students begin

in higher education at any time and continue attending higher education to eventually complete their program of study (Tinto, 2012). For years, student retention has been a challenge for institutions (Baugus, 2020; Bergman et al., 2014). According to Terras et al. (2018), student retention for online programs is lower than in a traditional setting. Online administrators and educators' greatest challenge is dropout rates (Terras et al., 2018). Student retention was viewed 40 years ago as the lack of individual skills and motivation, where the student was responsible for failing, not the institution (Tinto, 2007). In the 1970s, the viewpoint changed where the institution was at fault if a student would stay or leave (Tinto, 2007). Tinto (2012) focuses on a traditional setting environment. He explains that institutions can increase student retention and graduation rates if they focus on the classrooms and change the way classes are structured and the students' experiences (Tinto, 2012).

Online dropout rates are 25 percent to 40 percent compared to traditional on-campus courses with 10 percent to 20 percent (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Gaytan (2015) argued that the United States Federal Government formed a grant program to help increase the completion rates for online learning. Some retention models, such as the Student Integration Model by Tinto, made it difficult to use for online courses when the model focused on traditional face-to-face learning (Gaytan, 2015). Non-traditional students decide to leave school with low academic performance, environmental factors, educational inspirations (Metzner & Bean, 1987; Witkowsky et al., 2016).

According to Renirie (2017), student retention is affected by students feeling isolated from online courses. Some researchers have found that self-efficacy and self-determination affect student retention (Bawa, 2016). The institutions can affect self-efficacy based on the academics and resources that are offered (Renirie, 2017). Research has shown that self-efficacy is related to

an adult student's decision to stay or leave an institution (Renirie, 2017). Sorensen and Donovan (2017) explained that some factors that influence student retention are faculty interaction, sense of community, and student engagement. Each factor is correlated to student retention. Sorensen and Donovan (2017) compared numerous factors and distributed them into three groups: student factors, course factors, and environmental factors.

Some students do not manage their time well (Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Students tend to drop out due to work obligations and family responsibilities that get too busy for a student to focus solely on online courses (Johnson et al., 2016; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017). Non-traditional students who juggle multiple roles lead to higher dropout rates and stress than traditional students (Bergman et al., 2014). Even though students were occupied with personal matters, they still were motivated to take online courses because of the flexibility and availability (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Scarpin et al., 2018). Hone and El Said's (2016) study focused on perception on experiences students had with their instructors and peers, which correlated with student retention. A survey was used to gather data of the students' experiences that tested why online students do not retain in online courses (Hone & El Said, 2016). Lloh (2019) found that institutional leaders and administrators can explore students' experiences, opportunities, and challenges to address and change non-traditional student's education. Institutional leaders and administrators exploring students' experiences can further research regarding understanding student retention and motivation for non-traditional students.

Family Factors

Hone and El Said (2016) explained that family and social obligations influence online student retention. Older learners are more likely to juggle multiple responsibilities, jobs, and family (Rabourn et al., 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Woods & Frogge, 2017). Online students

are more likely to be older with family and financial obligations that may disrupt their online courses (Glazier, 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). There are also gender differences within families that may affect online retention. Women are more likely to feel pressure for the time around family and domestic work (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Students can have stress with their families. Family obligations, such as childcare create a challenge for non-traditional students and cause stress that can lead to withdrawing from school (Bergman et al., 2014; Bohl et al., 2017). The identity of older students can be tested within their households if they do not have someone to relate to or communicate with when they are going back to school (Stone & O'Shea, 2019). The identity of older students will be tested and can lead students to drop out with no family support.

According to Bohl et al. (2017), supporting student family members will positively reinforce student retention with non-traditional students. Students receiving encouragement and family support can positively affect staying in school (Bergman et al., 2014). Bergman et al. (2014) found that external environments such as finances and family encouragement is essential to students' persistence in college.

Faculty Rapport

Students taking online courses can interact with their instructors through online tools such as email, videos, and more (Sivo et al., 2018). According to Bettinger et al. (2017), students taking online classes have felt less pressure to respond to their professors and feel less oversight from their professors. Some non-traditional students are not tech-savvy when taking online courses and need to rely on instructors and additional assistance to get through the online course. Students communicating with their instructors and having relationship-building strategies with online teaching can increase students' chances of staying in school (Sivo et al., 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019).

Faculty with a strong teacher presence in the online environment post often respond quickly to students, remind students of deadlines, and provide feedback (Edmonds et al., 2021). Bohl et al. (2017) found that responsive and approachable faculty influenced non-traditional students to continue attending the school they were attending. Not having instructors communicate with their students can create a sense of loneliness (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Stone & O'Shea, 2019; Remenick, 2019). Faculty and staff need to have open communication with adult learners to use consistent vocabulary and articulate what they expect from their students (Renirie, 2017).

Faculty relationship is essential because faculty is the main point of contact between the student and the institutions, contributing to students' attainment and retention (Zerquera et al., 2018). According to Ren (2023), faculty are important in designing online courses and providing online instruction to motivate non-traditional students to learn online through strategies and interventions. Dropout rates are correlated with faculty and student interaction (Terras et al., 2018). Ensuring that the relationship is established is also particularly important. Students who receive extensive feedback from their instructor with no established rapport could turn them away (Glazier, 2016). According to Barbera et al. (2020), faculty feedback during the first year is critical for students to adapt to the college-level curriculum.

Additionally, faculty feedback provides good performance and encourages student's performance to improve (Barbera et al., 2020). Gaytan (2015) argued that online students would prefer faculty-student interactions of high quality only when the feedback from the instructors provides suggestions for improvements on their performance in the class. In that case, instructors need to create a mutual rapport with their students early in the semester (Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

Student Services

Student services include academic advising, career services, tutoring, counseling, and financial aid services (Remenick, 2019). These departments are available to help non-traditional students achieve or manage their multiple roles in their lives while they attend school (Remenick, 2019). Students are motivated to academically achieve from support programs, which is essential for institutions to value the services they provide to students to meet their needs (Dauer & Absher, 2015). Students who receive academic advice from staff and faculty multiple times during their first semester on course schedules and social involvement will persist higher than attending college orientation (Tinto, 2012). Students need support to achieve their expectations of success, such as financial support (Barbera et al., 2020; Tinto, 2012). According to Barbera et al. (2020), the lack of financial support led to students dropping out of non-STEM majors. Additionally, some institutions lack the funding to support non-traditional students' needs, causing institutions to provide a one-size-fits-all approach that tends to cater to traditional students (Remenick, 2019).

Some departments are structured for traditional students with day hours and faculty, and staff has expectations of students expected of traditional students instead of non-traditional students (Remenick, 2019). The lack of academic and social support for many students will increase student's unpreparedness and struggle to succeed in college (Tinto, 2012). According to Dauer and Absher (2015), some institutions have highly selective admissions for their traditional students and tend to be more prepared to provide the support services and guidance for their traditional students to succeed academically, while other institutions provide less support for non-traditional students. Students not receiving good advice or needed advice during their first

year will more likely leave the school or transfer, which will extend their degree completion (Tinto, 2012).

Peer Support

The willingness of students to participate in an online learning environment is fragile if there is no trust built with other peers and instructors (Lin, 2019). The more students interact with their peers, the more likely they will stay in college (Tinto, 2012). Students involved with their institutions, such as participating in student organizations, peer groups, and faculty, will enhance their academic success (Dauer & Absher, 2015). Students working with their peers will increase achievement and communication skills (Rabourn et al., 2018). Kinkead et al. (2016) found that non-traditional students perceive to improve their learning experience through working collaboratively with peers, which can reduce their stress. Sujatha and Kavitha (2018) found that the lack of student-teacher bonding and peer interaction led to drop out of online learning after students were enrolled. Students who have a lack peer and social support can lead them to feel isolated (Witkowsky et al., 2016).

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university. The problem is that student retention is a challenge with online learning (Boston et al., 2019; Sivo et al., 2018; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xing, 2019). More non-traditional students are taking online courses because of the availability and flexible time on taking the course (Muljana & Luo, 2019). A quarter of the student population in college are traditional students (Remenick, 2019). The non-traditional student rate will double by 2021 compared to traditional students (Johnson et al., 2016; Woods & Frogge, 2017).

Non-traditional students have high attritions rates (Bohl et al., 2017; Stephen et al., 2020). There are challenging barriers for non-traditional students, such as finances, family, and work (Johnson et al., 2016; Woods & Frogge, 2017; Xu & Jagers, 2014). Non-traditional students are more likely to have family and financial obligations that may disrupt their online courses (Glazier, 2016; Stone & O'Shea, 2019). Research has shown that non-traditional students are more likely to finish online courses because they are organized, self-determined, self-motivated, and manage their time (Travers, 2016; Woods & Frogge, 2017).

The theoretical framework that guided this study was self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1980, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This theory explains the drive and motivation that students use to persist through taking online learning. Self-determination can influence positive learning outcomes through intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Hsu et al., 2019). Self-determination provides different types of motivation that affect student learning, such as well-being, personal experiences, and performances (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Additionally, self-motivated, independent learners tend to do better in online classes (Glazier, 2016). Institutions can improve student retention by encouraging student engagement, student perception, and technology acceptance (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Pursel et al., 2016; Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018).

MOOCS is a type of online learning, where students can take online courses from anywhere worldwide and use online videos and virtual communication to learn (Chang et al., 2015; Evans et al., 2016; Jung & Lee, 2018). Motivators, such as internal and external factors, contribute to student retention for online courses (Xiong et al., 2015). There is 40 percent to 80 percent of students who have dropped out of online programs (Bawa, 2016; Bergman, 2016). Non-traditional students have a high increase in online enrollment, but they are less understood

(Bergman, 2016). There is little research on the experiences and perceptions of non-traditional students taking online learning (Maxfield & Noll, 2017). In that case, a gap in the literature has been identified. The need for this current study to understand motivation in student retention on non-traditional students taking online classes at a public or a private university has been identified. The results of this study could improve online programs at public or private universities through improving student engagement, student perception, and technology to assist with student retention.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This transcendental phenomenology study understood the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students while taking online courses at a public or a private university. This study had two public universities and one private university that were contacted, but due to the lack of participants from the public universities, all 13 participants came from a private university in Virginia. Additionally, in chapter three, there is a discussion on the design, research questions, the rationale for the sites, and the participant selection. The procedures of this study were defined, and the researcher's role was explained. The data collection and data analysis are outlined, trustworthiness is identified, and ethical considerations are explained. Finally, this chapter concluded with a summary.

Research Design

In this study, a qualitative method was used with a transcendental phenomenology approach. Using a qualitative method for this study provided more insight and understanding about the motivation in student retention for non-traditional students taking online classes. Qualitative research involves using different practices to make sense or meaning of the phenomenon, such as interviews, recordings, and field notes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative method discovers the meaning of individuals' problems and collects data using various questions and procedures (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The quantitative research method uses objective testing theories and the relationships between different variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additionally, quantitative uses instruments to test statistical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In that case, using the qualitative research method would be beneficial, and it

will allow the researcher to understand motivation in non-traditional students when taking online classes.

For this study, using different practices such as a screening questionnaire, questionnaire, interviewing, and a journal prompt on non-traditional students helps understand their motivation and experiences with online classes. A qualitative approach, such as phenomenology, is used based on the researchers' focus and the research problems, which can be beneficial to guiding and conducting the experiment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A phenomenology design describes a person's experiences, awareness, and senses (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenology approach was used for this study to explore different perspectives from non-traditional students on their experience with being in an undergraduate online program. Additionally, the phenomenology approach helped discover the reasons that led non-traditional students to continue in school.

Transcendental phenomenology provides meanings and themes to unravel the interests and concerns of a person in their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Edmund Husserl discovered transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). One of the transcendental phenomenology components that was used is Epoche. This component allows the researcher to have an open perception, leave freely, and be more receptive to new experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Another type of phenomenology is hermeneutical phenomenology, which describes the lived experiences and interprets the texts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hermeneutical phenomenology has no moral phenomena, only interpretations, where the prejudgments will be corrected based on the interpreted texts, which will lead to new prejudgments (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology set-asides prejudgments of the phenomenon to be open and receptive to the experiences that are described by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental phenomenology study provided more understanding and motivation for non-traditional students

while taking online classes. Additionally, this provided more insight into student retention in online learning.

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenology study understood the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university. The central question and three sub-questions that were created assisted with understanding this phenomenon.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of non-traditional students while taking online courses at a public or private university in Virginia?

Sub-Question One

What influences non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to persist in online learning?

Sub-Question Two

What motivates non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to attend online education?

Sub-Question Three

What strategies would help drive non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to complete their online education?

Setting and Participants

Private and public institutions of higher education provide numerous educational opportunities for students. One of those opportunities is that private and public universities provide online learning to students. This allows students another option to receive their education. Non-traditional students use online learning to have an easier or more efficient way to

attend school and manage their life as well as responsibilities at the same time. In that case, this study focused on two public universities and one private university. Unfortunately, due to the lack of participants from the two public universities, all participants came from one private university.

Sites

This site was contacted, but no participants were available to participate from this site. Also, after contacting this site and having no participants, I later discovered that this site's distance learning program has a mixture of online and in person classes, which does not meet the requirements of my study. This site is a public university called Charlie University (CU) (pseudonym). CU is in an urban city of Virginia that over 230,000 people surround within the city as of July 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). CU is the main campus and has three satellite campuses located across neighboring cities. Each campus has traditional in-person classes and a distance learning program. The CU student population is comprised of students from over 80 countries and over 40 states. CU consisted of over 23,000 students total who were enrolled in Fall 2021 (Use the Data, n.d.). Over 18,000 students enrolled in undergraduate programs to receive bachelor's degrees (Use the Data, n.d.). CU had 35 percent of the student population taking online courses in undergraduate programs (Use the Data, n.d.). There is 26 percent of the total student population that is non-traditional students enrolled in an undergraduate program at CU (Use the Data, n.d.). In Fall 2021, the student population consisted of 43 percent White, 32 percent Black or African American, 10 percent Hispanic, six percent two or more races, five percent Asian, two percent Race/ethnicity unknown, and one percent nonresident alien (Use the Data, n.d.). Additionally, eight percent of the student population were from out of state (Use the Data, n.d.). The retention rate from the first year (Fall 2020) to the second year (Fall 2021) for

full-time students' bachelor's degrees was 72 percent and 42 percent for part-time students (Use the Data, n.d.).

