LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR CHRISTIAN

STUDENT SUCCESS IN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

DURING THE PANDEMIC

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Philip Lamar Nash

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2024

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July 24, 2024

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the journeys of first-year undergraduate theological students during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to figure out what, if anything, aided the students in completing their coursework with passing grades. COVID-19 has impacted organizations and individuals around the world, prompting changes to ensure that things kept moving forward safely. The research was conducted to discover what, if anything, brought about achievement for students in a COVID-19 collegiate environment. The research was guided through a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach by conducting interviews with students about their first year in a residential secondary educational setting that moved to being online because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research study aimed to discover factors that led to the successful completion of course curricula by first-year undergraduate students in a COVID-19 collegiate environment while in theological studies.

Keywords: Coronavirus (COVID-19), Success, First-year Students, Undergraduate, Theological Education, Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Dedication

Dedicated to my wife, Valerie J. Nash, who pushed me to go back to school. I thank God for you praying with me when I felt like quitting, praising me when I did well, and putting up with me during this process. I could not have done this without you. Also, I want to dedicate this to our three children and six grandchildren, who excused me from family functions and events when I needed to work on this project.

Acknowledgments

Liberty University staff for guidance and grooming to get me to this place in my academic endeavors.

My siblings always encourage me to keep moving forward and stay focused.

Pastor James E. Wiley, thank you for always challenging me to do something with my education; it is not just another academic notch in my belt.

My wife, Valerie J. Nash, always asks me where I am with my schoolwork. It got on my last nerve but kept me honest with the process.

To the countless individuals who knew that I was on this journey and just took the time to make a phone call, send a text, compose an email, or ask me how things are going, I want to say thank you all.

To those who will take what I have done in this research and further this conversation in academics, hopefully in other areas where the discussion is deemed worthy.

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List of Abbreviations

Brief Resilience Scale (BRS)

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

Generation Z (Gen Z)

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Psychological Capital (PsyCap)

Psychological Well-Being (PWB)

Research Question (RQ)

Self-determination Theory (SDT)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

United States (US)

World Health Organization (WHO)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

The successful completion of a degree starts with the student deciding to go to college. Student success has been measured, gauged, and researched from many perspectives. The odds of that student successfully completing the goal are challenging because about 20 percent of four-year colleges and universities graduate less than one-third of their first-time students within six years (Carey, 2004). York et al. (2019) stated that student success has been on the minds of students, institutions, faculty, and parents because of its importance to the overall academic success of an individual at the collegiate level. Kuh et al. (2011) indicated that students' success varied from one higher education institution (HEI) to the next, especially for those entering college for the first time.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen variable that seriously affected students and their educational success (Ali, 2020). Pocai (2022) indicated that Christian HEIs struggled during the pandemic based on surveys conducted during and since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and is not suggestive that other non-Christian HEIs did not have challenges. The struggle can be seen on several levels throughout various organizations, including the educational system (Desai et al., 2020; Filho et al., 2020). Rowley (2020) indicates the difficulties that universities had to deal with, like financial issues, declining student enrollment, adjustments of professors, and changes in technology systems to support what has happened with the pandemic. Brammer, Branicki, and Linnenluecke (2020) note how COVID-19 has caused governments to close borders, ban mass gatherings, and enforce social distancing, generating a new normal for businesses and individual citizens.

Closures of schools, institutions, and other learning spaces have impacted more than 94% of the world's student population (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2020). The one factor that caused the

adjustments was the coronavirus. The COVID-19 pandemic led to the entire United States going into lockdown, mandates put into place, and people glued to media outlets to understand what was happening. Churches, schools, major corporations, and small businesses scrambled to stay relevant in this new climate. People were working from home, children were doing school from home, people were having church from home, and the list goes on and on. There was a new norm as people in the US and other countries were wearing masks and asked to socially distance themselves from family, friends, classmates, and co-workers (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). People were contracting the virus and dying while medical personnel and other essential workers struggled to support the country and keep things afloat (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Students had to adjust to new conditions by adhering to quarantine, staying in place orders, and not returning to the classroom (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). These changes resulted in students who usually went into the classrooms to enroll in online classes. The enrollment of students into online courses caused the institutions and faculty to make changes to support the students who had already registered and paid their monies for that current school year. Approximately 95% of faculty positions advertised on the HigherEdJobs website (07/08/2020) using the term online or remote learning were from online-only institutions or for part-time jobs (Falk & Lemanski, 2020. p. 195). The need for online or remote education required a different set of leadership skills and understanding to grow those who gravitated to and flourished in the classroom environment. Many questions arose from students and those responsible for leading those students centered around the success of students in completing their coursework.

There was some information available that had the potential to aid students and those in the leadership of the students. However, there was a need for more since there were different circumstances with COVID-19. This concern prompted this researcher to consider this problem

and investigate the issue from a qualitative research approach to figure out if students

successfully completed their coursework and what, if any, factors brought about the students

making the grade. The rest of this narrative considers the possible issues that have affected how

students learned during the pandemic while considering what caused the successful completion

of coursework for the students. The problems that came to light happened by examining more

research centered around the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic while assuming that the

pandemic influenced how students in their first year learned and resulted in a passing grade

being earned by those students in an HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic.

<div align="center">**Background to the Problem**</div>

The CDC issued mandates and supplied guidance when the coronavirus hit the United

States (US) to keep the citizens safe (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019). The

pandemic was a scary time for all in the US and the world as this was not an isolated incident but

one with a global impact. COVID-19 presented significant problems and challenges for those in

the educational field, as there was still the need to ensure that students were successful while

guaranteeing that things were conducted safely (Salceanu, 2020). The classroom environment

was no longer the place to perform learning as one did not know what to expect with the

coronavirus, so online classes were in high demand (Leasure et al., 2020). Research has shown

that coronavirus has had positive and negative effects on student success (Gonzalez et al., 2020).

The students had to make adjustments, as did the instructors, during COVID-19, which caused

the two groups to go to online learning environments (Leasure et al., 2020).

Burke, Marx, and Lowenstein (2012) indicated that there is a need for the leaders of

students to learn skills that will facilitate their growth, which equates to successful habits being

transferred to the students. Others would disagree, as success can be individually based on the

student and the teachers (Burke et al., 2012). If one knows this, one must do what is necessary to

cultivate a positive outcome, but that is not always possible. So, one must endeavor to explore

the flourishing nature of students while considering the factors around the students without

making assumptions about what brought about the positive achievements of the students during

the COVID-19 pandemic. Student success is significant to the HEI where those students attend,

and gathering this information can aid those institutions in building a plan that can breed their

success (Kuh et al., 2011). Measuring success can be difficult because of the variables that lead

to success, and adding other unforeseen variables can create a more incredible difficulty in

having success (York et al., 2019). Now consider the impact of the coronavirus on the academic

community within the past two years. Yes, there was a lack of research into what was happening

then (Ali, 2020). The issues, as mentioned earlier, prompted the need for research to be

conducted based on the gap in the current study. The researcher determined that the gap in

collected scholarly information would be suitable for exploring and ascertaining what was

necessary for first-year students in theological studies to complete their coursework successfully.

It was difficult for everyone to deal with the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Filho et

al., 2020). Individuals struggled to make sense of what was happening in their lives. Christian

institutions are responsible for ensuring that education and the lives of those teaching and

learning are committed to maintaining a biblical worldview (Cartwright et al., 2017).

Worldviews are driving forces in the lives of individuals and should not be taken lightly because

of this fact (Hiebert, 2008). Worldviews must align with the biblical narrative and be Christ-

centered by converting behaviors and beliefs (Hiebert, 2008). Smith (2009) submitted that there

is a need "to push down through worldview to worship as the matrix from which a Christian

worldview is born—and to consider what that means for the task of Christian education and the

shape of Christian worship" (p. 11). The biblical worldview should be woven throughout the

lives of believers just as the Godhead is seen throughout the biblical narrative from Genesis to

Revelation (Hiebert, 2008). Even in times of challenge and chaos, the biblical worldview must

be leaned into because the power of Christ rules in the lives of those who believe in His birth,

life, death, and resurrection to overcome anything (Hiebert, 2008). The COVID-19 pandemic

was not a time to go back on what one knows and believes as a Christian or what the Bible says

about adversity in life.

Job falls to the ground and worships the Lord after his servants tell him that everything he

accumulated in life, including his children, is gone in one swoop (New Living Translation,

1996/2015, Job 1:1-20). Smith (2009) maintains that worship, discipleship, and discipline are

practices that go beyond Sunday but are seen in the everyday lives of individuals who maintain a

biblical worldview (pp. 208-214). Daniel was told not to pray because of a decree that was given

by the king of his day or suffer death by lions. However, he still prayed three times a day,

resulting in him being thrown in with the lions to die, but he did not (New Living Translation,

1996/2015, Daniel 6). Smith (2009) communicated the importance of praying and spending time

in prayer as means of practicing Kingdom and living one a biblical worldview (pp. 192-194).

"Since then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of

God.… Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness…" (New Living Translation,

1996/2015, Hebrews 4:14, 16). Even Jesus taught his disciples to pray (Matthew 6:5-15; Mark

11:25-26; Luke 11:1-4) and exercised prayer at different instances in His life (Mark 1:35; Mark

6:41; Luke 6:12; Luke 22:39). The acts of worship and prayer were not in the brick and mortar

building but outside and in homes which suggest what Smith (2009) was arguing "the practices

are beyond Sunday."

"Using *lectio divina* (words from God) or practicing spiritual disciplines is not a quick fix

or a shortcut to Christian growth. We need to admit we need the help of others in implementing

the life change we seek" (Pettit, 2008, pp. 22-23). Ortberg (2010) argues the need to understand

that God uses people to form people (p. 182). The COVID-19 pandemic caused people to rethink and reengineer their abilities to stay connected and keep healthy relationships while staying safe (Filho et al., 2020). Pastors and churches had to figure out Christian education, church fellowship, worship, prayer, and fulfilling the Great Commission during the pandemic (Chow & Kulberg, 2020). "The change or transformation that occurs in the believer's life happens best in the context of authentic, Christian community and is oriented as service toward God and others" (Pettit, 2008, p. 19). "Let us hold tightly without wavering to the hope we affirm…Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us not neglect our meeting together…" (New Living Translation, 1996/2015, Hebrews 10:23-25). Even though the pandemic was a difficult time, God was not absent in the lives of those who remained engaged with Him, His Word, and Work (Oliver, 2021).

Statement of the Problem

One can assume that students want to be successful in their educational journey. A case can also be made that no one wants to waste their time or money on something that will not benefit them. The thing plaguing the educational community is that there was not much information about the impact of COVID-19 on students' success in their educational journey within their first year (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). This information could be a valuable tool for those who lead students, especially given that another pandemic could feasibly occur and that the results of unpreparedness have already been experienced. As such, this information would be vital to those giving leadership to the students (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The academic community must come together and get workable data that can aid in revolutionizing how things will move forward for the instructors leading the students. Leasure et al. (2012) show how online classes have helped students, teachers, and universities with programs incorporating various learning opportunities. Almusharraf and Khahro (2020) noted that success could be found in the

online or e-learning environment due to students' familiarity with classes previously held in this atmosphere. One might assume that by knowing this information, one knows what is needed to study this area further. However, the research here was conducted in a small Saudi Arabian community (Almusharraf & Khahro, 2020). A single study is rarely, if ever, significant or conclusive enough to provide the necessary understanding regarding student success during the pandemic phenomena, so additional research is necessary.

Much of the research that was out there shows that COVID-19 impacted what universities and higher education learning environments did in an attempt to support students and their leaders (Daniels et al., 2020). Adjustments had to be made to help students and professors ensure that both had what was needed to bring about learning and teaching (Leasure et al., 2020). Prasath et al. (2021) communicate that mental health issues presented with the onset of the pandemic while indicating that coping strategies aided students in their class assignments, with some being positive but others being negative. Lederer et al. (2020) admit that before the pandemic, students were already experiencing substantial mental health concerns, jeopardizing their health and academic success. There was little information collected about the pandemic and how associated conditions affected residential college students. Additionally, there was not much information about the successful completion of those students' coursework. The nature of the pandemic exposed a tremendous gap in knowledge and a fundamental lack of understanding regarding the experiences of students when learning under such strained conditions.

College life for professors and students shifted in the US and other countries because of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. It would be good to know some particulars about the adjustments made by both groups. However, this research focused on first-time students in their first year in a collegiate learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this research sought to determine first-year undergraduate student's methods and support structure,

usually environmental structure external to the college, required to complete classwork and pass their classes successfully. Success has been seen in the lives of students during the pandemic. However, research is needed to focus on first-year students enrolled in an academic program at the onset of the coronavirus, dating back to the end of 2019 and throughout the 2020 school year, as this period was easily the most challenging in recent history.

Purpose Statement

Leedy and Ormrod (2019) indicate the narrative section should be concise and straightforward to let the audience know what is happening in the study. This study employed an interpretive and inquisitive research approach to understand first-year Christian student success enrolled in a theological curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic in a collegiate setting. Kachur and Barcinas (2021) define success for the student as the student meeting his or her goals. Still, from a professional and institutional standpoint, success is when the student(s) acquire or complete a credential within a specified time (Kachur & Barcinas, 2021, p. 108). During the COVID-19 pandemic, HEIs were tasked with the same goals as before the disruption regarding their accomplishments and those of their students (Desai et al., 2020; Filho et al., 2020). There is a difference between the success of the student and that of the educator who ensures that success. Gelles et al. (2020) note that during this unprecedented crisis, findings show that faculty members are critical for supporting students' well-being and success by communicating care and incorporating flexibility into their courses (p.1). A qualitative interview methodology was used to collect data on first-year Christian students' success in theological studies moving from a pre-COVID-19 learning environment to a COVID-19 learning environment. Palermo et al. (2012) conveyed the importance of recording student success and being intentional in the efforts of those professionals and researchers in making this a practice.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What did the completion of theological studies look like for first-year Christian students in a pre-COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

RQ2. What does the completion of theological studies look like for first-year Christian students in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

RQ3. What factor(s) has/have contributed to the completion of theological studies of first-year Christian students in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

RQ4. What factor(s) has/have hindered the completion of theological studies of first-year Christian students in a COVID-19 learning environment enrolled within their chosen higher learning institution?

Assumptions and Delimitations

One cannot conduct his or her research without setting up the parameters of their research (Creswell, 2018). It is essential to develop assumptions and delimitations to aid in creating the scaffolding for those reading the study (Roberts, 2010). Leedy and Ormrod (2019) state that it is vital for researchers to discover assumptions by asking, "What am I taking for granted concerning the problem or question?" (p. 50). Things that a researcher is not going to do in a research project are known as *delimitations* (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 50). Good researchers are willing to admit where the research is limited or has weaknesses (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p. 51). This section will provide this structure.

Research Assumptions

The following assumptions were assessed in the research:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic influenced students enrolled in college.

2. The COVID-19 pandemic affected professors, instructors, and college life.

3. The COVID-19 pandemic caused organizations to make changes to remain relevant in their perspective communities.

4. Records kept determining whether students passed grades during the COVID-19 pandemic.

5. Academic institutions adjusted their procedures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to allow professors to continue instructing students and ensure students received educational services.

6. The first-year Christian students answering the questions were honest in their replies.

7. The interviewer was attentive to students during interviews.

Delimitations of the Research Design

The research population was delimited to first-year Christian students based on their enrollment in a theological studies program on or after the onset of the pandemic at the end of 2019 through the 2020 school year. The research population was delimited to those who had successfully completed their coursework at or above the minimum standards established by their Christian institute of higher learning. The research population was delimited to first-year students in a residential study program versus those already enrolled in an online program before the COVID-19 pandemic. Students already taking online or digital programs before COVID-19 and not having to transition into a virtual learning environment were not considered for this study. The research was limited to first-year residential students attending a HEI for the first time who had to move into an online or hybrid program because of COVID-19.

<div align="center">Definition of Terms</div>

1. *Student:* A person enrolled in college-level courses when the coronavirus hit the US at the end of 2019 through 2020 residing on campus.

2. *Professor*: Any person designated by the institution of learning to lead students in their academic course of studies.

3. *Coronavirus (COVID-19):* The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a global outbreak of coronavirus – an infectious disease caused by the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) (WHO, 2024).

4. *Success:* The completion of a course with a grade recorded as passing by the academic institution.

5. *Residential program:* Educational programs that are designated for on-campus and in-person learning settings.

Significance of the Study

Leasure et al. (2020) state that collaborative efforts of both students and faculty aid in creating an environment for success. Education leaders must be prepared to lead students with an adaptive learning approach to ensure educational goals are met (Burke et al., 2012). The COVID-19 pandemic caused many to be confined as education was happening in a different learning and teaching atmosphere (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Some students and professors were introduced to a learning and teaching environment other than what they had been previously acquainted with, resulting in adjustments (Niskac, 2021). Prasath, Mather, Bhat, and James (2021) note that the well-being and flourishing of students were lower than before the pandemic when comparing their scores on the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PsyCap), Brief COPE Questionnaire, and PERMA Profiler. There was not much research about the pandemic and the impact that it would have on educational institutions and students, so there was a need for information to be compiled and shared (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Compiling and sharing collected data about a specific phenomenon can improve the community in which the information is distributed (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

There is a need to track students' success (Palermo et al., 2020). The research that was conducted has the potential to aid in monitoring students' success during a future pandemic, which could translate into how students met their goal(s) in challenging times. Rowley (2020) communicates that educating others has to change as the organization moves and looks to the future as one considers the needs of the student and the institution. Falk and Lemanski (2020) note that there was a shift to online teaching during the pandemic and learning for the student who needs a different kind of faculty member in this new climate. This research was shaped to determine what factors brought the student success and what other things contributed to or challenged their success.

Summary of the Design

A qualitative research method was used to collect data during this research (Creswell, 2018; Roberts, 2010). Leedy and Ormrod (2019) assert that if one is going to gain an understanding of a person's experience or a phenomenon, then it would be wise for that person to utilize the theories found in a qualitative research method. Using a qualitative approach can bring a greater understanding of the existing problem, considering the parameters of the proposed study. COVID-19 brought about a need for more research as there was not much at the time of the onset, resulting in a new way of doing things. The design asked questions of first-year Christian students enrolled in theological studies at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to determine if or what factors contributed to their successful completion of coursework to make a satisfactory grade. The design determined if students' success happened on an island for the students or if other factors brought about their achievement during COVID-19.

Creswell (2018) communicates that asking the right questions can bring the answers the researcher needs to gather the information necessary to complete his or her dissertation. The interview questions of this narrative were used similarly to add to the literature once the

dissertation had been completed (Bredfeldt, n.d.). Data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted

in a manner that was used to determine that the variables within this research method interacted

with one another (Roberts, 2010). Each participant provided thorough answers to the questions

asked during their interviews, providing adequate information about their experiences during the

pandemic, resulting in data that can be used to understand better the events of the COVID-19

pandemic on student success.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The World Health Organization (WHO) communicated that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) was sweeping across the globe rapidly while causing sickness and death to those who contracted it (WHO, 2020). From its perspective, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommended that the current administration of the US government issue ordinances to stay in place to slow down and hopefully cut the spread of COVID-19 (CDC, 2020). The CDC suggested mandates that the federal government started, which resulted in further directives being issued at the state level, resulting in a lockdown and eliminating public and private gatherings (CDC, 2020). COVID-19 protocols resulted in organizations like HEIs pausing teaching and instructing face-to-face in the spring of 2020 (Ali, 2020). The inconvenience resulted in students and their instructors moving from a traditional learning environment to one online. There was still a need for students to complete their curriculum to obtain a passing grade, which made a need for those professors to be available in the process. Chapter One outlined research questions that were considered for the study that suggested a need to explore theological and theoretical literature while considering other related literature centered around the suggested problem. This chapter will examine theological and theoretical practices related to student success, HEIs, and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theological Framework

Theological research goes through the same process that other research methods follow, while the aim is the same as others: to bring about new knowledge (Kibbe, 2016. pp 21-22). If you look closely at the word theological, another word can be found: theology. Theology is a compound word with *Theo* meaning God and *ology* meaning the study of, so theology is the study of God. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) state, "Research is a systematic process of collecting,

analyzing, and interpreting information or data to increase our understanding of a phenomenon about which we are interested or concerned" (p. 2). "There is a difference between theological research and other kinds, first of all, that it is a "spiritual" or "sacred" activity whereas researching US history, molecular biology and Shakespeare are "secular" activities" (Kibbe, 2016, p. 26). It is essential to the foundation of a research study to consider how God can guide and lead a researcher through the power of the Holy Ghost to aid in analyzing and interpreting data to better understand the truths in the research (Kibbe, 2016). The theological framework postulates that God is the centerpiece of the research, and the other elements of research can be used to shed more light on the importance of considering Him throughout the research process. This section will expound upon a worldview that incorporates biblical and Christian foundations with an understanding of spiritual disciplines and formation that leads to being more Christ-like.

Terms of Engagement

Estep et al. (2008) communicate that defining terms is critical to having a meaningful dialogue. In fact, without agreeing on some basic definitions, two people may be involved in an intense debate and be conversing about two entirely different concepts. One might ask, "What is theology?"

> Theology has been defined as that discipline that strives to give a coherent statement of the doctrines of the Christian faith, based primarily on the Scriptures, placed in the context of the culture in general, worded in a contemporary idiom, and related to the issues of life (Estep et al., 2008, p. 6).

The definition here presents some other sub-terms that must be defined in this section as well, like *Christian* and the *Scriptures*. Akin (2014) takes *theology* further by saying that "Christian theology is a disciplined reflection on God's self-revelation for the purposes of knowing and loving God and participating in his mission in this world" (p. 39). In this definition, one notes the

redundant word that is to be defined as *Christian* but presents other thoughts of *self-revelation* and *mission*.

Christ-like Theology

Seeing that the word *Christian* is a reoccurring thought in *theology*, one must look to understand what this term means as well. The biblical narrative notes that after Barnabas found Saul, whose name was later changed to Paul, the two traveled to Antioch and stayed there a whole year while teaching in the church. It was there the followers of Christ were first called Christians (King James Version, 1769/2017, Acts 11:22-26). *Christian* is not defined in the passage, but an example of the word is presented as a description of those who followed the teachings that were given by Paul and Barnabas. The term *Christian* has stuck as a recognizable word from that time even to now and has brought about a thought process and conversation as to bring the word into anything that is being considered by one who professes Christ as his or her personal Savior (New International Version, 1973/2011, Romans 10:9-10). It is this Christ who was sent by God because of His love for His creation in order to redeem humanity back to Him (New American Standard Bible, 1960/2020, John 3:16). So, the Christian is a person who believes in Christ who was sent by God and is the manifestation of God also known as *Immanuel* (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 1:23; John 1).

Biblical Theology

"Biblical theology seeks to study and describe this progressive divine revelation by focusing on the various groupings of Scripture and by collecting and arranging the many themes of these biblical groupings" (Estep et al., 2008, p. 12). Akin (2008) noted, "biblical theology is a discipline that studies the various biblical texts as a whole, seeking to apprehend and express their unity, and to do so by means of categories taken from themselves" (p. 48). The way that each of these authors defined and described biblical theology creates a framework that can be

interwoven into the fabric of the research. Research that is adequately conducted should uncover what is being studied. Scripture is incorporated throughout the narrative as needed to support the basis of the research. The study process required the *collecting and arranging of many themes* that were highlighted and used to explain what was happening to those in the biblical text while speaking to what was happening in the lives of those who share the same faith. Estep et al. (2008) communicate that biblical theology relies upon exegetical theology to interpret Scriptural text, and systematic theology follows this pattern (p. 12). Akin (2008) notes that "hermeneutics is the theory and philosophy of interpretation. Theologians must approach the biblical text with a proper hermeneutic" (p. 47). The interpretive viewpoint of biblical theology is what makes the discipline an essential key to this research. Kibbe (2016) expresses the importance of a researcher having a working knowledge of exegetical methods, hermeneutics, and Bible study methods because interpreting Scripture is difficult (p. 32). Because the study incorporates Scripture, the necessity to dissect and explain the passages selected is why biblical theology is part of the research.

Christian Theology

Akin (2008) articulates that Christian theology recognizes Christian Scripture as its norm and further states that Christian Scripture is the primary source and supreme standard (pp. 43-47). The Bible has been called God's Word to His people so they may live godly lives. The person of Christ is also called the *Logos,* or the *Word*, as discussed in John 1, and the study of the person and work of Christ is called Christology (Estep et al., 2008; Akin, 2014). The Bible is authoritative because it is inspired by God (Wu, 2019, p. 316). It has been further communicated that the power of the Bible is conveyed in the will of God to those created by Him while supplying what one is to believe and aids in the conduct of the person who believes (Erickson, 1998, p. 267). The Protestant position on the authority of Scripture is characterized as

autopistia, which is derived from *autopistos,* the Greek word meaning that it can be believed or trusted in and of itself (Van Den Belt, 2011, p. 435). "All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (King James Bible, 1769/2017, 2 Timothy 3:16). It is this verse that explains that God prompted the writings that one can read in the biblical narrative while giving specific uses for the Bible with one of those areas being that of *instruction* or *education.* Education is another area that was defined in this section, but one must first discover the self-revealing nature of God to understand theology better.

The Revelation of Theology

Theologians have debated much about the revelation of God but more specifically in the self-disclosure of God to all rational beings, a revelation that comes through the natural creation and through the makeup of human creatures known as *general revelation* or *natural revelation* (Akin, 2014, p. 67). God always reveals himself to all people and in all places and through various means (Estep et al., 2008). Old Testament biblical passage of the creation and fall of man (Genesis 1-3), Job 38-41, and the prophetic writings reflect how God uncovers himself to those He has created, while New Testament Gospels point to God revealing himself through Christ in John 1, the book of Acts, and those in Romans 1-3.

However, the revelation of God did not stop here; it manifested as specific truths of God and his redemptive purposes that are given to precise people at particular times in specific places called *special revelation* (Akin, 2014, p. 104). Direct divine speech is another means of special revelation, such as God's call of Abraham and his promises to the patriarch, God's speaking with Moses in the burning bush, and his giving of the Ten Commandments (Estep et al., 2008). A biblical example of special revelation can be seen in Saul on the road to Damascus because this resulted in the conversion and commission of Saul to preach and teach about the same Christ that

he had previously persecuted, punished, and penalized others for their beliefs in that name (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Acts 9:1-31). If one considers his or her own life and is honest, then he or she can express how he or she has experienced this self-revealing God in one way or another or at some time or another. This section is not complete without discovering what instruction or education means.

