The Balance of online Learning: A Qualitative Case Study
Exploring online Students’ Decision Making and Experiences

Jessica Ashley Hill-Jones
Z1811131@STUDENTS.NIU.EDU

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ABSTRACT

THE BALANCE OF ONLINE LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXPLORING ONLINE STUDENTS’ DECISION MAKING AND EXPERIENCES

Jessica Hill-Jones, EdD
Department of Counseling and Higher Education
Northern Illinois University, 2021
Dr. Gudrun Nyunt, Director

Online learning is an evolving and growing aspect of higher education. Past research highlights the benefits of online learning, such as the flexibility and increased access it provides to students, as well as its drawbacks such as isolation, time management, and teacher presence. As the number of students who are pursuing their degrees online continues to increase, more research is needed to holistically understand the experiences of online learners.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what influences students’ decisions to pursue an online degree and their experiences once in the online program. Data was collected via 16 semi-structured interviews and document analysis of program marketing materials. This study found that online learners are driven by multiple influences when deciding to pursue a degree, such as fitting the program into their current realities and career advancement. Once in the program, online learners need the right balance of autonomy and engagement. The flexibility of the online program increases the need for online learners to
balance competing priorities. Finally, online learners perceive legitimacy of their degree and maximization of their experience as earning a return on their investment. Implications for practice are discussed.
THE BALANCE OF ONLINE LEARNING: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY EXPLORING 
ONLINE STUDENTS’ DECISION MAKING AND EXPERIENCES

BY

JESSICA HILL-JONES
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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL 
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Doctoral Director:
Dr. Gudrun Nyunt
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mom and dad, who have always been my motivation, as well as to my sister and husband, who are my loudest and constant cheerleaders. And to Bear, whom I hope will be inspired to set ambitious goals and never stop working to achieve them.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Education, as many other professional fields, is evolutionary in nature. It has been and always will be influenced by and be an influencer of the society in which it is situated (Durkheim, 1956). In the context of U.S. higher education, online learning has also been an evolving component of the field, one which has become seemingly expansive and revolutionary since the start of the 21st century (Kentnor, 2015). However, the history of online learning suggests that it has been part of education for many years. While still a hotly debated topic with regard to legitimacy, scalability, and longevity, online learning appears to be one aspect of higher education that has persisted over time (Kim, 2018).

Before the advent of technology and the internet, “distance learning” was the predecessor of online education. Distance learning is defined as a system of instruction in which the instructor is physically located in a different place from the learner and at times may deliver the instruction asynchronously utilizing various technologies (Hyatt, 1998; Moore et al., 2010). For the purposes of this dissertation, the term “online learning” will be used as it is more inclusive of the overall experience—distance learning reflects only one aspect, the physical aspect of online learning.
Online learning is often nestled under the “innovation” section on a long list of things that could potentially hold the key to some of the biggest issues facing higher education (Robinson, 2012). Colleges and universities are considering and establishing online learning programs as a way to diversify revenue streams as well as redistribute and hopefully mitigate costs (Rumble, 1997). Therefore, online learning programs are becoming more readily available and accessible to students who would otherwise have to make difficult choices about pursuing postsecondary degrees. Online students often have significant work, family, and financial obligations on top of earning their degree (Tait, 2000), which makes the accessibility of online learning so appealing (Kentnor, 2015; Kim, 2018; LaPadula, 2010).

Today, online learning occupies a niche (yet expanding) area of the higher education landscape. Over the last thirty years, colleges and universities of all types have increasingly incorporated aspects of online learning into their curriculum (Casey, 2008; Kentnor, 2015). In the fall of 2015, almost six million students (5,954,121) were enrolled in online courses of any kind at degree-granting postsecondary institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018; Online Learning Consortium, 2017). The Online Learning Consortium (2017) reported that there was an increase of 226,375 online students in 2017, which reflects a 3.9% increase from the previous two years. Of those nearly 6 million, 2.9 million students were completing all of their coursework online while the other 3.1 million were taking some courses online (Online Learning Consortium, 2017). Broken down further, 53% of online students identified as women and 47% as men and the average age of an online student was 34 years old (Education Today, 2021). Online students today are 46.6% White, 24.8% Black, 29.8% Hispanic, 3.2% Asian and 4.6% other (Education Today, 2021).
Online vs. Distance Learning

As technological advances have made learning in virtual spaces more of a reality, there are some terms and definitions that have evolved as well. Distance learning has become an outdated term, as it only indicates that a person is physically separated from the campus (Layton, 2017). A broader term that has become more commonly used in education research and literature terminology is “online learning.”

Online learning can take place at a distance but also includes students who live on or near campus but choose to take courses online for a variety of reasons. There are many campus-based courses and programs that incorporate online learning components into classroom instruction. This may come in the form of assignment submissions, lecture notes and media, assigned readings, opportunities to practice skills, or discussion board participation (Layton, 2017). In this way, online learning helps to supplement traditional teaching and learning, but it does not replace class time.

This dissertation uses the term “online learning” as I am focusing on students who are completing their entire degree online—not just a component or a course—though students’ physical distance from campus may vary. Regardless of geography, this dissertation seeks to explore how online learning provides access to postsecondary education to students who may otherwise not have been able to do so. Online students tend to be older, working professionals (Tait, 2000). Depending on the degree level of the online program they are pursuing, they may be a number of years out of school or may have never stepped foot on a college campus; they may be military veterans, parents, spouses, caretakers or any combination of the aforementioned (Tait, 2000).

While students’ access to education is increased, their overall engagement with their coursework, faculty, and the institution may be lost if not intentionally incorporated in the online
learning experience. By utilizing built-in technologies that allow students to interact with the materials and with their classmates and faculty, faculty and advisors can be intentional about their outreach and support (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015).

Research Problem

With the increased availability of online learning programs (Rumble, 1997) and their appeal to a broader public (Appana, 2008), it is not surprising that an increasing number of students take advantage of these programs. While colleges and universities are considering and establishing online learning programs as a way to diversify revenue streams, redistribute and hopefully mitigate costs (Rumble, 1997), there is a potential for student interests to get lost in the shuffle. Student affairs professionals have a responsibility to continue to situate the student and the student experience central to the work that is done and the decisions that are made on their behalf every day. It is thus essential for us to understand students’ decisions to enroll in an online program and their experiences once in the program to understand how we can capitalize on the positive aspects of online learning while mitigating the negative aspects.

Research Purpose and Questions

As online learning opportunities become more popular, it is important to explore how pursuing and attending an online learning program impacts students holistically. When an individual considers and pursues an online learning program for higher education, there are many aspects which influence the student’s decision to choose this type of program and their subsequent experience in the program (Darling, 2007). By understanding these influences and the way students must balance many competing priorities, higher education practitioners can
engage students in intentional and strategic ways throughout the student journey (Angelino & Natvig, 2009).