The next site was contacted, and all participants came from this site. This site is a private university called James University (JU) (pseudonym). JU is in a suburban city of Virginia that over 79,000 people surround within the city as of July 2021 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). JU does not have multiple campuses and is within driving distance of another university. JU consisted of both traditional in-person classes and has various online programs. JU had over 94,000 students enrolled in Fall 2021, with 73 percent of their students enrolled in strictly online undergraduate programs (Use the Data, n.d.). The total student population that is a non-traditional student enrolled in an undergraduate program at JU is 51 percent (Use the Data, n.d.). In Fall 2021, the student population consisted of 56 percent White, 20 percent Race/ethnicity unknown, 10 percent Black or African American, seven percent Hispanic, three percent two or more races, two percent Asian, and one percent nonresident alien (Use the Data, n.d.). Additionally, 73 percent of the student population were from out of state (Use the Data, n.d.). The retention rate from the first year (Fall 2020) to the second year (Fall 2021) for full-time students' bachelor's degrees was 79 percent and 40 percent for part-time students (Use the Data, n.d.).

This third site was contacted, but no participants were available to participate. When I did not receive participants, I later made modifications and when I submitted the modifications for my study to their IRB. This site's IRB did not get back to me about their approval of the modifications, so I did not continue reaching out to their potential participants for this site. This third site is a public university called Tree University (TU) (pseudonym). TU is in a small suburban city of Virginia that over 16,000 people surround within the city as of July 2021 (U.S.

Census Bureau, 2023). TU does have multiple campuses and is within driving distance of another university. TU consisted of both traditional in-person classes and has online programs. TU had over 8,000 students enrolled in Fall 2021, with eight percent of students enrolled in strictly online undergraduate programs (Use the Data, n.d.). The total student population that is a non-traditional student enrolled in an undergraduate program at TU is nine percent (Use the Data, n.d.). In Fall 2021, the student population consisted of 64 percent White, 17 percent Black or African American, eight percent Hispanic, six percent two or more races, three percent racial/ethnicity unknown, two percent Asian, and one percent nonresident alien (Use the Data, n.d.). Additionally, nine percent of the student population was from out of state (Use the Data, n.d.). The retention rate from the first year (Fall 2020) to the second year (Fall 2021) for full-time students' bachelor's degrees was 67 percent and 75 percent for part-time students (Use the Data, n.d.).

CU and JU have the Board of Trustees that oversees the institutions along with the budget and finances. TU has the Board of Visitors that oversees the institutions along with the President and University Auditor. For CU and TU, the President reports to the Board of Trustees, while at TU the President reports to the Board of Visitors. Then, the Vice Presidents report directly to the President at CU, JU, and TU. The Vice Presidents and Provost oversee each Dean and Director at JU, the Provost oversees each Director in one campus at CU, and the Vice President and Provost oversees the Associate Vice Presidents, Deans, and Directors at TU. The Board of Trustees collaborates with the Vice Presidents and Provost at CU and JU, while the Board of Visitors at TU collaborates with the University Auditor and President to ensure the staff and faculty follow policies and procedures to run effective institutions.

Students who receive bachelor's degrees from a public university and a private university

such as CU, JU, and TU tend to increase earnings and a higher increase in employment and health outcomes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The student population of non-traditional students who have received a bachelor's degree has increased by 2.8 percent between 2010-2014 and 2015-2019 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Online programs have a retention rate of 68.2 percent in a public university and 72.9 percent in a private university (Sorenson & Donovan, 2017). Private for-profit universities have high attrition rates for online learners, which has caused the for-profit institutions to be under observation from the United States Department of Education (Sutton, 2014). Additionally, public institutions have students taking online courses who will likely not persist and complete their online courses compared to traditional face-to-face settings (Lee & Combes, 2020). This led to choosing three sites with a diverse participant population who may have different experiences with taking online courses from their campuses.

Participants

Non-traditional students who met the criteria of being enrolled in an online undergraduate program for the Fall 2020 semester and continuously enrolled in the Fall 2021 semester at JU, CU, and TU were able to participate in this study. Participation in this study was voluntary. The participants in this study were selected through purposeful sampling and convenience sampling. Purposeful sampling is where the participants were purposively selected for this study to understand the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There was a minimum sample of 12 with the inclusion of one more to account for attrition making the total 13 participants. Convenience sampling is where the participants were convenient or readily available to access for this study (Naderifar et al., 2017). Some of the participants for this study knew about this study from the social media post on Facebook that was purposively posted to the online programs for JU. This shows convenience sampling. The intention was to collect a minimum of six participants from

both JU and CU, but due to the lack of participants, the third site TU was added later. A total of 13 participants were collected from JU, based on the participants that were received.

Additionally, snowball sampling was used. Snowball sampling is used to find unattainable populations with the target characteristics and collect data until saturation (Naderifar et al., 2017).

Researchers who use phenomenology recommend using three to 10 participants to receive in-depth interviews to discover the meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, there were 13 participants that define the meaning of their lived experiences using phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The sample size could increase depending on the saturation of the data being met; therefore, a range of participants was used in this study (Naderifar et al., 2017). Most importantly, maximum variation was used with selecting the participants and sites to ensure a diverse population (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Researcher Positionality

I am excited to conduct this study on motivation in student retention on non-traditional students taking online classes. I want to investigate this study because I have worked in higher education for eight years, and I have witnessed various students dropping out of school or returning later to complete their unfinished degrees. Each student came from various degree programs, and I wondered why they stopped attending school or what made them want to come back and complete their degree. Currently, I work as an Academic Advisor at a public university where there are some non-traditional students, but the majority are traditional students. This college allows students to take online classes and on-campus courses, or students can be strictly online students who will only take online classes. I have seen students succeed or decide to drop out in both formats. Through all the years of listening to the various reasons for students not

returning to school or returning to school have motivated me to fix the gap of students not returning with taking online classes. In that case, I want to understand the motivation in student retention for non-traditional students taking online courses.

Interpretive Framework

Interpretive framework is the beliefs research may bring to their study to conduct or process it (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These interpretive frameworks are broken down into paradigms, which guide the research through theories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There are seven paradigms that a researcher could use in their study, post-positivism, social constructivism, pragmatism, postmodernism, disability theory, feminist theories, and critical theories.

Post-positivism is deterministic based on the theories and the cause and effect, while social constructivism is based on finding the meaning and understanding of the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Pragmatism focuses on the actions and situations of the research instead of the conditions like post-positivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Postmodernism is a group of perspectives or family of theories that have commonalities, while disability theory focuses on the human differences and inclusion in schools, administrators, parents of children with disabilities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Feminist theory focuses on different international and dynamic development that make women's diverse situations problematic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finally, critical theory is encouraging human beings to get through barriers that are placed on them such as gender, race, and class (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In that case, I have brought the social constructivist paradigm to this study, which has helped shape this study. Social constructivism will rely more on the perspective, viewpoints, and meaning of the situations for non-traditional students, which will help provide solutions to student retention for online learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used participants' perspectives of

their experiences with taking online classes through their questionnaire, interviews, and journal prompt to provided subjective meanings to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Understanding motivation in non-traditional students on their experiences with taking online classes will help me be more mindful of the institutions that provide support services and resources to assist non-traditional students with persisting in online learning.

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are important to research and guide qualitative research through philosophy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My philosophical assumptions motivated me to conduct this study. The three philosophical assumptions are ontological, epistemological, and axiological.

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumption involves the characteristics and nature of the reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ontological assumption helped lead to this study because I observed multiple realities from non-traditional students and using their different perspectives about their reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a researcher, I was able to use each participant's actual words and experiences and compile them expressing the differences in everyone's viewpoint of taking online classes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Various motivators or factors can affect an individual's experience. This confirms that individuals can have different perspectives when they share the same phenomena.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological involves the views and experiences of individuals (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers use epistemological assumption to get as close as they can to the participant, where they can form knowledge from the subjective experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I was

able to use each participant's subjective experiences and rely on their experiences and quotes to help me formulate themes and evidence in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using this assumption provides a deeper understanding when each participant shared the same phenomena of taking online classes.

Axiological Assumption

Axiological assumption involves the researchers' values and biases in their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I set aside my beliefs and values when I began to collect data (Moustakas, 1994). I approached this study with providing my positionality and setting of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Bringing up my position and values in the beginning allowed me to have a deeper understanding of each participant's experiences with taking online classes.

Researcher's Role

In this transcendental phenomenology study, I served as the researcher to use various data collection strategies to analyze and understand motivation in student retention for non-traditional undergraduate students taking online classes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I focused on the participants' lived experiences and followed the transcendental phenomenological design to conduct this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative method involves understanding the data through interviews with participants and researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Prejudgments and biases were removed during the data collection and analysis process with Moustakas's (1994) data analysis method. This would allow the non-traditional students' responses and experiences to get analyzed.

I have gained eight years of experience working in higher education in a variety of roles. As a current academic advisor in a public college, my role is to advise, guide, and schedule courses for students taking classes in a traditional in-person and online format. The student

population is a mixture of traditional and non-traditional students. However, most of the student population are traditional students that I advise in the bachelor programs. In this role, I have witnessed various students continuing their education each semester and quite a few students that decided to drop out for different reasons. This created a concern and intrigued me to want to know how to help students stay in school.

Additionally, I have had experience working at CU, but as a career advisor to a variety of students and programs. I did not advise or teach any online students at CU and TU. I am attending JU through the online doctoral program. I am not working at JU, and I have no interaction with the students in the online undergraduate programs. I am a part of the social media Facebook group for JU which has a mixture of all ages and degree level of online students. I did not interact with the strictly online student population from all three colleges.

Procedures

The procedures provide a very detailed step by step of how this study was conducted. Following the procedures helps further researchers be able to replicate this study.

Permissions

First, I filled out the Liberty University Intentional Review Borad (IRB) application. In the IRB application, I explained that I was going to use JU and CU as my two sites. Once I received the IRB approval from Liberty University (Appendix A), I contacted JU and emailed their Deans requesting their approval to send my recruitment letter (Appendix G). Additionally, I contacted CU informing them that I received IRB approval and requested site approval from them (Appendix E). CU provided me with their site approval (Appendix H) and explained that I will need to contact the departments for approval as well. Once I received the approval, I emailed the Deans of the departments requesting their approval to send my recruitment letter (Appendix

J). Additionally, I contacted a third site, TU, based on the lack of participants from CU and JU. I emailed TU for site approval (Appendix F) and provided them with my IRB application and IRB approval. Once I received TU site approval (Appendix I), I then notified Liberty University IRB of the modification for adding the third site (Appendix B). Based on the low participation of my study, I requested a modification on having social media such as Facebook (Appendix C) being a part of my recruitment process and a modification on providing \$25 Amazon e-gift card (Appendix D) to those that complete my study. I contacted Liberty University IRB and received the IRB approval for those modifications and re-requested approval from JU's Dean to send out my recruitment letter. I notified TU of those modifications. The IRB for TU did not get back to me about their approval of the modification, so I did not continue reaching out to their potential participants for the site. Also, I did not continue reaching out to CU once I was informed by their online department that they do not have strictly online undergraduate programs. They informed me their students take a mixture of online and in person classes, which does not meet the requirements of my study.

Recruitment Plan

After the IRB approval, I emailed the Dean and Program Director for JU and CU to request approval to send my recruitment letter to their students and faculty. During this process, purposeful, snowball, and convenience sampling was used. I explained the criteria for this study to the Deans and Program Director to assist with purposively selecting the participants that meet the criteria, and they contacted the participants and the faculty that has participants in their classes that meet the criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Next, the Deans and Program Director used snowball sampling by encouraging their faculty and participants to recruit future participants that meet the criteria, and then the process continued until I received 13 participants

(Naderifar et al., 2017). Additionally, this allowed participants to recommend that they meet the criteria to participate (Naderifar et al., 2017). Additionally, I posted my recruitment letter on social media such as Facebook (Appendix K) for JU online student groups. After the participants received the recruitment letter or saw the Facebook post and they wanted to participate in this study, the participants emailed me of their interest in participating in this study. I responded to each participant through email and provided them with the screening questionnaire (Appendix M) to voluntarily complete and submit to me through email. Once the screening questionnaire was sent back to me, I reviewed the screening questionnaire to ensure they met the criteria. Once each participant met the criteria, I sent the consent form (Appendix L) and questionnaire (Appendix N) for them to voluntarily complete and submit to me through email.

The consent form went over the study, the purpose, risks, participant's involvement, and confidentiality, where the participant will sign for approval to participate in this study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A questionnaire is a list of questions that relate to the interview and research questions and impact the results of a survey (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019). A closed-ended set of questions, where participants can only answer yes or no questions that are predetermined provide limited information (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019). To assist with recruitment, narrowing down the participant selection, and gaining insight into the participant's experiences, a screening questionnaire and questionnaire was provided to each participant to partake in the study. Pseudonyms were used for each participant in this study. Additionally, the screening questionnaire has 10 open-ended and closed questions. The questionnaire has four open-ended questions that each participant must fill out. This information would help provide more insight into the participant's experience of taking online classes. I emailed each participant to voluntarily schedule an interview (Appendix O) with each of them after they completed and

emailed me their questionnaire and consent form. Additionally, I emailed each participant after the interview with the next steps of the time frame to complete the journal prompt (Appendix P) and directions on reviewing the transcribed interview (Appendix Q). After all steps were complete, the \$25 Amazon e-gift card was emailed to them. Also, when I received the modification approval to send out the \$25 Amazon e-gift card, I made sure to send the \$25 Amazon e-gift card to the three participants that I received before I had the modification approved.

Data Collection Plan

The data collection strategies that was used in this study was a screening questionnaire, questionnaire, interview, and a journal prompt to discover the meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Data collection is where a researcher gathers information on a site, observes an individual's behaviors, and interviews the individual (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenology approach describes a person's experiences, awareness, and senses (Moustakas, 1994). The data was collected and provided an understanding of the participant's experiences with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Questionnaires Data Collection Approach

A screening questionnaire and questionnaire was used in this transcendental phenomenology. Questionnaires provide questions that relate to the research questions and interview (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019). It is essential that the questionnaire is validated and does not deviate from the research and interview questions (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019). To ensure the questionnaire is validated, the content and face validity was addressed in the questions. According to Warner (2013), content validity has test items that represent the content of the study. The 10 questions focused on the participants meeting the criteria of a non-

traditional student currently taking online classes in an undergraduate program for the screening questionnaire. The questionnaire focused on four open-ended questions where each participant described their experiences and reason for taking online classes. This helped me have an understanding of their online experiences. Face validity ensures the test measures what it is supposed to measure (Warner, 2013; Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019). The questions reflected on closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions allow participants to choose one or more pre-determined responses based on limited information (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019).

When a participant was interested in this study, they would email me that they are interested. I would then email each participant the screening questionnaire for them to answer. After each participant answered the screening questionnaire on a Microsoft word document, they would each participant emailed me their screening questionnaire and I reviewed them to ensure they met the criteria of this study. Once they did meet the criteria, I sent them the consent form and the questionnaire with the four questions. Once each participant was done, they sent the consent form and questionnaire to me.