Theological Christian Education

At its most basic, education can be described as the intentional process of facilitating preferred learning (Estep et al., 2008). Yount (2010) conveys that the word education comes from the Latin *educare*, ["bring up, to rear"] and refers to the process of developing "the faculties and powers of a person by teaching, instruction, or schooling" (p. 1). The Scriptures say to direct your children onto the right path, and when the children are older, the children will not leave it (New Living Translation, 1996/2015, Proverbs 22:6). The importance of education from a biblical perspective can be seen in Deuteronomy 4:9 which states "But be careful! Watch out, and do not forget the things you have witnessed. Do not forget them as long as you live, but teach them to your children and grandchildren (New Century Version, 2005). The Apostle Paul tells believers in Philippi that whatever you have learned or received or heard from him or seen in him—put it into practice. Furthermore, the God of peace will be with you (New International Version, 1973/2011, Philippians 4:9). However, if Christ is not at the center of the educational model that one is exercising, then the education is not Christian and not founded upon the theological principles or practices found in the Bible (Cartwright et al., n. d.). The historical aspects of education are important because one must know where one has come from if one is going to improve upon the practices that were foundational to one's education (Estep et al., 2008; Anthony & Benson, 2003). One can note that the education of others has been happening throughout the history of humankind while evolving as time has progressed, but the foundational

aspects have not changed because one still needs a teacher, a student, a method of instruction, and material to be taught/learned, and a means to evaluate (Anthony & Benson, 2003; Estep et al., 2008; Yount, 2010). Understanding and communicating theology and the many facets that make it up while incorporating the many areas that make up this conversation can be a tremendous undertaking. However, one must still strive to be scholarly in the efforts to bring clarity to waters that can sometimes be cloudy with little to no visibility.

Christian Education and the Church

The church plays a significant role in educating the members of its congregation. The biblical narrative informs its readers that those who profess to be followers of the Lord are to go unto all the nations and make disciples by teaching them (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Matthew 28:19-20). These were the words of Christ as he went off the scenes of the Gospel according to Matthew, who was one of the disciples and was also one of the apostles. The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Ephesus that through Christ, there are those who are in the body who are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers who are there to equip and build up those who are within the ministry and the body of Christ (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Ephesians 4:11-12). It is within the confines of these verses that one can see the importance of the church educating those who are within it. The Apostle Paul lists out the individuals who are responsible for making sure that people have what they need to grow in Christ, and it starts with a person being in a leadership role to guide the other person along their path to maturity.

Chow and Kurlberg (2020) communicate that the church has a responsibility to support those who are members of its congregation, even during the pandemic. Many churches were mandated to close down due to the restrictions that were placed on them because of the COVID-19 virus that was spreading in March 2020 (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2020). Some Christian communities have argued that government-mandated distancing policies are an infringement on

the freedom of religion (Chow & Kurlberg, 2020, p. 300). The biblical narrative speaks about how believers are not to forsake gathering with one another (Hebrews 10:25). The Old Testament communicates how good and pleasant it is for brethren to join together in unity (Psalms 133:1). Verses like these were the basis of many of the arguments that sprang up as well as the fact that church and online was not something that should be a fix for the growing number of deaths that were being seen during the pandemic (Chow & Kurlberg, 2020, p. 300). The Bible is clear that the flock of God must be fed by those in leadership if it is going to grow (1 Peter 5:3). There is an old hymn entitled, *A Charge to Keep I Have* by Charles Wesley. Wesley says, "A charge to keep I have, a God to glorify." The church has a charge and a God to glorify. The part of the hymn that speaks to this research is "to serve this present age, my calling to fulfill. Oh, may all my power engage to do my Master's will." It is these words of this hymn that those in the church during the pandemic embodied to serve better those that God had charged them.

Churches began to engage with online platforms and social media (live streams, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Zoom) (Chow & Kurlberg, 2020). Yes, there were challenges, as some of the churches were not familiar with online platforms and social media, or they were not engaging with those who were online prior to the pandemic (Chow & Kurlberg, 2020). Cartwright et al. (2017) admit that there were challenges as institutions looked to go online with internet connections and the learning curve of those who are educating and those learning. If you have those within the congregation who are not as tech-savvy or just not used to using iPads, iPhones, Android devices, or computers, then there are things that must be taught and learned to be more effective in this area (Cartwright et al., 2017; Chow & Kurlberg, 2020). Churches began hosting services, Bible Studies, small groups, and other discipleship opportunities for memberships, which showed growth for churches and their congregants (Chow & Kurlberg,

2020). The Christian church is part of the educational journey of those in their community as well as those who grace the doors of its physical facility or its online facility.

Biblical Worldview

Cartwright et al. (2017) maintain that educators must ensure that a biblical worldview is foundational in their teaching and mentoring approach to leading students. A biblical worldview cannot be embedded into the students' lives without it being a part of the educator's lifestyle (Cartwright et al., 2017). A biblical worldview is "the human understandings of the underlying givens of Scripture…" (Hiebert, 2009, p. 265). "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true… God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work" (New Living Translation, 1996/2015, 2 Timothy 3:16-17). Hiebert (2009) notes that a biblical worldview is seen when individuals rely on and live according to Scripture by connecting the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the Old Testament, which is seen in Jesus throughout the New Testament. Cartwright et al. (2017) note that it is essential for Christian institutions to offer coursework that builds on the biblical worldview of individuals while ensuring that it is seen in the entirety of their degree programs. Morrow (2015) communicates the importance of even incorporating a biblical Christian worldview, as outlined by Morales (2013), which is the integration of the Bible into an individual's Christian worldview. Because of a worldview of this magnitude, some have outlined it as not just a biblical worldview but also a Christian worldview, as there is not a difference but preference (Hiebert, 2009; Morrow, 2015; Smith, 2009).

"The goal of a Christian Education is the development of a Christian perspective, or more commonly now, a Christian worldview, which is taken to be a system of Christian beliefs, ideas, and doctrines (Smith, 2009, p. 17). Cosgrove (2006) notes that a "worldview is a set of assumptions or beliefs that affect how we think and how we live" (p. 19). Smith (2017) argues that a Christian worldview is discovered because of an education that shapes, forms, and molds

the Christian through the practices of Christian worship (p. 18). Cosgrove (2006) states that a "Christian world and life view is not just a list of beliefs but a living view; not just an academic endeavor but a personal one as well" (p. 19). With a Christian worldview, Christian education should challenge students to grow in their spiritual disciplines and spiritual formation.

Whitney (2014) states that "spiritual disciplines are those practices found in Scripture that promote spiritual growth among believers in the gospel of Jesus Christ. They are the habits of devotion and experiential Christianity that the people of God have practiced since biblical times" (p. 4). Whitney (2014) notes that as prescribed by the Bible, spiritual disciplines should be personal and interpersonal while focusing only on the personal disciplines of prayer, fasting, studying and reading the Word, journaling, solitude, and Sabbath (pp. 5-9). The biblical narrative outlines that Christ spent time fasting before His earthly ministry being tempted by Satan but relied on His knowledge of Scripture to offset the advances of His adversary (New Living Translation, 1996/2015, Matthew 4:1-11). Jesus was not the only one who fasted. However, Moses spent 40 days in the presence of the Lord without food or drink (New Living Translation, 1996/2015, Exodus 34:28).

Earlier in this narrative, there were references to Jesus praying and teaching His disciples to pray. Jesus, right before His crucifixion, desired His disciples to pray so they would not fall into temptation (New Living Translation, 1996/2015, Matthew 26:36-46). In this same passage, Jesus went to solitude and prayed a little farther from his sleeping disciples.

Pettit (2008) discusses "spiritual formation as the ongoing process of the triune God transforming the believer's life and character toward the life and character of Jesus Christ, accomplished by the ministry of the Spirit in the context of biblical community" (p. 24). Lewis (2020) notes that "a working definition of spiritual formation from a biblical perspective that applies to both face-to-face and distance education was produced from their study" (p. 52). The

Apostle Paul writes to the church at Galatia, "Oh, my dear children! I feel as if I'm going through labor pains for you again, and they will continue until Christ is fully developed in your lives" (New Living Translation, 1996/2015. Galatians 4:19). The verse suggests that there is a collaboration from a leader in the church to the members that moved them through the birth canal to birth to a full life in Christ. Estep et al. (2008) note that "the purpose of biblical instruction is the spiritual formation of the individual and the faith community, though it may be expressed in devotion, knowledge, relationship, service, obedience" (pp. 66-67). The Apostle Paul writes to Timothy and reminds him to remain true to what he has been taught because he can trust those who taught him to live a life for Christ (New Living Translation, 1996/2015, 2 Timothy 3:14-15). A teacher must be an example to the student to live a life that has been formed in Christ through salvation. Estep et al. (2008) convey that spiritual formation begins with conversion but progresses by the making of a disciple in Christ through Christian education both personally and corporately.

Christian Education and the Teacher

One of the individuals spotlighted by the Apostle Paul to the church in Ephesus who was there for leading individuals in ministry and forming those in the body of Christ is seen in the *teachers* (Eph. 4:11-12). However, if one is to look closely at those passages of scripture, one will note that there are four other persons who have the same responsibilities, so there is a sharing of the duties for the *apostles*, *pastors*, *evangelists*, and *prophets*. Everyone who operates in one of the lists that the Apostle Paul speaks about has a specific role in the process, but it is the teacher who is asked to instruct or *didáskō* (to teach) (Bible Hub, 2004). It is the role of the teacher that the writer of Hebrews was hoping that the people had matured, but it was not so; in fact, they were in need of being taught the elementary truths of God's Word (5:12). It is not a good day when you have someone who has the right look or age, but their maturity level is not

where it should be. The church has a responsibility to have teachers, and those teachers have responsibilities to themselves and those they have been given leadership over to cause others around them to grow. So, it is essential that teachers spend time in the Word of God, walking in the Spirit, while falling into practices like fasting, praying, and worship of God. There is humility that is needed to operate in the role of a teacher of Christ (New Living Translation, 1996/2015, Matthew 23:8).

Yount (2010) writes about the Christian teacher and their responsibility to God and the profession of being a teacher while understanding their purpose. Bredfeldt (2006) conveys the need for teachers to recognize that they are leaders of themselves and their students. Teachers must model the behavior that they expect from their students (Yount, 2010). In Christian education, teachers' attitudes and behaviors confirm the truth of their teaching (Estep et al., 2008, p. 68). Teachers were role models and respected by people in their community (Estep et al., 2008). Christian education is about both the curriculum and the student; an educator should develop an awareness of how to influence their students to be successful (Cartwright et al., 2017, p. 72). Teachers must be knowledgeable of what is to be taught and be able to show the learners the importance of absorbing this material not just for the purposes of making a grade but also for making their lives better (Bredfeldt, 2006; Cartwright et al., 2017; Estep et al., 2008; Yount, 2010).

Ayuk (2022) states that the pandemic brought about changes that need to be made in the teaching and learning of theological higher educational institutions (HEIs) to support their vision and values. Teachers had to learn the curriculum and online ways of engaging with their students to increase learning despite the challenges they were facing because of moving from face-to-face instruction (Ayuk, 2022). Bredfeldt (2006) states that teachers still have to be able to lead change in the lives of those around them by being able to adapt to the changes that are happening around

them. The pandemic brought about a need for teachers to be leaders of change. Yount (2010) conveys that faith is essential to those in the teaching discipline, while there is a need for them to understand the science of teaching but not theory overshadow theology.

In the emergency remote teaching (ERT) environment, teachers had to deal with their students in a remote setting and those in person, so they needed to be flexible (Gelles et al., 2020). Cartwright et al. (2017) say that there is a need for teachers in an online environment to figure out a better way to fulfill their duties toward their students. Teachers figured out what they needed to do to support their students and get their jobs done, but there were others who could not do this and had to bow out (Ayuk, 2022; Gelles et al., 2020). Teacher shortages and having to take on more classes and students brought about burnout for those who were teaching and those who were learning (Mostafa et al., 2022). Teachers who made it through the pandemic were strong leaders who became more vigorous, which brought about a strength that was passed on to their students.

Christian Education and the Learner

Another way to relate to individuals who are in a program where they are gaining knowledge from another is to call them learners (Wilkinson, 1992; Yount, 2010). Even the biblical text calls the persons who are learning from another *disciple* (King James Version, 1769/2017, Matthew 10:24). In a modern-day setting, the same person(s) is called a *student* (Wilkinson, 1992; Yount, 2010). The learner has a responsibility to the process of learning because he must submit to the one who is teaching (Wilkinson, 1992; Yount, 2010). The learner must make adjustments to effectively manage barriers found in the learner, the learning environment, the instructor, and what is being taught (Wilkinson, 1992; Yount, 2010). Jesus understood all these things because of his method of instructing the disciples in *parables* while still taking time to deal with the disciples in private to expound upon what He was teaching to

ensure that He was heard by them (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Mark 4:33-34). The learner has to be connected to the teacher in a way that they can see themselves in the teacher while being able to see the benefit of gaining the knowledge that is being given in the setting (Wilkinson, 1992; Yount, 2010). If the connection does not happen, then the student will continue to remain in a state where knowledge is not being added to their life, and they will be kept in the condition of not learning (Wilkinson, 1992; Yount, 2010).

Learners in a Christian learning program must be able to see Christ in the programming and those around them (Wilkinson, 1992; Yount, 2010). The Apostle Paul asked those around him to follow him as he followed Christ (King James Version, 1769/2017, 1 Corinthians 11:1). The passage communicates the importance of the relationship between the person in leadership and the follower by pointing out that if the leader does not exhibit Christ-like qualities, the leader should not lead the follower. The learner can stop following the leader if that leader is not going after Christ. Estep et al. (2008) articulate how the learners are being moved to a place of proficiency in what is being taught (p. 60). The thing about learners in Christian education is that they are lifelong learners, but it is the responsibility of those in Christian education to provide opportunities for learning for Christians their entire lives (Estep et al., 2008, p. 117). If learners are in a perpetual cycle of learning throughout their lives, then as things come into their lives, it is essential to embrace what is to be learned from those moments. There are opportunities for learning for the learner that can be taken advantage of by pressing into the pain or the struggle that comes along with learning (Estep et al., 2008). Ambrose et al. (2010) express that learners must take all their experiences in life to aid or guide them in the learning process, and if the learners do not have what is needed, then being able to figure out what must be done to acquire the necessary skills.

The Power of the Holy Spirit

Yount (2010) is adamant when it comes to the need for the Holy Spirit as the teacher of all, while noting that none of the areas of psychological theory or theme has yet to compete or compare to this area of Christian education (pp. 28-29). Akin (2014) notes that the scope of pneumatology is the person and work of the Holy Spirit while describing the Holy Spirit as wind and not without much debate (p. 483). The biblical narrative starts off by communicating that the Spirit of God was present in the creation of everything that was made (Genesis 1) (Estep et al., 2008). It is this same Spirit that is spoken about by Christ as He noted that the Comforter/Helper/Spirit of Truth would not come unless He left and would lead and guide believers into all truth (King James Version, 1769/2017, John 14:15-31; John 16:13). Jesus speaks after His resurrection from the dead and before His ascension that you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you. You shall be My witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. As far as the remotest part of the earth (New American Standard Bible, 1960/1995, Acts 1:8). One can see the importance of the Holy Spirit to the life of the believer but also see that those who are educators or leaders of education require this same power to be effective (Dockery, 2011; Yount, 2010).

Plague or Pandemic

The theological aspect of this section considers some of the illnesses or sicknesses as one thinks about what has happened in the past while looking at what is presently happening in the World. As one considers the historical aspects of the biblical narrative, which is riddled with cultural and social connotations, the flood came to do away with humankind because of the sinful nature that resulted. None wanted to revere God, but one named Noah (King James Version, 1769/2017, Genesis 6-9). However, there were plagues that God sent to cause Pharaoh to let His people go, and God caused a separation so that none of what had happened to Egypt

was happening to His chosen people (King James Version, 1769/2017, Exodus 7-13). God used the fiery serpents that bit the people to turn them away from sin and back to him, but they could not be healed unless they looked to the pole that Moses had lifted with a serpent upon it (King James Version, 1769/2017, Numbers 21).

Snowden (2008) goes on to communicate that historically, there have been several plagues like epidemics or pandemics that have transpired throughout the World that were catastrophic in nature, like the bubonic plague in 1347, syphilis in the 1490s, cholera in 1830, and the Spanish influenza of 1918-1919 (p. 11). As the latter portion of the nineteenth century came to a close, the world was hit with Ebola, HIV/AIDS, SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome), swine flu, and Zika (WHO, 2020; CDC, 2020). The presented plague that has impacted the entire globe is the Coronavirus (COVID-19), bringing death, disparity, and decline to all in its path (Snowden & Graaf, 2021). Ostling (2021) labeled the COVID-19 pandemic as the "wrath of God" or "plague" on humankind, allowing death to happen without any selectiveness. It is this same COVID-19 that has caused the lockdowns on states, nations, countries, and the global front on so many industries and organizations, including homes, churches, businesses, schools, etc. (WHO, 2020). COVID-19 presented itself in the spring of 2020 with much destruction while presently not having as much havoc on the world with global impact at its onset (CDC, 2020). Churches and schools were not meeting as these organizations did before the pandemic, which resulted in a different approach to meeting the needs of those within these organizations/institutions (Taragin-Zeller & Kessler, 2021).

Plagues have happened in the past, like the pandemic that happened in the spring of 2020, and have the potential to happen in the future. Regardless of how disruptive and destructive an event is, it is necessary to know what happened in the past to aid in the present climate and how to view and voyage through its effects. There are differing beliefs about what brought about the

COVID-19 pandemic, but what is not contradictory is what transpired because of it. God allowed the plague or pandemic events that happened in the biblical narrative, those that have happened in the past, and those that are happening presently. There is a purpose and a season for everything, whether it is happening or has happened in the past or seems good or bad (King James Version, 1769/2017, Ecclesiastes 3:1). These assertions can be sown into the tapestry of life to help in understanding the plague or pandemic that comes in life.

Theological Integration and Integrity

The biblical narrative speaks to the importance of individuals who walk together must first be in agreement as to what direction the individuals are heading (King James Bible, 1769/2017, Amos 3:3). As one considers the terms and sub-terms of the earlier section, there is a need for integration of every subject with the impression education that is theologically Christian to be interwoven into the presentation with careful balance (Cartwright et al., n. d.). Lowe and Lowe (2018) communicate the need of those who are theologically minded to consider the ecological, which pertains to the interrelationship and interconnection of all things in nature (p. 27). "As humans, we live in a series of nested ecologies—all of which are connected in one form or another and therefore mutually influence each other to varying degrees" (Lowe & Lowe, 2018, p. 22). The aforementioned areas of this narrative have communicated how things are connected to one another and cannot be pulled apart without something going lacking in some way or some fashion. Oliver (2021) conveys the need for community within that which is needed to hold things together from a theological educational perspective, which happens through the integration of theological doctrines into all areas of the educational experience (pp. 39-40). Almaiah et al. (2020) argue that challenges will arise to attempt to derail the educational process, but one must continue to strive to give his or her best to bring about the needed strategies and procedures that will promote learning to take place.

Diamond (2008) notes the importance of designing and assessing what is going to be taught and learned in the learning environment. Hall and Zygmunt (2021) communicate how the displacement and dislocated conditions that students have been faced with have influenced negative academic performance due to the uncertainty centered around COVID-19 and the inability of the student to resume his or her former routine and activities centered around collegiate experience. D'Amico et al. (2022) wonder if those who are educators and responsible for educating others are doing enough to offset what has and is happening because of COVID-19 while looking to shore up areas of academic and technological ensure efforts are being made to safeguard students and completion of the course and not the dismissal from the curriculum. All of this can be disheartening to think about and consider, but one thing that is consistent in all of what is going on is that God is a very present help in times of trouble (New Living Translation, 1996/2015 Psalm 46:1).

Summary

Students have been affected by the effects of COVID-19. While the students of institutions of learning are not the only individuals affected by the coronavirus, this explorational journey is what this author wants to consider in this narrative. The theological framework of this narrative is not an exhaustive list or depiction of what has happened, what is happening, or what needs to happen. It is compiled to shed light on this dark topic so that one who is in the dark can see that there is hope. There are those who think that the plight of those individuals is worthy of being illuminated enough to bring the needed exposure to prompt action(s) on behalf of those affected. Students have a responsibility to their beliefs and how they live out those beliefs during chaotic times while striving to be like Christ to maintain connected to their purpose for their existence in the world. The next area of this research study will consider different theories that have risen to the top and have been researched while noting success that has come about because

of the application of the concepts laid out by those who have gone before from the areas of educational, secular, and spiritual theories.

Theoretical Framework

Students in their first year of college had to make adjustments to their new educational journey. One cannot articulate all that each student had to encounter during their transition into taking classes at the collegiate level. This literature review considered looking at students in their first year of college while encountering another variable that presented itself in the Spring of 2020: the COVID-19 pandemic. This section of this narrative considered those first-year students of HEIs and how they could complete their coursework during the pandemic by looking at literature surfacing during that time to pull out theories that demonstrated a basis for this study. The literature review was not exhaustive; it focused on the theories and theorists who came to the surface during the research of the previously mentioned problem. Roberts (2010) communicates that this section of the dissertation should consider the scaffolding or boundaries consistent with the study that one is conducting (p. 129). Because of this, the researcher chose theories that aligned with the problem of the research to build upon the research. Exploring theories like Ryan and Deci's *Self-determination theory (SDT)*, Austin's *Student Involvement Theory*, Tinto's *Theory of Student Departure*, *Student Identity Theory*, Maslow's *Hierarchy of Needs Theory*, and other relevant theories will create the necessary basis for the exploration of the current topic and future research.

Student Involvement Theory

Lusk (2020) utilized Austin's student involvement theory to conduct the proposed study only to discover that philosophy applies to traditional and non-traditional educational approaches (p. 24). It is essential to determine more about this theory to understand its relevance to the proposed problem. Wakeman (2020) states that student involvement theory claims that students

who are more involved or engaged will have increased learning over those less engaged students. Assertions were made that student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy students devote to the academic experience while describing students as highly involved and uninvolved (Austin, 1984/1999, p. 518). The involvement theory has five postulates: (1) involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects; (2) Regardless of the object, involvement occurs along a continuum, as different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object; (3) Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features; (4) The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program; (5) The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement (Austin, 1984/1999, p. 519). The environment where education was traditionally conducted has taken a different turn since the introduction of COVID-19; one must consider looking back to look ahead (Lusk, 2020).

Tinto's Theory of Student Departure

Kazmi (2010) highlighted Austin's student involvement theory within their own literature review, expressing its importance to the study while considering another approach by a prominent researcher of student success and retention in Tinto's theory of student departure (pp. 1-5). Tinto's student departure theory articulates that social and intellectual interaction is the key to student retention and persistence, noting that new students have difficulty adjusting and fitting into the campus lifestyle due to feeling lost and isolated (Lusk, 2020, p. 25). Those who are leading students, as well as those associated with the institution, come alongside students who are new to the culture to aid them in acclimating into the collegiate surroundings, which has the potential to assist in the success of those students (Kazmi, 2010; Lusk, 2020). Creating and

implementing policies devoted to student persistence can lead to student success and graduation

(Tinto, 2002). HEIs can focus more on students getting to graduation instead of remaining with

the organization (Tinto, 2017). When HEIs become student-focused, there is a greater reward for

the student and the organization, leading to the accomplishment of goals for each (Tinto, 2002;

Tinto, 2017).

Student Identity Theory

Jorgenson et al. (2018) converse about the importance of connecting to the student and

not while implementing the principles of the student involvement theory and considering

attachment from the social aspects of the *social identity theory* (p. 77). Harrison (2020) notes that

the practices of social identity theory explain how groups connect with one another through not

just the commonality of the group dynamics but also the emotional involvement with those

associated with the group from leadership to membership (pp. 21-22). Yount (2010) notes that it

is essential that students and teachers are connected within the classroom culture to ensure that

what is being expressed by the teacher can be absorbed by the student but cannot happen unless

the learning experience is one that is socially charged to make the attachment to bring about

achievement. Blizzard (2020) notes that one can be tethered to another through the ability of

another to express his or her presence of care, concern, and compassion toward the existence of

another through social networking or support that another provides (p. 20). The biblical narrative

supports both of the principles and practices of the aforementioned theories as Jesus desired for

His followers to be with Him to prepare the disciples for what each will have to do to support the

Kingdom agenda in a present and futuristic context (New International Version, 1973/2011,

Mark 3:13-19). The social sciences are valuable to education and that which is Christian, but one

must have a mind open to integration, which has rewards but is not without reservations from a

solid theological foundation (Wilhoit, 1991).

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

  Hogan (2020) researched the theories mentioned earlier while considering Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs theory (p. 39). Mohale et al. (2020) used the same theory to guide the study to revamp the curriculum for students and faculty because of the pandemic (pp. 16608-16609). Casanova and Price (2018) insist that Maslow's theory can be used as a structure for coursework and how one can incorporate it into the framework of in-person learning and online. Hawks (1994) asserts that Maslow's theory of hierarchy has implications relating to the health of individuals from a spiritual capacity. Yount (2010) describes Abraham Maslow's theory as a theory of humanistic learning (pp. 309-311). The hierarchical order comprises five central human motivations: physiological needs, safety, social, esteem or ego, and self-actualization (Maslow & Lewis, 1987, pp. 987-990). Maslow adds to the theory by categorizing the needs as deficiency needs, meaning that until needs are met, the individual would not be motivated to learn. However, on the other hand, the growth needs are expanded upon versus being satisfied, like the lower deficiency needs (Yount, 2010, pp. 437-439). The Maslow theory is expounded from a curricular standpoint by pointing out personal motivation called stakeholders' ownership, institutional motivation known as institutional impact and institutional ownership, and basic needs stated as instructional, technical, and financial support (Hawks, 1994, pp. 7-11).

  Wakeman (2020) asserts that another theory outside the ones mentioned above is that of the self-determination theory, which has some substantial implications for educational practices (p. 22). The theory is one of human motivation, which defines in detail the nature of motivation while dealing with the aspects of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which is tied to the regulation of the individual (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Earp (2020) proposed this same theory while dealing with those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and were first-generation students to aid

in adapting students to the collegiate environment while not having a familial barometer to guide them along the path. Navigating academia can be difficult alone, and it can be downright scary when one does not have another footing.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Ryan and Deci (2000) maintain that the self-determination theory focuses on the motivations that motivate an individual to take action for whatever reasons or goals he or she is striving to accomplish (p 55). The pair discuss motivation as *intrinsic* or *extrinsic* (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 55). If one is doing something because he or she enjoys it or is interested in it, then the motivation is *intrinsic*; however, if one does an activity to attain some separable outcome, the motivation is *extrinsic* (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 60). When intrinsically motivated, a person is moved to act for the fun or challenge rather than because of external prods, pressures, or rewards (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 56). *Competency*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness* are the psychological needs that are met when motivation is intrinsic, but recognize that basic need satisfaction accrues in part from engaging in exciting activities (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p. 57). However, a person who is extrinsically motivated is moved by outside forces like failing a class should a student's work not be done or loss of wages because of excessive tardiness (Pelikan et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Walker et al., 2021). SDT maintains that stimuli can be internal or external (Pelikan et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Walker et al., 2021). Ryan and Deci (2000) state that students could carry out tasks with negative emotions but also saw where some resolved to do so with an attitude of willingness (p. 55). Walker et al. (2021) maintain that SDT is thus an appropriate lens through the faith maturity of older adolescents and emerging adults and may be helpful in populations with other religions or philosophic worldviews (p. 253).