The purpose of this case study is to explore students’ decision to enroll and their engagement in an online graduate degree program. Guided by the model for engagement of online learners (Angelino & Natvig, 2009), this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What influences students to attend an online program?
2. How do students experience their online program?
   a. How do students perceive the structure of their coursework influencing their experiences?
   b. What co-curricular supports do students identify as important?
   c. How are students exposed to postgraduation opportunities?

These questions aim to explore the influences and experiences of online learners in an effort to better equip practitioners to support and engage online students across the student journey. Such intentionality, in turn, could lead to holistic access for online learners to higher education across the student journey, well beyond admission.

Literature Review Overview

Access to education is an important aspect of higher education and the student experience overall. Access, however, must be considered holistically and not just from an admissions perspective. Online education has influenced the way we can expand access to students who
otherwise may not have been able to pursue higher education degrees previously (Miller, 2018). However, with increased access come questions of legitimacy and to what extent students are having an experience online comparable to that they would have in the traditional classroom.

This stigma permeates online learning in a plethora of ways and comes from a multitude of places. Part of this stigma comes from the negative publicity that came from for-profit institutions that originally had a strong foothold in online learning (Etherington, 2018). However, colleges and universities have seen the benefits that online learning and expanded access can offer their institutions and have found ways to counterbalance the negative perception of online learning by associating their own brand names with online learning.

At the same time, students considering or pursuing online degrees must grapple with the reality that online learning is the best option to allow them to accomplish their goals while accepting that there may be some perceived societal stigma to contend with (Etherington, 2018). In Chapter 2, I will discuss how online learning provides access to higher education for students as well as share existing findings related to the student experience of online learners. I will highlight challenges students experience such as time management, feelings of isolation and alienation, and a lack of interactions with faculty and the virtual classroom environment. I will also discuss the need for proactive outreach from faculty and advisors as one of the most important influences on how students experience online learning.

Conceptual Framework Overview

This study is grounded in Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) model for engagement of the online learner, which provides a holistic approach to the online student journey. The model is broken down into four categories: recruitment, coursework, post coursework, and alumni. Each
of these categories play a role in how students experience online learning and how higher education practitioners can engage students along the way.

During the recruitment phase, students are considering all of their options, obligations and realities as they decide whether or not an online degree is right for them. Students likely engage with marketing materials and program staff to ensure they have all the information they need to make an informed decision. After joining the program, students then move into the coursework phase, where engagement comes heavily from faculty and the virtual classroom environment. Outside of the classroom, students also engage in post coursework, such as registering for the upcoming semester. Finally, after completing the program, students move into the alumni phase of the model where, ideally, they will engage in mentoring, ambassadorship and join the alumni association as examples of staying engaged postgraduation. I will explain this framework in more detail in Chapter 2.

Methodology Overview

This dissertation uses a qualitative case study approach as a way of examining and sharing individual stories of online students. Case studies emphasize the in-depth understanding of an issue or condition within the context of a bounded unit (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The bounded unit or case for this study is an online program. This program is a graduate-level health program, that is advertised as being 100% online. Students have a practicum requirement to complete at the end of their program but can complete their practicum hours locally and are never required to come to campus. Students can choose from six concentrations and, upon admission, can start their program in the spring, summer or fall semester.
Serving as the sole interviewer, I collected data through semi-structured interviews from 16 participants. Once interviews were completed, they were transcribed and analyzed through multiple rounds of open coding. To improve the trustworthiness of this study, I engaged in peer review, explicitly stating the researcher’s positionality and sharing disconfirming information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In Chapter 3, I will discuss my research design, data collection, and data analysis in detail.

Findings Overview

When it came to what influenced students’ decisions to pursue an online degree, there were multiple influences for pursuing an online graduate degree. As students made their decisions, they were balancing aspects such as their current realities, career advancement and whether or not their degree would be viewed as legitimate, considering how each would be impacted by their decision to complete an online degree.

As a result of their decision to pursue an online degree, students then had new aspects influencing their experience once they started the program. Students found that the right balance of autonomy and engagement was necessary. Additionally, students also had to account for how flexibility related to the need to balance competing priorities. Finally, the perceived legitimacy of the degree coupled with the ability to maximize their degree ultimately determined if they felt they had earned a return on their investment. Findings will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

Discussion and Implications Overview

There is a balancing act that online students must navigate when considering and ultimately pursuing an online degree. Online learners must reconcile the reality that they have
obligations and responsibilities that make online learning an ideal option while considering how completing their degree will impact said realities and how they will contend with perceived stigmas surrounding online learning. How online students experience the program and higher education overall is also impacted by this balancing act across the student journey. Gender may also play a role in how students decide to pursue their degree online, what they are looking for in the program and their overall experience once in the program. Most participants in this study were women, which may be why flexibility and competing priorities turned out to be a major theme in the findings. In addition, women may be socialized to worry about the legitimacy of their degree more due to imposter syndrome. In each phase of Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) model for engagement of online learners, the balancing act continues, spanning across the student journey. By engaging students during each phase, practitioners can support students accomplishing their goal of graduation and help them keep their balance.

Implications for future research may include expanding the scope to explore how different, specific populations experience online learning. In addition, future research may also expand to include multiple institutions or programs as a way of comparison. In practice, implications include an intentional focus on networking efforts for online students, even if students do not always take advantage of them. Practitioners may also focus their efforts on ensuring students have managed expectations during each phase of the student journey by engaging them consistently and resetting as necessary. More information on how the findings relate to existing literature and the framework as well as implications of my findings are discussed in Chapter 5.
Significance

Online students are a growing part of the landscape of higher education and college students. The rate at which students are pursuing their degrees online (whether in part or completely) is only continuing to grow as technology becomes increasingly sophisticated. Conversely, concerns regarding the attrition of online-learning students is also warranted. Recent data suggests that anywhere from 40%-80% of students drop out of online classes (Bawa, 2016) and online courses have a fail rate that is about 10%-20% higher than brick-and-mortar classrooms (Bawa, 2016). Reasons that students withdraw from online courses include those related to work, personal issues, and program issues (Bawa, 2016). Current and robust research needs to be done to contribute to the existing body of literature and to stay abreast of best practices pertaining to the needs of this student population.

A plethora of research has examined the attrition and retention rates of online students (Bawa, 2016; Lynch-Holmes, 2013; Tait, 2000; Thach & Murphy, 1995, Tinto, 2006). However, the fact that enrollment in online courses and programs continues to increase, even in the face of fluctuating retention rates, is reason for pause. There is an opportunity to contextualize this data to truly understand the multidimensional aspect of online learning and the complex experiences of online learners. This study seeks to add to the dialogue around online education by highlighting the experiences of online learners and the aspects that influence their decision to pursue an online degree.