Questionnaires Questions

This screening questionnaire was provided to each participant to determine if the participant is eligible to participate in the study.

1. What is your first and last name?
2. What is your gender? A. Male B. Female C. Other
3. What is your race or ethnicity? A. Black or African American B. White C. Asian
D. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander E. American Indian or Alaska Native
F. Two races or more G. Hispanic or Latino

4. Were you 25 years old or older the start of the Fall 2020 semester? A. Yes B. No
5. Did you enroll and participate (e.g., complete assignments) in an online undergraduate program (any Bachelor program) in the Fall 2020 semester? A. Yes
N. No
6. Did you complete the Fall 2020 semester? A. Yes N. No
7. Did you continue to enroll and participate in an online course/s in the Spring 2021 semester? A. Yes B. No
8. Did you complete the Spring 2021 semester? A. Yes N. No
9. Did you continue to enroll and participate in an online course/s in the Fall 2021 semester? A. Yes B. No
10. Did you complete the Fall 2021 semester? A. Yes B. No

This questionnaire is provided to each participant to understand participants' experiences with online classes.

1. Why did you enroll in online classes at your college?
2. How would you describe your feelings when you first started taking online classes compared to your feelings about online classes at your school now?
3. How has your opinion of online classes changed since you began taking online classes at your college?
4. What strategies or support have you used while taking online classes at your college?

Using closed-ended questions in the screening questionnaire narrowed the selection of the participants based on being a non-traditional student that is enrolled and participating in an online undergraduate program (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019). The questionnaire with four open-ended questions required participants to answer questions in their own words, which

provides more detail of their experiences with taking online classes (Yaddanapudi & Yaddanapudi, 2019).

Questionnaires Data Analysis Plan

Before data collection began, I used Epoche to free my mind of judgments (Moustakas, 1994). For this to occur, I disclosed their experiences, removed their perceptions, judgments, and feelings (Moustakas, 1994). Epoche requires concentration, attention, and presence, while everything about other feelings and judgments from people must be shut out (Moustakas, 1994). The process of Epoche helped me set aside their prejudgments and biases and allow new information to enter my consciousness for the first time (Moustakas, 1994). I reviewed the screening questionnaire for demographic information and ensuring participants met the criteria. I reviewed the questionnaire with the four questions and began the phenomenological reduction process.

Next, I used phenomenological reduction, where I described in-textural descriptions, such as what non-traditional students were experiencing with taking online classes (Moustakas, 1994). I reviewed each participant's experiences on the questionnaire and highlighted each statement that related to their experiences with taking online classes and research questions, called horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). I used imaginative variation, where I was able to explain the "how" of each participants' experience on the questionnaire and provide structural descriptions of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I used the textural descriptions to create the themes through the meaning that I found in the questionnaire.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect data for this qualitative transcendental phenomenology study. A semi-structured interview is a mixture of structured and

unstructured interviews. A list of questions guides the researcher but allows the researcher to respond or add questions during the interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The structured interviews are predetermined and limit participants' perspectives and understanding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The unstructured interview is exploratory with no predetermined questions and can receive various information about the phenomenon that can be confusing in putting all information together (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

The semi-structured interview allows the researcher to create more flexible questions, and the researcher can be flexible on responding to questions in a structured and less structured way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The semi-structured interview allowed participants to provide their perspectives on their motivation to take online courses. I scheduled virtual interviews for each participant who met the criteria and wanted to participate in this study. Before I began recording the interview, I re-confirmed that each participant provided consent for me to audit and video record. The interview questions received experts to review the interview questions before being used for the study. I sent the interview questions for review to receive IRB approval. Once IRB approval, interview questions were used before I began collecting data. The interview questions was provided to each participant through email (Appendix E). The interview questions was open-ended, and there was a follow-up question based on the response from the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on some internet connection and glitches, I could not properly hear a participant's answer and I repeated what I thought they said and they verified their response. Additionally, I had to repeat interview questions for some participants to clearly hear the question based on their internet connection. Most importantly, some participants disclosed their age during the interview and their age did not meet the criteria. I had to stop the interview and explain the reason they do not meet the criteria and can no longer participate.

The semi-structured interview was video and audio recorded through Microsoft Teams, where the participant and I could visually see and hear each other during the interview at any location with available internet. Using web-based platforms provides advantages of time, cost, data transcription and provides a non-threatening environment to the participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I provided each participant with the interview questions at least 48 hours before the interview so they have the interview questions available during the interview. Once each participant was interviewed, the video-recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, pseudonyms were used for each participant in this study.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What is your future career path?
3. What is the name of the educational program that you are in at your college in Virginia?
4. What are your experiences with taking online classes at your college?
5. What led you to choose the online delivery method for taking classes instead of taking traditional in-person classes at your college?
6. What motivated you to attend your online classes at your college?
7. What are some ways to stay motivated to finish your online degree at your college?
8. What factors led you to want to continue enrolling in online classes at your college?
9. What are your expectations of taking online classes at your college?
10. What are your expectations of your instructors and peers when taking online classes at your college?
11. What are your expectations of yourself when taking online classes at your college?
12. What resources are you using to help you while taking online courses at your college?

13. What resources do you think will help you continue enrolling in online classes at your college?
14. What would you like to change with online classes to help other students finish their programs at your college?
15. What ways do you think other institutions could do to help students complete their online programs?
16. For the last question, what else do you think would be necessary for students to know or achieve with their online education at your college?

Questions one through three are background and demographic questions. These background and demographics questions provide demographic information relevant to the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These questions are asked to understand the student's background, the program of study, and the goals they wanted to achieve. Students are motivated if they have a goal to achieve (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Non-traditional students tend to have higher internalized motivation than traditional students and a higher learning goal orientation (Woods & Frogge, 2017).

Questions four and 12 describe the experiences from the perspectives of the participants. These types of questions are an experience and behavior question that describes behavior and actions of a person (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These questions are asked to understand the motivation of the student from their perspective. Motivated students tend to take on challenging activities and are more engaged with completing their tasks (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018). Most importantly, the experiences of the student determine their motivation (Sujatha & Kavitha, 2018).

Questions five through 11 and 13 through 16 are opinion and value questions. The

researcher is interested in the participants' thoughts and beliefs about a subject area (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). These questions were asked to have the participants express their perspective of their value on themselves and others while taking online classes. Student satisfaction or perception is relevant to academic performance and the quality of their learning experiences with online courses (Kuo & Belland, 2016). Participants learning experiences and beliefs can affect their student retention, and these questions can help provide information to answer the research question. Online student satisfaction and student retention need to improve (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Additionally, these questions can provide ways to improve online education.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Each interview was audio and video recorded. During the interview, I was memoing to take notes and collect data to analyze (Appendix G) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After each interview, I saved the audio and video recording to my laptop, secured with a password only I know. I transcribed each participant's interview and provided each participant their transcribed interview for them to member check to ensure accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each participants' transcribed interview was sent to them through email, and each participant emailed any changes and/or validation. Each participant validated their transcribed interview, through email by confirming that there were no changes or providing the changes that needed to be made and then confirmed the accuracy.

When the transcribed interviews were member checked. Before reviewing the interviews, I used Epoche to be open-minded when I reviewed the transcribed interviews on the experiences of the non-traditional students (Moustakas, 1994). I used phenomenological reduction. The phenomenological reduction process describes the in-textural descriptions as what is seen externally and internally, such as the experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

During this process, the qualities of the online experiences of the non-traditional students are the focus where I described using textural descriptions such as the color, shape, or size from each participant's experiences (Moustakas, 1994). I used the horizontalization of the data to highlight each statement that relates to the topic and question (Moustakas, 1994). I was able to use imaginative variation as the next step in the process, where I found meaning through imagination and frames of reference from different perspectives, roles, and functions (Moustakas, 1994). I used the textural descriptions and meanings to help me create the themes of the experiences of the non-traditional students taking online undergraduate program.

Journal Prompts Data Collection Approach

The document analysis that will be used in this transcendental phenomenology study is a journal prompt. Journal writing can improve the researchers' thinking and creative action (Konecki, 2019). A journal can record notes, thoughts, and feelings from the interviews (Konecki, 2019). Documents from participants such as a journal are supplemental to observations and interviews, creating themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The journal prompt will be used to answer the two prompts and document any other thoughts and experiences after the interview.

After the interview, the journal template was emailed to each participant for each of them to complete. The template consisted of two writing prompts. Prompt one asked each participant to write about a positive experience while taking online classes while enrolled at their college, explain why it was a positive experience, and explain what else could make it a positive experience. Prompt two asked each participant to write about a negative experience while taking online classes while enrolled at their college and explain why it was a negative experience and what could change to make it a positive experience. Additionally, each participant can write

down anything they would like to express that they did not mention during the interview. The participants emailed me their response to the two prompts and provided any information not collected during the interview that they wanted to disclose. Participants must at least write three sentences minimum for each prompt, which each participant did. There was no limitation on how much the participant would like to write. Each participant submitted their journal prompt through email to me within 24 hours. The journals were analyzed and coded for statements.

Journal Prompts Data Analysis Plan

I reviewed each journal prompt to ensure the two prompts met the writing requirement of having at least three sentences. All participants did have at least three sentences for each prompt. Afterward, I used Epoche to be cleared my mind of bias and prejudgment when I read through the journal prompts (Moustakas, 1994). I used phenomenological reduction to understand the conscious experiences of non-traditional students taking online classes, where I linked the participants qualities they described to textural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed me to use horizontalization to highlight the text that related to the research questions and topic (Moustakas, 1994). The meanings, intuition, and essence become the focus (Moustakas, 1994). This process is the imaginative variation, where I formed descriptions of the participants perspectives and experiences as well as motivation to form the essence or meanings to this study (Moustakas, 1994). This led me to create the themes from the journal prompt.

Data Synthesis

The last step of the phenomenological process is synthesizing the experiences. Synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experiences involves intuitive integration (Moustakas, 1994). Intuitive integration is where the textural and structural descriptions are combined to form a statement of the experience from the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I used the in-textural

descriptions and formed integration and structural descriptions to describe the meanings of the themes and participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To assist me with synthesizing the data, I used Nvivo. Nvivo is a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software that helps organize, visualize, and collect data (Dhakal, 2022). Using Nvivo helped me organize my data to create codes and categories to form themes (Dhakal, 2022). This helped me remove repetitive statements and I was able to code the statements that had similarities from the questionnaire, interviews, and journal prompts (Moustakas, 1994). This allowed me to synthesize the meanings to form the essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). I described the participants' shared experiences, showing the essence of their experiences with taking online classes in undergraduate programs at JU (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Trustworthiness

This study used different methods to collect data, such as a screening questionnaire, questionnaire, interviews, and journals. Each method focused on the motivation of non-traditional students and their experiences with taking online courses. The data collection helped understand the motivation in student retention with online programs. Trustworthiness is essential to ensure the quality of the study (Connelly, 2016). Trustworthiness provides a criterion for the study to have credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Connelly, 2016). Trustworthiness addresses credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Trustworthiness provides reliability and validity. This study consisted of member checking and triangulation.

Credibility

Credibility is the truth of the study that is conducted (Connelly, 2016). There are different ways to test for credibility within a qualitative research study. To ensure the finding of this study

is transferable, the researcher collected rich, thick descriptions, prolonged engagement with the participants, and triangulation of the data sources to establish credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility can be used by various techniques such as member checking (Connelly, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking is when the interview or analyzed data is returned to the participants to validate for trustworthiness (Birt et al., 2016). Interviews were provided to each participant, and the participants were provided their transcribed notes of the interview to check for content and accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, participants were able to voice their feedback on the transcriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This helped validate the experiences and motivation of the non-traditional students taking online classes.

Transferability

Transferability is where a qualitative researcher provides a detailed story of the participants in the study, location, setting, and trustworthiness (Connelly, 2016). Transferability will occur by providing thick, rich information on the non-traditional students taking online classes at JU and CU (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researcher will transfer information to different settings and if the findings can be transferred (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation is providing validity to the findings of the study. This study used multiple sources such as a screening questionnaire, questionnaire, interviews, and journals as evidence to support the theme (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability

This study used a screening questionnaire, interviews, and journals for each participant to capture every detail of the participants' experience after the interview and the responses to the prompts. This leads to having dependability. Dependability involves auditing the research process to find the consistency of the data and research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Dependability can be addressed through rich, thick descriptions of the participants and study setting, which provides consistent, contextual descriptions and details (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability is the stability of the data collected and analyzed over time (Connelly, 2016). To address dependability, an auditor will examine the process and product to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations, findings, and conclusions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The auditor was someone who had no connection to the study, is familiar with transcendental phenomenology, and uses an audit trail to provide reliability through the created documentation or logs of the process followed (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Confirmability

Confirmability is where the findings are consistent where a researcher could repeat the findings (Connelly, 2016). Confirmability provides details of the procedures to this study, transcribed interviews, and themes were reviewed for accuracy using member checking (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Member checking allowed participants to view the findings and interpretations to judge credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using member checking assisted with the reliability and trustworthiness to avoid any biases from the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues can happen at any moment before, during, collecting data, or analyzing the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There was IRB approval from CU, JU, and TU to allow the researcher to conduct the study at the sites before data is collected. There was data security of the interviews and documentation. Data security prevents participants' information and recorded videos from being damaged and disclosed; the researcher is the only one that has access to the password protection of the video recording on their laptop (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All

documentation and information on the participants and study was stored on the researcher's laptop for five years (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Additionally, participants were given a consent form to fill out and submit to avoid forced participation. The consent form explained the purpose of the study and provided voluntary consent and information on any risk factors or harm to avoid deceiving participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Most importantly, to protect participants' and sites' privacy, there are fictitious names or aliases used to analyze data to provide confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

This transcendental phenomenology study is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university. The research design is a transcendental phenomenology approach that assisted with exploring the experiences of non-traditional students with being in an undergraduate online program. The methods and research questions were described. The sites and participants were discussed. The procedures were listed in detail of how to conduct the study. The researcher's role, data collection, and data analysis were presented. The trustworthiness and ethical consideration of this study were addressed. In chapter four, there will be a discussion of the findings of the motivation in student retention with non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This transcendental phenomenology study was to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students while taking online courses at a public or a private university in Virginia. The results and data analysis are within this chapter. The description of each participant is involved in this chapter. Data was collected from participants through screening questionnaires, questionnaires, interviews, and a journal prompt. The themes are the individual, uncontrollable situations, positive online experiences, drive, and resources. The themes, central research questions, and sub-questions are answered in this chapter. Finally, a summary of this chapter was included.