Transformational Leadership

Heitman (2021) communicated that as one looks at the state of the educational backdrop, one should look at it from a biblical worldview, considering Bass' thoughts on Downton's transformational leadership theory (pp. 26-27). Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, research has expanded in the area of proposed literature, noting that transformational leadership theory is one of the methods used in the development of students and programs at universities (Yokus, 2022). Pettit (2008) communicated how vital transformational leadership is to the leader and follower relationship as there is a mutual trust that exists between the two because of the evolution of the follower to become a leader and the leader to relate to where the follower is in order for them to become the leader. In the educational aspects, the leader or teacher is there to guide the student or follower to the place of learning, but this does not happen without the belief that the teacher has an understanding of the student and where he or she is while seeing the developmental aspects of where the student will be after the encounter (Heitman, 2021; Pettit, 2008; Yokus, 2022).

Brown & Nwagbara (2021) convey a similar need for this theory to be studied but give regard to *emotional intelligence* (*EI*), which was considered in the related literature because of the *awareness* and *managerial* aspects of this methodology. Hooijberg and Choi (2000) interviewed Bass, who discussed his humble beginnings while paying homage to Burns's (1979) narrative regarding transformational leadership, which gave birth to *Leadership and Performance Beyond Expectations* in 1985 (p. 295). *Charismatic leadership* is a component of transformational leadership, with the other three *inspirational leadership*, *intellectual stimulation,* and *individualized consideration* being intercorrelated (Hooijberg & Choi, 2000, p. 295). Giles (2021) stated that transformational leadership positively correlates with the behaviors and outcomes of students connected to higher learning institutions (pp. 33-36).

Coley (2006) conveys the spiritual aspects of the model by looking at Nehemiah as one who exemplified the practices of transformational leadership. The leadership behavior that Nehemiah demonstrates in Nehemiah 2 has been described by researchers as the ability to identify and articulate a vision (Coley, 2006, p. 97). Nehemiah's leadership brought the people moving into action as Nehemiah worked and warred alongside them against their adversaries to complete the vision (Coley, 2006). It was essential for those in leadership to connect with those they were leading while considering how they felt about what was happening around them (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021). Nehemiah was in tune with everything happening around him and the people to whom he was to give leadership because of his observance of how things looked around him in Nehemiah 1 and 2. If one is going to be a true example of transformational leadership, it must start with a transformation from him, and then it can spread to others.

The Disciplers' Model

Yount (2010) communicates about learning while introducing the rationale to consider *The Disciplers' Model* for a biblical and theological framework in educational psychology (p. 5). The model is founded upon biblical principles and practices governed by an analogy utilizing building to shape this model (Yount, 2010). At the model's base, the Bible is the left foundational stone, with the People being the other stone on the right (Yount, 2010). The two stones work together to balance the model out while not being too people-oriented and not considering the need for biblical influences as individuals are educated because the imbalance can lead to the entire paradigm collapsing (Yount, 2010). The thing about the Disciplers' model is that the people are the learners and that there needs to be an understanding of the needs that are in these areas, which leads to the pillars of helping people think (left), assisting people in valuing (right) and helping people relate (center) (Yount, 2010, pp. 12-21). The top of the model is the capstone of assisting people in growing while the Holy Spirit circles it as a Discipler (Yount, 2010, pp. 22-

26). The model has limitations because it is more biblically based, and some from a scientific discipline may not find its principles to be standard as merit (Yount, 2010). One can look to the biblical narrative to discover those impacted by this model throughout the Book of Acts.

The Christian Teachers' Triad

Yount (2010) communicates about the Christian Teachers' Triad, which was first mentioned in print in Eldridge's *The Teaching Ministry of the Church* (1995) (p. 334). Manala (2010) notes that the pastor, as the teacher of the church and the congregation, has been given leadership over by God or the governing body of that congregation. It is the responsibility of that person to give leadership in the area of education while growing and grooming others to assist in this area within the church (Manala, 2010; Yount, 2010). Laniak (2006) lays a biblical framework of the pastoral leadership office from the Old Testament to the New Testament by highlighting biblical persons who operated in the office of teaching and educating those who were under their tutelage during that time of their leading.

The primary practices of the Christian teacher's triad are founded upon *thinking*, *feeling, valuing*, and *doing* (Yount, 2010, pp. 336-339). The thinking circle represents life's rational or cognitive sphere: knowing, encoding, conceptualizing, problem-solving, analyzing, synthesizing, and evaluating (Yount, 2010, p. 336). The words of Solomon note that as a person thinks in his heart, so is he (King James Version, 1769/2017, Proverbs 23:7). The Apostle Paul writes to the church in Rome about the need for the mind to be transformed by the renewing of the consciousness (King James Version, 1769/2017, Romans 12:2). It is encouraged that one thinks on whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good report (King James Version, 1769/2017, Philippians 4:8). Yount (2010) notes that the feeling and valuing circle stands for the emotional or affective sphere of life: listening, sharing, loving, appreciating, prioritizing, and reflecting spiritual truths in daily

life (p. 337). There is a need for those in leadership to aid in moving the student from just a surface relationship to one of substance, from the casual to the committed, from the external to internal, and from head to heart (Yount, 2010). The doing circle represents the behavioral, or skill, the sphere of life: imitating, practicing, repeating, honing, exercising, programming, reinforcing, and innovating (Yount, 2010, p. 338). Jesus exemplified the Christian teacher triad model as He encouraged those not just to be one who hears His words but acts upon His words (King James Version, 1769/2017, Matthew 7:24-27; Luke 6:46-49). It is imperative that students move from just being hearers of what is being said but doers (King James Version, 1769/2017, James 1:22). Teachers are in the position to come alongside students and not to think, feel, or do for the student but to challenge the student to do that for themselves.

Social Learning Theory

Yount (2010) comments that Albert Bandura's social learning theory is a consideration for educational psychology. Gagné and Middlebrooks (1977) communicate that the model is manifested through observing behaviors where the learning happens by human modeling. The modeling can be that of verbal and visual stimulation, which can be in the physical form of a human or that of audio or video, or visual instruction (Gagné & Middlebrooks, 1977; Yount, 2010). The stages of this model are attention, retention, production, and motivation (Yount, 2010, pp. 218-222). Yount (2010) notes that this theory has limitations, so those would have to be considered should one decide to incorporate this theory within the methodological consideration of this narrative (p. 226). Yount (2010) highlights other theorists from the cognitive and behavioral areas of psychology while showing the educational disciplines that each contribute to the theoretical aspects of this narrative while figuring out which of these theories may aid in framing this narrative moving forward.

Yarberry and Sims (2021) show that the COVID-19 pandemic made organizations move from brick-and-mortar to online environments for continued success. The need to make this shift during the pandemic brought about a change in the approach that those in HEIs were going to use to ensure that education and learning were going to happen. Cartwright et al. (2017) conversed about the social importance of face-to-face interaction in gaining knowledge of those in the teacher/student relationship while noting how some of that is lost when one is not in the presence of the other. Even so, the pandemic made those HEIs adjust to the times they were in with the need for social distancing while still fulfilling their commitments to faculty and students. The safekeeping of those in the educational community during the pandemic was a high priority but not without some lower levels of maintaining social connectivity and learning with all the restrictions.

The main goal of Albert Bandura's social learning theory is to change the behaviors of others through observation and imitation of behavioral models (Yount, 2010). Those in leadership should be the example others can look to and follow (Yarberry & Sims, 2021). What hurts the theory is that there is a need to move the student to a behavior change, not just observation (Yount, 2010). There is a need for those who are in a place of influence to move the pupil into a place of self-action through motivation (Gagné & Middlebrooks, 1977; Yarberry & Sims, 2021; Yount, 2010). In the biblical narrative, the writer of Hebrews notes the importance of motivating others to do good things (10:24). It also speaks to the importance of those in leadership, being the example that others can imitate (1 Cor. 11:1; 1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:7; 1 Peter 5:3).

Summary

The theoretical framework of this narrative considered the different aspects of the educational community that have contributed to students' success. There was little research when

the COVID-19 pandemic hit, but it has increased since then. HEIs were responsible for their organizational missions and supporting the students who were there to learn. The theories above considered the social aspects of being in a HEI and the importance of individuals' interactions with one another. Other theories focused on the need for students to be engaged in their HEI experience and have what it takes to be able to navigate their own success. Theories for this research further considered leading and learning for students because that is why HEIs exist and tie into their goals. The COVID-19 pandemic brought in a variable that many HEIs and students did not have prior knowledge about, but the information provided may create a means for a workaround.

<center>**Related Literature**</center>

Research has been completed since the onset of COVID-19, and this area is still growing. However, there was enough literature to formulate the basis for the study with added considerations regarding this topic. This section has explored other theories that were closely related to the COVID-19 pandemic and student success while considering the HEIs those students were attending. Students and HEIs who were impacted by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic needed to figure something out to salvage the remainder of the school year. The task of overcoming COVID-19 in an educational forum to better serve those students has caused the faculty to explore alternatives to support those first-year Christian students who are looking to complete their theological studies.

Leading and Managing in Crisis

Thornbury (2011) expresses that in difficult times, the people in leadership or management positions need to be able to aid in navigating the dark waters of that time and bring the organization out. Gigliotti (2020) states that there are things that leaders should be doing during tough times and that there should have been things that were done prior to the difficulty,

which sets them up to be able to overcome the adverse times. Thornbury (2011) converses about prior planning and the need for communication and a structure that is in place because if you are not in a crisis, you are heading into one or just coming out of one, but either way, there is a need to be prepared. "An outbreak can cause financial, emotional, and logistical challenges to an institution, especially those with residential campuses" (Thornbury, 2011, p. 272).

The COVID-19 pandemic or crisis created a shift in higher education that brought about the transition on so many different levels, and one of those areas dealt with students and how they would learn at this time (Gigliotti, 2020; Urick et al., 2021). The fallout of the COVID-19 crisis fell on those leading and managing in the collegiate arena, which brought about a need for how they would support the faculty and the students from an institutional standpoint (Gigliotti, 2020; Tourish, 2020). The Apostle Paul went from being a participant or, better yet, prisoner to a leader and manager in a crisis when the ship that he was on got caught in a storm, which required him and those with him to begin to eliminate assets to survive (King James Version, 1769/2017, Acts 27).

Ayling and Luetz (2022) communicate that higher education institutions (HEIs) during the pandemic were responsible for leading students facing unanticipated course condition adjustments, campus lockdowns, and home study necessities; possible unemployment; and challenges to resilience, mental health, and well-being, including spiritual health (p. 47). Gigliotti (2020) states that effective crisis leadership in HEIs requires individuals to consider a wide array of crisis events or situations that might affect the institution, take appropriate actions to prevent specific crises, and carefully plan and prepare for the impact of these potential crises (p. 62). HEIs had the typical situations that they had to deal with, and then adding the pandemic on top of what they were already dealing with brought about an even more significant undertaking for them. A distinctive of Christian HEIs is their commitment to providing

opportunities for students to achieve their academic goals with a faith primacy inspired within their educational programs and processes (Ayling & Luetz, 2022, p. 47). Seven percent of US college students reported that they were sick with COVID-19 in the Spring of 2020 (Hoover, 2021). If you add having to deal with the coronavirus with leading and managing as an HEI during the pandemic, then one could only imagine the pressure that one could be under to figure out what needs to be done to keep things flowing in the right direction.

Forrest and Roden (2017) argue that the external opposition that Nehemiah faced as he led during trying times to get the walls rebuilt for the people of Israel (Neh. 4:3) (p. 273). Nehemiah was a model leader (1) who was prepared by God, (2) was steeped in prayer, (3) who sought only God's glory, (4) who had a vision, (5) who could act and enlist others, (6) who was sensitive to the problems of others, and (7) who was not intimidated by the opposition (Forrest and Roden, 2017, p. 274). Esther and her older guardian, Mordecai, clearly exercised courage and determination while leading God's people at the threat of a potential massacre (Forrest & Roden, 2017, pp. 281-284). In times of crises, there is a need for those in leadership to be able to man their stations and figure out what things need to be done to ensure that things do not go backward or become stagnant but forge ahead.

Educational Disruption

Since the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, nothing has been the same for the lives of those in the world because of its global impact. Many institutions of learning have had to shuffle to make their situations better for the faculty and, more importantly, their students. Alsoud et al. (2021) asserted that the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the educational flow in colleges, universities, and other learning institutions. This brought about a need to alleviate stress to get things back on track. Schools were asked not to meet face-to-face, creating a ripple effect in traditional education. Students and teachers had to scramble to get into the emergency distance

learning and teaching environment to offset the effects of the pandemic (Alsoud et al., 2021).

Even though some institutions moved to the new way of teaching and learning because of the

pandemic, there were others who continued educating the old way but adopted the latest hygiene

and distancing restrictions (Meinck et al., 2022). The pandemic caused dorm life to change for

students and teaching life to change for faculty. The registering for classes that could be done by

going into the registrar's office became phone calls and online registrations. Classrooms that met

during the pandemic were limited to the number of attendees due to the need for students to be a

certain distance from one another. Let us not forget the requirement to wear masks or some face

covering to keep down the spread of the coronavirus.

Learning was not the same and will not be the same as home-based education, which

moved more to the front of the line, resulting in a need for more involvement from parents.

Teachers had to go to online platforms to instruct students from a screen, and those students had

to be present in a learning environment that presented more challenges and distractions

(Badiozaman et al., 2020). Fass-Holmes (2022) indicates that students and teachers had to be

creative in their approach to making learning and teaching innovative to ensure that needs were

met by all. The need for more innovation in the areas of teaching and learning came about

because of the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Alsoud et al., 2021; Badiozaman et

al., 2020; Fass-Holmes, 2022; Meinck et al., 2022). Karalis (2020) argues that the COVID-19

pandemic brought about the need for *hi-tech*, *low-tech*, and *no-tech* solutions that could mitigate

the disruption in the educational community (p. 126).

Panther et al. (2021) assert that educational disruptions happened long before the

COVID-19 pandemic. An academic disturbance occurs when a plan is created by an individual

or school and interrupted by the unplanned with overlapping and intersecting effects along a

continuum of physical, social, and emotional well-being that potentially result in individualized

trauma (Panther et al., 2021, p. 327). Educational disruptions happened before the COVID-19 pandemic. There were things that organizations and individuals did to keep things going. There were things that were happening prior to the pandemic, which made some organizations better suited to handle the effects of the pandemic, but not so much for others.

Innovation

The pandemic created a need for creativity in how education was being conducted (Alsoud et al., 2021; Badiozaman et al., 2020; Fass-Holmes, 2022; Karalis, 2020; Meinck et al., 2022; Panther et al., 2021). The need for innovation presented itself because of the restrictions that were imposed by governments and institutions at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Alsoud et al., 2021; Badiozaman et al., 2020; Fass-Holmes, 2022; Karalis, 2020; Meinck et al., 2022; Panther et al., 2021). The tech industry rose to come alongside teachers and students by creating or enhancing platforms that could be used to aid in overcoming the educational disturbance that happened because of the pandemic (Alsoud et al., 2021; Badiozaman et al., 2020; Fass-Holmes, 2022; Karalis, 2020; Meinck et al., 2022; Panther et al., 2021). It was also noted that new ideas were created and implemented to ensure that disturbances were limited or eliminated for teachers and students (Alsoud et al., 2021; Badiozaman et al., 2020; Fass-Holmes, 2022; Karalis, 2020; Meinck et al., 2022; Panther et al., 2021). After the pandemic, the new norm was to be online with smartphones, tablets, computers, and laptops equipped with IOS, ANDROID, APPLE, and MS software or utilizing apps and online platforms such as What's App, Google Teams, Canvas, Black Board, Nearpod, Zoom, and other educational tools to make the teaching-learning experience possible (Alsoud et al., 2021). There were and have been more technological advancements to grow the tech area and overcome the effects of the pandemic within the educational arena. Seeing that the technical and institutional arenas were making

moves to combat the outcomes of the pandemic, there needed to be a move with the professional

(teacher).

   Teachers' innovativeness refers to their capacity to adapt to changes in their teaching or

educational contexts by altering their attitudes toward new inventions or discoveries, producing

new thinking, and developing dynamic abilities for adopting new educational technologies or

teaching methods (Alsoud et al., 2021, p. 4). Meinck et al. (2022) convey that teachers have to

become students and teachers if they can successfully deal with the troublesome nature of the

COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers were faced with learning new skills in the digital world, creating

engaging content through online programs, and making it accessible to students who may not

have equitable access to technology (Badiozaman et al., 2020, p. 2). Teachers were asked to

network and work alongside other teachers who were more adaptive to technology as they

learned the new technologies required to serve their students better (Fass-Holmes, 2022). The

digital literacy of the teachers was essential to their eventual success in teaching and learning

activities, so there was a need to improve their skills in this area to be better suited to a pandemic

educational environment (Badiozaman et al., 2020). Teachers were in need to understand the

emotional, social, educational, and technological aspects of themselves while being able to come

alongside those exact needs in their students (Alsoud et al., 2021; Badiozaman et al., 2020; Fass-

Holmes, 2022; Karalis, 2020; Meinck et al., 2022; Panther et al., 2021). Innovation in the

pandemic and since the pandemic is an ongoing area of advancement because of the need to

support institutions, teachers, and students from a technological standpoint and is an area for

further study and research (Alsoud et al., 2021; Badiozaman et al., 2020; Fass-Holmes, 2022;

Karalis, 2020; Meinck et al., 2022; Panther et al., 2021).

Distance Education

Cartwright et al. (2017) argue that those who want to further the area of education of others from a theological perspective should consider doing so in a forum where the students are not physically in the presence of the instructor, known as distance education (p. 5). Almaiah et al. (2020) converse about the fact that since the onset of COVID-19, educational institutions have been shifting rapidly to distance and online learning (p. 5262). Since this transition has happened and is still happening presently, this change has also presented a need for technological development and training for instructors and students (Al-Kumaim et al., 2020, p. 153). Harris (2012) noted that the physical separation between students and teachers was not just a recent phenomenon but one that has historical context and one from a spiritual perspective because God's hands are written all over it.

Distance learning is a concept that has not just been embraced by educational institutions like Christian Colleges and Universities but also by religious denominations like Assemblies of God, Pentecostal, Baptist, and Evangelical (Harris, 2012). Holmberg (2005) conveyed that this concept is not without challenges but is an innovation that will positively impact future learning and instruction when applied appropriately to the mission of the institution or organization. Many HEIs faced challenges when it came to online learning because the COVID-19 pandemic had caused the transition to happen for some sooner than were ready (McCollough et al., 2021; Potra et al., 2021). However, many HEIs have weathered the storm and have begun to find a new sense of norm to embrace not just a distance learning environment but figuring out how to be acquainted with traditional learning by incorporating a hybrid learning atmosphere (Hutchings, 2021; Kavun, 2021). Distance learning is not going away anytime soon, and religious organizations should consider implementing this structure within their educational

programs to see how those who are already connected to the organization can win for Christ (Jones et al., 2017).

Cartwright et al. (2017) argue that distance learning is more adaptive when the faculty is better prepared for the task while ensuring that the classroom environment is conducive to teaching and learning. The thing about the COVID-19 pandemic is that online education may have been in place for some schools while others did not have it in place, teachers may have been prepared while others were not, students were equipped while others were not, or others were not qualified as an HEI, teacher, or student (Pelikan et al., 2021). At this point, COVID-19 is not a thing of the past as it is not going away, and distance learning is not. The thing that many do not know about distance learning is that it was utilized by adult learners who could not attend school, so the curriculum was mailed to them, and they would complete the material and send it back to the university for evaluation (Cartwright et al., 2017). The process continued to evolve with modern technology to the point that is seen presently with the curriculum being at a student's fingertips just by having a smartphone, laptop, computer, or tablet (Cartwright et al., 2017). Spring 2020 changed distance learning for everyone in HEIs, and it was interesting to see how this area has evolved since that time. "During the onset of the pandemic, online learning increased sharply among CUNY's 23 colleges. Specifically, at Bronx Community College, fully online courses increased 94.16% from Fall 2019 to Fall 2020; meanwhile, in-person courses decreased by 90.81%" (Price Banks & Vergez, 2022, p. 1).

Resilience

Edara et al. (2021) discusses the resilience of students during the present pandemic while linking their religiosity to finding achievement. Resilience is the ability of an individual to bounce back or recover from stressful events (Edara et al., 2021, p. 5). The uncertainty and stress of the pandemic are not synonymous with students within the institutions but also have had an

impact on faculty (Welsh et al., 2021). This is another area where this narrative does not focus, but there is a need to study further how faculty have been able to overcome this during the pandemic. Many students have been speaking about how overwhelming things have been, resulting in levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, leading to a decline in his or her mental health (Horton, 2021). There are certain things that have contributed to effective coping strategies for students and there have been things that have caused them to give up or retreat when it comes to matters pertaining to school (Heitman, 2021). The biblical narrative encourages individuals not to grow weary in doing good because, at a particular time, things will happen as long as the person does not give up (New International Version, 1973/2011, Galatians 6:9).

Bozkurt (2022) highlights the need for HEIs to develop strategies directed at strengthening the resilience and sustainability of the institutions and the services they offer (p. 9). HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic found that much of what they thought that they had in place to support the life of their institutions was lacking, especially in the area of digital resiliency (Bozkurt, 2022, pp. 9-10). HEIs made the best of the COVID-19 pandemic by ensuring that their technological systems were improved by implementing resilience contingencies. HEI students with high levels of resilience handled the distress of the pandemic by increasing their psychological well-being (PWB), but students with low levels of flexibility struggled with managing the anguish of the pandemic with a decrease in their PWB (Sood & Sharma, 2020, p. 612). Resilience is also an area for faculty and staff to improve because of the support that these individuals give to HEIs and their students (Bozkurt, 2022; Smith et al., 2008; Sood & Sharma, 2020).

The Apostle Paul says, "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed..." (King James Version, 1769/2017, 2 Corinthians 4:10). The aforementioned biblical passage describes

the elasticity of the believer during difficult times. Smith et al. (2008) state that the Brief

Resilience Scale (BRS) is a reliable means of assessing the resilience of an individual and may

provide insight into how people cope with difficulties. There are six items that are used to assess

the toughness of a person, with items 1, 3, and 5 being positively worded and items 2, 4, and 6

being negatively worded (Smith et al., 2008; Sood & Sharma, 2020). Items are as follows: (1) I

tend to bounce back quickly after hard times, (2) I have a hard time making it through stressful

events, (3) It does not take me long to recover from a stressful event, (4) It is hard for me to snap

back when something that adversely happens, (5) I usually come through difficult times with

little trouble, (6) I tend to take a long time to get over set-backs in life (Smith et al., 2008, p.

196). Another means of assessing resilience can be found in the Connor-Davidson Resilience

Scale (CD-RISC) which aims to evaluate characteristics like self-efficacy, sense of humor,

patience, optimism, and faith (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Smith et al., 2008). Discovering how

individuals persevered during difficult times, like the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, can

further the research that is proposed in this narrative.

Coping Theory

Handling stress and adverse situations through cognitive and behavioral efforts is noted

as coping (Prasath et al., 2021, p. 6). Ricker-Boles (2020) discusses how COVID-19 has

overwhelmed the lives of students, resulting in a need for them to be able to handle the pressures

of school life and personal life. Because of the effects of COVID-19, research has been

surfacing about the tensions and how one can overcome this dilemma by studying stress and

coping theory to mitigate what is happening (Ricker-Boles, 2020). Carver (1997) researched this

area after pulling from the model of management design of Lazarus and Faulkner (1984), which

focused on self-regulation in those times of tension or trauma by conducting *Brief COPE*.

Carver et al. (1989) teamed up with a group of individuals to research more about this phenomenon about the capacity of individuals who dealt with issues in his or her life by speaking about two distinct types of coping called problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping communication by Folkman and Lazarus in 1980 (p. 267). It was noted that people varied when dealing with his or her stressors to actively taking charge, strategizing on how to deal with the issue by denying the thing had happened, delaying how and when the problem will be handled, and even turning to his or her religious beliefs (Carver et al., 1989). The Bible declares that there are benefits to him or her who comes close to God as He will close the gap by coming closer to that individual (English Standard Version, 2001/2020, James 4:8). It is in God that one can find the peace that he or she needs to deal with his or her issues by relying on Him (New International Version, 1973/2011, Isaiah 26:3).

Pat-Horenczyk et al. (2021) inform that the COVID-19 pandemic brought about functional difficulties for individuals but there is hope for those who are able to enhance their perceived coping abilities to mitigate their distress (p. 2). During pandemic, people were dealing with psychological, physical, mental, and social issues but some were able to overcome these issues by exercising coping theory and self-regulating skills (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022). Self-regulating is where one is able to control or adjust their state accordingly to offset external stimuli that cause an internally unsettling nature (Apgar & Cadmus, 2022). Being able to know what to do and how to execute the necessary things to bring about positive actions while not giving in is essential in life (Kar et al., 2021). Students were faced with anxiety during the pandemic, with some expressing that they coped by following the guidelines, avoiding news media about the pandemic and fatalities, avoiding going out in public, doing relaxation activities, conversating with family and friends, seeking professional help, and incorporating spiritual activities (prayer, Bible Study, and worship) (Baloran, 2020). Even though individuals may have

implemented a regiment to get over emotional, physical, and mental roadblocks and were successful, not everyone was as lucky and fell into hopelessness, addictive behaviors, self-blame, and suicidality (Polizzi et al., 2020).

Activities that aided others during the pandemic were listening to music, solving puzzles, playing games with others via internet or phone, learning a language, remembering personal values, and using video chat to check in and be checked on (Polizzi et al., 2020). Silva et al. (2021) conversed about how students during the pandemic decided to intentionally self-distract with activities like venting about what they were experiencing, practicing religious beliefs, maintaining a positive framework, limiting substance use, finding emotional support, and developing a sense of humor (p. 4). Wootton et al. (2022) express that coping behaviors during the pandemic were not known but a decision was made to figure out what others were doing to better life for themselves and those around them. The majority of those in the study concluded that most found success during the pandemic through *approach coping behaviors* (active, emotional support, informational support, positive reframing, planning, and acceptance) and *avoidance coping behaviors* (self-distraction, venting, and self-blame) (Wootton et al., 2022). Thomas and Barbato (2020) characterized the COVID-19 pandemic as a stressor but there are those who found relief through applying adaptive and maladaptive behaviors of positive religious coping that lead to an increased wellbeing. The findings in this section show how individuals during the pandemic were able to continue moving forward in life by making appropriate adjustments to counter how they were feeling about what was happening to them.