Furthermore, this study has practical implications as well. There is some existing data regarding the benefits of proactive outreach as well as “quality reactive outreach” and the positive impact that such approaches have on the retention of online students (Simpson, 2004).
By shedding light on students’ decisions to enroll and experiences in an online program, the analysis of this study will seek to reinforce and expand on such best practices as they relate to understanding and supporting this unique population.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed in this dissertation focuses on access to and student experiences in online learning programs. Access is more than just being admitted into a degree program, and student engagement is a key to eliminating the feelings of isolation and disconnection that many online learners report (LaPadula, 2010; Richardson et al., 2015; Scheuermann, 2012).

Often, access is described as simply being able to attend an institution. This is absolutely part of it, and throughout history, this has been an ongoing challenge in higher education. However, true access is more holistic and layered than just admissions criteria. Getting into an institution, regardless of selectivity, and being able to physically attend is only part of the conversation. Being granted admission and attending a college or university does not matter nearly as much if students are not being retained and ultimately earning degrees.

To highlight the importance of this reality, during the Obama Administration, an emphasis was placed on increased student outcomes in higher education. College is only getting more expensive and students are having to take on more and more debt to earn their degrees. However, as it is stated on the U.S. Department of Education website, “the most expensive education is the one that doesn’t lead to a degree” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Besides the fact that the majority of students who are enrolling in bachelor’s degree programs are not
graduating within six years, students who take out college loans but do not finish their degrees are more likely to default on said loans than students who complete their degrees. (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Without a focus on student outcomes and retention, institutions are getting students in the door, but it is oversimplistic to say that this provides students with access. Access must be analyzed and understood holistically if higher education is to provide equitable and inclusive opportunities for everyone.

Thus, understanding student experiences is essential to understanding if a program truly provides students with access—not just to get into an institution but to achieve their goals at that institution. For example, balancing intentional connection with flexibility has been found to increase overall student engagement in online students who are also working professionals and are juggling competing priorities (LaPadula, 2010). Faculty, administrators, and student affairs professionals may provide a sense of community and connection with the institution, which in turn works to combat isolation. A sense of belonging can result in overall student persistence, combined with a feeling of responsibility, loyalty, and openness to the experience (Bailey & Brown, 2016).

Access to Higher Education and Online Learning

Access is a broad and relatively subjective term as it pertains to higher education. Admission to a college or university is one aspect of access. However, degree completion and student experience are equally important factors to the concept of access. There are multiple factors that tend to have the biggest influence on a person’s decision to go to college, whether for a bachelor’s degree or for a graduate degree. Costs, of course, are one of the biggest factors
influencing whether or not students pursue a college degree (Kane, 1995). Other factors include family, career, and personal motivation (Tait, 2000).

Prior to World War II and the introduction of the GI Bill, access to higher education was relatively limited to the elite, White males in the country. The passing of the Morrill Act in 1862 offered loyal states (during the Civil War) 30,000 acres of land per congressman (Loss, 2012). This establishment of what are known today as land-grant institutions, was designed to “help endow a college in every State upon a sure and perpetual foundation, accessible to all, but especially to the sons of toil,” as the drafter of the bill, Justin Smith Morrill stated (Loss, 2012). It is worth noting that since this bill was introduced during the Civil War when Blacks were still enslaved, the Morrill Act of 1862 expanded access only to the White working class. It was not until the Second Morrill Act was passed in 1892 that land was set aside for the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that access to higher education for African Americans was expanded as well (Loss, 2012).

After World War II, there was a mass movement to pursue postsecondary education, particularly for those who had historically been excluded (i.e., African Americans, women, first-generation students, low-income students, veterans; Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015). Between 1950 and 2000, the percentage of 25-34 year olds who had completed some college quadrupled from 16% to 57% (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015). The introduction of the Higher Education Act and federal funding options for students resulted in increased college enrollment rates for 18- to 24-year-olds regardless of family income, particularly in the late ‘80s, ‘90s and early ‘00s (Perna, 2006). However, while the enrollment rates of historically marginalized student populations have increased, access to higher education continues to be stratified, particularly by socioeconomic status (SES; Miller, 2018; Perna, 2006).
Between 2000 and 2012, the same percentage of 25-34-year-olds who had completed some college increased marginally from 57% to 63% (Page & Scott-Clayton, 2015). For example, follow-up research to the National Center for Education Statistics’ High School Longitudinal Study of 2009 found that students who are high achieving but of low socioeconomic status are 18% less likely to enroll in college than their peers of the highest socioeconomic status with similar grades (Miller, 2018). Perhaps more astonishing is that students who are in the lowest socioeconomic status with a high school GPA of 2.0 to 2.99 are 61% more likely to enroll in college, compared to 88% of their highest socioeconomic peers with the same GPA (Miller, 2018). Research also shows that Black and Latino students in higher socioeconomic statuses enroll in a selective college at lower rates than their White peers (Miller, 2018). Although selective colleges and universities do not make up the largest percentage of higher education, the influence that they yield is beneficial to Black and Brown communities, making this statistic particularly problematic (Miller, 2018).

A 2019 study conducted by the Jain Family Institute looked at education “deserts,” areas where there is little access to institutions of higher education. Physical access to higher education is stratified across the poorest and wealthiest zip codes in the United States, with the largest “deserts” in rural areas. In their study, Beamer and Steinbaum found “the poorer you are, the less access you have” (as cited in Johnson, 2019, para 6). Moreover, the study also found that there is a higher concentration of for-profit institutions in areas where there is little to no access to public higher education institutions. This suggests that for-profit institutions have identified this gap and have capitalized on the need for individuals to obtain a college degree. Additionally, these institutions have often been referred to as “predatory” and have come under fire for taking advantage of students, both at their brick-and-mortar campuses and online (Etherington, 2018).
In more recent years, access to education has been expanded by online learning, challenging the traditional notion of higher education and degree completion (Lynch-Holmes, 2013). Online students share many of the same realities as it pertains to their decision to pursue college, but they also have other realities that the traditional college student may not. In the most basic sense, online students can be classified as “nontraditional” students (Tait, 2000). Online students tend to be older, with family and career obligations that may limit their options when it comes to pursuing higher education (Tait, 2000). In light of their competing priorities and multiple responsibilities, successful online students tend to be self-starters and disciplined (Tait, 2000).

Increased access to higher education is also challenged as it pertains to retention rates of online students (Bawa, 2016; Lynch-Holmes, 2013; Tait, 2000; Thach & Murphy, 1995, Tinto, 2006). Tied to the argument around academic standards and rigor, some of the preconceived notions around online learning is that it is not as challenging as programs that are campus based (Levine & Sun, 2002; Lynch-Holmes, 2013). One way that online-learning administrators and faculty combat this challenge is by building in components of the program that require engagement from students at various points. These could be anything from live sessions in the classroom, a capstone, or a practicum requirement (Bawa, 2016; McDearmon, 2011, 2013).