Participants

Once I received the IRB approval from all sites at CU, JU, and TU; participants were secured. Participants consisted of 13 non-traditional students enrolled in an online undergraduate program at JU from the start of Fall 2020 and were continuously enrolled to Fall 2021. There were no participants from CU and TU that were interested in participating in my study. After I received the IRB approval, I contacted the Deans who then forwarded the recruitment letter to the Chairs and faculty of their department at JU and CU. TU chairs were contacted and there was no success on hearing back from the chairs at TU. I updated my IRB approval and resent the approvals to CU, JU, and TU. Once I received the updated IRB approval, I posted my recruitment letter on social media, such as Facebook to receive participants from JU. JU had Facebook groups where participants attended the online undergraduate programs from JU.

All 13 participants emailed me that they were interested in participating in my study. I provided each of them with the screening questionnaire, and once they met the criteria, I sent

each of them the consent form and questionnaire. Once the consent form was signed and I received their completed questionnaire, I scheduled each participant for an interview. Before each interview, each participant was emailed the interview questions, I verified their signed consent form, and consent to video and audio record the interview. Once the interview was completed, I went over the instructions of the journal prompt. I sent each participant the journal prompt through email. I transcribed each participant's interview. Once each participant completed the journal prompt, I sent each participant their transcribed interview. After each participants reviewed their transcribed interview and confirmed their accuracy, I provided each participant a \$25 Amazon e-gift card. Also, when I received the modification approval to send out the \$25 Amazon e-gift card, I made sure to send the \$25 Amazon e-gift card to the three participants that I received before I had the modification. Each participant ranged from the age of 27 to 57, and there were 10 males and three female participants. Four participants did not provide their age. The participants who did not provide their age were at least 25 years of age at the start of the Fall 2020 semester. Pseudonyms were used and each participants' information was kept confidential. See Table 1 for demographic information.

Table 1

Participants' Demographic Information

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Race or Ethnicity
Kevin	49	Male	White
Marshall	57	Male	White
Barb	46	Female	White
Tommy		Male	White
Walt		Male	Black or African American
Tasha	28	Female	Black or African American
Kyle	41	Male	Black or African American
Devin	27	Male	Black or African American
Malcolm	28	Male	Black or African American
Bryan	29	Male	Black or African American

Stuart		Male	Black or African American
Adam	29	Male	Black or African American
Trina		Female	Black or African American

Kevin

Kevin is a White male who is 49 years old turning 50 next month. Kevin is married and has three puppies living with them. Kevin has four children, who have all graduated college and moved out of the house living their own lives. Kevin will be graduating from JU with a Bachelor's in Christian Counseling with a minor in marriage and family counseling as well as a certificate in Christian ministry. Kevin worked at a counseling office for their internship and wants to become a marriage and family counselor. Kevin preached sometimes and wanted to do counseling from a Christian worldview and become a minister.

Kevin explained that JU was a school that they really wanted to go to and attend online classes because they allowed Kevin to care for their wife at home. When Kevin was accepted and began taking classes at JU, they were nervous. Kevin graduated high school 33 years ago and never thought they would be taking classes online. Kevin thought it was difficult to learn Blackboard and to begin learning again. Kevin described that enough though they have one more semester left they still get nervous each semester for the first day of class. Kevin was nervous about not seeing the professor and their classmates when online classes began. Kevin was worried that they would forget how to study for class and take notes. Kevin quickly discovered that professors had thorough lesson plans and were patient, which makes Kevin "push forward" when they felt cared for by their professors.

Marshall

Marshall is a White male who is 57 years old and is single and lives in Florida. Marshall has some health issues such as congestive heart failure and a bad back. Marshall received

disability and had attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, bipolar, and suffered from depression. Marshall lost their son five years ago and when they were seven, they lost their father. Marshall's mother lives in Virginia. Marshall has two sisters and one of them is still alive. Marshall is working on their bachelor's in criminal psychology at JU. Marshall was in social work but then decided that they wanted a different direction and decided to do Psychology. Marshall wanted to get their master's in clinical and become a professional witness of the state to counsel inmates and provide a psychological analysis on the inmates, as well as open their own practice.

Marshall explained they attended online classes to keep a promise to their son that they made. Marshall described that their son did not want to go to college because Marshall was successful without it. Marshall promised that if their son went to college so would they, unfortunately, Marshall's son passed away and a few days later, their son received an acceptance letter to college. Marshall honored their word to their son by enrolling into college. In the first few months of college, Marshall wanted to quit, and Marshall explained they have not been in school for 46 years and were a high school dropout. Marshall explained that they have attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder and by taking online classes they can take their time at their own pace. Marshall learned overtime that they love learning, and they are on honor roll.

Barb

Barb is a White female who is 46 years old and not married. Barb is dating someone and has a boy and girl who are twins, and they are nine and half years old, and Barb has an eight-year-old girl. Barb has been working as a flight attendant for the past 18 years. Barb was in the Air Force reserves and a veteran. Barb started JU back in 2019 and getting two bachelor's degrees. One bachelor's degree is in Religion with a concentration in NextGen and the other is in

Christian Counseling Psychology. Barb wanted to start their own business to work for themselves and plan on getting their doctorate in social psychology.

Barb explained they did not get good grades in high school, and they were terrified to take online classes. Barb is under two years of finishing both of their degrees and they explained they are doing better than they thought. Barb has a 3.78 GPA. Barb thought that taking online classes was going to be hard, but they would have to make time to study and not being about to be in a classroom setting. Barb discovered that it is difficult to make time to study, but most of the time “it is not too bad.” Barb enjoyed writing papers and interacting with their classmates on discussion boards, but they feel that getting started to write is the hard part.

Tommy

Tommy is a White male who did not disclose their age. Tommy is at least 25 years old or older at the start of the Fall 2020 semester. Tommy is active duty in the Navy and has been in the Navy for about 17 and half years. Tommy is short of two and half years of retiring. Tommy has been enrolled in JU for six years and they are getting a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology with a cognitive criminal psychology. Tommy is not sure what they want to do next with their degree. Tommy may choose to take on a contractor job within the Navy.

Tommy’s wife was already enrolled at JU which led Tommy to take online classes as well. When Tommy’s online classes began, they were nervous and excited. Tommy did not know what to expect, which led to them feeling nervous and they were excited to begin their college degree. Tommy explained they still feel excited about taking online classes even though they are getting a second degree. Tommy feels that online classes are a great option for military members and for learning abroad, especially being able to access material electronically.

Walt

Walt is a Black or African American male who did not disclose their age. Walt is at least 25 years old or older at the start of the Fall 2020 semester. Walt is from Virginia and wants to become a lawyer. Walt is working on their bachelor's degree in law.

Walt explained that they attended online classes because COVID 19 impacted them causing them to not be able to take classes in person. Walt felt anxious about taking online classes and currently feels better about taking classes and has overcome it. Walt explained that they work and taking online classes saves time. Walt explained that online classes are flexible and convenient for them to advance their knowledge while attending school and working.

Tasha

Tasha is Black or African American female who is 28 years old. Tasha is by their self in the United States and comes from a family five. Tasha came to the United States for school and business. Tasha wants to become a management officer or law officer. Tasha is working on their bachelor's degree in business economics, humanities, and social sciences.

Tasha explained they wanted to take online classes because they learned about JU "efficiency on their online classes" compared to traditional in person schools. Additionally, Tasha explained they were referred to take online classes at JU by a friend and Tasha wanted the effectiveness to improve their knowledge to achieve their goal. Tasha had a lot of expectations towards JU and taking online classes and they met most of Tasha's expectations. Tasha explained that taking online classes has helped them become more organized, productive, and manage their time.

Kyle

Kyle is Black or African American male who is 41 years old. Kyle lives in San Francisco, California. Kyle is from Alabama and attending a college there and transferred to JU. Kyle

worked for years in hotel management which started their career and now has a good career. Kyle was diagnosed with cancer and was in treatment for four and a half years, which took Kyle out of the corporate world. Kyle is an administrative pastor at a church and is working on their bachelor's degree in Christian Counseling. Kyle wants to become a lead pastor or along the areas of pastorship such as chaplain, or counselor.

Kyle explained they attended JU because it is a Christian university and flexible with taking online classes. Kyle felt anxious, overwhelmed, and worried sometimes when they began taking online classes. Kyle is now more at ease with taking online classes because they are aware of the steps they need to take and the online format. Kyle explained that they are satisfied with taking online classes because it has given them freedom to not be stuck in a classroom all day and work while they take classes.

Devin

Devin is a Black or African American male who is 27 years old. Devin lives in New York City and takes care of their mom who is currently hospitalized from breast cancer. Devin has a daughter that died last year. Devin wants to be a lecturer or teacher and Devin wants to be an artist to be in a movie. Devin was inspired by their role model Dwyane Johnson who acts in movies. Devin is working on their bachelor's degree in elementary education.

Devin explained that they were able to balance their work life and family commitments by taking online classes. Online classes for Devin were hard and stressful. Devin explained that not having a teacher/lecturer in person to check and see if you were doing the assignments correctly or not and it was hard and to understand the assignments. Devin explained that taking classes online has helped them because they can access learning material at any time which helped them balance their work and study commitments.

Malcolm

Malcolm is a Black or African American male who is 28 years old. Malcolm is not married. Malcolm is getting their Bachelor of Science degree in computer science. Malcolm wants to become an IT or computer expert.

Malcolm's friend advised them to take online classes while they were working at a TV company part time. Malcolm decided to take online classes to acquire more knowledge and experience. When Malcolm began taking online classes, they felt nervous and anxious because it was strange to them. Malcolm explained they were able to adapt to the online classes using the digital tools. Malcolm learned quickly how to use the digital tools and applied what they learned from online classes to their experiences to gather more income by helping people outside of school.

Bryan

Bryan is Black or African American who is 29 years old. Bryan is getting their Bachelor of Science in data analytics. Bryan works a part time job. Bryan wants to become a data analyst.

Bryan explained that taking online classes gave them free time, flexibility, and reduced cost. Taking online classes gave Bryan a personalized education and when they first began taking online classes it felt different. Overtime Bryan felt good about the flexibility online classes gave them with their time and course variety. Bryan explained they were able to study at any time and be able to spend time with family, friends, and other activities.

Stuart

Stuart is a Black or African American male who did not disclose their age. Stuart is at least 25 years old or older at the start of the Fall 2020 semester. Stuart is currently living in Virginia. Stuart has a brother who they have not seen, and their mom and dad are still alive.

Stuart wants to continue to grow and gain several degrees. Stuart is getting their bachelor's degree in agricultural education.

Stuart explained that taking online classes was more flexible for them to be able to continue working. Stuart was not able to stop working. Once Stuart began taking online classes, they were nervous, but currently they are stressed from taking the classes and managing their work. Stuart explained that taking online has also helped them because it allows them to be able to participate in social activities and do schoolwork.

Adam

Adam is a Black or African American male who is 29 years old. Adam currently works as a sales manager and lives in New Jersey. Adam is married and has a son. Adam wants to become an accountant and is currently getting their bachelor's degree in accounting.

Adam explained that they wanted to take classes online because there are less people around and it is flexible with their work and time. Adam had a friend advise them to take online classes. Adam was excited and nervous to take online classes when they first started. Adam thought that taking online classes was going to be difficult and they thought it was going to collide with their job, but once they started classes Adam was able to adjust. Adam realized that taking online classes was better than they thought.

Trina

Trina is two races or more female who did not disclose their age. Trina is at least 25 years old or older at the start of the Fall 2020 semester. Trina works and wants to be a clinical therapist at a hospital. Trina is getting their bachelor's degree in psychology.

Trina explained that taking online classes was acceptable to do since they work as well. Trina explained they were stressed out to take online classes at first, but they are not now. Trina

feels great when they see their good grades and they realize that the stress was worth it. Trina is proud of the progress they make towards their online classes even though it wears them out from working and balancing school.

Results

This analysis of the data and information collected were used to answer the research questions for this study. The questionnaire, interviews, and journal prompt were used as data collection and similarities were grouped together to form codes, which were created as four major themes. The themes are the self, online experiences, motivation, and strategies. The data collected shows information on the themes and phrases that support the findings. See Table 2 for codes and themes.

Table 2

Codes and Themes

Codes	Sub-Themes	Themes
Accountable	Skills	Self
Critical Thinking		
Organized		
Focus		
Self-Disciplined		
Autonomy		
Technical Skills		
Afraid	Emotions	
Anxious		
Boring		
Excited		
Frustrated		
Isolated		
Nervous		
Overwhelmed		
Proud		
Stressful		
Terrified		
Scary		
Worried		

Convenient	Classes	Online Experiences
Efficient		
Flexible		
Affordability		
Freedom		
Course variety		
Multi-task		
Personalized education		
Popular		
Reduce cost		
Accessible		
Reliable Information	Environment	
Being alone		
Technology		
Internet		
Less people		
Transportation	Negative	
Comfortable clothes		
Location		
Disadvantage		
Human connection		
Need	Drive	Motivation
No support		
Pay		
Restrictions		
Communication		
Encouragement		
Grades		
Not Alone		
Children		
Family		
Health		
Helping people		
Military		
Personal		
Desire		
Integrity		
Learn		
Passion		
Personal drive		
Push oneself	Faith	
Belief		
Religion		
Hope		
Book		

Classmate	Resources	Strategies
Professor		
Online tools		
Study space		
Support		
Writing papers	Time Management	
Time		
Calendar		
Schedule changes		
Sleep		
Social activities		

Self

The non-traditional undergraduate students that participated in this study were from the ages of 27-57. When asked what their experiences are with taking online classes and why they chose to take, each participant began to describe factors of their self. This led to the theme of the individual. The participants explained their individual characteristics and feelings, which are listed below.

Skills

There were some participants that talked about skills in some type of way. Skills that have led the participants to take online classes or have helped them with taking online classes. Marshall explained that they thought college was pointless, but since they have attended college through online classes it has opened their eyes. Marshall expressed that they were the first to go to college in their family and they realized college is more than learning. Marshall said:

College is about opening your critical thinking skills, and that's what it's done for me. I can look at a situation and come at it five different ways instead, with one narrow mindset, I can listen to what someone is saying and understand what they're trying to say, even though their opinion might be different, I don't argue it, you know.

Tasha described their experiences with taking online classes as a positive experience. Tasha felt that they have more time to be flexible with their daily activities and hobbies. Tasha explained that self-discipline helped them maintain their day-to-day responsibilities and taking online classes. Bryan stated, "Self-discipline is required in online classes." Bryan described that they use self-discipline to prioritize and manage their time with social activities, so they can have flexibility.