Wellbeing

Seligman (2011) identified five building blocks of wellbeing: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (denoted commonly by the acronym PERMA). PERMA is being studied as a means for dealing with the undesirable effects that

COVID-19 has been happening to individuals and more specifically students (Prasath et al., 2021) Butler and Kern (2016) indicate the positive correlation that PERMA-Profiler had on those who participated in the study which added eight additional filler items which yielded positive psychological development. The wellness factor is also tied to this study which is something that those who have been dealing with the effects of COVID when it comes to school and the stress and anxiety which has come along with it has found a sense of calm and peace with and understanding of PERMA (Butler & Kern, 2016; Seligman, 2011; Prasath et al., 2021). Even though COVID-19 was not around when Seligman first introduced the PERMA model, it did focus on the amount of stress individuals had in their lives centered around life issues like divorce, health decline, job loss, and even death to name a few categories that were associated with stress factors (Seligman, 2011; Butler & Kern, 2016). COVID-19 has had an adverse effect on the lives of all as well as the dynamics that goes along with the lives of individuals but there were other coping strategies which were considered to aid those in higher education which was not just the students but those in leadership (Prasath et al., 2021). Butler and Kern (2016) states that as individuals cope with his or her stressors in life and move to a positive place with those difficulties it is called *flourishing*. It is the place of thriving that students and faculty have to come to when dealing with the aftermath of COVID-19 (Prasath et al., 2021).

Psychological Capital (PsyCap)

Prasath et al. (2021) examine the mental capacity of individuals by assessing his or her psychological capital (PsyCap) as a way of coping with different negative stimuli, that would call for a person to give in to an unfavorable situation of circumstances like COVID-19. Luthans et al. (2007) indicate that the determining factor of the positive PsyCap of an individual is derived from his or her development of psychological constructs, which include hope, resilience, optimism, and self-efficacy (p. 543). Godoy et al. (2021) converse about the impact

COVID-19 has had on individuals and, more specifically, students of higher learning institutions from a psychological perspective while dealing with schoolwork and technological aspects of dealing with relating to fellow students and teachers through distance learning. Individuals need to have confidence (self-efficacy) to take on and put in the necessary effort to succeed at challenging tasks; (2) make a positive attribution (optimism) about achieving now and in the future; (3) persevere toward goals and when necessary, redirecting paths to objectives (hope) in order to succeed; and (4) when beset by problems and adversity, sustaining and bouncing back and even beyond (resilience) to attain success (Prasath et al., 2021, p. 542).

Pelikan et al. (2021) admit that the psychological needs of individuals are satisfied within the confines of their social interactions. If people are going to be healthy from a mental standpoint, then it is essential that those individuals are around people of common interest. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about the need for people not to gather in large groups because of the spread of the virus to those in proximity of one another (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2020). The biblical narrative conveys that "it is not a good thing for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18). One person can be overpowered, two can defend themselves, but a cord of three stands is not quickly broken (New International Version, (1973/2011), Eccl. 4:12). People who were able to maintain a level of social connectivity during the pandemic were able to offset damaging effects cognitively (Prasath et al., 2021, p. 20). Adjusting or changing the mind can bring about positive outcomes for that person.

Emotional Intelligence

Brown and Nwagbara (2021) communicate that emotional intelligence has been on the lips and literature of academic scholars for more than three decades while making progress about its importance to those in leadership and those who follow with specific ties to those in the academic community. Grace (2004) discusses how important it is for professors to influence

their students in learning and achieving. However, the responsibility falls on the individual student to carry out those goals that have been set by the student, which, by doing so, fulfills the requirements of the learning institution. Shipp (2010) notes that the students' emotional intelligence aids them in persisting and traversing those moments when they may be doing something that has adverse effects on their trajectory toward their objective or desired target. There is a personal and social competence that an individual must possess in order for him or her to be able to say that he or she is emotionally intelligent (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Shipp, 2010). Emotional intelligence (EI) consists of those personal and social competences of an individual broken out into self-*awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness*, and *social skills* or *relationship management* (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009; Grace, 2004; Shipp, 2010).

The COVID-19 crisis has presented destructive effects on the mental health of individuals, resulting in a need for EI training, which leads to the development of the skills needed to persist (Persich et al., 2021). Holt (2007) verbalizes how EI has predictors that lead to success in a number of areas in a person's life, including religious, professional, and educational achievement, to name a few (pp. 38-42). Barchard (2003) declares that some of the same predictors exist, but research specifically about students' academic success as individuals govern their emotions through competency indicates their cognitive ability to manage their emotional state during adversity. Baba (2020) states that EI gives a foundation to build emotions in a balanced way so that a person can handle different situations very effectively (p. 811). It is the management of the emotional complexities of COVID-19 that has made for difficulties for students and those who lead the students, but there is success to be had when one is able to control his or her emotional state (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021; Flanagan, 2021; Hogan, 2020).

Chandra (2020) states that college students overcame academic stress during the pandemic by incorporating EI to adjust to online and face-to-face HEI education structures.

Misra and Castillo (2004) admit that academic pressure can take a toll on students for different reasons, but being able to maintain balance emotionally can aid in overcoming the stressors of higher education. Being a student in HEI can be challenging, but when you add the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic into the equation, then you have a petri dish that will create trouble if it is not appropriately handled. Chandra (2020) states that many of the skills that one develops about their EI are tied to academic activities like group projects, team activities, role plays, etc. This does not mean that students cannot advance their EI, but the pandemic has presented other factors that need to be explored and overcome if they are going to enhance their EI (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021; Chandra, 2020). A person's EI can be improved by observing their environment, teachers, peers, parents, and siblings (Chandra, 2020, p. 236). The ability of those who have influence over others can increase the EI of those around them because of their increased knowledge of EI and its effects on their well-being (Brown & Nwagbara, 2021; Altamirano & Collazo, 2020).

Summary of Related Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic was not easy for anyone, and those in the educational community had to figure out how to right the ship to keep it heading in the right direction. During times of crisis, some stepped up and led the educational community through the COVID-19 pandemic (Gigliotti, 2020). Students looked to those in the classrooms and those leading their HEIs to be able to provide support during the disruption of their educational journey (Karalis, 2020). The disruption came, and some students were moved into distant learning classrooms that had not been in them before (Ali, 2020). This move was unfamiliar to many of the students, so they needed to figure out how they would still accomplish their educational goals. The continued completion of coursework was needed for them to achieve their goal of graduation. This section

of this narrative outlines many of the variables that were attributed to their success but does not contain them all.

Rationale for the Study and Gap in the Literature

Much of the literature presented has spoken about the issues experienced by educational community members during the COVID-19 pandemic. The HEIs needed to remedy the pandemic's effects and develop more curricula offered in digital classrooms (Ali, 2020; Hogan, 2020). Much of the literature points to secular HEIs, but some research has addressed those in Christian HEIs. Literature has discussed those students who were in their first year in college as undergrads. However, there is a gap in the literature that does not address those Christian students who were in their first year in an undergraduate program focused on theology during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research sought to fill in the gap where residential undergraduate Christian students of theology were moved to online classes to complete their required coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic and were successful.

Profile of the Current Study

Students needed to continue successfully completing their coursework, pandemic or not, if they would accomplish their desired academic goals in the HEIs they were attending. Being online should not deter their success, so this research considered what success looked like for them before and during the pandemic to grasp their success in its entirety. The COVID-19 pandemic was a full-blown crisis with bumps in the road. Understanding how the students navigated those detours could shed light on their success by discovering contributing and hindering internal and external factors. Chapter Three will outline the research methodology taken to determine success for those residential undergraduate Christian students of theology in their first year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research aims to determine first-year Christian students' success in completing their theological curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic. The method that guided this research falls under the guidance of a qualitative research method that used interviews to gather information from the students. The RQs of the proposed research came out of a need to determine students' success by setting a baseline before and after the pandemic hit. Chapter Three outlines the research method employed to obtain the needed information by discussing what procedures were applied by highlighting the problem, a purpose statement, and research questions. This researcher explains the research by summarizing the following areas: setting, participants, the role of the researcher, ethical considerations, data collection methods and instruments, and data analysis.

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

The lives of individuals were changed dramatically by the COVID-19 pandemic (Almaiah et al., 2020). The adjustments made during that time brought about shifts in the day-to-day operations and patterns in students' lives in their usual classroom environment. Students enrolled in a face-to-face educational environment for most of their lives were asked during the pandemic to go into an online learning environment to continue their education. This researcher hopes to determine what, if any, contributing factors enabled those students to complete assignments and meet deadlines associated with enrollment in theology within the higher learning institution of their choice.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the success of first-year Christian students who were enrolled in a theology-disciplined curriculum during

the COVID-19 pandemic in a higher learning environment. The theory that guided this study was the principles and practices in the *self-determination theory* (SDT) because of internal and external stimuli that motivate one through his or her autonomy, competency, and social relatedness to get things completed (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Pelikan et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021). SDT maintains that when psychological needs are met, growth potentialities are optimized (Walker et al., 2021, p. 241). The theories of a hermeneutic phenomenological study seek to understand the lived experience of individuals through phenomena (Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1962; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). This research desired to understand the lived experiences of first-year Christian students during the pandemic. SDT was used to determine what environmental characteristics either support or undermine individuals' efforts to see growth or development (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Pelikan et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021).

Research Questions

The following research questions were asked to guide this study:

      RQ1. What did the completion of theological studies look like for first-year Christian students in a pre-COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

      RQ2. What did the success of completing coursework look like for first-year Christian students studying theology in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

      RQ3. What internal or external factor(s) or both has/have contributed to the success of completing coursework for first-year Christian students studying theology in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

      RQ4. What internal or external factor(s) or both has/have hindered the success of completing coursework for first-year Christian students studying theology in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

Research Design and Methodology

      A qualitative phenomenology research design was used in this research because it enables this researcher to understand what the individual(s) experienced in their own words (Creswell,

2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The qualitative phenomenological research was expanded upon by incorporating *hermeneutics* into this research because of its interpretative qualities, which was able to shed more light on the understanding of the experiences of people (Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1962; Laverty, 2003; Patterson & Higgs, 2005; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). There was a need to ask open-ended questions to get individuals communicating about their experience(s) while also adding follow-up questions to dig deeper for a full explanation as to what the person is stating when they are giving their description of the event(s) (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). A quantitative one was not used because the questions in quantitative research limit the answer choices to yes or no, true or false, red, blue, or green (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). Interviews were the best practice for getting the data needed to complete the totality of this research (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The collection and analysis of the data were crucial to conducting qualitative research while ensuring that the confidentiality of those taking part in the study is held in the highest regard (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). One cannot move forward in coding the data without ensuring that the earlier aspects of a qualitative research method have been completed (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). Charting or graphing the data to show different trends from the data coding was appropriately compiled and incorporated into the final product of this narrative should this research be accepted (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

This research incorporated the practices of *hermeneutics* into a phenomenological study to discover meaning and achieve understanding from the lives of those who participated in the survey (Annells, 2006; Kinsella, 2006; Laverty, 2003; Patterson & Higgs, 2005). Phenomenology focuses on individuals' lived experiences as it considers the phenomena one has experienced. At the same time, hermeneutics interprets the experiences one has lived through,

which makes for a need to combine the two qualitative approaches to bring clarity to the research (Dreyfus, 1991; Heidegger, 1962; Wilson & Hutchinson, 1991). It is a benefit to understand better what transpired in the lives of Christian students who were expected to continue their studies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The self-determination theory (SDT) was considered within this study because of its ability to discover internal and external motivation when it comes to one completing his or her goals (Pelikan et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Walker et al., 2021). Furthermore, SDT has been used with students to understand the phenomena of motivation about their ability to complete course assignments, whether to gain the approval of parents or professors or out of curiosity and interest (Ryan & Deci, 2000, pp. 54-55). SDT, more recently, has been incorporated into studies to understand students' lives during the pandemic while dealing with distant learning and spiritual growth (Pelikan et al., 2021; Walker et al., 2021). Recent studies prompted this researcher to incorporate SDT to understand Christian students, COVID-19, and the successful completion of coursework from a hermeneutic phenomenological study.

Setting

Higher education institutions (HEIs) were impacted just as hard as other organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some institutions had contingencies. In contrast, others struggled to gain footing in the new climate with online and remote learning as a necessity (Ali, 2020). There was not a large amount of data on the pandemic and higher education at the time that the effects of COVID-19 were unfolding right before the students, professors, and administrators in higher institutes of learning (Mostafa et al., 2022). The rationale here was to add to the research by expanding upon what has been and is being discovered by looking at Christian students enrolled in theology in an institution of higher learning.

The organization(s) this research explored were those with Christian students in their first year enrolled in a curriculum focused on theology during the pandemic. If the organization(s) met the abovementioned qualifications, this was a starting basis for considering the institution(s). It was necessary to know whether the institution was operating during the COVID-19 pandemic and did not shut down its classes. This research focused on institutions that did not have to shut down due to the pandemic and had the means to keep educating their students. Institutions found in the Southeast region of the US were called upon because of their proximity to this researcher. Still, this researcher could not move forward without getting approval and understanding the outlined institutions.

The ideal institution(s) were those institutions that met the following conditions when the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the spring semester of 2020 or March 2020:

A) Institutions with an existing online learning program offered theology studies.

B) Institutions had to have first-year students who were asked to participate in classes online.

C) Institutions where attending students were Christian or lived according to a biblical worldview.

D) Institutions where enrollment numbers met or exceeded the needed number of participants for the study.

E) Institutions where students were diverse individuals (culturally, biologically, mentally, and spiritually).

F) Institutions that were located near the Southeast region of the US.

It is essential to understand the phenomena of the COVID-19 pandemic and that of institutions that supply education at the secondary level, which can have students in a classroom environment and then must shift to online or distant learning. Institutions, where professors, administrators, and students had to move from being in-person to a remote working and learning environment, are necessary to the research because of the abrupt move that had to be taken to

follow mandates from federal, state, and local government officials (CDC, 2020; WHO, 2020).

Giving information back to the institutions that supply education for those in a theological study

setting would help the organizations and those that are similar while providing a basis for others

to follow this researcher and expand upon the research. This study's location was HEIs, located

in the Southeast region of the US, where this researcher can be found around the Metro Atlanta

area. This researcher had to reach out to HEIs to gain access once the IRB had approved the

research.

Participants

Creswell (2014) discussed the importance of the researcher finding the purposefully

selected sites or individuals for the proposed study (p. 189). 13 participants for this study

were undergraduate Christian students in their first year studying theology. They professed to

be Christian within their chosen higher learning institution when the COVID-19 pandemic

hit. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) communicated that it is essential for the researcher to find the

right participants for a qualitative research method while selecting a suitable sample (pp.

241-243). Leedy & Ormrod (2019) pointed out that most qualitative research uses *purposive*

sampling, which is a strategy that involves choosing participants or other units of study, as

the name implies, for a particular *purpose* (p. 178). A questionnaire was emailed to each of

the participants interested in the study individually, and based on their answers to the

questions, a consent form was sent permitting them to be included in the research.

Once the participants had been selected, an interview was set up, and seventeen

questions were asked about their success in completing their coursework while dealing with

the effects of the COVID-10 pandemic. The interviews were completed via a video

conferencing call. The video conference call did not allow for the protection of the identities

of the participants, so the calls were conducted individually. Participants were asked to verify

the authenticity of their words during the interviews by going through the transcripts of their interviews. Participants were given a gift for participating in the study once the tasks listed above were completed.

Role of the Researcher

Creswell (2014) asserted that qualitative research is interpretative; the inquirer is typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants (pp.187-189). The researcher must strive for balance, fairness, and completeness in data analysis and interpretation, carefully document the analysis procedures, and be upfront about personal biases in the final report (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, pp. 356-357). More importantly, this researcher needed to ensure that the understanding of the inner workings of the qualitative research method is followed and incorporated in its entirety within the research. There was a need to constantly contact the selected dissertation supervisor to ensure that all the protocols for doing this research are being followed while involving others as a means of accountability (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). Referring to the handbook provided by Liberty University and revisiting the IRB website was foundational for this researcher as they were the model for moving this research to completion.

This researcher realized how important this research is to the overall community while understanding the need to keep the highest levels of credibility while conducting a study of this size and in keeping with the footprints of countless others who have blazed this similar trail (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). This researcher needed to apply theoretical and theological disciplines to the inner workings of this research, so there came an increase of knowledge in these areas to complete this narrative. The responsibility, accountability, confidentiality, and integrity that went into completing this dissertation cannot just be on the pages but should be exemplified in the life of the researcher (Creswell, 2014;

Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The researcher did not have any prior relationship with or financial ties to any HEIs involved with the research. The researcher also had no prior interactions or dealings with any of the participants of the research. The technology used during this narrative's production did not provide any kickbacks for utilizing their products or mentioning their names in this study. This researcher acknowledges that one has made it this far with the help and grace of the Lord. This same confidence was leaned upon to press toward the mark for the prize of this high calling of God in Christ Jesus (King James Version, 1769/2017, Philippians 3:12-14).

Ethical Considerations

The researcher was required to obtain approval from the IRB located on the Liberty University campus (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The process started by completing the necessary application, which was filled out accurately and guided by the leadership of the assigned supervisor (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The IRB approval document is located in Appendix A of this document. There was a need to obtain consent forms for the participants (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). These consent forms were guided by samples that were provided by the IRB. The consent form for this research can be found in Appendix C. There was also a need to get the permission of those in authority at the specific institutions participating in the study while selecting the site(s) in which this researcher has no vested interest (Creswell, 2014). Appendix B contains the letter used to obtain permission from the HEIs to conduct the research with their students. This researcher was only connected to the HEIs because of the research that was being conducted, and no prior relationship existed or presently exists. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) outline instances where waivers may be needed during the IRB process while saying that the best practice is to refer to the university website with which the researcher is associated (pp. 115-116). It was

essential to this research study that one protected those taking part from any harm, ensure that all documentation be signed by those taking part, and protect the right to privacy of those taking part in the study as well (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

The participants who were accepted into the study were given informed consent forms, as provided by the Liberty Institutional Review Board, outlining the research structure and any innate risk(s) associated with their participation. Gaining consent from individuals taking part in their study is a necessity for the process that one will take after gaining approval from the IRB (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). As consent is obtained from the participants, there was a need to supply a certain amount of information to them while not supplying too much information to hinder or hamper the research by shifting participants' participation levels (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). It was imperative that the research and data collected were kept in a manner that was confidential by changing some of the details or characteristics associated with participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The actual names of participants were not used to ensure their privacy. It was essential for this researcher to mitigate anything that could potentially bring harm to the research and its participants. The removal of communications from email and other devices of communication were scrubbed of the materials located in them which could identify participants.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Because this research was conducted from a qualitative approach, it was necessary to facilitate a setting where interviews can be completed, whether in-person, via a video conferencing platform, or by telephone (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). There was a need for record-keeping, whether written or via some form or recording device, which would later require transcription (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The right questions needed to be considered that are centered around the research problem and

questions outlined earlier in this narrative (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

Collection Methods

Collecting information for qualitative research was done through detailed interviewing techniques, such as asking questions to the participants to get them to converse about what they experienced. One cannot get to the place of interviewing participants without approval from the IRB. Even then, two vital steps in this research had to happen before this occurred. The first thing that had to happen was to contact the HEIs who participated in the research and get approval to do the study with their students. Appendix B holds the content of the request that was used to access the potential student pool that was contacted to participate in the study. Appendix D was used to ensure that students taking part in the study fit the prerequisites outlined by the problem and the RQs of the survey. Appendix C is the consent form that was used to let the participants know what to expect should they decide to take part or if they wanted to end their participation. Appendix E outlines the questions that were asked to the participants to get them to speak openly about their experience(s) for this study. Each of these documents followed the templates that were proved by the IRB and approved by the IRB to ensure that the appropriate wording was used throughout the documents.

Instruments and Protocols

The first tool that was used was the Student Qualifying Questionnaire (SQQ), found in Appendix D. The questions were asked of potential participants by emailing the questions to them. Question 1 of the SQQ was asked because the RQs of the study are focused on Christian students. There was not a need to include students who do not believe that Christ is the only begotten Son of God and have decided to live their lives with a biblical worldview. Question 2 of the SQQ was asked because the RQs of the study are directed to students in their first year in an

HEI during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of this question was to exclude those students who were returning to classes. This question was also asked to ensure that the research did not include graduate students. Question 3 of the SQQ was asked to figure out if the student was enrolled in a theological studies class during the pandemic. When this question was asked, students enrolled in other disciplines were excluded from the study. The final question of the SQQ was asked to omit those students who did not complete their coursework or did not find success during the pandemic.

Appendix E contains the Student Interview Questions (SIQ), which contain questions that were asked of the participating students. The questions of the SIQ were asked face-to-face with the students or via Zoom. The determining factors for the interview setting were based on the students and the interviewer's availability and comfort level. The questions that were asked are derived from a combination of the RQs of the study and SDT principles of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The questions that were asked were open-ended to allow the students to express in detail about their experiences (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). There was a need to record all interviews so that they could be transcribed upon completion of the interview. The significant protocols and instruments of this research were conducted in compliance with the IRB to ensure the safety and security of those taking part in the study.

Interviews

Leedy and Ormrod (2019) suggested that a researcher should outline general and possible follow-up questions before conducting an interview. This researcher used RQs to aid in producing questions that guided the interviews with the participants. Questions for the interviews were centered around the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the successful completion of first-year Christian students in a theological studies curriculum. Another consideration for interview questions could be the participants' cultural backgrounds (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019, p.

247). Because participants were of differing cultural backgrounds and a biblical worldview, there was a need to be aware of these factors while asking about the pandemic's effects on coursework completion. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) state that participants are diverse across cultural groups and subgroups. Hence, researchers need to be mindful of tailoring questions because of this.

The interviews were conducted with participating students from HEIs who were in the Southeast region of the United States and who offer theological studies. The students were qualified based on their responses to the emailed questionnaire, Appendix D, which came from the list provided by the HEIs who had acknowledged that they would take part. Interviews followed the outlined questions that are in Appendix E of this narrative. Those interviews with the students were recorded during that time, which fell between 30 minutes to an hour in length.

During the interviews, students were allowed to speak freely and ask questions of the interviewer should they needed. It was essential for the researcher to ask follow-up questions of the students where there was a need for more clarity or if the students said something that warranted more elaboration. The setting of the interviews had to be quiet and clear of distractions so that the student and the interviewer could focus. The environment had the proper lighting to ensure that the video was clear and that the room was set for recording. The students were asked to speak loudly to ensure that the recording of the interview was clear. Because the interviews were conducted via Zoom, the students were asked to have their cameras on so that facial expressions and body language could be observed as well.

Document Analysis

Getting all of the information from the interviews was necessary. Some of this information came from notes that had been taken in a notebook during the interviews. It was essential to gather additional information explicitly recorded during the interviewing process. It was necessary to collect emails that some of the participants had sent to the researcher after the

interviews that included additional personal reflections relevant to the study. The document analysis came from the transcripts of all the recordings that occurred during the video Zoom call with the participants. Notepads and sticky notes that were used during the interview process had to be transcribed and included in this study. All data collected during this study was transcribed to ensure that this document encompasses all the data. It was vital to the research that the safekeeping of documents during the analysis process be implemented to ensure that "no harm" is done to the participants or that of the study (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

Procedures

The qualitative research that was conducted during this research was performed from a hermeneutic phenomenological study. It sought to interpret the lived experiences of Christian theological studies students who were able to complete their studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding internal and external factors that may or may not have been essential to completing coursework was necessary. At the same time, the phenomena of the COVID-19 pandemic were present, along with the transitions made to ensure that institutions of higher learning were asked to follow governmental mandates.

For this research to achieve its goals, HEIs had to offer the appropriate curriculum outlined earlier in this chapter. There was also a need to find participants enrolled in theology in their first year during the pandemic. There was no need for additional consent from parents or guardians because of them being of the age of consent Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). There were not any of those who fit in another category where it would require the need to get another to sign for them, so there was no need for consent to be taken by a parental signature or by means of recording them with their verbal consent or video of their physical consent to take part in this study. The input of as many first-year students who fit the criteria was needed to create a well-

balanced study. It was vital to the research to gain informed consent from the study participants (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

Before anything could be done with the institutions or the students in this research, it was crucial to gain approval from the IRB connected to Liberty University (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The process began with the researcher completing a document worthy of being researched, known as a *prospectus*. Here, there was a need to complete the necessary training in the CITI program connected to Liberty University, which outlined the application process, consent, and other information needed to perform the research. Once leadership had been established and approval was granted, letters of intent were sent to the institutions for authorization to research on the campus. The outline of the documents followed the procedures that the IRB and the support of the supervisor outlined. Once permission was granted, the questionnaires were emailed to the first-year students to see if they were the ideal participants. All of the data that was collected and approved was housed in a manner that maintained the necessary confidentiality held in high regard to the research process (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

The information discovered about the participants was used to move them to the interviewing stage of the research, which this researcher conducted. The data from the questions were gathered by voice recordings, written notes, and video while not showing any collected information. The collected information was kept in a safe and secure location, with those digital items being secured on a password-protected device. Once the data had been collected, it was analyzed by following the code used to decipher what, if anything, were contributing factors to the success of first-year Christian students in a theological studies curriculum during the pandemic. Fictitious names were assigned to all students who participated in the research to ensure they could not be identified. The data was kept safe by housing it in an approved office

space where access to the information was under lock and key. Access to the area was limited only to this researcher and those approved by the supervisor. Once all the data had been processed and the final product was completed, it could be published and shared with the community most connected to the research to improve that community (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

Data Analysis

It was essential to this study to ensure that all data was analyzed following the appropriately chosen approach (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). This study utilized the qualitative research method and followed the procedures accordingly (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

Analysis Methods

The explanatory work of hermeneutic phenomenology is not tied to a single set of analytical practices, but it is an unraveling method involving several investigative activities (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; Raheim, 2021). Because this researcher realized this demand, it was crucial to figure out which one of the many activities would serve as a means of analyzing the data. The process began with reading through the transcribed information. Being committed to this part of the process enabled this researcher to begin to understand how the phenomenon impacted the students' lives. The researcher needed to transcribe all the data collected through the interviewing process, whether via in-person, phone conversations, or video calls. The similarities from combing through the data were used to make a code. Researchers have used a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to their qualitative research and NVivo to store and analyze data (Bynum & Varpio, 2018; Paterson & Higgs, 2005; Raheim, 2021). However, this researcher took a physical approach to combing through the data but utilized MAXQDA to aid

the coding process. It was essential for the research to be organized so it could be developed into an initial code for the data (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010).

Hogan (2020) commented about the need to use the phenomenon of participants' lived experiences through hermeneutics as a means of understanding and coding. Laverty (2003) noted that interpretation of what individuals recalled, thought, and felt was essential to understanding what they had gone through. There was a need to make notes of what themes became apparent, which could aid in the coding process. Coding could be done by using Microsoft Word (Hogan, 2020). It was conducted by taking what was transcribed and read through or listening to it while making detailed notes, whether in Word or a notepad (Laverty, 2003).

Once the code had been double-checked to ensure that the code was the right one for the data that was collected, there was a need to begin identifying themes, patterns, and relationships that were discovered in the data (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). Following the process, as mentioned earlier, was crucial to ensure that the data and the codes that were developed flowed together through validation (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The data that was validated needed to be summarized to ensure that all of the previous procedures had been conducted in a way that would ensure that the information was appropriately analyzed (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). During this process, it was essential to ensure that the identities of the study participants were protected by creating pseudonyms but ensure that the aliases would be symbolic relative to the phenomenon of interest (Vandermause & Fleming, 2011, pp. 370-371). The code created for this research was placed in the appendices of this document, specifically Appendix J.