Furthermore, it would be an oversight not to consider how nontraditional and marginalized students experience higher education generally to understand how online learning can have both an exacerbating and mitigating effect on their access to and experiences in higher education. For example, there is a plethora of research focused on how marginalized and non-traditional students navigate through feelings of imposter syndrome at both the undergraduate and graduate levels (Chapman, 2015; Parkman, 2016; Ramsey & Brown, 2018). To add an
additional dynamic and identifier as an online student, which may come with a negative stigma, has the potential to exacerbate anxieties about pursuing a degree online (Levine & Sun, 2002; Lynch-Holmes, 2013). At the same time, for students who have family obligations or careers which cannot be uprooted, online learning expands access by providing them with an option to pursue their degrees without eliminating things from their lives (Frenette, 2004; Tait, 2000).

Legitimacy of Online Education

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, online education was a controversial and stigmatized part of higher education. Perhaps it was fear of the unknown or the sentiment which existed that students who had done their degree online did not have to work as hard to earn their degree. To make matters worse, it was during this same time that for-profit institutions, also referred to as “degree mills,” began to make their mark on higher education (Etherington, 2018). These programs were unaccredited online programs that preyed on students with little oversight (Etherington, 2018). Furthermore, gatekeepers such as employers overwhelmingly had negative perceptions of online degrees, mostly citing lack of rigor (which in turn meant a lack of preparedness for the workforce) as well as increased opportunities for academic dishonesty (Etherington, 2018).

Part of the stigma around online education also came from within universities themselves as faculty pushed back on online learning, perhaps for similar reasons. In the 2015 study Faculty Attitudes on Technology, faculty were asked if they strongly agreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “For-credit online courses can achieve student learning outcomes that are at least equivalent to those of in-person courses” (as cited in Haynes, 2017, para. 13). Faculty who had
taught at least one course online were more likely to strongly agree regarding the effectiveness of online education than faculty who had never taught a course online (Haynes, 2017).

Today, the role of for-profits in higher education continues to be called into question. However, with more public and non-profit colleges and universities developing and offering online programs within their brand, the stigma and legitimacy of online learning seem to have begun to shift. As previously mentioned, a gap has existed within higher education when it comes to access to higher education. This not only comes in the form of physical access (education deserts) but also in the form of symbolic access, in the sense that marginalized students continue to enroll in college at lower rates than their White counterparts (Miller, 2018). Those who do enroll are less likely to complete their degrees than their White counterparts as well (Miller, 2018).

Colleges and universities have realized that one solution to addressing the problem of access is through online learning. Other options that institutions have are to create satellite campuses to address the physical access issue and provide greater incentives and resources for marginalized student populations to pursue college. Frankly, these involve additional costs that many colleges and universities may not have. Online learning also involves additional costs but offers a win/win solution for institutions and students. Students can access a quality education while still maintaining the flexibility they need. Institutions can expand their reach and are not confined to considering physical space limitations when making admissions decisions.

Furthermore, there is also a demand for higher education to shift to a more digitalized mode of operating, particularly as it relates to employer and business needs when students enter the job market. Employers are already beginning to see the value of students who have completed (or are completing) their coursework online. It is not just the degree they are finding
valuable, but the accompanying soft skills that come with doing so as well. For example, employers are finding that students who have completed their degree online are already prepared to work in remote environments, meaning less ramp-up time and training needed from the company (Ericksen, 2020).

In addition, students who have completed online coursework are more adept at balancing competing priorities, managing their time, and demonstrating digital literacy (Ericksen, 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 global pandemic has catapulted the market into new territories, and in turn, colleges and universities have been forced to adjust to online faster than ever. Given the positive response from employers, perhaps online learning has carved out a permanent space within higher education.

Student Experience of Online Learners

Existing literature pertaining to the experience of online students presents mixed findings. In large part, this is due to the inconsistencies from student responses when asked about their experiences. For example, one student may find attending live sessions a valuable part of their learning, whereas another student may find having to be on a video call at a specific time burdensome and the antithesis of the flexibility they were seeking (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). Additionally, students’ own ability to adjust to the learning style necessary for online education also influences some of the inconsistencies researchers have found when trying to understand the experience of online students (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005).

Academics and Classroom Structure

The classroom experience for online students tends to be a frequently cited influence on their overall experience in the program (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015;
Scheuermann, 2012; Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). While delivery of material varies across institutions, programs, and faculty, there are a few basic components of online courses.

Students are typically expected to complete assignments, such as projects, papers and discussion boards. Students complete their work via a “learning management system” or “managed learning environment” such as Blackboard or Canvas (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). These platforms house all of the relevant materials students will need to complete their coursework including due dates, course information, learning materials, and resources, all in one place (Share & Benfield, 2005). Some programs also require students to attend live sessions or participate in group work. (Scheuermann, 2012; Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). Live sessions are typically two-way video conference meetings led by the faculty (Scheuermann, 2012) and students log in at a specific time to participate.

Isolation and Alienation

A consistent sentiment of online students is feeling disconnected from the brick-and-mortar campus (Bailey & Brown, 2016). Students may be physically separated from campus, and many of the resources or opportunities they have access to as students may not be geared towards nontraditional students (Bailey & Brown, 2016). Research has found that intentionality with regard to outreach and communication is necessary for mitigating the physical separation that exists for online learners (Bailey & Brown, 2016). For many students, student affairs professionals typically serve as the face of the institution and a linkage to campus that is necessary for online students to engage with the university (Bailey & Brown, 2016; LaPadula, 2010).
Time Management

Students also report struggling with time management, which can manifest itself in a few different ways. Online learning has often been touted as providing flexibility for students by allowing them to complete their work on their own time, at their own pace. However, research suggests that while online learning does offer a degree of flexibility, time is still one the most cited aspects of the student experience. For example, Cramphorn (2004) found that of the 45 students asked to reflect on their experiences taking online courses, time was mentioned by each of the participants (as cited in Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). Their responses referenced “physical writing time, time lag, time needed to reflect on posts, and finding time in busy schedules” (Sharpe & Benfield, 2005), suggesting that time management was a multidimensional aspect of their experience.

Teacher Presence

Teacher presence is the consistent, proactive and responsive involvement of the faculty in the online course (Baker & Taylor, 2012) and has proven to be an important practice in engaging online students. Since online students do not have the same advantage of being able to pass their faculty and classmates in the hallways, online teaching faculty must have a different level of intentionality in their communications and outreach. Research suggests that teacher presence increases student attention and motivation and fosters a sense of community within the virtual classroom (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015). Furthermore, it reassures students that there is someone on the receiving end of their inquiries and submissions and that their work and questions are not being lost in the abyss of cyberspace.