Walt talked about their online classes have been great and that taking online classes assist them in balancing their work, life responsibilities, and school. Walt explained they prioritized their goals and to make sure they can tackle their school and work life. Walt believed that online classes will lead them to achieving technical skills. Walt stated, "Let me see. It also gives me real world skill like in terms of technology."

Devin expressed that taking online classes you must stay focused. Devin thought that students should take online classes seriously. Being focused can help people accomplish the goals that they want to achieve. Devin wanted to finish their online degree and believed that staying focused will accomplish that goal for them. Devin said:

Because I believe that if you're not focused in life, there's no possible way that you actually going to achieve what you're after. So the major thing there is focus, you just have to stay focused. You want to get there? You want to get something? Stay focused. That's it.

Devin explained they enjoyed taking online classes. Devin believed that remaining focused will help complete their work. Devin feels that they can access online material at any place and time, which helped them manage school and work as well.

Emotions

There were participants who talked about how they felt about taking online classes. Some participants were nervous, afraid, or anxious before they started taking their classes. There were other participants that were excited and looked forward to beginning their online classes. Kevin explained they have not taken online classes before JU and was nervous and had anxiety when they were accepted into JU. Kevin said:

I was incredibly nervous when I was first accepted and began classes. It had been so long since I graduated High School, and I had never imagined I would be able to take classes online. Learning Blackboard was initially difficult for me because it was just one extra step I had to get used to, along with the idea of learning again.

Kevin explained that their daughter helped them overcome their emotions with using online tools while taking online classes. Kevin stated:

My daughter came over and kind of walked me through, you know, some of the requirements for online school and showed me how to use Blackboard and how to interact with the classes. So you know, it was all new to me when I started. I was definitely afraid of it. But it's become routine now.

Tommy had a mixture of feelings towards taking online classes. Tommy explained they were nervous and excited. Tommy was not sure of what to expect when taking online classes. Tommy stated, "Excited to be starting my college degree but also nervous due to not knowing what to expect from the online setting. Currently, my feeling toward online classes is still exciting, even with it being my second Bachelors." Tommy explained that even though they had mixed feelings in the beginning with online classes, they still felt that taking online classes is a great choice for them.

Barb described their feelings as scary about taking online classes. Barb explained, “At first it was quite difficult. Scary. I never did well in school, so I wasn't sure what to expect.” Barb did not have very high hopes with taking online classes because they had uncertainty. Barb stated:

I had a lot of doubts personally about myself and who I was as a person wasn't. Uh, where I am today, so it's quite scary. Now, I know that there's a ton of resources, not just available through our college, but just out there in general.

Barb realized that attending JU provided them with a lot of resources to make them feel comfortable with taking online classes.

Malcolm explained they felt nervous and stressed about taking online classes. Taking online classes Malcolm even felt bored with some of their classes. Malcolm stated, “I had to go extra miles towards learning, and I didn't really have enough time for myself, and it was so bored and stressful.” Stuart also stated they were stressed with taking online classes. Stuart stated, “When I first started, I was nervous but right now I am stressed out.” Stuart explained they did not have time for themselves and thought they could manage their school, social activities, and work. Stuart said, “At the beginning I thought it was going to be flexible but with work and all, it is stressful.” Stuart explained that taking online classes has been stressful, but they have enjoyed taking online classes because it has given some flexibility to squeeze in social activities.

Online Experiences

Online experiences are the next theme that was derived from the data analysis. Participant responses that were coded and created the online experience's theme. The theme online experiences addressed the central research question and sub-question one. Most participants

shared their experience with taking online classes and described the reasons why they choose to take online classes.

Classes

There were participants that talked about how their classes were delivered and why they choose to take online classes. Bryan believed that online education helps with students having the ability to set their schedule to create flexibility. Bryan explained that online classes are flexible. Bryan stated, "Online education enables the teacher and the student to set their own learning pace, and there's the added flexibility of setting a schedule that fits." Bryan explained that flexibility gives them time to manage their school, work, and social life. Bryan stated, "this gives time to help you have time for social activities." Bryan described flexibility where they can have free time to complete things that they like to do. Bryan stated, "online courses give you the flexibility to spend time with work, family, friends, significant others or any other activity you like."

Stuart explained that flexibility is provided with taking online classes as well. Stuart stated.

I would just say online classes have been giving me this flexibility like in terms of able to do my assignments on time and able to reach out to either my supervisor or my suits or and all the aspects of it or like pertaining to academics.

Stuart explained that online classes are helpful with creating opportunities for students to freely do different things in their time. Stuart stated, "free like in terms of me attending to my assignment on time and also creating other flexibility like in terms of social activities maybe meeting my friends and going to party and maybe coming back to take my test." Stuart believed

that flexibility with taking online classes and being able to have balance work and social life has been beneficial to them.

Walt's online classes was flexible but also believed online classes provided them freedom. Walt stated, "online classes was that they give me more freedom, perhaps, more than I can handle! This freedom can be dangerous if you don't learn how to handle it." Walt explained that online classes is "liberating, like it helped me to pursue my school and at the same time and also save time." Kyle stated they have freedom to take online classes as well. Kyle explained that attending online classes allows them to balance work and school life. Kyle stated, "It gives me the freedom to work while attending school and not have to be stuck in the classroom all day." Online classes can create freedom as well as provide accessibility.

Tommy explained that accessibility is what online classes provide for them. Accessibility makes it easier for students to complete tasks and assignments for their classes. Tommy stated, "It's easy. Ease of access and just easy. Easier for me." Tommy explained that they are active Navy and move around a lot and taking online classes made it an obvious choice to choose. Tommy stated:

Just being active-duty military and never being settled in one place for very long and just easier to take the time to do the online versions of the class.

Tommy explains that having online material and content for online classes is a great way to have students from all over, take classes.

Environment

Taking online classes creates a learning environment where students feel they can be more comfortable in their comfort zone or take their online classes at any location. Marshall explained that their online environment works better for them. Marshall stated that "the online

delivery platform, it lets me work anytime I want. I'm not stuck at from 2:00 o'clock till 4:00 O'clock being at a class sitting." Marshall continued to explain that choosing online setting made things for comfortable for them. Marshall stated:

The online platform just works better for me. Uh, I'm not hermit, but I'd rather stay at home than go anywhere. When people are doing weird things, being rude. I have a tendency that I have to open my mouth and I've learned that staying away actually works better for me.

Marshall explained that for military members, taking online classes is an easier option since they have to move around a lot.

Tommy also talked about how online classes are better to use for those in the military. Tommy explained they are currently living in Pennsylvania now when they are taking online classes for their university in Virginia. Tommy stated, "just being active-duty military and never being settled in one place for very long and just easier to take the time to do the online versions of the class." Online classes allow students to take classes in any location and environment.

Online classes also allow students to find areas that make them feel comfortable taking their classes. Tasha explained that online classes allowed them to take classes anywhere which made it easier for them. Tasha stated, "I am able to learn like in my comfort zone." Bryan explained that comfortable clothing and being in their comfort zone was easier for them to take online classes. Bryan stated:

It got pretty comfortable, and you combine your comfort you know, having these classes and you get to wear normal casual clothes without having to go through the stress of what to wear or, you know? Before rushing out to school, so yeah. I like the comfortability. You can be your own comfort and you know talk to and do your thing.

Bryan explained that being comfortable in your environment you can get things done with no excuse. Being comfortable allows you to relax and focus on the task at hand. Bryan stated:

The online learning, it's comes with the comfortability of being in your house. There is no much excuse. There's no, there's no other thing. To that would stop one from not learning well, because the environment is already, you know, good enough.

Walt explained they believe online classes are relaxing environment to take classes in a setting that is comfortable to them. Walt explained that they like taking online classes because it reduces their cost to use transportation. Walt explained they are able to be in their house and take online classes and not have to leave. Walt explained that online classes, “reduce costs because not having to commute to campus really help me save on transportation costs.” Online classes provide an environment that is less people around in person where comfortability, being in students comfort zone helps them focus on their classes and assignments.

Negative

Some participants explained their experiences with taking online classes as negative. Trina feels that online classes have some “disadvantages.” Tasha explained their negative with online classes is having no human connection. Tasha stated:

An online class eliminates the human connection that a face-to-face or in house teaching environment provides. And then student motivation, it takes a highly self- motivated and independent student to be able to complete an online course. I feel if there's some way, we can get more motivation and get to connect with other students it would have been a nice ride.

Tommy explained their negative experience with writing a paper for class. Participant 4 explained:

I did not have access to all the possible resources due to restrictions. This caused me to defer to outside means of information that were not as reliable, which in turn caused my grade to suffer and almost be considered unqualified of what was required.

Tommy did not enjoy their experiences with some of their online classes and even explained that they did not use resources. Tommy stated, "I haven't utilized any support as I am not fully aware of what support there may be for me." Marshall also did not use resources. Marshall stated, "I have no family so there is no support or strategies."

Malcolm explained they had to go the extra miles to complete their online class, which they had a negative experience. Malcolm stated, "I had to go extra miles towards learning and I didn't really have enough time for myself." Malcolm described the negative experience by stating:

High financial commitment was observed while taking part in the learning process as I went Extra miles to gather cash for purchase of gadget's. Some times i had some technical hitches ranging from poor internet connections and this really affected my participation on the studies.

Kevin explained that based on their experiences with online classes, they believe online classes should "slow down a tad bit." Kevin explained that some classes students would pick up the information quickly and others would need time to catch up. Bryan explained with their online classes they would ice their professors to be more lenient and approachable. Bryan stated, "I want them to be more approachable." Marshall explained that they feel like there is too much reading for their online classes. Marshall stated, "you're basically shoving a whole book into an 8-week period. Sometimes I find the reading to be just way too much." Barb talked about what

they have seen that is inconsistent is the grading from each professor for assignments such as American Psychological Association writing.

But the differences on how they grade that, like one is like accepts it one way another accepts it another way. But just that there is a consistency of expectations of us as students so that we can be consistent in our writing, because if we consistently write one way, every professor for the last three years of it has accepted it and then all now all of a sudden, you know, a professor's like, nope. Marks everything after. Like what did I do. So just to consistency, so we are doing formatting properly really.

Walt explained that they think there should be changes such as having a tutorial to show how to use online classes. Walt stated:

Before setting up an online class, they should be a kind of introductory parts whereby they invite us in and they will show us how to run the online class we will know we will understand the whole process.

Kyle explained that online classes can improve by making their syllabus clear. Kyle stated, "I'm saying one thing I would like to change is like sometimes the way the syllabus is like given can be a bit complex and you know not easy to navigate."

Devin explained their negative experience with an online professor. Devin talked about their professor not treating them fairly or appropriately. Devin stated, "some lectures who just want the job probably for the money, but they actually scare people away and they make people feel extremely, very bad." Devin continued to say, "they really have to screen the instructors." Negatives experiences can decrease the motivation of taking online classes.

Motivation

Motivation is the next theme that was derived from the data analysis. The codes were created as a theme called motivation. The theme motivation addressed sub-question two.

Participants explained the reasons that motivated them to want to take online classes and what kept them wanting to continue taking online classes.

Drive

Drive pushes people to want to accomplish a goal or task. A few participants explained their drive behind taking online classes. Kyle explained one of their online classes' experiences, which was their math class. Kyle stated:

A few semesters ago, I took a math course. I have weak math skills but I attempted to do the work anyway. Throughout the semester, I kept an open line of communication with my professor, asking questions about what I didn't understand or needed his assistance. He took the time to not only respond to each of my questions but also made himself available to do a live session with me as well. I appreciate his efforts to assist me.

Kyle explained that their drive is communication with their professor in a math class.

Stuart explained that they had positive experiences with their professor. This encouraged them to take online classes. Stuart stated, "Our lecturers created Skype accounts to communicate with them during office hours which became extremely helpful." Students having a positive interaction with their students can create a positive experience for the student. This can drive them to continue taking online classes.

There are some participants that talked about health as their reason for driving them to take online classes. Kevin stated:

We've had a lot of health issues at home. And my wife has been for the last several years Unable to be alone and without anyone to stay with her or make sure she's OK. You

know, I didn't want to risk going out to a school and being gone, you know all day for the whole week.

Kevin continued to explain that they were motivated to continue taking online classes because they feel like they were supported by their family. Kevin stated:

I really feel like I'm supposed to be helping people and you can't do that if you don't finish your degrees and get your licensure, so I'll push forward. Also, it helps to know that there's a lot of family and friends that are proud of me being an old man and going back to school, you know.

Devin explained their family drove them to take online classes. Devin explained that they were depressed and lost their dad and their mother is sick. Devin stated:

I will have to pick an online class so that I can try rescheduling my business for the day, I have time for my work, have time for my mom and have time for studies. That was one of the reasons why; my family, my mom and then work.

Devin explained they choose to take online classes to balance their work, school, and helping their mother.

Barb explained that motivation to them is their children. Barb stated, "So my children are what keep me motivated because I realize now they see me and I can't just quit." Barb continued to say, "I get to go to college while my kids see me go to college so I can be an inspiration to them to say to dream big and have big hopes and that no matter what happens." Barb explained their children have helped them stay on track with their online classes. Additionally, Barb explained how encouraged they were by their professor, which also motivated them. Barb was encouraged by how their professor helped them. Barb stated, "The most humbling part was her words of encouragement. She had no idea what I was going through in my personal life. But her

words.... they made such a difference to me.” Kevin also explained that they were encouraged by their professor. Kevin explained how they were struggling with a class and the advice their professor provided them. Kevin stated:

To my surprise, not only did she offer quite a bit of advice on how to manage the difficult course but she also offered a link to an outside website that went into greater detail. This was encouraging to me, and offered positivity when my anxiety was only seeing failure.

Kevin explained that having encouragement can make a difference to students.

Faith

Faith can be strong enough to drive someone to finish a task or goal. Some participants have explained that their religion and hope has motivated them to continue taking online classes. Barb explained their experience with taking an online class and how their professor helped them by providing them advise. Barb explained how their advice encouraged them. Barb stated:

We all go through things, and we do not know what is going on in someone’s life. God commands us to love one another. It is the one command he gave us since Jesus. She was obedient, so God was able to use her to encourage me. I needed that and am blessed to be on the receiving end.

Barb explained that having faith in God and lead them the way to their next path and goal. Barb stated, “I left it open for God to let me know what he wanted me to do. And I know now. There is no mistake the reason of why God has helped me take the path that I have.” Kevin wants to help people and use their biblical worldview to assist their motivation. Kevin stated, “I really feel like I'm supposed to be helping people.” Kevin explained that they didn’t come this far to stop and want to keep pushing to complete their online degree.