Trustworthiness

Roberts (2010) reiterates that trustworthiness, a cornerstone of qualitative research, is often used to refer to validity (p. 161). The commitment to truth in the qualitative method means

that the researcher rigorously checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing specific

procedures (Creswell, 2014, p. 201). Leedy and Ormrod (2019) communicate that qualitative

strategies like reflexivity, triangulation, and member checking are used to ensure the integrity

and reliability of the research (pp. 239-241). This researcher followed the paths of honesty and

truthfulness to ensure that what is communicated and calculated in this narrative was founded on

the facts. The utilization of direct quotes from the words of the participants was instrumental in

maintaining the integrity and reliability of the research.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality

(Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). It was the researcher's primary

responsibility to gather information from students impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic in

their traditional higher educational environment but who found success in fulfilling their goals

relating to the school. The assistance this researcher needed began by accessing records that

were provided with data about the students who found success while expressing the lived

experiences of those students. It would be suitable for this researcher to be able to provide the

institutions and students with the findings and follow up with the institutions and students to

ensure that what is being communicated reflects what was shared. Students were given the

opportunity to review their transcripts to ensure the accuracy of the transcribed information.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the detail of the research context centered around your

processes and procedures (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). It was

important that all of the actions taken by this researcher be documented in a way that others

could follow and imitate in the instance of a replication study. Having others walking alongside

the researcher to ensure that instruments are appropriately utilized made for a work that could

be relied upon Should another pick up the manuscript (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). It was necessary for all of the research to be accessible by those of the community, and it would be the responsibility of that person to ensure that things would be conducted in a way that is in keeping with the high standards of compiling a dissertation.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret the data (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). It is necessary for those conducting research to be able to supply an *audit trail* (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). It was essential for this researcher to be able to provide all data collected at the request of others. Having this information readily available and approved by the dissertation supervisor would add to the confirmability of this work should it be deemed necessary.

Transferability

Transferability is the possibility that results found in one context apply to other contexts (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic affected the lives of almost every individual in the known world. This narrative only focused on the lives of theological students connected to a higher learning institution. However, what was studied in this narrative can be used in other areas of people's lives and organizations. There was not a significant amount of information about the impact of a pandemic like that of the coronavirus. Still, there are researchers out there who are beginning to put out research in this area. This researcher hopes that others will be able to take this research further by considering other fields for the study and asking more or even different questions to expand upon this problem.

Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined how the researcher utilized a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative approach to understand what the participants went through during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research set out to determine the success of the participants prior to and during the pandemic when it came to completing their coursework. Furthermore, the research looked to understand what, if any, internal or external contributing or hindering factors experienced by the participants during the pandemic. Throughout the research, the researcher ensured that all of the areas of ethical consideration were carried out to maintain the highest level of moral quality.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to determine what made first-year Christian students successful in completing their coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first chapter of this narrative dialogued about the phenomenon that allegedly disrupted the lived experiences of students during the events that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The second chapter of this narrative spoke to the literature associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and its effect on students while highlighting related literature from theological and theoretical perspectives.

The third chapter of this narrative outlined the scaffolding that would be used to aid in unearthing what, if anything, can be discovered about the successful completion of coursework for students during the global pandemic, which started in March 2020. The breakdown of this next section will consider the following four main headings: Compilation Protocol and Measures, Demographic and Sample Data, Data Analysis and Findings, and Evaluation of the Research Design.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

The researcher needed to reach out to HEIs that met the requirements outlined in Chapter 3 of this narrative once the IRB had approved the research prospectus. This researcher emailed, called, and visited the HEIs campuses in the Metro Atlanta area to get approval to perform the research on their campuses. Some HEIs did not participate in the study; subsequently, the students could not participate because of their affiliation with the HEIs. Also, HEIs did not allow their students to participate in outside research studies. Other HEIs required this researcher to go through their IRB approval process with an approved sponsor from the HEI staff. Some HEI's educational curricula of theology were designed for students outside of the given parameters of the research.

This researcher had to expand the search to some of the smaller HEIs near the Metro Atlanta area and those located in the Southeast region of the US. This researcher visited HEI 2, 3, and 4 in the aforementioned locations. The letter in Appendix B was emailed to approving department heads to gain access to students by disseminating the flyer (Appendix G) created with QR codes to potential participants so they could understand the research and reach out to this researcher. Participating students were vetted using the SQQ document in Appendix D and then given a copy of the consent form in Appendix C to be signed and returned to this researcher. Interviews were conducted via ZOOM at a date and time that coincided with the availability of the student and the researcher. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed via Microsoft Word and then cross-examined for accuracy by reviewing the recordings along with what was transcribed via MS Word. The discrepancies in the interviews were edited and confirmed by this researcher and participants for their accuracy. Once the interviews were confirmed and edited, each participant was given a gift for participating in the research per the IRB-approved research.

The data for the research was collected by conducting interviews through Zoom. Zoom had a recording function as well as a transcribing function. However, all the interviews were transcribed by utilizing Microsoft Word. The recordings from Zoom were uploaded into an open Word document under the voice header, and the program transcribed all the interviews, separating the speakers on the recording. Once all the interviews had been transcribed, the researcher read through all of them thoroughly. Roberts (2010) stated that one should describe in detail how a large amount of data was managed by including software, sticky notes, index cards, or other processes used (p. 159). The researcher read through all the transcripts and then went back through the transcripts while making notes of things that were similar among the interviews in their wording when asked the questions during the interviews. Creswell (2014) conversated about how vital it was for the researcher to organize and prepare for data analysis, read or look

over the data, start coding, use the coding to generate a description of themes, figure out how the

themes could be used in the narrative, and then make an interpretation in qualitative research of

the findings or results (pp.197-201). A preliminary set of themes and codes was developed using

the information collected from the transcripts by highlighting, underlining, color coding,

italicizing, and bolding specific texts that were similar to those in the Word documents.

Microsoft Excel was utilized to confirm the themes and similarities of the words expressed by

the participants by incorporating the RQs of the study and those questions from the SIQ

document. As a final means of analysis, theme finding, coding, and discovery of findings, the

researcher uploaded the transcripts into MAXQDA to ensure that the hand coding was like what

was being unearthed by the research technology.

Because the research was qualitative, it was necessary to ask open-ended questions to get

the participants to share their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019;

Roberts, 2010). Research conducted in a qualitative manner has other sub-categories that it can

take on, and this research focused on the phenomenological aspects centered around the impact

of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lived experiences of first-year Christian students in a

theological studies curriculum. The interviews that were conducted brought about different

themes that emerged through a hermeneutic approach of interpreting alongside the theories of

self-determination theory (SDT).

Demographic and Sample Data

This hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study called for first-year Christian

undergraduate students who were enrolled in theology at an HEI at the onset of the COVID-19

pandemic. The participants of the study also needed to have taken in-person classes, moved to

online classes, and successfully completed those classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. This

information was confirmed using the SQQ document located in Appendix D. Each participant

was emailed a copy of the SQQ document and asked to answer the questions and return the

completed document to the researcher. These documents were removed from the email and

stored on a password-protected laptop in a secure location in an office space. The remainder of

the data was collected during the recorded interviews, guided by the research RQs and the SIQ

document in Appendix E.

Table 1.

Qualified Participant Demographics & Data

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	HEI
Participant 1	Male	Caucasian	HEI 1
Participant 2	Female	Caucasian	HEI 1
Participant 3	Female	Caucasian	HEI 2
Participant 4	Male	Caucasian	HEI 3
Participant 5	Female	Caucasian	HEI 4
Participant 6	Male	African American	HEI 5
Participant 7	Female	Caucasian	HEI 2
Participant 10	Male	African American	HEI 6
Participant 11	Male	African American	HEI 6
Participant 13	Female	Haitian	HEI 6
Participant 14	Male	African American	HEI 6
Participant 15	Male	African American	HEI 6
Participant 16	Male	African American	HEI 6

There were 13 participants who qualified for the research. The three other individuals were interviewed, and during the interview process, it was discovered that they were ineligible to participate in the study. The ineligible participant's information was collected and stored in the data but not included in the findings of this chapter. The research participants were diverse individuals from multiple cultural groups, ethnic groups, and genders.

Table 2.

Qualified Participant Gender

38%

62%

☐ Females   ☐ Males
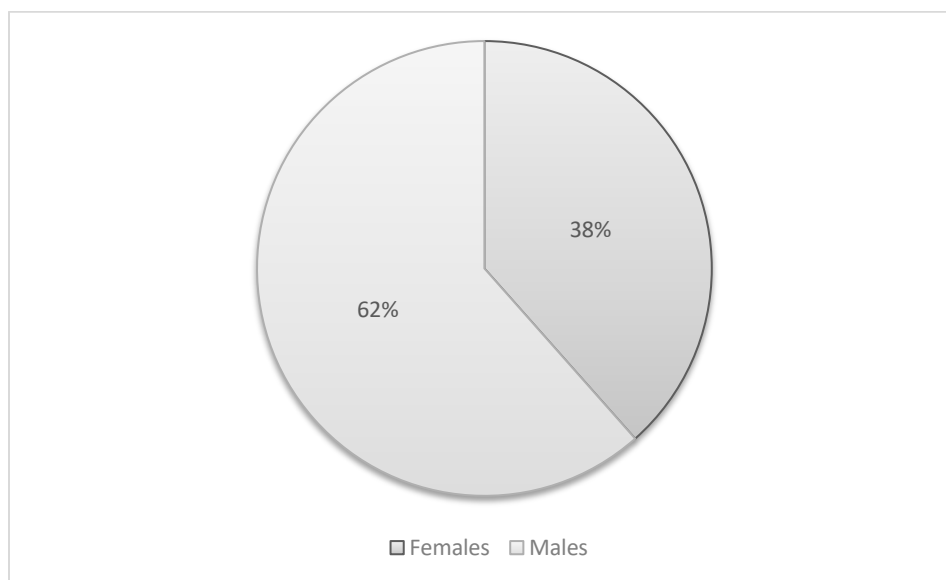
Table 3.

Participating HEIs

Bar chart titled with y-axis ranging from 0 to 7, showing Participants across six categories: HEI 1 = 2, HEI 2 = 2, HEI 3 = 1, HEI 4 = 1, HEI 5 = 1, HEI 6 = 6. Legend: Participants.
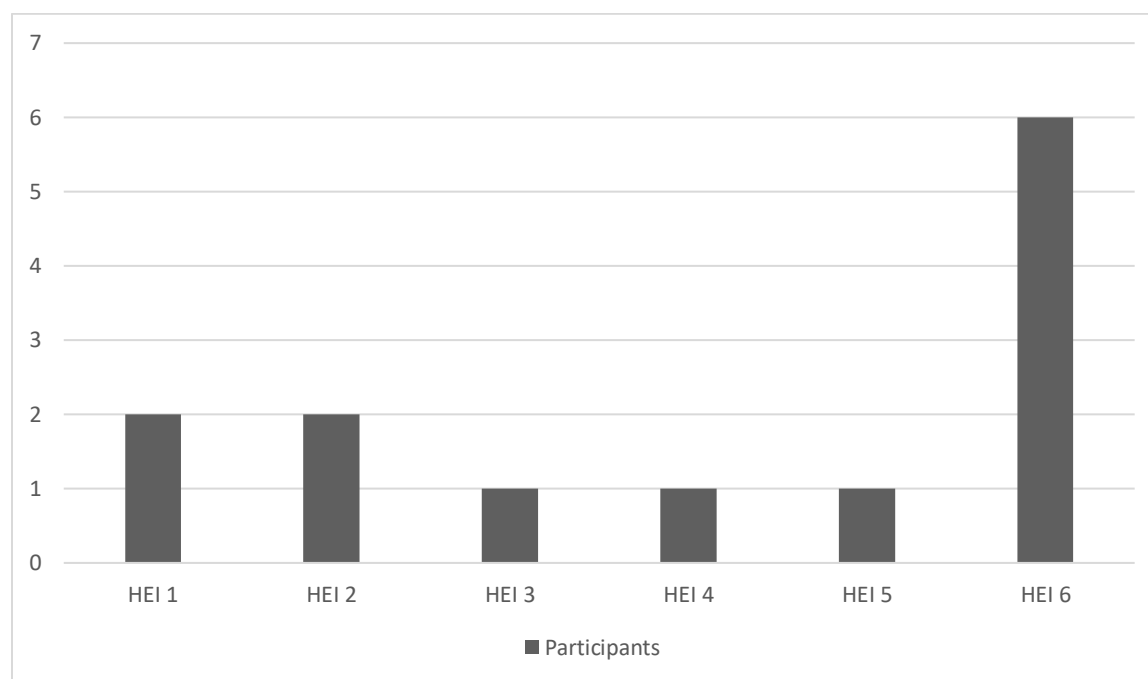
Data Analysis and Findings

The data collected after Zoom interviews were completed and uploaded into Microsoft Word to be transcribed and combed through, and then uploaded into MAXQDA to be categorized and coded to determine themes and patterns that reflected the success that unfolded for the study participants. Utilizing the hermeneutic practices of interpretation and repeated watching and listening to the recordings of the interviews, and the tedious task of going line by line of each transcript in MAXQDA, the surfacing of themes and sub-themes became evident and are listed in Table 5. These themes and sub-themes are discussed alongside the RQs of the research, the principles of SDT, and the lived experiences of the thirteen participants at the six HEIs during the COVID-19 pandemic in the following sections.

Pre-COVID Success

This section of this narrative will discuss the student's success before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. P 1 stated that HEI 1 was in person. Students came to classes on campus. Professors stood in front of the classes and could answer questions directly as students asked them. Group projects were done in a group setting inside student housing. Chapel services were held in the spaces designated for those services, with students present with those leading the services. Prayers were offered for fellow students by holding hands and standing before each other. Assignments were handed to the professors, and if there were other student life needs, they could be done in the administration offices by setting up an appointment. Social gatherings were conducted face-to-face without any restrictions. Coursework was completed, and grades showed that the enrolled classes were successfully completed.

P 2 attended HEI 1 and communicated a similar experience as P 1. P 2 added that hanging out with friends and having study groups and group projects were completed in a face-to-face group setting. P2 stated that being able to be in class was necessary because this participant was a learner who thrived in a physical classroom environment. P 2 mentioned, "We would go to our local churches and do devotionals as part of the teachings in class, which help with our call on our lives." P 2 noted, "Overall, school was good, and my grades were good because I was in my classes with my professors and classmates."

Participants 3 and 7 attended HEI 2. The school setting and activities for school were like that of HEI 1. Students were required to complete assignments and required milestones to receive passing grades. Social events were held in person. Professors were readily available before, after, and during classes for student inquiries into the taught curriculum. Students could go out to the movies and eat at local eateries, churches, and other gatherings. It was the typical

student experience for those coming to college in their first year. Both students lived in student housing.

P 4 attended HEI 3. This participant did not have the same lived experience as the other participants in the study. The school experience for P 4 was not so much about the social aspects of college life because this participant was not Generation Z (GenZ) but a Millennial who had started college to fulfill a call to ministry in the student's life. Yes, school was similar in that it involved attending classes, turning in assignments, and receiving passing grades like HEI 1 and HEI 2. The social gatherings and events of the school were not as crucial to this participant as those of the younger participants in the study. Students and professors interacted similarly at the campuses of HEI 1 and HEI 2. P 4 attended classes in the evenings after being at work on the scheduled days during the week. P 4 believed that the call of God was being fulfilled as classes were completed because of the call on this participant's life.

P 5 attended HEI 4. The lived experience of this participant was similar to that of the participants who attended HEI 1 and HEI 2 because this participant was GenZ. The school setting was in person with professors and classmates in the classroom environments, and those classes were successfully completed by fulfilling the requirements of the HEI. What made this student different but similar to others in this study was that P 5 was on a tennis scholarship. This participant had obligations to training, practices, matches, and academic proficiencies that were mandatory to maintain the scholarship. Completing coursework meant playing time and not being on any academic probation or being able to interact with teammates and coaches.

P 6 attended HEI 5. This participant expressed that HEI 5's school environment was "a lot to take in and even overwhelming at times to take in because of the campus' size." The overwhelming feeling did not come from fear but the "awesomeness of God and how blessed this participant felt to be associated with HEI 5 and its great history." There were endless

activities and events to participate in and groups to be involved with. "Campus life was buzzing, and my heart was filled with joy and expectation of great things to come." Even though this participant was a Millennial in a petri dish of mostly GenZ students, the participant embraced the experience but lived off campus. HEI 5 operated similarly to HEI 1 through HEI 4 because participants were educated in a residential educational environment. P 6 was a first-generation student embracing the weight of familial expectations and HEI academic excellence.

Participants 10, 11, 13-16 all attended HEI 6. Participants 10, 11, 14-16 were all male basketball players from the same team. However, P 13 was female and from Canada. The athletic participants expressed that they had to do a similar regiment as that of P 5 at HEI 4. "Academics had to be on point," as stated by P 10. Participant 10 also added, "I came to college by the grace of God because I got in with a 1.9 GPA, but I now have a 3.7 GPA. It took much work getting in and staying on track." P 11 said, "In-person classes played into my strengths as I am an extrovert and love interacting with my professors and classmates." P 13 lived in the dorms and enjoyed student life because "it kept me from focusing on family and my distance from them. I found that my relationships with my professors and working on campus aligned me with my academic goals." "Making good grades came easy for me because I wanted to have playing time," as stated by P 14. P 15 stated, "I could rely on teammates and roommate to keep me accountable when it came to classes and assignments." P 16 discussed "the joys of being able to speak with professors and classmates about the topics of unity found in the curriculum." All these participants, like those from HEI 1 through HEI 5, were in class environments where they were face-to-face and completed their coursework while being able to engage with others in social gatherings and other activities without any restrictions on their comings and goings.

Pre-COVID, the students' success happened organically because of the environments they were connected to, which aided them to do so before the pandemic. This is not to say that no

other students experienced success outside of this research. The HEIs these students were connected to were operating their facilities based on the mission, vision, and values they had established. The HEIs had faculty and staff who were employed and supported those efforts and endeavors. Participants of this research conversed about their professors who were there and facilitated their classrooms accordingly to ensure that learning could happen for the students. The research participants dialogued about how they conversed with their advisors and how helpful they were to them before the pandemic hit. Other participants of this study were athletes, specifically tennis and basketball. They shared how their coaches were pushing academics because if that did not happen, then they would not be able to play their specific sport. Because of the competitive nature of those who participate in sports, the teammates of some of the participants were their motivation to succeed, as well as the desire to play in matches and games. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these participants' social norms and in-person classroom attendance. The following section will focus on the second RQ of this study and the lived experiences of the participants as they share what success looked like for them during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Success During COVID

This section will discuss what success looked like for the participants of this study at the different HEIs following the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and the shift away from in-person classes. P 1 stated, "Success on any level can be one that is fleeting. One minute, you think that you got a handle on things, and then you realize that you do not." "I think that my overall approach to school and prior experience with online school helped me complete my classes. Because I was home schooled before starting college," expressed P 1. "I had to go back home once the pandemic hit and being around family was helpful for me because I was looking at school in Japan. That would not have been good to be there when COVID hit," stated P 1. "I

acted like I was still going to class like I normally would so I got up and got dressed just like I would if I were going to class," commented P 1. "Getting work done early was helpful to me because it freed me up to do other things in other classes and at home," stated P 1. "Being able to still be connected with my fiancé was good for me too because she was still in Georgia, and I was in Minnesota. As long as I knew she was safe, I was good," noted P 1. "The prayer group we had before the pandemic kept meeting via Zoom and that was great knowing others were praying for and with me, made things doable," commented P 1. "Surprisingly, I had less distractions and more time during the pandemic, so I was able to focus more and be more attentive. I think I learned more during this time," articulated P 1.

P 2 stated, "Um, I had a lot of accountabilities with my classmates and a couple of them are like close friends. So, we were very honest with each other whenever we were falling to set each other up for success." "I think a lot of prayer. Prayers went a long way since we were so isolated. We texted each other, group calls, and stuff. Asking God to help us, give us motivation and strength and the ability to finish," explained P 2. "I am more of an in-person student or learner, and being online made it tough, but I still had some of my friends who were close and it worked out," expressed P 2. "Utilizing technology was key but I am not a technical person, but I knew how to use my cellphone so FaceTime calls with classmates and friends helped in a major way," noted P 2. "It took a few times but I got used to using Zoom and Moodle so that I could get assignments completed and turned in on time. But it worked out eventually," said P 2

Participants 3 and 7 went to HEI 2 before and during the pandemic. P 3 mentioned, "Honestly, it was by the grace of God that I was able to do my classes during COVID. It was COVID now and I've always struggled in school and being online. It was God who brought me out." "And another factor is just family, just having a good family and a support system around me to be able to push me to do what I wanted to do and to do what I never thought I could,"

expressed P 3. "My professors were outstanding. They helped me with wise counsel and taking out time for me when I was struggling. They were a lifesaver," commented P 3. "The support of the professors came in a major way because of the biblical studies that I was not familiar with and the programs we needed to use, like Logos, Zoom, and Canvas. I figured it out," noted P 3. "I really had to buckle down because I was not an online kind of student, but after a while, I got the hang of it," explained P 3.

P 7 explained that "the fact that it was convenient to be able to get on and do the work. My professors understood that the COVID-19 pandemic was unprecedented. So, they gave us a little more leniency and we could work ahead." P 7 expressed, "Um, I think also just the willingness of the professors to communicate like they were just open and set up a Zoom to do whatever. They were just open and available for us to come and speak to whatever." "I really had to adjust to being online because I like being in the classroom. I could not be in my pajamas because I would fall back asleep. I had to get up and out of my bedroom," noted P 7. "I knew that God would make all things well, but I had some fear and anxiety when COVID hit. I just kept pressing forward and let God handle the rest," exclaimed P 7. "My mom always pushed me to keep trying my hardest because she knew how school was for me all my life. She would say stuff to me and I really didn't even have to say I was hurting," sighed P 7. "Staying physically active kept me in a good head space to get my schoolwork done. So, I worked out and played with my little cousins a lot because I would keep them for my aunt sometimes," expressed P 7.

P 4 attended HEI 3. "So, one of the things that was absolutely vital was obviously technology. We had to have a computer, a camera, and a microphone that was hooked up. And that allowed us to stream on Facebook and a professor." "Something else that I would add is that we had to have class participation and that engagement with my professors and fellow students helped too," P 4 expressed. "Success obviously was getting passing grades which came down to

studying just like normal. You had to spend time in the class material and the Bible to get everything," noted P 4. "There were a lot of prayers because I knew that I couldn't do this alone, so I needed the Lord and the power of the Holy Ghost to help me," commented P 4. "I am a note taker, so I had to have my notepads handy when I was engaging my classwork and that helped me out tremendously. I could go back without having to log back into the system to study," explained P 4. "Communication was essential during COVID because a whole lot happened, and being informed is what helped me stay on point with phone calls, emails, or texts, I had what I needed to complete classes," expressed P 4.

P 5 attended HEI 4. When asked about their success, P 5 explained, "Zoom, had a lot of Zoom classes. Internet Resources and posting all assignments online during COVID. So, I would say the biggest thing was technology." "I was a freshman, and I did not want to fail my classes, so freshman motivation was because I was back home with my parents. So, yeah, self-motivation to do my work," stated P 5. "I would say that guidance from my professors helped a great deal because we were online, and having to overcome that barrier was important for me. I need that extra supervision," noted P 5. "I am an emailer. So, I communicated a lot with my professors about things I had questions about. They would reply to let me know certain things that I asked about. So technology and professors helped," expressed P 5. "I played tennis, so I missed my season, and that kinda was a bummer, but I still had schoolwork to do, but I still worked on my game when I could because I would be back on the court," sighed P 5. "There was much prayer going on because of the uncertainty, but I had faith that there would be an answer and that it would end. Eventually, we came back to class and were on the court," stated P 5.

P 6 attended HEI 5. Participant 6 commented, "Yes, given the enormous global measures of the COVID pandemic, the factor that contributed the most was me focusing on my schoolwork. So, I did not have to focus on the enormous amount of death and dying." "I had to

manage my time wisely and get pulled into all that was happening with the pandemic. This was not an easy task," commented P 6. "My faith was everything. I knew by faith that this would pass. I would complete the process by faith as long as I prayed and stayed connected to God. I would succeed, and I did," exclaimed P 6. "My instructors were instrumental in keeping me focused during that time. I did not have a lot of people around me who could identify with me and why I was in school," stated P 6. "Keeping myself motivated was what helped me to succeed because I could have just got in my feelings about the political, social and racial tensions that were high but I did not. I must stay on task," expressed P 6.

Participants 10-11, 13-16 attended HEI 6. Participant 10 stated that success came because "I had more time and focus. I couldn't go nowhere, and I couldn't be around people because I didn't want to bring COVID back to my granddad or other family members." P 11 mentioned "So like the main tool was like the technology, the devices to even be able to meet online. So, I feel like that's where it all stems from and then goes into consistent schedules." "Now I think success happened because I think there was accountability between students since we were online. And so, we had to start utilizing group chats between, you know, classmates because we couldn't see each other," explained P 13. "I mean it really wasn't a lot of help. So, I would say that I was a freshman, and there was work that needed to be done by the due dates, and I just did it before that date," expressed P 14. P 15 declared that "I wasn't a good student and COVID was my first year of school. I had to buckle down because I didn't want to fall behind. So, I told myself, "You gonna have to get this work done."" P 16 asserted "Communication was big, you know you couldn't go in person. So, if you did miss a Zoom then you need to let the professor know. Oh yeah and being more disciplined because of being online." The success that was experienced by the participants of this study was noteworthy, considering their ages and the circumstances that they were facing with the pandemic. However, there were other factors that

brought about the success of these participants, which can be summarized in their faith, families, fellowships, and fortitude, which will be discussed in the following section.

Contributors to Success During COVID

This section of the study will explore the internal and external factors that aided in the success of students during the COVID-19 pandemic. P 1 from HEI 1 expressed, "I had professors who would give extra credit for work that was turned in earlier. So, I feel like that helped me to stay ahead and not have work pile up on me." P 2 commented, "I found that pressing into my faith by spending time in prayer, meditation, and fasting helped me to stay aligned with God to bring peace during the pandemic." P 1 stated, "We had a prayer group at school that we kept going even after I left HEI 1, which kept me connected with God and my fellow students. It was quite encouraging to me." P 2 mentioned that "I would FaceTime with my fiancé, who is now my husband, to do class work as well as other students. That accountability really helped me out with getting my work completed." Both Participants 1 and 2 expressed that they had professors who communicated with them through email and phone conversations to ensure that they had what they needed to be able to complete assignments to make passing grades. P 1 vocalized that "I would also have conversations with other students via Zoom or FaceTime to have study sessions, especially in my Greek class because that was a challenging class." P 2 remarked, "My dad was the Dean of Student during the pandemic and having him in the home with me and just checking in to see how things were going helped me to get studies and schoolwork finished."