In addition, teacher presence also humanizes the overall experience of online learning (Jones et al., 2008). DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant (2005) define humanizing as “the
action of providing immediacy behaviors creating a situation or environment that is people-focused and that will help to increase learners’ investment in the process” (as cited in Jones et al., 2008, p. 1). This immediacy may not be in the form of direct interaction with the faculty, but students interacting with the course in alternative ways, such as an introductory video from the faculty, discussion boards, and verbal and nonverbal feedback during virtual face-to-face interactions (Jones et al., 2008). These behaviors help students’ perceptions and attitudes within the online course and encourage engagement (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Jones et al., 2008; Richardson et al., 2015).

As mentioned, teacher presence may not be limited to direct interaction with the faculty but is also facilitated through the design and organization of a course. Course learning outcomes, deliverables and due dates, learning materials and assessments are all part of how students experience a course and thus may experience their time with a faculty member. Research has shown that increased teacher presence is also positively correlated with student experience and overall satisfaction (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Baker, 2010; Russo & Benson, 2005; Shea et al., 2003). In online learning, teacher presence has also been shown to be a greater predictor of student success than interaction with peers (Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005; Means et al., 2014).

**Support and Proactive Outreach**

Tait (2000) states that there are three primary functions of student support—“1. cognitive: supporting and developing learning through the mediation of the standard and uniform elements of course materials and learning resources for individual students; 2. affective: providing an environment which supports students, creates commitment and enhances self-esteem; 3.
systemic: establishing administrative processes and information management systems which are effective, transparent and overall student-friendly” (p. 2). These three functions must work in conjunction with each other in order to optimize the student experience for distance learners (Tait, 2000).

According to Tait (2000), cognitive outcomes are those which focus on a sense of belonging, interaction, and community membership. As a result, learner support services “where students feel at home, where they feel valued, and which they find manageable” are created (Tait, 2000, p. 289). These are essential factors to optimizing the student experience. Furthermore, while Sanford’s (1962) theory of challenge and support focused on undergraduate students, it can arguably be applied to online students at all levels as well (Evans, 1996). For example, if students feel as though they cannot manage navigating the technology along with completing their work, there is a very high likelihood they will not persist through an online program.

The systemic aspect of student support is not as well researched but is an essential function of student affairs professionals, particularly those supporting online students. One of the most important aspects of managing an online program is scalability, although it is not always possible to perfectly replicate or simulate on-campus practices online (Tait, 2000). Therefore, it is important for student affairs professionals who are working with online students to pay special attention to the administrative processes and procedures that support students and the day-to-day operations of the program (Tait, 2000). Early alerts are an example of a systematic way of supporting online students. Early alerts are notifications that the advisor receives that indicate that a student may be at risk; this may be due to a course grade, attendance and participation, or overall GPA (Lynch-Holmes, 2013).
In order to be effective, support for online students must be consistent and continue throughout the entire life cycle of the student (Duncan-Stermer, 2018; Tait, 2000). The most efficient support comes in various forms of scaffolding, such as orientation, one-on-one advising, and creating a community space in the learning management system (Duncan-Stermer, 2018).

With regard to advising, advisors can use a number of advising techniques to support students. Examples include proactive advising; strength-based advising; and appreciative, descriptive, and prescriptive advising (Duncan-Stermer, 2018). Each has its advantages and disadvantages, but proactive outreach tends to be common among online student advisors because it is the most common approach to supporting students who might be considered nontraditional or at risk (Duncan-Stermer, 2018).

Limitations of Existing Literature

Ultimately, there is not much literature focusing on the holistic experience of online students. Much of the research that has been done pertaining to online students is siloed by topic, such as technology, academic engagement and learning styles, and best practices for success as an online learner. There is an opportunity for research to be done examining why students choose online learning programs in the first place and their motivations for persisting through graduation. Moreover, there is an opportunity for research to understand how the aforementioned topics interact with and impact each other to ultimately influence student success. This study seeks to fill the gap in literature by exploring the lived experience of online students in more detail, through their own words, and within its real-world context by considering how their experience is impacted by and impacts their environment.
Conceptual Framework: Engagement of the Online Learner

This study utilizes Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) model for engagement of the online learner. This model categorizes student engagement into four main areas: recruitment, coursework, post coursework and alumni (Angelina & Natvig, 2009). Specifically, the model posits that it is in these areas that engagement can occur for online students. For clarity, post coursework includes activities in and out of the classroom that serve to prepare students for the next semester. Examples include midterm grades for the current semester as well as registration or securing financial aid for the next semester.

Angelino and Natvig (2009) define engagements as “actively participating, interacting and collaborating with students, faculty, course content, and members of the community” (p. 3). The model was developed in response to the notion that higher attrition rates are seen across online programs, in comparison to on-campus programs (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). Studies by Terry (2001) and Lynch (2001) both found that attrition rates are 21-36% higher for online students than students taught in a traditional classroom. In 2005, the attrition rate for online students was 26% compared to 5% for on-campus students (Dunagan, 2005).

Early engagement is one of the key ways Angelino and Natvig suggest to reduce attrition and increase student engagement over the course of the student journey. Engaging students as early as possible allows educators and administrators to have open lines of communication, but it also determines what areas the student may struggle in and action plans to address those issues early may be developed (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). The authors suggest that as students become more comfortable in the online learning environment, as well as in their abilities to succeed in learning online, retention rates will increase (Angelino & Natvig, 2009).
The first strategic category of the model is recruitment (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). The model suggests that during the recruitment period it is necessary to market the program, connect with potential students, determine whether or not the student is a “fit” for the program, assist students with registration and ensure they are prepared for the first day of classes (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). After developing a marketing strategy, the program must identify their target marketing and determine demographics of potential students. Brochures and the program website are effective tools for communicating program attributes to prospective students.

Once it is determined that a student is a good fit for the program and the student’s comfort level with technology is appropriate, program staff seek to obtain commitment from students. Students are assisted through the admissions process and registration process by way of an array of modalities including phone and email. Students should have clear instructions regarding deadlines for registering and paying for courses and should also be oriented to their course space before classes begin.

The second strategic category is coursework. When classes begin, the model suggests that instructors engage students early on by posting an introduction and setting expectations with students on how they should engage with the classroom, their classmates, the instructor and the material. Instructors should ensure that assignment instructions are clear and detailed, particularly because faculty do not have the benefit of identifying understanding via nonverbal cues the way they might be able to in a face-to-face classroom. The model also suggests that grades should be posted as soon as possible, and feedback should be timely with in-depth constructive comments.

In lieu of traditional classroom interactions, the model indicates the discussion boards serve as the substitute. Students earn credit towards their final grade by participating on
discussion boards, which the authors suggest is a strength of online learning. Unlike the traditional classroom where students can be in attendance but unengaged, discussion boards require students to engage with the material and their classmates at least minimally. By requiring student-student, student-content and student-faculty interaction, instructors are creating an opportunity for students to engage online in a way they otherwise may not have.