Tommy talked about having hope helped them keep pushing to complete their online classes. Tommy explained that they were having technical issues with the internet and the professor worked with them and they were allowed to turn in their work a little later. Tommy stated, “I feel like this experience not only helped me complete the class with a passing grade but gave me hope that I could trust future professors to do the same.” Tommy explained that their experiences with their professors pushed them.

Kyle explained their faith and beliefs helped them stay motivated to continue taking online classes. Kyle explained they have different sticky notes to help them stay focused. Kyle stated:

Have faith and don't doubt and you know, Genesis says Lord make it clear or Proverbs 10 to 9. Walking into here with you always, you know, just justice. Motivation wall.

Kyle explained that the Lord had led them to JU and to finish their degree. Kyle stated, “But he made away from me now to be able to finish my degree and work to get my degree right there, and I don't want to squander.” Kyle explained that they did not want to mess up this chance and want to continue taking online classes to finish their degree.

Strategies

The next theme that was derived from the data analysis was strategies. Participant responses that were coded and created the strategies' theme. The theme strategies addressed sub-question three. Some participants shared their strategies to assist them with taking online classes. The strategies helped participants with completing their online classes or overcoming their challenges with assignments by using resources and time management.

Resources

Resources were used to take online classes. Most of the participants explained the different types of resources they used to help them with taking online classes. Tasha explained that having a quiet study area is helpful in doing online assignments. Tasha stated, “better space to work because when you are comfortable working and work more effectively than and no excuse and to prepare and do what you have to do. Things like comfort study.” Having a comfortable study space can help participants stay focused. Tasha stated that they “create a regular study space” for themselves, which helps them eliminate distractions. Bryan explained that creating a study space can help them focus as well. Bryan stated, “have a designated study space that is free of distractions so I can focus on my work.” Other resources that participants used were their classmates.

Adam explained that their classmates helped them with taking online classes. Adam stated, “having a strong connection with fellow online course mates has really been supportive.” Adam explained that their classmates would check up on each other outside of classes. Adam stated, “even though we've never met physically, but we are really, really close, we get to call each other outside classes we you know check up on each other.” Adam also explained that their professor was helpful as well. Adam stated, “getting to contact my professors whenever I need help” was very supportive.

Kyle used their professor as a resource. Kyle explained they had an “open line of communication with my professor, asking questions about what I didn’t understand or needed his assistance.” Barb explained they reached out to their professor, tutor and peers for assistance with writing. Barb stated, “have utilized a tutor, asked the professor questions, and even asked peers to help explain something that I might be having difficulty understanding.” Other resources that were used were online tools and support.

Kyle explained they used some online tools and support resources. Kyle stated, they “utilized the school resources and advisors. Reached out for assistance from my friends and Facebook groups” to assist with their online classes. Kevin stated they used other online tools such as the writing center. Kevin explained, “I love the library, I love the online writing center.” Kevin continued to explain that they used webinars and YouTube. Kevin stated:

And my daughter has shown me different YouTube videos, especially when I was taking like probabilities and statistics that, you know, my gosh, it's been over 34 years since I've had a math class, so watching YouTube videos on how to do things properly. That's been a big help.

Trina explained that they use other online tools to help them with their online classes. Trina stated, “I'm actually using some resources like Grammarly and YouTube.” Trina also explained that they used additional support resources as in tutors. Using online tools and additional support resources helps students improve on their online classes and assignments.

Time Management

Time management was described in different ways by some of the participants. Participants explained they used time management as a strategy to help them take online classes. Bryan explained that taking online classes provides them time to accomplish their tasks. Bryan stated, “gives time to help you have time for social activities” and “achieve other positive goals in life.” Bryan explained that taking online classes gives them free time, but managing their time helped them with completing their online classes. Bryan stated, “I create a schedule and manage my time wisely. Keep a semester and a weekly calendar and I Stay organized and be thorough.”

Barb explained that having time management skills is important to manage their personal life and schoolwork. Barb stated, “Now, I know that there's a ton of resources, not just available

through our college, but just out there in general. And I think the biggest thing having time management skills is a must.” Barb explained that they had to make time for what they love to do and what they need to do such as church, school, work, and family. Barb stated, “I think that once we all find that we're a lot happier when we can see our family spend time with friends, have personal time, have God time, have school time. So, like I said, time management.” Kyle explained that they thought they had time management, but realized they need to be more disciplined with managing their time. Kyle stated:

Online classes for me, I have to be more intentional. I had to be better disciplined. I had to learn, you know, whereas I thought I had time management and how to prioritize tasks and matter of fact, how to make sacrifices and say no, taking online classes has taken it to a new level.

Malcolm feels that time management helped them stay on track with their time and manage their school and life. Malcolm stated:

Time management has really helped you know, you know, with that I'm always I'm able to you know to maximize minimize and make use of different time. You know I can schedule time for myself you know rather than a whole making a whole deal of me sitting down in classes.

Devin explained how to manage their time they use a schedule. Devin stated, “I also set a schedule for completing and reviewing assignments.” Devin also explained that managing their time helped them balance their study and work commitments with taking online classes. Tasha stated they use a to do list to manage their time. Tasha stated, “I get like set out my to do list every day, sometimes weekly I set out my schedule for the week.” Sometime using calendars, check lists, and balancing time are helpful to managing online classes.

Outlier Data and Findings

There was data that was collected and did not correlate with the research questions. The data was the codes, and they were unexpected. Participants explained their online experiences through the journals, interviews, and questions which formed these outliers called negative experiences and conditions.

Outlier Finding #1: Descriptive

There were a few participants that explained their experience with online classes and described themselves. Adam explained that online classes motivated them which are the people in their classes. Adam stated:

When I see how serious they are, when I see how they put their effort in, you know, the education that has really motivated me to put more effort in, you know, continue with my online classes.

Barb explained that they value themselves and believe that their value helped lead them to taking online classes. Barb stated:

It took me potentially over half of my life to understand my value and worth. I want to help others have self-love, self-care, and understand their value and worth.

Barb also explained that they expect themselves to do their best. Barb stated, “do my very best no matter what that looks like.” Malcolm also valued themselves and education. Malcolm explained, “I explore round the internets to gather more information about the on-line teaching, and it was a value.” Malcolm explained that education added value to their goals.

Outlier Finding #2: Conditions

There were a few participants that described conditions or uncontrollable situations that caused them to take online classes. Barb stated:

I want to make sure I mention that I partially started in psychology because of my own circumstances that I have faced and continue to face. I wanted to help my children. I did not know until last year what I wanted to do with my degrees.

Barb explained, “I realize that my circumstances do not determine my joy, and I want to share that with others.” Trina explained that being in a good and “cool environment” works for them with taking online classes. Devin explained that working in a “productive learning environment” helps them stay focused with taking online classes. Walt stated that “due to the impact of COVID 19” that led them to taking online classes.

Research Question Responses

The data that was collected was analyzed and grouped to create themes that answered each research question. This section provides a narrative and participant responses of the central research question and sub-questions to this study. Themes and direct quotes of the participants support the research questions.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of non-traditional students while taking online courses at a public or private university in Virginia?

There were many experiences amongst the participants with taking online classes. Some experiences were negative, and others were positive. The online experiences brought on different emotions where participants talked about themselves and their skills. Kevin explained they were nervous about taking online classes and received “full blown anxiety” when they were accepted to JU. Kevin explained they get “nervous” each semester and “learning Blackboard was initially difficult.” After his daughter helped him with how to use the Blackboard and online tools, Kevin felt better. Another participant felt nervous, which was Stuart. Stuart stated, “When I first started,

I was nervous but right now I am stressed out.” Devin also felt stressed out with taking online classes. Additionally, Devin found online classes to be hard “to understand the assignments.” Trina also found that online classes were stressful. Trina stated, “I am a bit more stressed about online classes than I anticipated when I first started.”

Walt explained they felt “anxious” in the beginning. Kyle stated they felt “overwhelmed, anxious, worried” while taking online classes in the beginning. Malcolm was also anxious and nervous when taking their online classes. Malcolm continued to explain that it was “very strange to me but along the line I was able to adapt to the system.” Adam had a different feeling. Adam was nervous but excited about taking online classes. Tommy had the same feelings as Adam. Tommy felt nervous and excited. Tommy did not know what to expect and from taking online classes, but now their “feelings toward online classes is still exciting.” Barb was not excited. They felt terrified about their experiences with online classes. Barb stated, “I was completely terrified” and explained that they did not receive good grades in high school and now is unsure how their grades will be and if they will finish.

There were participants that explained the theme, self, through their skills. Bryan explained that taking online classes have “increased having technical skills.” Adam explained that they can benefit from taking online classes because you can gain, “new skills, more freedom, spending time with family as were as having to spend time with themselves.” Kevin explained with taking online classes they were able to “pick up my own abilities and push harder” to complete their classes. Walt also believe that technical skills were gained from taking online classes. Walt stated, “gives me real world skill like in terms of technology.” Other than technical skills for each participant, some participants talked about being focused, being organized and self-disciplined when taking classes. Devin stated, “if you're not focused in life, there's no

possible way that you actually going to achieve what you're after.” Tasha explained their experiences with online classes that led them to having self-discipline and organization. Tasha stated that online classes help them develop “self-discipline from planning my day and tasks around class times.” Tasha also explained that online classes allowed them to “organize my study.”

Sub-Question One

What influences non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to persist in online learning?

Participants explained what influenced them to want to continue taking online classes. These influences motivated them to persist. The theme, online experiences, explained the classes, environment and negative experiences which influenced participants to take online classes. Walt explained what influenced them was that online classes is “kind of convenient” and it is “flexible.” Tasha explained flexibility as well. Tasha explained they get to have “reliable information” from online classes and flexible enough to “get good sleep” so that they can function to go to work. Tommy explained flexibility of taking online classes due to them being in the military. He explained it is “just easier to take time to do the online versions of the class.” Marshall also agreed that it is easier. Marshall stated, “anytime I approach an assignment I can say at least I have read about it in 20 different locations.”

Bryan explained also explained that flexibility influenced them and having flexibility gave them “time for social activities.” They explained that being in a comfortable setting helps them as well. Bryan stated they can get “pretty comfortable” and “combine your comfort” to wear “normal causal clothes” at their home when they take online classes. Adam explained that flexibility of “combining both working and also learning” can create a “conducive environment.”

Stuart stated that “flexibility” gave them the “opportunity” to reach out and meet other people as well as make time for their assignments. Kyle explained the flexibility “to set mine own schedule as far as like when I do my class” and “meet my deadlines.” He explained that online classes “provides the opportunity.”

Trina explained that being in good environment, which is “self-motivating.” Trian also described they “couple my school life and my work life together, which feels like multitasking.” Devin explained that they had to multitask by “balance work and family commitments.” Barb explained that online classes allow them to make time for “church, I still carve out time to have social relationships.” She explained they found “a balance in life.” Malcolm also explained that they balanced their time. He explained they attended “school part time while working.”

Sub-Question Two

What motivates non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to attend online education?

The questionnaire, interview, and journals led to various reasons that participants were motivated to attend online education. The theme, motivation, led to sub-themes drive and faith based on the data analysis. Barb explained their motivation comes from faith and drive. Barb explained they used “the gift that God gives me” and they “have finally figured out what I am good at.” Barb explained their “children help me stay motivated and “it is an inspiration to them.” Marshall also says their child is their motivation. Marshall stated, “I am just honoring a promise to my son.” He explained that he told his son if they go to school then they would as well.

Kevin had a different motivation. They explained their personal dive pushed them. Kevin explained, “I wanted to study the mind” and put “my own biblical worldview into helping

someone through a rough time.” He explained “I want to succeed. I want to complete what I started.” Walt also explained their personal drive. Walt explained taking online classes motivated them to “stick to my goals.” Malcolm also explained their personal drive that motivated them. Malcolm explained “I want to have a good future for myself.” Bryan explained they “wanted to take some online classes for my education. That is pretty much it.” Tommy explained their motivation was “wanting to help kids.” Tommy explained their personal drive to get a criminal justice degree and to become a “probation officer type counselor for juveniles.” Trina also was motivated by getting a degree for a certain job. Trina stated, “I want to be a clinical therapist” and “I need to add some more stuff to my resume. So, when I apply I will get the job.”

Kyle explained their faith pushed them through online classes. Kyle explained, “God has made a way for me now to be able to finish my degree.” Devin, Adam, and Malcolm explained their motivation came from their peers. Devin explained the “people I met on the online classes” and having friend around “make me feel at home, make me feel very comfortable” with taking online classes. Adam stated, “I had this friend, the same friend who, you know spoke to me about who introduced me to online classes, you know, kind of like motivated me because I saw that he was doing really well.” Malcolm explained, “a friend of mine motivated me.” Stuart explained their passion for online classes and finishing assignments. Stuart explained “passion like in terms of I just see online classes to giving me these free opportunities to attend activities.” He explained they have the “passion for it because I try to finish up my assignment on time.”

Adam and Tasha explained that what motivated them was their professor. Tasha explained “quality teaching in the online learning” motivates them. They explained that having a “good professor who is really intentional about getting to instill more knowledge about what they are studying” is supportive and helpful to them.

Sub-Question Three

What strategies would help drive non-traditional students at a public or private university in Virginia to complete their online education?

There were participants that provided strategies that helped them complete their online education. Some of the participants provided resources and others used time management as a strategy. Bryan explained they used a schedule for time management and kept a “semester and weekly calendar.” Devin and Walt used a schedule as well. Devin stated, “I also set a schedule for completing and reviewing assignments.” Walt stated, “I create a schedule and manage my time wisely.”

Kevin explained they used online tools as resources such as discussion boards. Kevin stated, “I am also able to gauge my levels of learning compared to fellow students based on our discussions.” Marshall explained they use write on note pads and use “Google Scholar” as their resources. Tommy explained they use online tools such as JU online to help them. Tommy explained, “all the resources that I really need are provided through JU online, whether it be the access to the digital library or anything like that.” Walt also stated they used online tools such as “Zoom” and “iPhone” to complete online classes. Devin and Stuart explained they use their iPhone as well. Devin stated, “My apple system I use the most times my cell phone because most times you know you, you can't just really carry your laptop all around.” Stuart explained “I use my smartphone and also, I use my tablet.” Malcolm and Adam used their “Zoom” and “YouTube” to help them with online classes. Adam stated they use “Google classroom,” “Zoom” and “books. Bryan also explained they use “YouTube” and “Klan Academy.” Trina explained they use “Grammarly” and “YouTube.”