Participants 3 and 7 attended HEI 2. P 3 declared, "I know my faith helped me during COVID because I had a professor who encouraged me to stay in the Word and prayer. I could see how the Lord walked through pain and suffering, and so could I." P 7 expressed, "Even though the pandemic brought fear and anxiety, I knew that whether I got COVID or whatever,

the Lord would heal me, or I would be resting with Him. The peace of the Lord would make it well." "I went home once COVID happened, so my mom would ask how I was doing and if I had finished assignments, and my professors checked in via Zoom classes to see what they could do to help out," explained P 7. Participant 3 voiced, "I think my mom was a big contributor because she would be there when I was discouraged to give me a word of encouragement. I also had professors who cared about my success." Both Participants 3 and 7 mentioned different places where they would go to ensure that they found success, like "the kitchen table, parks, and a gazebo on the campus." They said that these places provided a place to focus on completing their coursework.

P 4 attended HEI 3 and noted that "I had to believe that God could use technology like Zoom and Facebook to advance learning and the Kingdom during a time of obscurity." P 4 also expressed how his professors sent encouraging emails as well as used a newsletter to communicate and give words of encouragement. This participant mentioned that fellow classmates interacted in the chats on Zoom and Facebook while having to respond to discussion boards. This participant reported the importance of technology during class work and for church because they could keep having church and Bible study once the pandemic started. "I was a musician at my church, and I would lead worship, which really helped me stay connected with God and our membership. This kept my spirits high during a very dark time," P 4 expressed. "I'm a very audio-visual learner. I took a lot of notes and sometimes I would rewrite my notes. I know it sounds tedious, but it helped seeing it again before tests," stated P 4. Participant 4 also asserted that going back to professors about certain class materials helped with retaining information and passing coursework.

P 5 attended HEI 4. "I spent a lot of time in prayer and meditation during COVID, and that seemed to settle me so that I could focus on my schoolwork and not on the bad associated

with the pandemic," expressed P 5. "My professors and coaches were the first ones who cared about my education and learning, so they aided in my success. And staying in touch with my friends," commented P 5. "I was back home during the pandemic, so I found that being in a quiet space like my room helped me to stay focused, and that helped me with passing my classes," stated P 5. "Now my mom and dad were on my sibling about his work for school because he was in high school, so they would ask me about how my work was going too. This was motivating," commented P 5.

P 6 attended HEI 5. "During COVID, I had a lot of extra time, so I made sure that I utilized my time by completing my work by reviewing it and revising to be a better student," explained P 6. "The online experience was helpful for me because I learn well when I have to experience the work, but there was more typing because of having to interact with classmates," stated P 6. "Experience the work" is putting my whole person into it and not just doing this because I have an assignment to complete. Let the work, work in me," Participant 6. "My professors and classmates helped me be successful by their interactions through the assignments and answering questions when I had them about some of the material that was being covered," commented P 6. "I think that being able to see my class digitally and, in its totality, helped me because I could work with some of those milestones of the course in mind by utilizing my time and staying on task," expressed P 6. "The one thing that helped me most was keeping the main thing the main thing. And that was getting my schoolwork done while not focusing on the pandemic. Because COVID was COVID, Period," exclaimed P 6.

Participants 10, 11, 13-16 went to HEI 6. P 10 said, "I really had to lean into praying and focusing during the pandemic because I am an in-person learner and being online, I was and could be easily distracted. I went from barely passing to thriving. That was all God." "The biggest help for me with the school was my mom and grandma, for sure. They always checked

on me because they wanted to see me play basketball; it was on me to get my grades," explained P 10. "My teachers did their thing to help me out, but my momma and my grandma stayed on me because I struggled in high school, so they stepped up in a major way," expressed P 10. "Like doing my work in my room and at the library helped out because both places were quiet with little to no distractions, but I was nervous going into the library with COVID and all," stated P 10. "I really had to get into a routine. I had to, like, be consistent because this was college, and these professors don't care about excuses. So, I did the work as quickly and effectively as possible, commented P 10. "I had good interactions with my professors and classmates. I would reach out and when I did need assistance, they showed up with what I needed to pass the class," stated P 10. "The overall experience taught me that success will require removing distractions and laziness while being focused on the goal and being willing to make the necessary sacrifices," explained P 10.

P 11 stated, "I had to create a desire to get up, jump on Zoom, and be dialed in so that I could pass because no one else was going to log on with your face to do the work for you." "When I think about my faith and how it helped, Philippians 4:13 comes to mind because I knew that Christ would give me the strength that I would need to get the job done. And He did just that," exclaimed P 11. "My parents were key to my success because they were on me and my siblings during COVID because I was back home with them, so they checked on me a whole lot," expressed P 11. "I found that going down to the basement helped me to do better with my schoolwork because my room was filled with distractions like my gaming system or stuff or falling back asleep," commented P 11. "I had to create a consistent schedule and stick to it. Time management was vital to me getting everything done because I want to be able to do other things like playing basketball or Bible study," expressed P 11. "My professors being accessible and my classmates participating in group chats helped me get through my classes. It was awkward at

first, but I was able to pass my classes," explained P 11. "So, I feel like the COVID pandemic was really helpful to me because it taught me how to be independent, consistent, and disciplined, which can help me in real life after college," commented P 11.

P 13 stated, "I had to really be intentional about school because there was no real accountability from my professors, and we were on Zoom for classes, so I had to buckle down to get my work done." "My faith helped me overcome my worries because I had confidence in God that He would help me get through because I had to be quarantined twice. "God brought me through each time," expressed P 13. "The peace that God gave me was like nothing that I had experienced in my life to that point, so I trusted Him to be "a present help in this troubling time," explained P 13. "I had great professors who were attentive to my questions and other requests that I had. I know some of my fellow classmates didn't feel like that, so I was blessed," smiled P 13. "My roommate/classmate helped me too because we were accountable and vulnerable with one another about our classwork, and we had some of the same classes, so that helped out," explained P 13. "Being from Canada the weather could be harsh, but Alabama weather was nothing like it. I would go outside and sit on the benches and interact with others, socially distant, of course," commented P 13. "This might be weird, but I had to make sure that my posture was upright and not slouching, which helped me stay in the right frame of mind for doing my classes. Had to have good body language," stated P 13. "I had to adjust my communication style because I was more introverted, but I quickly became an extroverted person due to the need for communication and connectedness in my course with discussions and other busy work," replied P 13. "The main thing that helped me was that I had to be independent because no one else was going to do the work and be in control of myself, so self-control to get it done," articulated P 13.

P 14 announced, "It was COVID and my first year in college, so it was different than I had anticipated. Being online, logging into Zoom, sending emails, and chatting with classmates online but I adjusted quickly." "My success was all on me, and I controlled it and no one else. I made sure that I was going to do whatever it took to pass my classes, expressed P 14. "I used search engines like Google, Google Scholar, and Bing to help me out when I was struggling with something when I had not heard back from a professor or a classmate because I had to manage my time wisely," explained P 14. "I believed that faith in myself and in God's ability to work through me would cause me to be successful in my endeavors, and God did just that because I saw people falling off, and I didn't want that," expressed P 14. "The people who were instrumental to my success were my mom, grandparents, and my roommate because my mom and grandparents kept me strong. Then my roommate kept me accountable because of us having a similar class load, maintained P 14. "If I had not learned time management, then I probably would not be interviewing with you. I also had to get motivated to get my work done while being confident in my abilities to get this work done," explained P 14. "I had some pretty cool professors who noted if you were committed to the process and would do things to help me be successful in their classes, so professors were very helpful," communicated P 14. "Managing my time and being proactive during the pandemic helped me be successful, along with support from my family, professors, coaches, and my roommate," exclaimed P 14.

P 15 expressed, "My faith was important, and it was first, next to that was schoolwork, basketball, and everything else because I knew I could "do all things through Christ who strengthened me." "My mom and grandma would encourage me because I was not playing a lot. So, they would tell me not to give up and give me positive feedback. I had a good tutor and advisor who helped me too," explained P 15. "My professors would give extra time, especially when there were technical issues, but overall, they were accommodating, and my classmates

were considerate, seeing that we were all in the same situation," announced P 15. "I really had to stay on business because being online was difficult for me, and I could not afford to slack off, so I had to take care of business," exclaimed P 15.

P 16 communicated, "I had to be engaged intentionally and communicate when I needed to so that I could be able to make passing grades. I was not about to waste my parent's money by not showing up." "I had three advisors who were on me about my class work, and of course, my parents were invested financially and also relationally because they held me accountable," commented P 16. "I found two places that supported my success, and they were my room and going to the library when it was available because there were times allotted to so many students at a time," explained P 16. "I had to be on my computer to do my work and Zoom meeting because I would get easily distracted with notifications coming up on the phone or my tablet," stated P 16. "I found it easier to email my professors on things that I needed, and the group chats were empowering with my classmates, so my professors and classmates helped out," expressed P 16. "I would gather with those more studious and engaged classmates because they were more helpful than those who were lazy, and I did not need that kind of influence because I wanted to get some playing time," explained P 16. "I found that staying connected to God through church, even though it was online, kept me grounded by keeping my focus on what was important. The main thing had to be the main thing to be successful," expressed P 16. The success of the participants came because of their faith, families, fellowships, and fortitude, but it was not without struggles, strains, and setbacks. The following section will discuss some of those challenging factors that were present in the lives of the participants of this study.

Hindrances to Success During COVID

This section will discuss internal and external factors that brought about challenges to the success of the students. P 1 expressed, "I learned better in a classroom. Like online, work was

manageable. I found it harder to ask questions and be engaged, and I did not feel that I retained or learned well when we went online." "I struggled to be socially engaged because we could not be around one another. I missed hanging out and conversing face-to-face, and being in my room alone at times became taxing," maintained P 1. "I would not say that I was clinically depressed, but I was bummed out when I had to go back home and start doing school online. I could not see my fiancée or other people that I held in high regards," explained P 1. "I had to leave Georgia and go back to Minnesota so I could not work for a while, so I had some financial issues, but they eventually worked themselves out because I was called back to my old job," communicated P 1. "It was pretty rough at first for me when the pandemic hit but things eventually got better but I had to do what I had to do when it came down to my schoolwork," exclaimed P 1.

P 2 said, "Yeah, it was really hard not being in person. You are not seeing the professor face to face. It was harder to ask questions. You could not show up at the professor's office or speak to him or ask questions." "Some of the students lived in other states and they had to leave suddenly because of the pandemic. My now husband and then-boyfriend had to leave. So, I felt isolated and by myself," explained P 2. "I am not a technical person, and neither were our professors because they were older so Zoom and being online was not friendly for us but foreign. It was hard, and they couldn't help themselves or us," expressed P 2. "I had professors who were avid Moodle users and others who were email motivated. However, HEI 1's policies advocated for us to use Moodle, which created more issues for my professors and me," expressed P 2. "I felt overwhelmed most of the time during the pandemic because of the uncertainty that came along with the effects of COVID-19 and then I thrive in a social energized environment, so I was hating how I was feeling," mentioned P 2. "It was difficult during the transition to online and having to use Zoom but my saving grace was my dad because he was the staff person who knew the program. So, it was bad but not too bad, articulated P 2. "I am not tech savvy at all so having

the more tech-savvy person right there was comforting. I rarely used my computer to submit my assignments because I wrote them by hand then typed them up," explained P 2. "It took some time getting used to Moodle, making sure I had sound, video, and operating the program but I eventually got there," expressed P 2. "It was a challenging time for me when we went online but God brought me success because I knew with Him, I would succeed," exclaimed P 2.

P 3 stated, "College and social life went hand in hand, so the pandemic hit; it was a challenge being online and sitting in front of a computer. Then the masks and the restrictions were not normal, and it was hard to grow relationships." "My private studies and biblical studies were conflicted during COVID because it was harder to get closer to the Lord because I had Bible work. It made me feel distant while others said they were closer to God," commented P 3. "Learning online was difficult for me. The transition from in-person to online was not a good time for me. I preferred to be in a classroom, not online, because I would rather interact with people face-to-face," expressed P 3. "I am not a social person. So, it was harder for me to build relationships with other students via Zoom because as soon as the class was over, they were clicking off and could not speak in person," commented P 3. "It was also a struggle for me to interact with my professors because I could stay back in the classroom if I had questions but once the class was over, they left the room with no time for questions," stated P 3. "I struggled mentally because I struggled with insecurities and that was why I really would not speak to people so having to do discussion boards and group chats was challenging for me as I feared being judged," articulated P 3.

P 4 stated, "The struggle that I guess would creep in for me was in accountability. I would leave the screen and not be engaged. I could leave the room and hear because no one was really watching me." "I found myself cleaning up and washing a load of clothes or preparing for the next day at work or thinking about the worship song that I had to learn for church, so, just

being divided at times," explained P 4. "I knew that I needed to get my classwork done, but other things would want my attention so the struggle to ignore the distractions because I would drift off. So, I really had to fight to ignore the distractions," P 4. "We had some technical issues that I would say were nuisances. They were minor like the professor forgetting to unmute their audio or forget to turn on their camera or not screen sharing properly in Zoom," explained P 4. "It was the same for classmates as they may be asked to share thoughts about something. They were muted, but most were called on because the camera was not on. My camera stayed on," chuckled P 4. "It was a struggle for me doing school at home because my family wanted to interact with me, but it would be during my time for school. And I needed to focus," communicated P 4. "I felt bad going to the church during school times on my way home from work because it was closer so that I would not feel rushed because that was a struggle too," replied P 4. "I needed a quiet and isolated place which could keep down distractions to be devoted to the school time. This presented itself as a challenge because others were in school too in the house," expressed P 4. "Traffic was not my friend when I needed to be on Zoom so I would miss things because it was hard focusing on driving and class and then having to transfer to my laptop once I got home", articulated P 4. "I mean COVID was an issue too because no one really could give answers as to what this disease could do. I was seeing the death numbers rising. So, anxiety and fear came but I knew God was able," inserted P 4.

P 5 explained, "My parents being on my back about school. Just being at home because I had my own space before the pandemic and then I was back in my old room. It was a big challenge for me." "I had to deal with negative emotions centered around going back home because I was enjoying being on my own. I struggled with not being able to speak to my professors, classmates, and friends too," expressed P 5. "I knew that we had to be protected from the effects of COVID and all the uncertainties. But I didn't have a freshman year like others. It

was disappointing and discouraging at times," mentioned P 5. "Oh yeah, I didn't get to finish my tennis season either. I mean. I'm a pretty good player and I didn't get to show off my skills. I guess I will get a mulligan for that," smirked P 5. "It was an unfortunate situation with COVID. I don't want to sound ungrateful, but I was expecting the year to be different but all that aside, I made it through. I am alive," sighed P 5.

P 6 stated, "The visuals centered around the pandemic. The death tolls, wearing masks, restrictions, canceling of social events and gatherings, and a shutdown on not just a national level but a global level. I wasn't ready." "My primary challenge was just psychologically dealing with the global and local ramifications of the pandemic," expressed P 6. "I had to adjust to a new normal with school being online and having to do more writing because of it with replying to other classmates and limited interaction with them and my professors," noted P 6. "The lack of social interaction was tough for me when we moved online during the pandemic. I liked seeing and dialoguing with people and never really looked at how I took that for granted," bemoaned P 6. "COVID seemed to bring out the true colors of people with political unrest, racial unrest, how was I going to pay my bills, and staying alive. I was struggling relationally, emotionally, and spiritually," exclaimed P 6. "I was not working, so I had all the bills that were coming in for me. I had to rely on the forbearances to pay them, and the stimulus checks helped, but I was still struggling," explained P 6. "I still had to do my schoolwork during this time, and it was tough staying focused," stated P 6.

P 7 articulated, "On a personal level, I struggle in online classes. I had to create a space for class, and sometimes, the technology did not work. It was tough." "I did not like being on lockdown because I am a social person. COVID was not a good time for me because I liked hanging out and being around friends. All of that had to stop," commented P 7. "It was exhausting having to go through a checklist of things. Sanitizer. Check. Mask. Check. Gloves.

Check. Etc. Just tiring having to do all those things. However, we had to be safe," expressed P 7. "I know COVID brought a lot of fear and anxiety, like being stuck at home, not knowing what was going to happen. People got sick and died. Economic, political, racial, and relational issues were on the rise. That is depressing," stated P 7. "I felt overwhelmed at times because of all that was happening in the world and then having to adjust to doing school virtually. I was like, what's next? I wanted to see the good, but it was bad," commented P 7. "Whenever I was just exhausted and didn't want to do it anymore. My brain stopped working. I was done, over it. I had taken seeing and being around people for granted. I knew God had the power," stated P 7.

P 10 stated, "I'm gonna be real. Challenging for me was the online classes." "I had to fight the laziness. I wanted to play the game or be online with my friends. I had to fight with laying back down after getting up for school," articulated P 10. "It was hard not being around people. I was playing basketball. So, we were not having games, tournaments, or practices and that was difficult for me," explained P 10. "Just having to stick to a routine of not being around people and the places that had become familiar to me. Now, all of that was taken away and that was a tough adjustment," expressed P 10.

P 11 articulated, "For me the response times of my professors because I had to email them. My classmates and the difficulty of trying to work on an assignment together. That personal connection was hard." "Being online had a negative impact at the beginning because of having to create a space away from friends, professors, and classmates in a technological space that worked and other times did not. It made it tough," expressed P 11. "My mental challenges came with being consistent and staying focused on the tasks at hand. Whether on a Zoom, class project or studying because I was back home with many distractions," commented P 11.

P 13 said, "I had health concerns because I stayed on campus because I was from Canada, and I could not go back home. I had to be quarantined twice, and they were both for 14 days. I

was apprehensive about my health." "Having classes online was a challenge because I was not feeling class and homework all online. I mean, I had to adjust to it, but that was a tough adjustment for me," expressed P 13. "I also had to adjust to being unable to return to my family. I was worried about them, and they were worried about me. Canada had a different set of restrictions than the US," explained P 13. "I had to resist the urge to stay in comfortable spaces like doing schoolwork on my bed or my favorite lounging chair. I had to resist the urges to multitask because I could be that person," affirmed P 13. "I had to increase my people skills and communication skills to be better in an online environment. There was more emailing, discussions, and group chats. So, this was an adjustment for me," asserted P 13. "There were strains with my relationships with my professors because some of the older professors were not tech-savvy. So, there were delays with electronic submissions," explained P 13. "I had to adjust to new professors during COVID because many of my professors left. I had to accommodate new professors with different teaching abilities and expectations. So that was tough," inserted P 13. "Mentally, I had to deal with the isolation and loneliness. I felt like I was forgotten, especially when I was quarantined. So being an extrovert and being isolated was rough," expressed P 13.

P 14 said, "I had to study more to get the information before my test. I had to do more Zoom classes because we were online. I am more hands-on when it comes to my learning and retaining information." "It was tough adjusting to being on Zoom. My teachers could help me out in class, but online, there was little to no assistance," expressed P 14. "When COVID happened. And I was going to school. I felt like it was hard for me. I felt like I could not do it because I had to adjust to it, and I was missing my basketball season," commented P 14. "The city that my school was in was on lockdown with restrictions in place, and it was long nights getting dialed in for my classes because I could not be around anyone but my roommate and our

apartment," stated P 14. "I had to adjust to my new norm, my schedule and routine changing because I had to get up earlier. I am not an early morning person and am very moody," commented P 14. "It was tough adjusting to my professors and classmates because we were in class, and COVID made us go online. So, I had projects that needed class participation, and getting timing aligned was tough," explained P 14. "Mentally, I was stressed out. I was forgetting assignments and some of the deadlines from time to time. I was glad I had a roommate who was in most of my classes," commented P 14.

P 15 expressed, "COVID was my first time being online and having to do assignments online, emailing work, communicating virtually. Then, technical issues happened with loss of connectivity and low bandwidth. It was tough times." "It was also tough because I was on the basketball team. I was not playing before COVID-19, and then there was no basketball, which was frustrating. Not even practices or workouts or no team" explained P 15. "I struggled in Zoom calls. It was early in the mornings, and it was hard for me to be attentive or stay away because most times I was getting up right on time, and I had not eaten anything," articulated P 15. "Well, I say it was hard to build a relationship with my professor or classmates because we never really saw each other. Yeah, unless it was by e-mail or something, and that was like, ugh," explained P 15. "Going online was hard because I had to try to maintain my relationships with my professors through an online environment because in-person they can see your demeanor and not so much online," declared P 15.

P 16 mentioned, "Getting up in the mornings for my classes was a challenge. I wanted to remain in my bed, and my alarm would go off, and if I lay there, it was over. So that was a struggle for me." "Personally, I would have rather been in person, but we were required to be online. It was hard at first, but I had to adjust to complete my classes," expressed P 16. "I had to adjust to doing school on a laptop. This was not my ideal means of learning because I am a

person who thrives in a classroom setting. So, COVID threw a monkey wrench in my college life," explained P 16. "I had to change my circle of friends because some wanted to brush off school because we were online. So, it strained the relationships because we were teammates too," commented P 16. "Being online was harder because you had to check online to see if assignments were due and test. I was not big on checking emails and message boards and setting alerts," articulated P 16. "Staying engaged was something that I struggled with too because there was a lot of screen time, and sometimes, I would zone out, but after a while, I knew that it would not be like this always," commented P 16.

Life has a way of throwing curve balls at a person that can come when one may not have been ready for them. There are different ways that one can handle the situation when this happens. One can stand there and watch the pitch as it goes by, or one can take a swing at the pitch. The likelihood of one hitting the pitch dramatically increases when the person swings at it versus just standing there and watching it. Individuals need to take action in times of difficulty rather than stand still and watch life happen to them. Students during the pandemic experienced some distractions and disturbances in their learning environment and distancing when it came to their relationships but found success by making adjustments and adaptations. The following section will focus on the theoretical aspects of SDT and students' success during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Success and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

This section will compare students' success and SDT during the COVID-19 pandemic to determine how the two match up. Ryan and Deci (2000) maintained that to be motivated means *to be moved* to do something (p. 54). The motivations of the self-determination theory (SDT) are *intrinsic* or *extrinsic* (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT stated that growth happens when psychological needs are met through *competency*, *autonomy*, and *relatedness* (Pelikan et al., 2021; Ryan &

Deci, 2000; Walker et al., 2021). (Walker et al. (2021) stated that SDT could be used in a setting where people of faith could be studied to discover more about individuals' theory and maturation. Pelikan et al. (2021) noted that SDT has many strengths when looking at the intrinsic motivations of individuals to perform their tasks or meet goals but noted that, like any other theory, there are limitations. This section will compare student success during the COVID-19 pandemic and SDT, utilizing the participants' lived experiences in a narrative form derived from their own words about their experiences.

P 1 stated, "I feel like my approach to schoolwork overall contributed to my success. I also had prior experience in online classwork, so I felt comfortable in my abilities." Because this participant acknowledged having an "approach to schoolwork," it suggested that there was an intrinsic motivation for success in completing coursework. P 1 commented, "I came back to Minnesota, so I was close to my mom, dad, and brother, and I missed all of the fun and games of school, but I still had a social connection with family and my church; we met on Zoom." The relational aspects of SDT commented on how individuals being connected socially can lead to motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This participant expressed the social aspect as a struggle but was eased because of the connection between his biological and spiritual family. Another stimulus for this participant was an "incentivized program" of some professors, which gave extra credit for work turned in before the due date. The participant noted that although the system was in place, other students did not take advantage of the program. The motivation to get the work done for this student came from an external stimulus, *extrinsic*, which is also associated with SDT. P 1 also discussed how professors, classmates, and even a belief in God while operating in the spiritual disciplines of *prayer* and *meditation* aided in the success seen during the pandemic. The previous aspects are stimuli that align with the principles of SDT.

P 2 stated, "I had a lot of accountabilities with my classmates, and a couple of them were close friends, which helped me complete my coursework. I also would say a lot of prayers to God for motivation and strength." The central premise of SDT is motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This participant reported conversations with classmates/close friends, which provided support to forge ahead, and conversations with God to assist where ability was deficient. This participant verbalized having struggles with loneliness and lack of tech savvy but was able to overcome the struggles in these areas because of friends, family, and faith in God through prayer, which led to class completion. SDT maintained that as needs are met, other areas move to a place of goal completion or tasks being finished. P 2 concluded, "When you are facing something difficult or something new, always rely on God. Never give up and keep going because you have to put in the time and effort to succeed." This participant still found success amid personal and spiritual adversity but was committed to going forward while resisting the urge to pause or stop.

P 3 communicated, "It was the grace of God that caused me to succeed. I was not even going to college, but I submitted to the Lord's leading. I believed that God would bring me through it, and He did." "Another one is just having a good family and a support system around me to be able to push me to do what I wanted to do and to do whatever," articulated P 3. "Being online and having to deal with masks and stuff was hard because it really brought my motivation down," expressed Participant 3. "I even struggled with my private time with the Lord because I had my schoolwork that was biblically focused. It was hard differentiating between the two," commented P 3. "I knew that I had to keep being dedicated, keeping it strong, and yeah, just keep trusting in the Lord," expressed P 3. P 3 said, "My mom helped me be successful because she always was pushing me to be better and she has always pushed me to work as hard as I can." P 3 also noted that professors and classmates helped with success by maintaining relationships

with them while transitioning to being online. "I knew that I had to get my work done, so I learned to manage my time and be organized when it came to my classes," explained P 3.

P 4 communicated, "I knew 100% that God would keep me during this time of COVID and that He would make provisions for me to be able to complete school and the needs of the church." "Technology functionality was essential to me completing my coursework. All the classes were online, and we used Facebook and Zoom for classes. I was familiar with technology from my experiences in IT, so I knew that I could do the work," expressed P 4. "I knew that studying would help me to be successful, and I would continue to pray and ask the Lord to give me the ability to get all of my work done and God did just that," noted Participant 4. "I struggled with accountability because there was no one really monitoring what we were doing during the class so I was home and I could go do other things while just listening to the class," commented P 4. "I knew that I couldn't get distracted because I had professors who had sight questions that had to be answered once the stream was completed which showed if a student was present or not," stated P 4. "I also struggled with having to stare at the computer screen because I would have been at work staring at a screen, so it was laborious having to do the same thing that I had just done at work for school," stated P 4. This participant stated that communication from leadership in the HEI was helpful in getting classwork completed and being able to feed off classmates during discussions was helpful. "At the end of the day, I knew that I had to do my part when it came to managing my time, completing assignments and other school-related activities, and trust that God would fill in the gaps," noted P 4.

P 5 communicated, "I think that time management, self-motivation, and being able to research things that I didn't understand helped me to be successful during the pandemic while in school." "I would also say that Zoom, the Internet, and other resources that I could link into aided me in being successful. So, I would just say that overall, technology made me successful,"

mentioned P 5. "Freshman motivation, you know like I didn't want to fail my classes and I had to go back home. I guess you can say it's more self-motivation because I didn't want to hear from my parents," articulated P 5. "There was a lot of praying going on during that time and I had to believe that God was able to be successful with school while I was online," explained P 5. "I stayed in contact with friends who were classmates, and my professors would answer my questions whether on Zoom or via emails and they helped me to be successful as well as my parents," expressed P 5. "I found that keeping my routine just like I was in school before COVID helped me because I got up, dressed, ate, and went to my school space when I had class. I was kind of OCD," stated P 5. "I played tennis, so I relied on my self-discipline that I needed to be able to win matches that I incorporated into how I approached my schoolwork," announced P 5.