The third strategic category of this model is post coursework, meaning the activities in and out of the classroom that facilitate student progression to the next semester. This form of student engagement comes during the middle of the semester, when students are asked to start thinking about the next semester. Students are informed about registration information for the following term and midterm grades are released, which often informs students’ future plans. At the end of the term, students are able to evaluate the course and the faculty, which is then used to make enhancements to the course the next time it is offered.

The final strategic category is alumni. The model suggests that students should be invited to join the university’s Alumni Association and participate in alumni activities. Graduates are also encouraged to promote the program from which they graduated through referrals, mentorship, and connecting with prospective students. By utilizing graduated students to attest to the benefit of joining the program, the idea and expectation is that it will result in the recruitment of other qualified students to join the program.

This model is helpful for framing this study as it is a holistic approach to understanding engagement across the student journey. As previously mentioned, access goes beyond just being admitted to the program and this model accounts for the many dynamics that influence student persistence throughout the program. By considering the influences on students’ decision to
pursue an online degree as well as the aspects that influence their experience in the program, practitioners can implement practices that better meet student needs.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation used a qualitative case study research design to examine what influences students to pursue an online degree and their experience in the online program. In this chapter, I outline the details of my research design and approach, starting with my research purpose and questions.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore what influences students’ decision to attend an online graduate program and their experiences while pursuing a graduate degree. Guided by Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) model of engagement for online learners, this qualitative case study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What influences students to attend an online program?

2. How do students experience their online program?

   a. How do students perceive the structure of their coursework influencing their experiences?

   b. What co-curricular supports do students identify as important?
c. How are students exposed to postgraduation opportunities?

Research Design

To explore my research questions, I used case study, a qualitative research methodology (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Case studies explore a phenomenon within a bounded system while considering its real-world context, which allows for a deep analysis within a narrow scope (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This study was a single-case study, focused on one program at one institution (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Case study is useful when the variables are embedded in the situation and difficult or impossible to identify ahead of time. This is what makes case studies appealing in higher education research, as there are many cases that can be easily studied, such as an institution, a program, a course, or an event.

Furthermore, case study allows the researcher to make meaning by situating the case within a specific context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this case, it is important that the reader understands the specific criteria of the program serving as the case study for the findings to be situated properly. The criteria of the case study and participants will be discussed in more detail next.

Case Description

The case for this study is an online master’s program in public health at Koda University (a pseudonym), a four-year, private institution in the United States. This institution is known for academic rigor and excellence and is a Research I institution (Carnegie Classification, 2021). This institution offers undergraduate and graduate degrees as well as certificates online. Some examples of the online programs at this institution include social work, education, communications, public health, and library sciences.
According to the institution’s website, the total undergraduate and graduate student population is 35% Caucasian, 19% Asian, 17% Hispanic or Latino, 7% Black or African, 4% two or more races and 5% unknown. In addition, the student population is 27% nonresident (international), as well as 54% female and 46% male.¹

The online program itself is 34% Caucasian, 29% Asian, 21% Hispanic or Latino, 13% Black or African, 2% declined to state, 1% Pacific Islander and 1% Native American. The program is 77% female and 23% male, as well as 7% international students. The program is advertised as practitioner based and tends to attract individuals who are in the field and are looking to advance in their careers and/or to expand their knowledge within their area of expertise. This graduate program costs approximately $80,000 USD for the entire program, which is towards the upper end of comparable programs.

Over the course of six semesters, students complete 42 units of coursework, including a practicum and internship opportunity, and can choose from six elective options. Courses are 100% online and students can access all of the learning materials for the entire course at the start of the semester. Students work through the course content in week-by-week “modules” with deliverables and due dates along the way. Students can work ahead if they choose and are able to. Courses vary in their synchronicity based on things such as group work or partner assignments and attendance and participation in live sessions.

All courses have a “live” component where students are able to log on at a specific time to meet with their faculty and classmates. However, the nature of these live components varies based on the instructor and the content. Some faculty use this time more as extended office hours.

¹ Available university demographic data cites gender but uses biological sex terminology.
when students can come and ask specific questions on the content they are studying. Others use these live components to replicate a virtual classroom where faculty lecture and there are class discussions, small group breakout rooms, or student presentations.

Once students get to the end of their coursework, they are required to complete a practicum and internship component as well. The program has many partnerships across the country where students often complete internship requirements, but the majority of the connections the program has are local to the campus. All students, regardless of geography, are responsible for setting up their own internships, but the program will help guide students by providing resources and sharing opportunities as they arise. Since the majority of the relationships the program has are local to the campus, students who are farther away often have to utilize their own professional networks or cold call to find internship opportunities.

There is also an on-campus version of the program at this institution. The curriculum is similar, with a few more course offerings on campus than online. As a program policy, students are not allowed to take courses in both the on-campus and online programs without petitioning and receiving approval to do so as an exception. Furthermore, students in the on-campus program can only switch to the online program, and vice versa, by getting approval from the respective program directors. If approved, they can only make this switch (either way) one time.

I selected this case for a number of reasons. There was a practical element in that I had access to the case and the participants. There was also a research-related significance in the multidimensionality of this particular program. This program is relatively selective; however, there is also an intentional commitment to ensuring that highly qualified, underrepresented students (such as first-generation students) are reflected in the student body as well. This
example of diverse student representation and selectivity highlights how access impacts the growth we are seeing in online education.

Participants

This study utilized purposeful sampling (Jones et al., 2014; Patton, 2002) to select participants. Purposeful sampling strives to identify participants who have “experience in the phenomenon under investigation” (Jones et al., 2014, p. 231). Students had to meet the following criteria to be eligible to participate: be currently enrolled in the program OR have graduated in the last 10 years from the program; completed the program or in the process of completing the degree. Online learning is a quickly evolving phenomenon, thus experiences in an online learning program more than 10 years ago may look very different from what they are like today. By limiting the time frame of students’ degree completion, the online graduate program is more likely to have followed a similar format for all participants, thus allowing for stronger comparisons across experiences.

Eligible participants were recruited via email. First, IRB approval was pursued upon successful proposal defense. Once approved, I contacted the Online Program Director at Koda University, who agreed to provide me with the email listservs of their online-program students and alumni. Students were sent a consent form which was completed digitally. Those who were willing to participate were asked to return the consent form via email attachment within two weeks of receiving the initial invitation and consent form. I sent two follow-up emails, one week apart, to invitees I did not hear back from.

Participants were a mix of students who are currently enrolled in the program (regardless of their current registration status) as well as alumni of the program. There was a total of 16
participants, 5 currently enrolled and 11 alumni (see Table 1). By including both current students and alumni in the study, multiple perspectives were captured as they pertain to student experience. Current students were able to talk about what they are currently experiencing as active participants in the program. Alternatively, alumni were able to reflect on the bigger picture of how the online learning program impacted their lives. All online students who met the criteria were included. I conducted interviews with 16 participants, which allowed for diversity in responses (see Table 1).