Barb explained they used a tutor as support and a resource. Barb explained, “I have utilized a tutor, asked the professor questions, and even asked peers to help explain something that I might be having difficulty understanding.” Stuart explained they use their “classmates.” Tasha explained they used “books” and “planning notebooks” as a strategy to taking online classes. Kyle explained they used the “school resources and advisors” as support and “communicate with my professor/teacher.” Kyle explained they used “office of accommodations” and “online tutoring,” as well as support from their “friends and Facebooks groups.”

Summary

This transcendental phenomenology study understood the lived experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university. This chapter described all 13 non-traditional students’ experiences while being in an undergraduate online program and each participants description. The results and data were analyzed of each participant through screening questionnaires, questionnaires, interviews, and a journal prompt. The four themes are self, online experiences, motivation, and strategies. The nine sub-themes were skills, emotions, classes, environment, negative, drive, faith, resources, and time management. The themes and sub-themes answered the central research question, and sub-questions. In chapter five, there will be a discussion of the conclusion of the motivation in student retention with non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology study is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university in Virginia. In chapter five, the discussion of this study's findings will be described. In this chapter, the interpretations of the findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research of this study were presented. Finally, this chapter concluded with a summary.

Discussion

This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach which provided an understanding of the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university in Virginia. There were different perspectives that came from each non-traditional undergraduate student that participated in this study. According to Moustakas (1994) phenomenology presents the senses and person's experiences of a phenomenon. Each non-traditional student who participated in this study was going through the same phenomenon of being enrolled in an online undergraduate program from the Fall 2020 semester and continuous enrolled the Fall 2021 semester. Additionally, transcendental phenomenology leads to themes and meanings that reveal a person's concerns or interests through their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study focused on Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory where a person's feelings, motives, and thoughts affect their behavior towards a task. Each participant described their experiences with online classes and explained their motivation behind taking online classes. The data was collected and analyzed to form

themes of each non-traditional student taking undergraduate online classes. The themes answered the central question and sub-questions.

Interpretation of Findings

Online learning has increased in popularity at institutions and enrollments has increased (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Non-traditional students tend to enroll in online programs to take online classes (Slover & Mandernach, 2018). Lacking motivation will decrease persistence for online classes (de Barba et al., 2016). Most importantly, student retention is a challenge for online learning (Boston et al., 2019; Sivo et al., 2018; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xing, 2019). In this study, the results from the themes provided evidence for motivation and student retention for non-traditional undergraduate students taking online classes.

This study focused on understanding the experiences of non-traditional students and their motivation while taking online courses. There was data that was gathered and examined to support the purpose of this study. The data was analyzed through screening questionnaire, questionnaire, interviews, and journal prompt. The analyzed data led to themes which were self, online experiences, motivation, strategies.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The participants' responses to their experiences with taking online classes provided insight into their motivation to take online classes. This created themes that show the thematic findings for this study. The thematic findings show the lived experiences of non-traditional students taking online classes in an undergraduate program in Virginia. Each non-traditional student provided their experiences with taking online classes through questionnaires, interviews, and journal prompts. Based on their experiences from the data that was collected led to the created themes self, online experiences, motivation, and strategies. There were nine subthemes

that emerged from the themes, which were skills, emotions, classes, environment, negative, drive, faith, resources, and time management. Participants explained that online classes benefited them based on the flexibility and convenience to allow them to make time for their social activities, family, and work. Participants explained the different emotions and feelings they had before they started taking online classes and when they continued with taking online classes. Participants shared what their motivation of their drive, faith and using different resources and time management skills to help them continue with their online program.

One's character. Remenick (2019) explained that non-traditional students tend to need more assistance with mangling multiple responsibilities and roles. Non-traditional students face the challenge of prioritizing their personal life, job, and social life (Remenick, 2019). This can cause different emotions to evolve and can affect their motivation. Deci and Ryan (1980) explained that feelings and attitudes have a relationship to behavior. Deci and Ryan (1980) self-determination theory focus on motivated behaviors and nullifying a person's psychological needs. Self-determination provides motivated behavior when their psychological needs, autonomy, relatedness, and competence are fulfilled (Alamri et al., 2020; Hsu et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2019).

Participants expressed their emotions and how they felt when they were taking line classes. This led to the first theme self. Participants were able to describe their experiences through their emotions on how they felt about taking online courses and the skulls they received from taking online classes. Marshall expressed that they gained critical thinking skills and Tasha used their self-discipline to manage their time and activities while taking online classes. Walt was able to prioritize their goals and believe online classes gave them "real-world skills" in technology. Stuart explained they were stressed with taking online classes. Kevin and Tommy

stated they were nervous, while Barb stated they were scared to take online classes. These emotions of fear did not stop them from taking the online classes. The participant emotions showed their internet drive to push through it to continue with their classes. Kevin explained they had their daughter help them with how to use online tools to better assist them with taking online classes. Kevin explained that after a while they felt better using the online tools.

Life online. Students taking online classes have the flexibility of choosing their own day, time, and use their electronics and computers (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Scarpin et al., 2018; Sivo et al., 2018). Each participant explained their experiences with taking online classes and they had an overall positive experience. Participants explained the benefits of taking the online classes which were flexibility, convenience, and having freedom to manage their time with activities. Bryan, Walt, and Stuart explained that taking online classes gave them flexibility to find a schedule that works for them and be able to work, do schoolwork, and have personal life. Marshall explained that taking online classes is in the comfort of their home or comfort zone. Taking online classes is a benefit to students and allows them to attend school for financial benefits and convenience (Kuo & Belland, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Tasha and Tommy explained taking online classes they were able to take them while they were in any location or state. Trina explained that it was convenient for them to get “access to other additional reading and learning materials.”

Encouragement. According to Deci and Ryan (1980) self-determination theory has two types of motivation called intrinsic and extrinsic. The intrinsic motivated behaviors for some of the participants of this study are their personal drive, family, children, encouragement. The extrinsic motivated behaviors from some participants of this study were their grades, degree, job. There are motivated factors from students’ interests in the subject area, such as value, beliefs,

earning a job, and completing a course to receive a certificate (de Barba et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019).

Kyle and Stuart explained to their professors they had positive experiences with, and their experiences encouraged them with taking online classes. Stuart stated that their professor was “extremely helpful” with interacting with them through online tools. Kyle stated their communication with their professor and their professor made the effort to be “available to do a live session with me as well.” Devin explained their family motivated them to continue taking classes. Devin explained their dad died and their mom was sick. They had to reschedule their work to make time for their “family, my mom, and then work.” Kevin explained that their family motivated them because they allowed him to push their self to do well to avoid letting their “family and friends down.”

Plan of action. There were some participants that used different strategies to help them with their online classes. Some of those strategies were online tools such as discussion boards, Zoom, YouTube, Grammarly. Malcolm stated they used Zoom and you tube “foster more knowledge.” Kevin stated that “discussion boards have been wonderful for me” He said that he was able to “gauge my level of learning compared to fellow students based on our discussions.” Trina used “Grammarly and YouTube” as their resource. Marshall used “Google Scholar” as their online resource.

Other participants have used their peers, professor, tutors, and time management. Students who are employed, have dependents, and who are taking online courses tend to be older adults, which leads to having difficulty with balancing courses (Edmonds et al., 2021). Walt and Bryan used time management to help them with their daily schedule. Walt stated they “create a schedule and manage my time wisely.” Bryan stated they have a “weekly calendar” to manage

their time. Tasha explained that they “learned the principles of time management it helped me a lot” they also explained they use notebooks to plan their daily schedule. There are services that support non-traditional students in managing their multiple roles that have while they are taking online classes, which are academic advising, career services, tutoring, counseling, and financial aid services (Remenick, 2019). Barb explained they used a tutor, professor, and peers for support to “explain something that I might be having difficulty understanding.” Adam used their professors and classmates when they needed assistance with their online classes.

Implications for Policy or Practice

Non-traditional students taking online classes for their undergraduate programs had a few negative experiences. These negative experiences shed light on issues with taking undergraduate online programs for non-traditional students. The negative experiences from the participants may be resolved once directed to administrators and faculty at JU. The data from this study led to implications for policy and practice.

Implications for Policy

There are policies in place for online programs, but online should have some adjustments to their policies to benefit their students. The policies should have administrators and faculty provide additional support on how to utilize technology, especially for students who have difficulty with using technology as well as for faculty. This can cause less technical issues if they have a policy to ensure there is technical support available and accessible if there are any technical issues. Online programs having technological tools and convenient technological support can assist faculty and students (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Having technology training can improve the self-efficacy in taking online classes for adult learners (Renirie (2017). There should be a policy that can enforce faculty to have mentorship with other faculty who have taught online

classes. This can help provide effective teaching strategies for faculty. Peer-mentoring program with faculty who have taught online classes can improve student retention (Muljana & Luo, 2019).

Implications for Practice

Online learning can be challenging. There are many things to juggle while taking classes such as personal and social life, family, work, etc. Non-traditional students tend to have more financial hardship, higher stress levels from academic success, and more commitments that cause higher attrition (Zerquera et al., 2018). Based on the data collected from this study, non-traditional students have had some negative experiences such as not knowing the strategies that are offered to support them, not having a supportive professor, or having technical issues. Walt and Barb did not use support strategies because they did not know what they were. Bryan and Kevin explained their worse experience with a professor. Stuart and Trina explained their experiences with technical issues. Stuart said, “technical issues arose during the upload of presentation” and stated that “technical issues disrupted my schedule for that day.” Trina said they “had very severe service issues when I am in a bad service location.”

Faculty can make a difference. According to Kuo and Belland (2016) being satisfied with your learning experiences can increase student retention. Administration of the online programs and institutions can provide education, professional development, and training to their faculty and improve their online programs to make it a more efficient and effective learning experience. The professional development will encourage faculty to use different theories and effective engagement for their students in online learning (Muljana & Luo, 2019). Sujatha and Kavitha (2018) found that having a lack of feedback, teacher-student bonding, and peer interaction can increase dropouts for students. Having faculty teach their students and help them develop

learning skills provides cognitive support, and having faculty feedback provided to their students promotes support (Zhao et al., 2022). Training faculty to provide effective teaching strategies and services can improve online learning. Faculty may be able to encourage their students through discussion boards and answer their questions in a timely manner. They can provide feedback from their assignments and discussion boards. They can provide group discussion boards and group assignments to encourage peer interaction. Faculty can increase motivation for online learning by answering questions on time, encourage interactions with peers and faculty, as well as faculty can provide more attention to the emotional needs of their students (Zhao et al., 2022). Marshall explained that they would like to have the ability to “ask or actually speak to other students” in their discussion board instead of just doing an activity online. Stuart stated “my professor is not able to reach out to me” based on their schedule and must make adjustments to meet with them. Stuart explained that professors should have time and flexibility.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The theoretical implications for this study focused on Deci and Ryan’s (1980) self-determination theory. Self-determination theory explains that there are two motivated behaviors in a person, which is intrinsic and extrinsic needs or self-determined and automated behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1980). The self-determined behaviors are when the mind and behavior are present, which are the intrinsic and extrinsic needs, and when the mind and behavior are not present which causes uncontrollable or mindless behaviors then it is called automated behaviors (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Based on the results from this study, participants described their motivation behind attending online classes as self-determined behaviors. Participants explained their intrinsic motivators, such as family, children, and personal goal to receive a degree and extrinsic motivators as getting a degree and career so they can help others. This led to the

theme's motivation and self. This study confirmed Deci & Ryan (1980) self-determination theory and how being self-determined promotes human motivation between the online classes and the student (Pugh, 2019). This study was to add to the literature of Deci & Ryan (1908) self-determination theory. Deci and Ryan (1980) self-determination literature were expanded on based on the motivation behind non-traditional students taking online undergraduate classes at a private university in Virginia.

The empirical implications for this study showed that based on the lived experience of the non-traditional students with taking online classes that institutions and need effective faculty and support resources to improve student retention. Some strategies that are needed to improve student retention for online learning for non-traditional students are social engagement strategies, improving faculty rapport, institutional support (Boston et al., 2019; Glazier, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Participant explained that they use time management, online tools, tutoring, their professors, and peers to assist them with taking online classes. The current transcendental phenomenological study adds additional knowledge to the experience of non-traditional students with taking undergraduate online programs. This shows how important it is to research non-traditional students what is the gap in the literature and explained strategies to improve online learning at institutions.

This study expands on current literature because it focuses on non-traditional students instead of traditional students. Additionally, this study focused on Deci and Ryan (1980) self-determination theory for motivation and address to the literature on motivation. Most importantly, students who lacked motivation when taking online classes had low persistence (de Barba et al., 2016). Participants for this study confirmed that motivation increased their student retention through their lived experiences and motivated behaviors.

Limitations and Delimitations

There were limitations that were not controlled in this study. There were technology issues during a few interviews where the participant could not hear me clearly and I had to repeat the questions several times. The technology issues led to glitches on what the participants were saying as well, which is why the member checking was helpful for the participants to review the transcribed interview and made the corrections if needed when certain words were not understood clearly. There were some potential participants who answered the screening questionnaire checking “yes” for them being over the age of 25 years old at the start of the Fall 2020 semester, but getting to the interview and stating their actual age and they were younger than the required age. This allowed a lot of wasted time and cancelling the remainder of the interviews. The participants of this data were all from JU in Virginia. This is a limitation due to wanting to receive three different institutions but only having participants respond and participant from JU. Receiving other participants from other institutions would have provided different perspectives from other institutions and their experiences.

Delimitations of this study was to use non-traditional students who were over the age of 25 years old because of limited research on the non-traditional students for taking online classes than traditional students. Additionally, non-traditional students have a higher increase in enrollment rates than traditional students (Ellis, 2019). Most importantly, there tend to be high dropout rates for non-traditional students (Bohl et al., 2017; Stephen et al., 2020). Transcendental phenomenology was used because I wanted to understand the deeper meaning of the lived experiences of the phenomenon which was non-traditional students taking online classes in an undergraduate program instead of focusing on hermeneutical phenomenology. Hermeneutical phenomenology focuses on no moral phenomena, only interpretations and can create

prejudgments, while transcendental allows you to be open and receptive to experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on non-traditional students taking online classes at a public or private university in Virginia, but the results were based on the private university due to the lack of participation from the public universities. In future research, this study can be repeated, but use traditional students. Using traditional students may provide different experiences and motivations behind taking online classes. Future research can use public universities in Virginia or anywhere in the United States. This study focused on online undergraduate programs and future research can expand the research by using graduate programs. Additionally, future studies can focus on a mixture of online and on campus classes or asynchronous and synchronous online classes.