P 6 said, "I had much more time to concentrate on my schoolwork. The fact that many people were dying on a global level caused me to turn my focus to school, so I did not have to hear/see all of that." "It was challenging to focus because of the effects of the pandemic, and I wondered if I was going to get sick or my family members. It was a hard time, but I knew that God could fix it," exclaimed P 6. "I knew that I could complete the process with school as long as I prayed and kept the faith in God. He would cause things to work for my good just like the Word says," expressed P 6. "My instructors kept me focused with encouraging words and replies to submitted assignments. In their replies to discussion posts and other group projects that we had to complete, my classmates helped me do well," explained P 6. "Time management and the utilization of my time because there was an enormous number of things happening during the pandemic, positively and negatively, but I resolved to major in my schoolwork while minoring in distractions," commented P 6. "It was a tough time financially, and the government stimulus helped out, but as long as I kept the main thing the main thing, then I would be successful. And I was. Thank God, expressed P 6.

P 7 said, "I passed my classes, but it was hard. I am a social person and being online and not around people was tough for me. God blessed me to get through it, but it was not without challenges." "I had to learn better study habits and ensure I utilized my time correctly because I worked in a daycare which kept essential workers kids. Nevertheless, God kept us even though we closed a couple of times," explained P 7. "Everything that I was involved in online except work. I was exhausted at times with school, church, and friends on FaceTime, and I was not able to go places without restrictions," commented P 7. "God gave me peace about it all. I knew that He would make a way like He did for those in the Bible. School seemed easier by being online with the videos, but I preferred to be in school," expressed P 7. "My mom was very encouraging to me during the pandemic because I had to go back home. I had professors who looked out for me by encouraging me when I was falling behind. My classmates helped when they could," stated P 7. "The convenience of school being online and the care of my professors and having a good family support system really helped me be successful in my coursework," exclaimed P 7.

P 10 stated, "I had to be willing to make the sacrifices to be successful and I did that. God gave me strength and focus because sometimes I wanted to do what others were doing, but I was locked in." "My mom and my grandma helped me out because they were on me because they wanted to see me play and I did not want to let them down by not being focused and not being able to play," explained P 10. "I had to maintain my routine like we were had in person, so sticking to that regiment kept me on track. I worked out, did my classes, and went to practices as scheduled," commented P 10. "I really shouldn't have been in school because I was not a good student, but God blessed me to move from a 1.9 GPA to a 3.7. I made the sacrifices to be locked in," communicated P 10. "I had to make the best of my time by being more focused. Classes were tough for me because I learned better in person and I was not feeling being online. I felt like I was on an island," commented P 10. "My professors answered questions that I had. My

classmates helped by explaining things that they understood that I did not. It was times when I helped them too," mentioned P 10. "COVID was bad, but I learned a lot about being successful, which is that if you want something, then you have to be willing to make those sacrifices to get it," exclaimed P 10.

P 11 communicated, "Consistent schedule and consistent Zoom meeting made it where I was able to be successful. Because without those, it would have been pretty difficult to be successful." "I really think that the main thing that was helpful was the technology because if it wasn't present then nothing else would have mattered because just being on a conference call would not have sufficed," commented P 11. "It was hard maintaining connections with professors and classmates online like we did during in-person classes. You gotta email or try to chat with them online, and it was the pandemic. It was tough," expressed P 11. "The verse just immediately pops up to my head is Philippians 4:13. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I knew that Christ would help me succeed," noted P 11. "My parents would make sure that I was on top of my work. They would check on me and my sisters because they were in school too during the pandemic," stated P 11. "I would get up in the mornings and go to the basement because it was quiet. No one really came down there and it less distractions than being in my room," explained P 11. "I had to create a schedule to keep me accountable because there was a lot of free time and I could fall into procrastination or other bad habits," stated P 11. "The COVID pandemic was bad but good for me. It taught me consistency, discipline, and independence," expressed P 11.

"Accountability between students since we were online. We had to utilize group chats between classmates because we were not able to see each other face-to-face," commented P 13. "I was concerned about my health and the health of my family and friends during the pandemic. I had to be quarantined twice for 14 days each time and it was daunting having to be in isolation,"

stated P 13. "I had faith to believe that God was able to protect me and those that I loved. God gave me the confidence and hope that I needed while keeping down my worries," mentioned P 13. "My professors and my roommate helped me stay on track with school because I couldn't go back home because I lived in Canada but couldn't travel back because of the pandemic," expressed P 13. "Maintaining proper posture was important to me because if I am a dancer and if I slouched, then I would probably lay back down, and then I would fall asleep," communicated P 13. "I had to concentrate and stay focused so I would go to my desk. I made sure that the area was organized because I do not like clutter because it makes me feel overwhelmed," stated P 13. "The things that helped me to succeed were to follow the guidelines that were in place pertaining to COVID and those outlined by my school. I had to have self-control and discipline to not get distracted," explained P 13.

P 14 expressed, "Because it was COVID, I was pretty much on my own. I just had to make sure that I did my work and logged into my classes. I didn't have anyone else to rely on but myself." "I didn't like being online with Zoom classes. I couldn't be around my friends and didn't have much communication with my professors or classmates. I looked up what I needed to on Google for help," explained P 14. "I saw people didn't come back to classes. I saw others who brushed classes off. It was hard to see all of the effects of COVID, but my roommate and I just focused on our work," commented P 14. "The main people who were there for me were my mom, my grandparents, and my roommate. My roommate and I just locked in, and my mom and grandparents encouraged me that COVID would be over soon," mentioned P 14. "I had a full load of classes, so I had to stick to a strict schedule because we still had basketball practices from time to time. I had to manage my time and be disciplined to stay the course," stated P 14. "For my first year of college, I was expecting it to be all that I had seen when we visited but COVID had me in isolation, so classes were tough for me being online," sighed P 14. "My professors and

classmates helped out when I reached out for help. It was times that I needed it and they were accommodating with support," explained P 14. "I had to stay motivated because I had a goal, and I knew that I had to keep pushing until I saw what I wanted to see. I felt like God would be there and He made a way," stated P 14.

P 15 communicated, "The main takeaway that I would say when it comes to being successful is that you must stay on business. You cannot be slacking off because that will follow you through life." "COVID was my first year and I didn't want to fall behind. I knew that I had to get my work done because I was on my own now. So, I had to buckle down and get it done," expressed P 15. "It was tough. We were online, and I had to email my professors to communicate, and that could take some time for them to answer questions. So, I had to do what I needed to do," explained P 15. "I knew that I had to keep the faith that I could do all things through Christ like in Philippians 4:13. I played basketball, and I was fighting there and just to keep up on every front," commented P 15. "My mom and grandma were encouraging me to keep my head up and that it would not always be like this and that was helpful to have them in my ears with those reminders. Positive feedback," articulated P 15. "I didn't like being on Zoom because it was early mornings, and it was hard for me most mornings. I would struggle through those morning classes, but I knew that I had to do it so that I could pass," mentioned P 15.

P 16 expressed, "Communication was key for me to be successful. We were not in class, so I had to check online dashboards to see what was happening or speak to my classmates." "I had to be motivated because those early mornings were tough for me, but I knew that I had to do it to get passing grades. I had to be engaged because I was not wasting my parents' money," explained P 16. "I had good professors and advisors who looked out for me. They would encourage me when things were getting overwhelming for me. All I had to do was reach out," commented P 16. "I spent time in the library and in my room mostly, and when I went to the

library, I was a little paranoid because of the pandemic, but we had to abide by the guidelines of COVID," noted P 16. "I would rather be in class than online, but I could not control COVID. I had to be on my laptop and not on my phone because notifications can distract me," articulated P 16. "Actually, I was glad my first year was like this. It made speaking with my professors and classmates easier because I am more of an introvert, so this was right in my wheelhouse," stated P 16. "I made sure that I eliminated any distractions because I was not going to let this year slip by me. I leaned on my faith to get through, and my parents were supportive all the time," expressed P 16.

SDT states that individuals can accomplish their goals through internal and external motivation. The participants of this study spoke in their own words about what caused them to accomplish their goals when it came to making passing grades for their classes. Some spoke about their faith. Others discussed their friends. Some mentioned other fellowships like professors, advisors, and classmates. They all commented about the fortitude it took to overcome the effects of COVID-19 on their HEIs while dealing with internal disturbances. A narrative of this magnitude has its own share of success and setbacks, like the students of this study. Students' lives were examined, and an assessment of the inner workings of this study needs to be made. The ensuing section will expound upon the strategies of this analysis of student success during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thematic Findings

Some themes and sub-themes emerged associated with the RQs during the interviews with the research participants. The first RQ focused on the students completing their theological studies before the onset of COVID-19. The students did experience success in completing their coursework, and they were learning in person. The students and their professors were engaged with one another person to person in a classroom environment located on the campuses of the

HEIs. The students interacted with one another through classroom participation and non-classroom activities, but they were associated with learning, which brought about the successful completion of their studies. Study groups and class projects were completed in the common areas of the dorms and libraries, which aided in the students' success before the pandemic. Students found it helpful to their success to gather and meet to collaborate with one another. Their professors assisted them to be successful before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The second RQ considered what the success of students looked like during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students could complete their coursework by engaging with class materials online or virtually during the pandemic. The students experienced a disruption in their face-to-face learning, and their faces were on screens along with their professors and their classes, but they found success. The students said there were highs and lows with the technology they used to complete their coursework, but they could work through those things to complete their coursework. The HEIs had the technological bridges available for the students to move into, causing a transition that each student adapted to during the COVID-19 pandemic to complete their classwork. Students succeeded despite being uprooted from their in-person learning environments to a virtual space online, and the themes and sub-themes were discovered by asking the third RQ.

Internal and external factors brought about success for the students during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as their faith, fellowships, families, and fortitude. The students expressed in one way or another that their reliance on the Lord, collaboration with classmates and professors, support of family members, and grit helped them complete their coursework during the pandemic. The students expressed how familial support happened because of the encouragement to focus on schoolwork. Relational support was experienced because their classmates, roommates, coaches, and professors were there for them when they needed them the most.

Spiritual support happened for them as they engaged with the Lord through His Word, prayer, prayer groups, and their local churches. There were internal and external stimulations that caused the students to complete their coursework, which aligns with the SDT of Ryan and Deci (2000). Even though students were successful during the pandemic, there were still some challenges to this success.

The fourth RQ asked what factors hindered students from completing their coursework in theology during the pandemic. The students communicated that there were distractions in the virtual learning environment while being online and around their home settings, which they were exposed to but still could complete their coursework. Some students expressed that some of the technical glitches caused problems but were able to offset those problems to remain successful. Others experienced being quarantined because of the pandemic, which had a physical and mental impact on them, but they overcame it to complete their coursework. Other students wanted to be engaged with their classmates and professors because they were extroverts, and the social aspects of the pandemic upset them mentally and relationally. However, they were still able to complete their coursework. The athletes experienced hindering factors physically, mentally, and relationally because they were unable to participate in athletic programs but found a way to complete their coursework. The students experienced success before and during the pandemic and figured out how to do it, but they were not alone in their journey to experience success.

Theological Findings

Study participants expressed that they experienced a closer relationship with the Lord. This happened for them because they remained connected to others who shared their belief systems. Students maintained their connectivity to their local church community by logging in online via the church's website, Facebook, or YouTube channel. Many study participants acknowledged that they did not just spend time fellowshipping with church but also personal

time developing themselves through prayer, reading and studying the Word, and alone with God.

Some participants expressed that they struggled with staying faithful to God but found their way

back because of the encouragement of others in positions of influence in their lives.

Table 4.

RQs, Themes, and Sub-Themes

Research Questions	Themes	Sub-Themes
RQ1. What did the completion of theological studies look like for first-year Christian students in a pre-COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?	In-Person Learning, Pre-Pandemic Success	Person-to-Person Engagement, Class Presence for Students and Faculty, Student life/Social Gatherings, Meeting People,
RQ2. What did the success of completing coursework look like for first-year Christian students studying theology in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?	Online/Virtual Learning, Pandemic Success	Disruptions, Technology Highs and Lows, Adaptation
RQ3. What internal or external factor(s) or both has/have contributed to the success of completing coursework for first-year Christian students studying theology in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?	Faith, Fellowships, Family, Fortitude	Familial, Relational, & Spiritual Support, Self-Determination Theory (SDT)
RQ4. What internal or external factor(s) or both has/have hindered the success of completing coursework for first-year Christian students studying theology in a COVID-19 learning	Distractions, Social Aspects	Physical Health, Mental Health, Relational Connections

environment within their chosen higher learning institution?		

Evaluation of the Research Design

Qualitative research is conducted to understand how individuals handle certain phenomena in their lives by allowing them to tell their stories in their own words through interviews (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). Leedy and Ormrod (2019) noted that a phenomenological study uses interview questions to gain a better understanding of the experiences of others about specific events. It was good that this researcher chose to follow this discipline for the study because it brought out some good information for the research. If the design had been quantitative, the design would have had to take a different approach and ask more questions requiring yes or no responses (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Even so, with a robust design, the same results could have been determined based on the disciplines of a quantitative or even a mixed-method approach (Creswell, 2014; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

According to Creswell (2014), qualitative methods rely on text and image data, utilizing unique steps in data analysis and drawing on diverse designs (p. 183). According to Ryan and Deci (2000), a researcher can utilize the principles of SDT to discover internal and external motivating factors that assist individuals in meeting goals. Adding SDT to this research project was a strength because many participants spoke of how their faith, family, fellowships, and fortitude aided their success in completing their coursework. Those four observations aligned well with the principles of SDT.

The lived experiences of first-year undergraduate Christian students during the COVID-19 pandemic were investigated through one-on-one interviews to determine the success of completing their theological coursework, which was the basis of this study. Thirteen participants

were qualified to be included in the study. However, three non-qualified individuals were interviewed. Some of the staff at the HEIs recommended the individuals because of their knowledge that the researcher was conducting a study. The students were interviewed based on the recommendation and did not follow the research design by having them complete the SQQ document prior to an interview. The weakness was not in the design but in the researcher adhering to the design. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) note that conducting research according to the design is essential to ensuring the trustworthiness of the research. The events happened early in the research process, and the research was righted by sending the SQQ document simultaneously as the desire to be a potential participant.

A large amount of data came in because of the interviews with the participants. It was essential to interpret what the students said as they shared their experiences during the pandemic, so a hermeneutic approach was added to the recipe (Kinsella, 2006). It was necessary to have the students discuss their experiences in detail and incorporate open-ended questions into the interviews, which were based on the RQs of research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The addition of the interpretive aspects of hermeneutics was a strength because the researcher wanted the individuals to speak and share openly to hear more of what they were communicating. The sharing of the participants brought about themes and sub-themes that coincided with the RQs but did not emerge without the application of hermeneutics.

Four RQs with seventeen interview questions guided the research. The RQs focused on students' success pre-COVID-19, COVID-19, contributions, and challenges. The direction of the RQs was necessary for the development of the research, but where the research could have seen better results was in the interview questions. The interview questions should have focused more on the research students' spiritual formation, development, and maturation while understanding more about what is meant by their responses about spiritual disciplines. Adding questions along

these lines would have clarified their spiritual experiences and insight into the importance of spiritual community and Christ-like characteristics.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored and expounded upon the lived experiences of thirteen participants who were first-year students during the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully completed their coursework. There was an outline of success that those participants had before and during the pandemic, emphasizing what facilitated success and what was challenging despite being successful. Notations were made about the strengths and weaknesses of the research. Themes and sub-themes that emerged were discussed based on their alignment with the research RQs. Chapter 5 is the following section and will provide the finale of the research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

This research study was conducted to examine the lived experiences of first-year undergraduate Christian students and their success in completing enrolled coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic in the discipline of theology. Students were enrolled in HEIs all over the US before the COVID-19 pandemic and successfully completed their coursework. When you add in a variable like the COVID-19 pandemic occurring in March 2020, on top of it being a student's first year in an HEI where the environment, expectations, and education are different for them, you now must deal with other variables that were out of the control of the students. These variables could be the breeding grounds for something or someone to thrive, survive, or not remain alive. Chapter 5 will restate the research purpose and the RQs that guided the research while incorporating conclusions, implications, applications, limitations, and ways in which this research can be furthered.

Research Purpose

Leedy and Ormrod (2019) indicate that this narrative section should be concise and straightforward to let the audience know what is happening with your study. This study used an interpretive and inquisitive research approach to understand first-year Christian student success enrolled in a theological curriculum during the COVID-19 pandemic in a collegiate setting. Kachur and Barcinas (2021) define success for the student as the student meeting his or her goals. Still, from a professional and institutional standpoint, success is when the student(s) acquire or complete a credential within a specified timeframe (Kachur & Barcinas, 2021, p. 108). There is a difference between the success of the student and that of the educator who ensures that success. Gelles et al. (2020) note that during this unprecedented crisis, findings show that faculty members are critical for supporting students' well-being and success by communicating care and incorporating flexibility into their courses (p.1). A qualitative interview methodology was used

to collect data on first-year Christian students' success in theological studies moving from a pre-COVID-19 learning environment to a COVID-19 learning environment. A qualitative research method was used to figure out what factors brought about first-year Christian students' success in completing their theological coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic. Palermo et al. (2012) convey the importance of recording success and being intentional in the efforts of those professionals and researchers in making this a practice.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1. What did the completion of theological studies look like for first-year Christian students in a pre-COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

RQ2. What does the completion of theological studies look like for first-year Christian students in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

RQ3. What factor(s) has/have contributed to the completion of theological studies of first-year Christian students in a COVID-19 learning environment within their chosen higher learning institution?

RQ4. What factor(s) has/have hindered the completion of theological studies of first-year Christian students in a COVID-19 learning environment enrolled within their chosen higher learning institution?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Application

A project of this size and significance should take the time to converse about what can be drawn from the research. A researcher must be able to leave out any of his or her biases so the readers will not be tainted with thoughts and reasonings that are not true when it comes to the research that has been conducted (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). At this point, a researcher shifts from being an objective reporter to becoming an informed authority and commentator (Roberts, 2010, p. 178). This section considered the findings of Chapter 4 and put into words some takeaways

and actions that can be taken to understand student success during an adverse time in the lives of those experiencing it in real time.

Research Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic proved a formidable opponent many did not see coming. The HEI community did not anticipate the pandemic before it happened. However, those who remained relevant devised a workaround to ensure that students and faculty could keep functioning. HEIs created class environments that complied with the standards approved by the US government and CDC, resulting in them going online. HEIs remained in the online setting until it was deemed safe to return to the classrooms. Returning to the classrooms still had guidelines that needed to be complied with according to the US government and CDC. Some of the HEIs adopted a hybrid approach to learning to meet the needs of the students and the professors. Social distancing and masks were still encouraged during this time, but that did not stop education from going forward on the campuses or online. Overall, the HEIs did what they needed to do for students and faculty to succeed in a COVID environment.

HEIs success did not come without a price. Some students and faculty did not want to learn in an environment where it was online and opted not to participate at all. HEIs had to send students back home and shut down dorms because of the effects of the pandemic. The facilities where students and faculty gathered in person were now places where dust was collected. The need for additional IT personnel and other tech-savvy individuals was essential to the needs arising from the increase in online learning. There was a need for more bandwidth and servers to support the added programs and platforms. Professors and students were asked to learn programs and platforms that were not what they originally signed on for. Some individuals did not understand the programs and platforms, so the learning curve had to speed up due to what was

happening with COVID. There were frustrations with technical issues as things worked but did not work at other times, which brought about tension with all involved in the process.

Social gatherings during COVID-19 were eliminated at HEIs. Events like graduations did not happen where everyone was gathered in person. There were mandates placed on people about vaccinations before attending in-person classes or events. There were mask mandates and strict compliances. Hand sanitizer stations and shields as protective barriers to keep down the spread of the virus. Individuals were washing their hands more often as well. There were temperature stations and individuals had to be scanned before coming into social events. There were no club meetings outside of those conducted online or otherwise approved by the HEIs. Students and faculty did not congregate in the usual manner, nor did they interact in the manner prior to the pandemic. There was no hanging out or holding hands with family and friends because of the pandemic. This was a tough time for the HEIs and its faculty, but somehow, they were successful in providing a means for students to still learn and pass their classes.

Professors or instructors who stayed during the pandemic had to adjust to the new norms of educating in a COVID environment. They usually stood in front of a class and interacted with students sitting in the class, but now, this has been moved online. Some used ZOOM, Facebook, MOODLE, Canvas, and Microsoft Teams to interface with their students. There was a need to learn these programs quickly so that they could be up to speed with what the HEIs wanted them to do to educate their students. This required them to teach and instruct differently but still drive for the results that they are there for to ensure that their students gain the knowledge to pass their classes. They had to learn to help their learners learn the material by bringing course materials online and accessing them in that same manner. Laptops, desktops, web cameras, and microphones were now their new class assistants to create this virtual learning experience that would make success happen for their students. There were older instructors who had to embrace

this online learning experience, as well as young ones. There were struggles all around with this new way of teaching and learning.

Technology has a mind of its own at times. Presentations worked at times, and at other times, they did not. Professors were asked to check their emails frequently as they conducted classes. They were asked to be ambidextrous and look into chats to determine whether students were engaged. They even dropped documents into the chats or emailed them to students before classes. Some knew about attaching documents to emails and dropping documents into the chat, but others did not, and this created some tough times and frustrations for those who could not and needed the information. Cameras on when they did not need to be and off when they should be on. Microphones were turned on when they should not be and off when they should. Presentations are muted, and they should not be muted, or you had the sound but no visual of the presentation. So, professors had their work cut out for them. However, those who remained made it happen for themselves and their students, which made the HEIs successful during the pandemic.

Students prior to the pandemic were living their lives like any typical first-year undergraduate student going to an HEI lived their lives. They were going to classes in a classroom setting. They were writing papers and turning them into their professors. They were socializing with their friends, families, and classmates. They were going to social events on campus and off campus. Students were living in dorms on campus, and others were living off campus. Some students worked on campus as part of their scholarships, and others had careers prior to school. Students were praying in prayer groups, going to chapel on campus, and going to local churches. Some students were athletes and were involved in tennis and basketball, as well as doing activities that kept them in tip-top shape so that they performed well on the court. Students were living their "best lives" and having fun enjoying their first year in the HEI of their

choosing without any limitations or restrictions. Then comes the coronavirus and the national and global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Students were placed on restrictions. Students were not allowed to come back to the classroom. Some students were asked to leave and go back home, while others did not have that luxury and remained where they were living. Students could not go out with friends, spend time with classmates, or have social gatherings because of the effects of the pandemic. Students were asked to go online despite many of them flourishing in their previous learning environments prior to the pandemic. Students had Zoom meetings and logged into Facebook, Moodle, Canvas, and other means where they could stream presentations from their professors and submit assignments to be graded. Some maintained their connections with their professors and classmates in a virtual classroom environment. They were asked to interact in chats and discussion boards while posting responses to classmates to get credit. Papers and other writings were uploaded through the platforms that the HEI made accessible to the students and the professors to ensure that assignments were completed.

Students expressed that being online was different from the learning environment they had signed up for when coming to school in their first year. Some of the students were comfortable with being online with classwork because of previous knowledge, but others needed to gain the prior knowledge or were comfortable with being online for school. Some students adjusted to being in online school seamlessly, while others struggled. They had to learn the etiquette of being online and having to be tethered to a digital space to learn and engage with the class curriculum. Students had to deal with technology and the issues that come along with it working as it should, and then other times, it did not work. Some students were fine with submitting assignments, while others had to go through training with some trial and error before getting it right. Students were asked to have their cameras on and be engaged in a class

environment that was different from what they were expecting or wanted to be involved in. Students were able to overcome the challenges that came along with being in a digital classroom space, but they also faced other issues.

Some students expressed that they were more introverted, while others were more extroverted. Others who were introverted had to adjust to an environment where they had to work more with written words to be introverted, whereas the extroverted students found it easier to communicate through their writing of questions and comments. Some students still had to communicate with their professors and classmates through digital means and found that it was a struggle to maintain those meaningful relationships because of the divide that comes with being on technology for learning. It meant that they had to be more intentional in their approach to how they were interacting with their professors and those that they were in school with. The students found ways to work through the social aspects of collegiate learning and interacting during the pandemic. Some students expressed that isolation, loneliness, mild depression, and anxiety were things that they had to overcome during their learning during the pandemic but were reduced by focusing on their faith, completing classes, and engaging with others through phone calls and video calling.

Students remarked about overcoming and being successful during the pandemic because of their faith and trust in God. Their churches were not meeting physically, so many of them were engaged with their churches virtually. Many found that having personal time with God helped them stay encouraged and maintained a biblical worldview as they considered the effects of the pandemic. The students expressed that in the face of the difficulties of schoolwork and the pandemic, they knew that God would not let them down. Some students found that Scripture memorization was vital to their success because they saw that specific passages brought them peace and reassurance that things would work out in their favor. Some students commented

about the power of prayer and its effect on how they were able to complete coursework during the pandemic. Students believed in the Lord and in themselves to be able to get it done with the Lord's assistance, and they did just that. Students were not alone in their success because they found that other people, like family, were there for them to aid in their success.

Students mentioned that their family members were accommodating as they worked through school during the pandemic. Students stated that some of them had to go home while others had other living arrangements. Students communicated that their parents and siblings helped them be successful. They remarked about how when things got tough for them, family members were there to give them words of encouragement. Students articulated that their family members would listen to them vent about things they were experiencing and give advice about how they could offset what had them in a bad headspace. These family members did not stop there but offered a prayer for them, which made them feel better and invigorated to move forward with their classwork to get it finished. Those words of encouragement, prayer, and just their presence in the fight with them gave them what they needed to keep the flame burning and the fortitude to move ahead. Other family members who were mentioned who helped were grandparents, aunts, and cousins, but other fellowships were not family that helped them, too.

Students who did not go home remained in their dorms and had roommates who were vital to their success. Many of the roommates shared some of the classes that the students of the research were in and could relate to them on a personal level. The students and their roommates shared different ideas and techniques that worked for them and brought about success, which caused a more significant amount of success for the team. Other fellowships that students mentioned were their professors, classmates, coaches, and advisors. Professors, demonstrating that they were there for them and cared for the students, assisted them in being successful. Students expressed that professors responding to inquiries and being available for them when

needed helped them be able to complete their coursework. Professors spent time with students in the virtual space and were willing to hang around for the students after classes had ended, which was helpful for the students. Classmates were useful because they knew things that other students did not, but their willingness to share information about subjects made them successful. Classmates participated in group chats and projects, and other discussions helped the students be successful. Those students with coaches noted that their words of encouragement and engagement with them during the pandemic helped with their success. Some had advisors embodying their roles as advisors, advising the students about what courses to take and helping them see that they would get back in the classroom eventually. These fellowships helped students succeed during the pandemic, but something else caused them to forge ahead with a fortitude that things would work out for them.