Table 1
Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Enrollment Status</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
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<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penelope</td>
<td>Active Enrollment</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Active Enrollment</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Decline to State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ann</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abigail</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaye</td>
<td>Active Enrollment</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Active Enrollment</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
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<td>Naomi</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
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<td>Jill</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooke</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Graduated</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>Luciele</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

I collected data in the form of semi-structured interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) that utilized open-ended questions and clarifying questions. Interviews are a way of learning about participants’ lived experiences from the perspective of participants, which aligned with my constructivist approach to the case study (Creswell, 2013). Interview questions addressed two topical areas: students’ decision to pursue an online graduate degree and their experience as online students once they started the program. I served as the sole interviewer and all interviews took place during the Summer 2020 semester.

Participants were asked to participate in one 1-hour interview with me via two-way video conferencing technologies such as Skype or Zoom. Participants were asked to turn their cameras on. To ensure privacy and confidentiality, all recorded interviews took place in an office or conference room where only I was present. With permission of participants, I recorded all interviews in order to transcribe the interviews later. During the interviews, I did not take notes so that I could be fully engaged with the participant; all interviews were transcribed using a third-party transcription service.

In addition to interviews, I also accessed publicly available information via the website and the brochure for prospective students. I chose these items because they are the most readily available resources for students who are considering the program. These resources are the first introduction to the program that potential students have, so they are important for shaping how the student perceives the program and may influence their decision to apply to the online program.
Data Analysis

Data collection and analysis occurred concurrently (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasize the value in engaging in analysis along the way, beginning to identify codes and emerging themes from the very first interview. As soon as I had completed the first interviews, I read through the transcripts to identify the main takeaways and themes of that interview. After identifying the main points in each interview, the first round of coding focused on creating categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In this study, I as the researcher came up with the categories based on what I was finding in the data. I went through multiple rounds of coding, focusing on category construction and constant comparative analysis to identify recurring patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Specifically, during the first round of coding I identified segments of data where students spoke to the influences on their decisions to enroll in an online program and how they experienced the online program (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using descriptive coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I created a codebook to note different influences. The second round of coding included axial coding, which allowed me to identify how codes or categories were related to each other (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As themes emerged, I returned to my data to look for any disconfirming data that did not fit into the themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

In addition to interviews, I also analyzed marketing materials and information publicly available to prospective students online. I used the themes from the interview findings (multiple influences for pursuing an online graduate degree, the right balance of autonomy and engagement, flexibility and the need to balance competing priorities, perceived legitimacy and
maximizing the degree yields a return on investment) and analyzed the website to see if those same themes came up in the marketing materials and, if so, how they were described.

To maintain and organize data during analysis, I stored recorded interviews on a password-protected OneDrive. Similarly, I filed consent forms as well as transcribed and coded interview transcripts in a folder on my OneDrive. Each round of coding was saved as a new document as a way of determining what phase of analysis was applied and how the themes were identified. This strategy allowed me not only to stay organized but also to keep a detailed audit trail.

Trustworthiness

Strategies to improve the trustworthiness of this study were explicitly stating the researcher’s positionality, peer review, and sharing disconfirming information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In the following paragraphs, I explain how I implemented each of these strategies and why they were important to improving the trustworthiness of my study.

First, explicitly stating the researcher’s positionality clarified the relationship between the researcher and the participants as well as the researcher’s approach to analyzing and in interpreting the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This was important because it outlines how the interpretation and analysis may be influenced by the researcher and the perspectives the researcher brings to the study. I share information about my positionality in the next section and discuss how my positionality influenced my approach to this study.

Second, each section of the study underwent multiple iterations of peer review. The methodology section was reviewed by multiple peers and a faculty member during a 15-week course. In addition, the interview questions were peer reviewed multiple times. Peer review is an
important practice in ensuring trustworthiness as it assists in maintaining the overall quality of scholarly literature being introduced into the field (Rowland, 2002).

Finally, any disconfirming evidence from participants is shared in the findings section to enhance the trustworthiness of the study and to potentially inform future research. Without disconfirming evidence, the results of the study may appear biased or that I only looked for evidence which supported any preconceived notions or biases I may have had initially (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peer review, sharing disconfirming evidence, and sharing the researcher’s positionality are all important ways of enhancing the trustworthiness of the study. These strategies also helped to address any potential researcher bias that may have influenced the findings.

Researcher’s Positionality

It is important to share information regarding my positionality because it provides insights into the way I approached this research study. As a researcher, I have a mostly outsider status as it pertains to online learning. I have not completed a degree online, though I have taken a number of courses online or in a hybrid format. Having taken courses in these formats allowed me to have a point of connection with my participants, though it was important for me to recognize that taking a few courses in an online format did not compare to completing an entire degree online. Given my limited experience, I needed to make sure to create rapport with participants so they felt comfortable sharing their stories with me even as an outsider. In addition, I also needed to be prepared to ask follow-up questions to make sure I fully understood what participants meant, considering my outsider perspective.
While I have limited personal experiences with online learning, professionally I work with online students and online-learning administrators. In my role, I am responsible for identifying retention trends in online learning programs and providing recommendations and solutions for influencing retention rates for the programs I work with. This may have caused participants to be hesitant to share their true feelings or share any negative thoughts, out of fear that there may be consequences from the program administration. To account for this, I reiterated to participants that our interview was recorded but that all data would be confidential, and data would be stripped of any identifiable information before being shared in this dissertation and potential reports or publications.

Additionally, I also identify as a bi-racial (African American and White) woman. Since this dissertation focuses on access for students from various backgrounds, my physical representation when virtually “face-to-face” over Zoom may have had an influence on the way in which students interpreted and responded to my questions. Students may have felt more open to share their true feelings, assuming that I would understand, or they may have felt less willing to share their feelings if they thought it might negatively impact the conversation.

This study was also shaped by my constructionist worldview. I believe that knowledge and meaning are conditional and situational (Creswell, 2013, p. 514). Moreover, I believe that knowledge is constructed within a social context (Creswell, 2013). Thus, human interactions with the world influence the ways in which individuals understand and relate to the world and with others (Creswell, 2013). Consistent with a constructionist worldview, I believe the aim of a researcher should be to represent multiple voices (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and to use gathered information as a responsible consultant. Therefore, I relied heavily on interviews to gather the
stories of my participants to understand their experiences and aimed to accurately represent their voices in my findings section.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that only graduate students were included; there is no undergraduate representation in this study, as my case was a graduate program. Previous research (Bawa, 2016; Levy, 2007) has found that students who are in lower levels of college are more likely to drop out than students at higher levels (i.e., undergraduates vs. graduate students). Furthermore, lower level college students tend to be less prepared or know less what to expect than upper level students (Bawa, 2016). Thus, it is likely that undergraduate students’ experiences in an online program may differ greatly from those of graduate students. However, by only examining the experience of graduate-level students, this study is able to situate the findings within existing literature using a narrower scope. Future research should examine how the lived experiences of online students pursuing an undergraduate degree may differ from those pursuing a graduate degree.