Conclusion

Online learning has grown in popularity over the years in higher education (Dodson, 2017; Glazier, 2016; Muljana & Luo, 2019). Online learning is unique because it is flexible, does not have a set location, and time, for students to work and attend school (Muljana & Luo, 2019). The attrition rates for online courses are significantly higher than traditional face-to-face courses (Muljana & Luo, 2019; Sivo et al., 2018). The problem is that student retention is a challenge for online learning (Boston et al., 2019; Sivo et al., 2018; Sorensen & Donovan, 2017; Xing, 2019). The theory that guided this study was Deci and Ryan's (1980) self-determination theory to understand the motivation behind completing a task. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenology study was to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public or a private university in Virginia. Data was collected

through screening questionnaire, questionnaire, interviews, and a journal prompt. The results showed the themes of self, online experiences, motivation, strategies that non-traditional students have intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to influence their student retention for online classes. Students' interests in the subject area, such as value, beliefs, earning a job, and completing a course to receive a certificate are some motivated factors for students (de Barba et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2019). The key implication for this study is that Deci and Ryan (1980) self-determination theory showed that motivation to take online classes can be extrinsic or intrinsic, which are self-determined behaviors. Another implication was that non-traditional students need effective faculty and support resources to improve student retention. Future research can expand on the research by looking into traditional students and expanding on the location in Virginia. Overall, this study shows that administrators and faculty need training and professional development to ensure resources are in place and non-traditional students have the rapport and support they need to continue taking online courses.

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Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

March 11, 2022

Jasmine Reynolds
Shante Austin

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-720 Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning

Dear Jasmine Reynolds, Shante Austin,

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 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). 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) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) 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(s) 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: IRB Modification Approval One**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 2, 2022

Jasmine Reynolds
Shante Austin

Re: Modification - IRB-FY21-22-720 Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning

Dear Jasmine Reynolds, Shante Austin:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY21-22-720 Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to add [REDACTED] as an additional research site has been approved. Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. Your revised, stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) 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(s) should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

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

Appendix C: IRB Modification Approval Two**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 16, 2022

Jasmine Reynolds
Shante Austin

Re: Modification - IRB-FY21-22-720 Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning

Dear Jasmine Reynolds, Shante Austin,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY21-22-720 Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to use social media to recruit your study participants has been approved. Thank you for submitting your social media recruitment document for our review and documentation. The final version of your social media recruitment document can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

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

Appendix D: IRB Modification Approval Three

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 29, 2022

Jasmine Reynolds
Shante Austin

Re: Modification - IRB-FY21-22-720 Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning

Dear Jasmine Reynolds, Shante Austin,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY21-22-720 Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to compensate your participants by giving each a \$25 Amazon e-gift card upon completion of the study procedures has been approved. Thank you for submitting your revised study documents for our review and documentation. Your revised, stamped consent form and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study in Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent 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.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

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

Appendix E: Site Approval Email-One

Hello (Personnel name),

I hope all is well. I am a current graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Administration, Educational Leadership degree. The title of my research project is Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning, and the purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a four-year university and a private college.

I am requesting site approval at CU. I want to use non-traditional students (25 years of age or older) at the start of the Fall 2020 semester and they must have been enrolled in an online undergraduate program for the Fall 2020 semester and subsequently enrolled in the online undergraduate program for the Fall 2021 semester. I am requesting a minimum of 6 participants and a maximum of 7 participants.

I have attached my recruitment letter, consent form, questionnaire, interview questions, and I have forwarded my IRB approval email.

I am looking forward to your response.

Jasmine Reynolds

Appendix F: Site Approval Email-Two

Hello,

I hope all is well. I am a current graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Administration, Educational Leadership degree. The title of my research project is Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning, and the purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a four-year university and a private college.

I am requesting site approval at TU, and I am requesting six to seven participants. I plan to complete my data collection by the end of Fall 2022. The participants must be non-traditional students (25 years of age or older) at the start of the Fall 2020 semester and they must have been enrolled in an online undergraduate program for the Fall 2020 semester and subsequently enrolled in the online undergraduate program for the Fall 2021 semester.

I have attached my recruitment letter, consent form, questionnaires, interview questions, and I have forwarded my IRB approval email.

I am looking forward to your response.

Jasmine Reynolds, M.S.Ed., NCC


Appendix G: Department Approval

Hello (Dean's name),

I hope all is well. I am a current graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy in Higher Education Administration, Educational Leadership degree. The title of my research project is Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning, and the purpose of my research is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a four-year university and a private college.

I have attached my IRB approval letter from (Site Name), and I am requesting to have about six or seven participants from your department participate in my study. The participants must be non-traditional students (25 years of age or older) at the start of the Fall 2020 semester and they must have been enrolled in an online undergraduate (Bachelor) program at [REDACTED] for the Fall 2020 semester and subsequently enrolled in the online undergraduate program for the Fall 2021 semester.

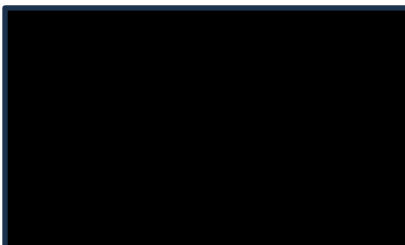
Can you please provide the attached recruitment letter to your faculty to have them share the recruitment letter with their online students? Additionally, can you please share with any other students that may be interested in participating in my study?

Please let me know if you need anything additional.

I am looking forward to your response.

Jasmine Reynolds
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix H: Site Approval One



Jasmine Reynolds, M.S.Ed., NCC
Liberty University

March 30, 2022

Dear Ms. Reynolds,

Thank you for your protocol submission entitled "Motivation in student retention: A phenomenology of non-traditional undergraduate students in online learning". As a non-affiliated researcher, your protocol has undergone an administrative review within the [REDACTED]

Everything appears to be in order with your IRB submission and approval from Liberty University. Administrative approval from the [REDACTED] is granted. Please note that this only confirms that appropriate human subjects approval has been obtained from your home institution for your project. You may need to secure additional approval from the administrative unit at [REDACTED] in which you intend to recruit participants before you begin recruitment and data collection.

If you make any modifications to your project that require approval by your IRB, you must submit those changes to [REDACTED] upon receipt of approval by your IRB. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or require any additional information regarding your data collection at [REDACTED]

Regards

[REDACTED]

Adam J. Rubenstein, Ph.D.
Assistant Vice President for Research Compliance

Appendix I: Site Approval Two



Institutional Review Board (IRB) Institutional Authorization Agreement

**Name of Institution or Organization Providing IRB Review
(Institution/Organization A):**

Liberty University

IRB Registration # IRB00007258 Federalwide Assurance (FWA) # FWA00016439

Name of Institution Relying on the Designated IRB (Institution B):

IRB Registration # [REDACTED] Federalwide Assurance (FWA) # [REDACTED]

The officials signing below agree that [REDACTED] may rely on the designated IRB for review and confirming oversight of its human subjects research described below: (*check one*):

This agreement applies to all human subjects research covered by Institution B's FWA.

This agreement is limited to the specific protocol(s):
 Name of Research Project: Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning
 Name of Principal Investigator: Jasmine Reynolds/Shante Austin
 Sponsor or Funding Agency (*if any*): _____

Other (*please describe*): _____

The review conducted by the designated IRB will meet the human subjects protection requirements of Institution B's OHRP-approved FWA. The IRB at Institution/Organization A will follow written procedures for reporting its findings and actions to appropriate officials at Institution B. Relevant minutes from IRB meetings will be made available to Institution B upon request. Institution B remains responsible for ensuring compliance with the IRB's determinations and with the terms of its OHRP-approved FWA. This document must be kept on file by both parties and provided to OHRP upon request.

Signature of Signatory Official (Institution/Organization A):

[REDACTED]

Date: 9/30/2022

Print Full Name: Terry Conner Institutional Title: Associate Dean, Residential Education & Graduate Operations

NOTE: The IRB of Institution A may need to be designated on the OHRP-approved FWA for Institution B.

Signature of Signatory Official (Institution B):

[REDACTED]

Date: 10.10.22

Print Full Name: Dr. Jeanne Mekolichick Institutional Title: Institutional Official and

Appendix J: Recruitment Letter

RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Student:

I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, and I am conducting a research experiment as a part of my doctoral degree. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public university and a private university, and I am inviting you to participate in this research study.

Participants must be at least 25 years of age or older at the start of the Fall 2020 semester and must have been enrolled in an online undergraduate program for the Fall 2020 semester and subsequently enrolled in the online undergraduate program for the Fall 2021 semester. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a questionnaire that will take about 10 minutes, an interview that will be audio and video recorded and take about 30-45 minutes, and a journal prompt that will take about 10 minutes to complete. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy that will take about 30-45 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will be confidential.

To participate, please email me at [REDACTED] will provide you with a screening questionnaire. After you complete the screening questionnaire, you will be contacted to schedule an interview, if eligible.

A questionnaire and consent document will be emailed to you if are found eligible. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you are eligible and you choose to participate you will need to sign the consent document by typing your name and the date and emailing it to me.

Participants who complete the entire study will receive a \$25 e-gift card from Amazon.

Thank you for your consideration in participating in this study, and I look forward to working with you. **Please forward this letter to anyone else who may be interested.**

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me.

Sincerely,

Jasmine Reynolds
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix K: Social Media Recruitment Letter

SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITMENT LETTER

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting a research experiment as a part of my requirements for a doctoral degree in the School of Education at Liberty University. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students taking online courses at a public university and a private university. To participate, you must be at least 25 years of age or older at the start of the Fall 2020 semester. Additionally, you must have been enrolled in an online undergraduate (Bachelor) program for the Fall 2020 semester and subsequently enrolled in the online undergraduate (Bachelor) program for the Fall 2021 semester. Participants will be asked to complete a questionnaire that will take about 10 minutes, an interview that will be audio and video recorded and take about 30-45 minutes, and a journal prompt that will take about 10 minutes to complete. Participants will have the opportunity to review their interview transcripts for accuracy, which will take about 30-45 minutes. Participants who complete the study procedures will receive a \$25 Amazon e-gift card.

If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please direct message me or email me at [REDACTED] for more information. I will provide you a screening questionnaire. A consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview, and you will need to sign the consent document by typing your name and the date and emailing it to me by time of your interview.

Appendix L: Consent Form

Title of the Project: Motivation in Student Retention: A Phenomenology of Non-traditional Undergraduate Students in Online Learning

Principal Investigator: Jasmine Reynolds, M.S.Ed, NCC, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be at least 25 years of age or older at the start of the Fall 2020 semester, have been enrolled in online undergraduate classes for the Fall 2020 semester, continued enrollment, and enrolled in online classes for the Fall 2021 semester. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of non-traditional undergraduate students while taking online courses at a public university and a private university. The central research question will guide this study: What are the experiences of non-traditional students while taking online courses at a public university and private university?

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire will be sent through email after you are eligible, and it is to gain information about your experiences with online classes. It will take about 10 minutes.
2. Participate in a virtual interview. The interview will be audio and video recorded, and it will take about 30-45 minutes.
3. Respond to two journal prompts after the interview. You will have 24 hours to submit your responses to the journal prompts back to the researcher through email. The journal prompts will take about 10 minutes.
4. Provide feedback on your transcribed interview. The researcher will transcribe the interview and provide the transcription to you through email to review and ensure accuracy. You will email any feedback on the transcribed interview to the researcher. This will take about 30-45 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include increased awareness and knowledge on motivation in student retention for non-traditional students taking online learning. The information from this study will benefit administrators to evaluate and enhance their online programs at institutions.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked laptop and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked laptop for three years and then deleted. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants who complete the study procedures will receive a \$25 Amazon e-gift card.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Jasmine Reynolds. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Shante Austin, at [REDACTED].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix M: Screening Questionnaire

SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

This screening questionnaire is provided to each participant to determine if the participant is eligible to participate in the study.

1. What is your first and last name?
2. What is your gender? A. Male B. Female C. Other
3. What is your race or ethnicity? A. Black or African American B. White C. Asian
D. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander E. American Indian or Alaska Native
F. Two races or more G. Hispanic or Latino
4. Were you 25 years old or older the start of the Fall 2020 semester? A. Yes B. No
5. Did you enroll and participate (e.g., complete assignments) in an online undergraduate program (any Bachelor program) in the Fall 2020 semester? A. Yes
N. No
6. Did you complete the Fall 2020 semester? A. Yes N. No
7. Did you continue to enroll and participate in an online course/s in the Spring 2021 semester? A. Yes B. No
8. Did you complete the Spring 2021 semester? A. Yes N. No
9. Did you continue to enroll and participate in an online course/s in the Fall 2021 semester? A. Yes B. No
10. Did you complete the Fall 2021 semester? A. Yes B. No

Appendix N: Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

This questionnaire is provided to each participant to understand participants' experiences with online classes.

1. Why did you enroll in online classes at your college?
2. How would you describe your feelings when you first started taking online classes compared to your feelings about online classes at your school now?
3. How has your opinion of online classes changed since you began taking online classes at your college?
4. What strategies or support have you used while taking online classes at your college?

Appendix O: Interview Questions

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What is your future career path?
3. What is the name of the educational program that you are in at your college in Virginia?
4. What are your experiences with taking online classes at your college?
5. What led you to choose the online delivery method for taking classes instead of taking traditional in-person classes at your college?
6. What motivated you to attend your online classes at your college?
7. What are some ways to stay motivated to finish your online degree at your college?
8. What factors led you to want to continue enrolling in online classes at your college?
9. What are your expectations of taking online classes at your college?
10. What are your expectations of your instructors and peers when taking online classes at your college?
11. What are your expectations of yourself when taking online classes at your college?
12. What resources are you using to help you while taking online courses at your college?
13. What resources do you think will help you continue enrolling in online classes at your college?
14. What would you like to change with online classes to help other students finish their programs at your college?
15. What things do you think other institutions could do to help students complete their online programs?

-
16. For the last question, what else do you think would be necessary for students to know or achieve with their online education at your college?

Appendix P: Journal Prompt

JOURNAL PROMPT

The journal will be used for participants to answer the two prompts and document any other thoughts and experiences after the interview. Please write a minimum of three sentences for each prompt.

Prompt One:

Write about a positive experience while taking online classes during your time at college and explain why it was a positive experience and explain what else could make it a positive experience.

Prompt Two:

Write about a negative experience you had while taking online classes during your time at college and explain why it was a negative experience, and what could have changed to have made it a positive experience.

Additionally, write down anything that you would like to express that you did not mention during the interview.

Appendix Q: Member Checking Email

Hello (Participant first name),

Thank you so much and thank you again for participating in my study. I have attached your transcribed interview for your review. Please respond to inform me if I need to make any changes.

Once I receive your response about the transcribed interview, I will send you the \$25 Amazon e-gift card.

Sincerely,

Jasmine Reynolds, M.S.Ed, NCC
Doctoral Candidate