Students conversed about being "motivated," "self-motivated," or "freshman motivated" and this brought about them being successful. Students mentioned that they had to do what they needed to do so that they would be able to complete their coursework. Students had a resolve within themselves that they were going to finish their work during the pandemic even though they were displaced. Students dug deep within the reservoirs of their mental, emotional, spiritual, and relational lives to make the grades necessary for them to pass their classes. Students explained how they had to create a specific routine that many of them tweaked throughout the pandemic to help them be successful. Some had routines of getting up and acting as if they were still going to their classes, which put them in a place where they could do their work. Others found that removing distractions or removing themselves from the distractions kept them driven to find success. Students not wanting to fail their courses, let others down, or have to explain why they were not getting their work done brought about a determination from within to ensure that they were successful in their classes.

The successes that students experienced during the pandemic are similar to the principles of Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory (SDT). The theory is outlined by internal and external stimuli, which cause an individual to meet goals based on their own strength of character and mind (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT also deals with individuals' autonomous and controlled motivations, which play out in their actions as they look to complete things in their lives, whether from the value it brings to them or from a place of external rewards or punishment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The actions of students during the pandemic, as discussed above, outline internal and external motivations that made their actions correlate with the success that they wanted to achieve. Ryan and Deci (2000) also outlined motivation as *intrinsic* and *extrinsic,* but both of which seek to determine what is driving the individual based on inward and outward influences. The participants of this study found themselves meeting goals because of the pressures they experienced, not just because of the pandemic but because of those they had placed upon themselves and those placed on them by others.

SDT is a theory that expounds on meeting individuals' psychological needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness by moving them to do something (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students in this study were moved to complete their coursework based on their motivation to do so and the motivation of those around them, so much so that they spoke of family, faith, fellowships, and fortitude to ensure that it happened. P 1 stated that "sticking things out and being adaptable" brought success. P 2 mentioned that one should "rely on God, never give up, and just keep going." P 3 articulated, "I have all that I need, and what I do not have will be provided one way or the other." P 4 exclaimed, "There is nothing too big or powerful for God to handle for me so I know I can accomplish anything." P 5 expressed, "Time management and self-motivation are keys to being successful in anything." P 6 noted, "Even under duress, you have to complete the process. The main thing has to be the main thing. I had to have a signature focus, and everything

else will be all right." P 7 communicated, "managing my time and being intentional and blocking out other things that were not necessary." P 10 said, "making appropriate sacrifices, praying, and relying on God to give strength and focus." P 11 stated, "It is not about motivation but consistency and discipline. You can be motivated to do something but not do it, but because of consistency and discipline, it gets done." P 13 discussed how "self-control is what you need to get through it all. Especially when you it is going out of control." P 14 said, "You do not have time to waste. So, I had to manage my time wisely by doing what I needed to do to work toward my goals." P 15 articulated, "Always staying on business, always making sure your business is taken care of." P 16 explained, "You gotta keep the main thing the main thing. Because everything else will fall in place." The students knew that what they had on the inside or outside of them was proof positive that success was going to happen for them one way or the other.

Research Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic took its toll on different areas of life for the students of this research. The pandemic impacted the HEIs, and changes were made to fulfill their mission of educating individuals on a collegiate level by going online or virtually. Professors had to adjust their teaching environments to keep shaping the minds of their students while having to become students of technology to support the students and the HEIs. Coaches had to adapt from blowing whistles and running suicide drills to ensuring that their athletes remained engaged athletically and academically in a time when either area could have gone undeveloped. The students had to make modifications to accomplish their goals regarding their academic advancement. The classmates of students made alterations to become co-facilitators of educational achievement by helping others to help themselves. The parents' homes became dorm rooms, study halls, and classrooms of learning for their college students and other children within the home. The faith of

students was exercised and engaged through prayer and personal time with the Lord. The local churches of students adjusted to being online to support their congregants.

Success happened on one level or another for all parties involved during the pandemic. It happened because students and the individuals around the students were not paralyzed because of the pandemic but pivoted. The students nor those around them did not press pause on their lives or hit the brakes of life to come to a stop but made the necessary offsetting moves to make things keep moving forward. "It is not the changes that do you in; it is the transitions" (Bridges & Bridges, 2016, p. 3). There were so many areas that were making transitions, like in the educational community during the pandemic, that it should have made the heads of students and those who were around them dizzy, but it did not. It caused the students and those around the students to evolve. This evolution happened because of managing the phases of transition: ending, losing, letting go phase, the neutral zone phase, and the new beginning phase (Bridges & Bridges, 2016, p. 5). There is a letting go of what is old to come to a place of embracing the in-between phase of the new not being completely functional until you arrive at the new beginning (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). The managing of transitions was what students and those around them had to do during the pandemic to bring about success.

The HEIs could not operate with a business-as-usual model because the pandemic was causing people to lose their lives (CDC, 2020). They could not have people gathering together because of the social distancing policies and other mandates given because of the effects of the coronavirus (CDC, 2020). This was life and death, so HEIs quickly had to let go of teaching and learning in classrooms and move to virtual spaces to keep learning going forward. The change had to move forward by preventing obstacles from blocking the new vision (Kotter, 2016, pp. 10-11). Students had to stop school and go home to keep learning. P 5 discussed how challenging this transition was because of the freedom they experienced while on campus but had to return to

their old room and the old rules of being home. However, P 5 got through the transition to the place of accepting the new beginning found in completing coursework in a virtual environment while being at home. Education had to keep progressing for students, but the old way had to end. Transition starts with an ending (Bridges & Bridges, 2016, p. 8). The end of a thing is better than its beginning (New International Version, 1973/2011, Ecclesiastes 7:8). The transitions and change did not happen without someone taking ownership.

Leading is taking ownership of something or someone to guide it or them along a particular path. There had to be individuals within the HEIs to take ownership of the education of students during the pandemic. The study participants communicated that their professors, coaches, and academic advisors were individuals who took personal ownership of the students' success. However, there had to be higher tiers of leadership who were in charge of the overarching success of HEIs and those subsidiaries of the HEIs. Most HEIs have presidents, vice presidents, and governing boards that make decisions about what happens on the campuses of the HEIs. The COVID-19 pandemic was a turbulent time in the world, and it shocked the core and foundation of the educational community. Gigliotti (2020) communicated that it would be good to have a conversation and get feedback from the senior leader(s) and administrators, senior communication representatives, or key university leaders about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. There must have been a need to manage and lead the community through the murky waters of the crisis known as the COVID-19 pandemic (Urick et al., 2021). Gigliotti (2021) argues that it is vital for academic leaders to possess competency in crisis leadership. Before engaging with whatever one is contending with, one must assess what one is facing to develop a strategy to overcome it. HEI leadership had to have done something along those lines because the research participants could continue their education and successfully complete their courses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students can only learn with someone being there to instruct

them and the ones who were giving instruction can only do so with someone giving them the green light.

The HEIs of this study were not secular but those with a biblical worldview. So, these were not just secular leaders but those who looked at leadership from a biblical lens. Forrest and Roden (2017) stated that the Bible is not a leadership book, but it provides examples of how God used men and women to lead His people, and not all those times were pleasant. The pandemic did not just hit secular schools and businesses, but it impacted those who were believers in what is written in the Bible. Ayuk (2022) communicated that those in leadership in theological schools had to make quick decisions because they knew this was a time of sinking, surviving, or thriving, and sinking was not an option. Like other organizations, going online was an option, and some HEIs had a working system that they rolled students into, but others did not (Ayuk, 2022). The leadership of HEIs had to do something to ensure that they survived. Filho et al. (2020) argued that during challenging times, it is essential for those in leadership to focus on their sustainability by developing policies and other initiatives that promote them being sustained. The pandemic brought about a need for leveling to happen so HEIs could support their students better.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a ripple effect that started in one place and ended up causing an impact across the globe. It was centrally located in a specific area but caused an interruption for HEIs and students. A disruption in the educational community brought about a need for innovation to right the ship to ensure that learning continued during the pandemic (Alsoud et al., 2021). A displacement was happening, and order had to be brought one way or another. There was quiet in the neighborhood of education because things were going well and learning was happening. Then, there was an unannounced and uninvited intruder who caused a major disturbance in the normal flow of things. Meinck et al. (2022) conducted a survey investigating the international educational disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic to build a

better system going forward. A system of this kind must be considered in the educational community and other areas of our lives. Disruption can happen at any point in time because these things are not just on the calendar of our lives, with a time and date stamp to indicate when it will happen. The thing that needs to be present is a mindset of being ready so that we do not have to get ready because things will happen that will try to throw us off our game.

Success happened for students who attended HEIs during the pandemic. Success also happened for those connected to those students as well. Success did not happen in a specific area, but a ripple effect rolled outward and not just inward. Students did not just lay down and accept that their school year was over but were resilient in their approach to ensure that they were able to pass their classes. Carver (1998) noted that *resilience* has to do with returning back to the former plain of operating while *thriving*, which is shifting to an exceptional degree of performance after a taxing event. The pandemic was a time for both in the lives of students. Students did not just lose contact with friends and other individuals around them but came up with ways of incorporating means to make meaningful connections with those who mattered most to them. P 2 shared about when she and her fiancé, P 1, were separated because of the pandemic but utilized video chat to stay connected with each other. P 4 spoke about making phone calls to ensure that he had the right information for classes and to stay connected with loved ones. P 13 was displaced because she was from Canada and could not go back because of the pandemic, so her phone became her lifeline, and other technology brought her success in school and relationships. Students leveled up during the pandemic and found that they had more grit than they thought they did. The same can be said for those supporting students during the pandemic. This study was not designed to research that but has the potential to be something that could be researched.

Students maintained consistency not just in their theological studies but also in their faith in God. Even though the pandemic separated them, they remained connected by relying on technology in their local congregations. Students found themselves spending more quality time in prayer than the quantity of prayer by keeping prayer times personally and corporately through online platforms. It is essential to spiritual formation that education incorporate disciplines and maturational elements to ensure growth happens (Cartwright et al., 2017; Estep et al.,2008). The students looked at the pandemic not just as a turbulent time in their lives but as an opportunity for God to move miraculously in their lives. Smith (2009) notes that believers must maintain their belief about things happening in their lives based on Scripture and maturation in Christ. Students communicated how individuals they were connected to caused them to stay faithful and grow academically and spiritually. Spiritual formation and maturity happen not on an island but in a Christian community (Pettit, 2008). The following section explores how the research can be applied because of its implications and conclusions.

Research Applications

The students of this research had success in completing their curriculum during the pandemic. It started with those in leadership at the HEIs ensuring that there were means for them to engage with the curriculum that they were enrolled in during the time of the pandemic. Those in leadership need to be able to adapt to situations like the pandemic going forward. It may not be something like the pandemic that causes a disruption of that magnitude, but there is a need for the development of contingencies to ensure that the mission of the HEI is still carried out. Bozkurt (2022) communicated that there is a need for HEIs to develop a new normal that incorporates the principles and practices of resilience, adaptability, and sustainability into the fabric of the educational community in a proactive and not reactive way. The building of specific muscles in the body does not happen without resistance and a change in the routine. If the body

is going to change, then changes need to be made to ensure that the change happens. HEIs had to look for ways to incorporate meaningful change that promotes the educational well-being of the students attending their establishments. Kotter (2012) noted that those organizations who embraced change and led change well were able to cause their organizations to grow exponentially, but not without understanding there may be concerns and resistance to the change. HEIs must figure out ways to do the same to keep students successful going forward, which equates to success for them. HEIs cannot do this without the appropriate staffing of individuals in the classrooms who promote the learning that students will need.

The professors were part of the fellowship for the success of students during the pandemic, and it might be necessary for them to keep learning and growing in how they approach their crafts. Hogan (2020) communicated the importance of the relationship between professors and their students, which is correlated with the motivation of students to achieve success. Those professors who contributed to the success of their students during the pandemic in this study were described by participants as being ones who communicated well, showed care and concern, and were available for them as things adversely developed concerning the curriculum. These areas may be ways that professors can enhance their skill sets to support their students better and bring about success for them. Hogan (2020) noted that professors who increased their interpersonal communication skills and class management skills positively impacted their students. Professors should continue to strive to increase their knowledge base when it comes to ways to impact the lives of students positively.

The success of students also happened because of family members. P 1 remarked about how, because he was back at home, his parents held him accountable when it came to his schoolwork. P 2 commented about how her dad was more tech-savvy than she was and was able to help her with some of the technological issues when it came to her schoolwork. Other

participants shared about how their parents helped them with their studies. P 6 conversed about being one of the first ones in his family to go to college and did not want to waste the opportunity. P 10 verbalized how proud his mom and grandmom were of him for going to college and passing his classes. P 16 discussed how he did not want to waste the money of his parents. P 14 reported about how their mom and his grandparents kept him strong. P 3 spoke of how supportive her parents were and ensured that she had whatever she needed. Parents need to understand just how important they are to the well-being of their students. Parental engagement and other family members have a way of bringing out the best in the student. Rahiem (2021) expressed that students who were engaged socially with parents and other family members were able to keep learning during difficult times. The influence that family has on students is directly connected to their success, and this needs to be understood by the parents, other family members, and the students.

Students understanding their own role in their success is essential to achieving their goals. P 13 stated, "There was no one else who was going to be knocking on my door or waking me up for school, so I had to set my own alarm and get up to get to classes." P 14 spoke about not having time to waste and having to prioritize what was important at that moment. P 11 articulated the need for "consistency and discipline" to be successful. P 5 communicated that "self-motivation and time management" were what caused him to be successful. Students had to buy into their own success when it all boiled down to it. The investment that was being made into each of the participants may not have been the same, but the reward came in what they put into it with their own sweat and tears to bring about success. Participants discussed how they had to create their own schedules to get their work done. Participants also spoke about maintaining their schedules and routines as if they were still on campus. The engagement and participation of each participant in their success brought about the success. Being able to bring this

understanding to students and develop certain habits will cause them to be successful in more than just academics; they will also be successful in life. P 15 mentioned that the habits he developed during the pandemic will stick with him throughout life. P 14 verbalized how not wasting time moves forward in life because as he moves into his potential career, he does not want to waste anyone else's time. Students made success happen during the pandemic and can continue to do so by being engaged in the learning and development process.

Students openly and honestly shared how their faith brought about success for them. P 1 believed that he was learning what he was learning because it tied into the purpose and call of God for his life. When an individual understands their purpose and, more specifically, the call of God, it is good for them to focus and move in that direction. P 4 believed that God could use the pandemic's time to fulfill what God had called him to, with school dynamics changing to being online. Jesus professed a similar observation to his parents when they had left him behind, and he was found in the temple speaking of the goodness of God. Jesus told them, "I must be about my Father's business" (King James Version, 1769/2017, Luke 2:49). These two students found success based upon their belief that God had ordered their steps by sending them to the specific HEI they were attending during the time of the pandemic and would not allow the effects of the pandemic to hinder the trajectory they were heading. P 2 articulated prayer and how spending personal quiet time with God was essential to her success. P1 spoke about how their prayer group kept going even though the pandemic had hit and turned to Zoom to keep the group going. P 4 mentioned prayer and personal devotion to God as a means of finding success because of the Word of God and memorizing passages of Scripture. The other participants also voiced the importance of praying and personal passages that were impactful with inspiration to keep going forward during the pandemic. Jesus would go away from the crowds of people and pray in solitude (King James Version, 1769/2017, Mark 1:35; Luke 5:16). Spending time with God and

in His Word helped these students develop their faith and the maturity to find success in a difficult time like the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about changes and challenges for these students because of the experience, exposure, and education that they obtained during this obscure time in their lives. Students who fall into this category can be used to minister to others in turbulent times. They can also aid in creating church curricula and other studies or devotions focused on pandemic-like events and how to effectively deal with them and continue to grow in their faith. Students can also facilitate support groups that focus on their experiences while being in a position to aid those in spiritual leadership to craft Bible lessons and sermon series.

Research Limitations

This study was limited to the lived experiences of Christian students in the first year of their collegiate studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research was limited to students aspiring to complete their undergraduate degrees. The study was also limited to HEIs in the Southeast region of the US and offered theology as an academic discipline of study. The research was limited to the recollection of the participants' lived experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic occurring in early 2020. Furthermore, the research was limited based on the research design, which was determined by the researcher to be centered around the hypothesis and RQs (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019).

Further Research

This section of the narrative provides a basis for where this research can be moved along to bring more information to light about the researched areas. This research was designed to look at the success of students who were in the first year of their undergraduate degree in theology and was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The research looked at residential students who were also Christian and were asked to complete their studies by moving into online classes. The

following paragraphs will outline some areas where this researcher believes that this research can benefit from others taking it beyond where it has been taken.

An area that could be considered is exploring HEIs that were able to bring their students academically through the COVID-19 pandemic. This study was not designed to conduct a study like that but, by default, noticed that success for the student meant success for the HEIs. A study designed to speak with the presidents and other HEI leaders about what factors brought about success for them during the COVID-19 pandemic could potentially expand the field of study. The study was limited to those HEIs that offered studies grounded in a biblical worldview so that an approach could be taken or one that did not use that as a limiter. Another way along the lines of the HEIs is to come back to the HEIs of this study, survey current study success, and compare it to this study to determine if some of the same themes come to light.

The study participants communicated that their professors were instrumental in their success during the pandemic. Because this was a finding, it might be wise to speak to those professors of students from the HEIs who were there during the pandemic and hear what they have to say about their role in their success. Determining what brought them success in a time of displacement from a traditional HEI learning environment. Allowing those professors to share their experiences may shed some light on some things that other professors might consider while spilling over to things that the HEIs may need to consider during their hiring process or continued education for their professors.

Participants in this study went from being in-person for learning to being only online during the pandemic but still had success in completing their coursework. It might be good to do a comparative study with students who had success in completing their coursework traditionally or in person with students who had success in completing their coursework virtually. It would be interesting to determine if some of the factors that brought about success for these students were

similar or different from those in a traditional and virtual classroom. It might even be good to consider students who did not return to online studies during the pandemic while determining if they came back at all.

Summary

"The outbreak of COVID-19 (caused by SARS-CoV-2) pandemic early in 2020 has impacted all aspects of our life, including the way of learning and teaching" (Mostafa et al., 2022, p. 1). This hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative project sought to learn what success looked like for Christian students of theology in the first year of their undergraduate degree during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first takeaway was the faith of these young believers. Many of the participants were young adults in this study, and to hear them talk openly and honestly about how it was nobody but God who aided them in their success during the pandemic was refreshing. They conversed about how prayer and Scripture reading were critical elements to maintaining their faith during a dark time. As this researcher reflects on this takeaway, it is reminiscent of David's word in Psalm 23:4, "Ye thou I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff they comfort me" (King James Version, 1769/2017). The participants relied on their faith in God because they were aware that if God brought them to college and a pandemic hit, He would in no way let them not finish what was started. God would make a way for them.

The second takeaway is the fortitude of these participants. The students had a never-say-never or never-quit attitude. They had resolved within themselves that they were going to complete their coursework regardless of what was thrown at them. They experienced technical issues and issues within their families, but this did not keep them from forging ahead to finish what they had started. This is indicative of the Apostle Paul's words to the church in Galatia, "And let us not grow weary in well doing, for in due season, we shall reap if we do not faint"

(King James Version, 1769/2017, Galatians 6:9). There were moments when this researcher wanted to quit but doing this research and hearing the words of these participants lit a fire that caused a push forward and not backward. "Not all storms come to disrupt your life, some come to clear your path."

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 29, 2023

Philip Nash
Justin Smith

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1499 A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR CHRISTIAN STUDENT SUCCESS IN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES DURING THE PANDEMIC

Dear Philip Nash, Justin Smith,

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, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

APPENDIX B

Institutional Permission Request Email

There are a few institutions that fall within the setting of the proposed research in the Metro

Atlanta area. The below email will be sent to the appropriate department head(s) to gain access

to potential participants by following the IRB-provided template:

[Insert Date]

Dear [Recipient],

As a graduate student in the Christian Leadership & Christian Ministry department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR CHRISTIAN STUDENT SUCCESS IN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES DURING THE PANDEMIC, and the purpose of my research is to apply qualitative research methodology to figure out what factors brought about first-year Christian student success in completing their theological coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at your school. I would need to have access to your first-year students enrolled in theological studies during the pandemic, which started in March 2020, and who successfully completed their coursework. If you can provide a list of the earlier outlined students with phone numbers and email addresses, I make contact to see if they are willing to participate.

Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time. Interviews will be conducted with participants at a place that is comfortable for the participants and the interviewer. The interview can be face-to-face, physically, or via a video conference platform. This is being done to be able to observe facial expressions because this can aid in understanding the responses of the participants.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on the official letterhead indicating your approval or respond by email to ██████████.

Sincerely,

Philip Nash
Ph. D. Candidate, Liberty University

APPENDIX C

Consent

Title of the Project: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of First-Year Christian Student Success in Theological Studies During the Pandemic
Principal Investigator: Philip Nash, Ph.D. Candidate, Christian Leadership & Christian Ministry Department, Liberty University
Co-investigator: Justin Smith, Doctor, Dissertation Supervisor, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and a first-year Christian college student who was enrolled in theological studies during the pandemic. 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 figure out what brought about the successful completion of the course curriculum of first-year Christian college students in theological studies during the pandemic. This research is designed to provide institutions, faculty, and students with a deeper understanding of what brought about the successful completion of coursework during the pandemic.

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:
1. Participate in an in-person or virtual, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Once the interview is transcribed, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript to confirm the accuracy of the information. This review should take about 20 to 30 minutes and can be done in person or virtually.

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 expanding social aspects in the college community, Christian leadership & ministry, and the literature in this study.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating 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 documents.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years until recordings have been reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

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

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the interview, participants will receive a $25 Visa gift card. Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will be pulled and separated from your responses to maintain your anonymity.

What are the costs to you to be part of the study?

There will be no cost to participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or your current collegiate affiliation. If you decide to participate, you are free not to 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 in the next paragraph. Should you decide 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 Philip Nash. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or

. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Justin Smith, at
███████████ .

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 IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is 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

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records/you can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher 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/video-record/photograph me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

APPENDIX D

Student Qualifying Questionnaire (SQQ)

1. Do you profess to be a Christian?

2. Were you a first-year student during the pandemic in March 2020?

3. Were you enrolled in theological courses during the pandemic in March 2020?

4. Were you able to successfully complete your coursework during the pandemic in March 2020?

APPENDIX E

Student Interview Questions (SIQ)

1. What factors contributed to you completing the classes you were enrolled in during the pandemic?

2. Is there anything else that you can think of that contributed to the successful completion of your coursework during the pandemic?

3. What challenging factors did you have to overcome to pass your enrolled courses during the pandemic in March 2020?

4. Is there anything else that you can think of that was/were challenging to you being successful in completing your course work during the pandemic?

5. In what way(s) did your faith contribute to your success in completing your coursework during the pandemic?

6. What person(s) aided you in being successful in completing your coursework during the pandemic? If so, what way(s) did the person help you in completing your coursework?

7. Did you find that going to certain places helped you to successfully complete your classes during the pandemic? If so, which ones and why?

8. What habits did you use or learn that helped you in completing your coursework during the pandemic?

9. How were you affected by the transition to online coursework during the pandemic?

10. What adjustments did you have to make to complete your classes once you transitioned from in-person to online?

11. How did the transition online impact your relationship with your professors and classmates?

12. What did your classmates do to help you succeed once your coursework transitioned to online during the pandemic?

13. What did your professors do to help you succeed once your coursework transitioned to online during the pandemic?

14. With the coursework changes, do you feel you were more successful or that it was hard to succeed? Why?

15. What mental challenges did you have to overcome to be successful in completing your coursework?

16. What financial aspects did you have to overcome to be successful in completing your coursework?

17. When you think back to the transition from in-person to online coursework in the pandemic, what lessons do you feel like you learned on how to be successful?

APPENDIX F

Recruitment Email or Letter

Dear Potential Participant,

As a doctoral candidate in the Christian Leadership & Christian Ministry department at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand a phenomenon that many individuals like yourself experienced. The purpose of my research is to figure out what factors brought about first-year Christian student success in completing their theological coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, first-year Christian college students enrolled in theological studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants will be asked to take part in a one-on-one in-person or virtual video interview. It should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour to complete the procedure listed. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but **participant identities will not be disclosed**.

To participate, please complete the attached survey and return it by email to ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. If you meet my participant criteria, I will work with you to schedule a time for an interview. A consent document will be emailed to you if you meet the study criteria one week before the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview or you can email it to ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮. Participants will receive a $25 gift card.

Sincerely,

Philip Nash
Ph. D. Candidate, Liberty University
▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

APPENDIX G

Research Participant Flyer

Liberty University

Research Participants Needed!

Seeking first-year undergraduate in-person students enrolled during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of my research is to figure out what factors brought about first-year Christian student success in completing their theological coursework during the COVID-19 pandemic.
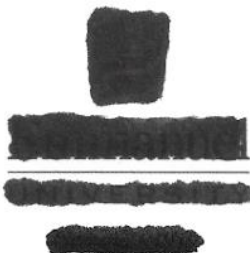
Are You Eligible?

Scan this code to learn more about the study!

I need your help with this study, and you can make a difference for others by participating.

For more information, email ████████████████

APPENDIX H

HEI 2 Approval Letter

Date: July 31, 2023

To: Philip Nash

From: ⬤ Institutional Review Board Committee

Regarding: Fall 2023 Liberty University IRB

Greetings,

This letter confirms the ▓▓▓▓▓▓▓▓ IRB acceptance of your research project entitled, A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of First-Year Christian Student Success in Theological Studies During the Pandemic, effective 8/1/2023. You may now begin to recruit participants and gather data for your project. You may not continue to work with participants beyond the date of your project listed in your IRB.

You must adhere to the research procedure exactly as you stated it in your "approved and stamped" IRB. If you desire to make any changes at all, you must submit an amended IRB to the chair of the IRB committee with an email explaining the changes you wish to make. If you encounter any adverse reactions or unforeseen complications with your research, you should immediately pause your project and inform the IRB chair.

The IRB Committee wishes you success in your research endeavor.

Respectfully,

APPENDIX I

HEI 4 Approval Letter

August 11, 2023

Dear Mr. Nash and Dr. Smith,

The ~~████████████~~ IRB Committee has approved your Exempt application for the project titled *A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLGICAL STUDY OF FIRST-YEAR CHRISTIAN STUDENT SUCCESS IN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES DURING THE PANDEMIC*. No further oversight from the IRB committee is required. Do note that this approval applies only to the current research detailed in your application and any major deviations from the plan would require further IRB approval.

IRB approval is considered complete until August 11, 2024. If you wish to continue the study past this date, you will need to file an additional IRB approval request for ongoing research.

Thank you for your application. The committee wishes you success in your research. Have a blessed day.

Sincerely,

~~████████████~~, PhD
IRB Committee Chair
~~████████████~~