A second limitation of this study is that all participating students were from the same institution attending a graduate online program with a good reputation; this unique context influenced the experiences of participants. As we strive to explore how online learning programs influence access for a more diverse group of students, understanding the experiences of online learners at less selective institutions will be essential. Future research should thus explore how the experiences of students in different online programs at various types of institutions compare to each other as they relate to access and the student experience of online students.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

This qualitative case study explored participants’ decisions to attend a graduate online program and their experiences while pursuing their degree in the graduate online program. Based on data from 16 interviews and document analysis, I found that participants were driven by multiple influences when deciding to pursue their degree online. In addition, participants needed the right balance of autonomy and engagement in order to have a positive experience in the program. Similarly, flexibility increased the need for participants to balance competing priorities. As a result of these multiple aspects, the degree to which participants perceived their degree as being legitimate and that they are able to maximize it results in participants feeling as though they have earned a return on their investment.

Multiple Influences for Pursuing an Online Graduate Degree

There were several aspects that influenced participants’ decisions to pursue a degree online. How participants were going to fit school into their existing reality was an important driver of students choosing to pursue their degree online, as was career advancement. Participants found that online learning provided them with access to higher education in a way that worked for them at the time they decided to pursue their degree. For example, students were
able to stay in their careers while still completing their degrees, which would afford them the ability to ultimately advance. By completing their degree online, participants were afforded the necessary flexibility of earning an advanced degree while still balancing existing priorities.

One of the “current realities” that came up most frequently as a factor that influenced participants’ decision to attend an online program was their family obligations. Participants shared an array of circumstances and family dynamics, none of which were the same. Some had small children while others lived with their parents and other family members and needed to have more flexibility in their schedule than being in a brick-and-mortar campus would allow. For example, Jill, an alumna, stated, “I think too, just the accessibility, I mean, had online not been an option, I couldn't have gone to school.” The access that online learning provided students was the catalyst for participants like Jill to have the choice to pursue a degree in their chosen field at their chosen institution. Luciele concurred, ”I don't know. Probably I probably would just, would've just made it work with one of the schools in my city.” The access and flexibility also allowed them to choose when they pursued their degree because they were not bound by time and location.

Some participants just did not have the option to leave their jobs for an indefinite amount of time while they pursued their degree. Luciele explained, “I didn't want to lose my job. I just didn't have the money to quit. And then I just, job hunting is so hard, and I was like, I don't really want to deal with that to be honest.” The ability to not have to choose between their job and their academic pursuits was what made earning their degree a possibility.

Similarly, Abigail, an alumna of the program, noted:

I needed to sort of be, be working not just from a financial standpoint, but also I needed to be adding things marketable skills to my CV and working in research was a way to do
that. I didn’t want to give that up. So being able to apply for online programs made more sense timing wise because it gave me the flexibility to have classes later in the evening, I could continue to work, gain skillsets in the real world.

It was not just about working for financial reasons but also to stay connected in the field and continue advancing in their careers. Since this program is practitioner based, many participants were already working in the field to varying degrees; they may just not have been in the specific position or at the specific level they aspired to be. Participants were passionate about their work and did not necessarily want to leave work altogether to pursue an advanced degree, which is why online learning was appealing. For example, Penelope shared:

I got promoted in my job and I actually really liked the whole, I had a really good networking system for me, and I just knew so many people from the community. And when I decided to go to school, I was like, okay I want to do online for that reason because I still want to keep working towards this job.

The reality, however, was that participants’ work schedules and inability to relocate were limiting. Family commitments and work would not allow participants to choose an in-person program. These realities thus pushed them towards pursuing their degree online.

Another factor influencing participants’ decision to pursue an online degree was career advancement. Participants’ pursuit of promotion and encouragement from colleagues drove them to pursue their degree specifically online. For some participants, their promotion to the next level in their career was predicated on them earning a degree. In fact, this was one of the biggest drivers behind participants looking into pursuing a degree in the first place.

Some participants were already in the field they wanted to ultimately be in but were not in the position they wanted. For example, Luciele stated:

So I was in the industry, but not the department I wanted to be in. And I had been applying to more, I want it to be more involved in the program implementation itself. So,
I had been trying to get onto that side for a few times. I had applied to a few different positions that had opened up, but just never made it over. I saw that the people who were getting those positions all had masters of course also talk to the people at my work and I really wanted to get into the monitoring and evaluation. So, the evaluative side, if this program doing what it should be, so I talked to people in my organization said, what do I, what do I need to get into that position? And of course, they said [degree program] so that like every single person I talked to, I talked to multiple and they all said, [degree program] is the way to go. So that of course sealed which masters to go for.

In Luciele’s case, she was also motivated by encouragement from colleagues who told her earning a graduate degree was the best way to move into the position she wanted. Luciele’s comments suggested that online learning offered a way to earn the degree needed for advancement without giving up her place in the industry. Alison shared a similar story for choosing to pursue her degree. She said:

So, I was already working at [company], but I was in a non-exempt more junior position because I didn't have an advanced degree. And so I had my, my bachelor's in biology and I was, you know, working and doing a lot of the same work, but they basically said, you will be in this position, at this level, for 10 to 12 years until you get the experience or you need to get some letters behind your name. So, it was kind of one of those things. And I knew I wanted to go [back to school].

Alison was faced with the choice of waiting multiple years to advance once she had the required work experience or being able to advance by way of her academic credentials. Online learning afforded her the option to choose pursuing her degree while still keeping her job and working towards a promotion long term. Similarly, a third participant, Brooke, an alumna of the program shared:

So, I don’t know why I wanted to go back to school with the grueling job that I had, but I think it was because I wanted to get higher up in the company. So, I didn't have to do the grueling work and could take a step back.

As previously mentioned, for many participants, their career aspirations were a driving force behind their decision to pursue their degree and their desire to not completely leave the field drove their decision to pursue online. For these participants, their decision to pursue a
degree online was not necessarily financially motivated, but keeping their connections to their network, community, employment organization, and their field was something that they were not willing to give up.

Document analysis of the program’s website and its downloadable brochure indicated that students could choose from six different concentrations and multiple start dates per year, which suggests that providing students with options is an important aspect of the program. In addition to logistical choices about when students could start their program, the website also stated that students had the option to complete their practicum locally. Again, this suggests that the program leadership understands that students need their degree to fit into their current realities.

The website did not explicitly mention career advancement as an outcome of the program. There is mention of how students can do hands-on research in the field and in their communities, but there is no mention that participants can expect career opportunities to come out of completing their degree. There was a heavy emphasis on the exposure participants would have to various aspects of the field by joining the program in addition to being connected with and becoming leaders within the field themselves.

The Right Balance of Autonomy and Engagement

The asynchronous aspect of the program came up as a common theme across interviews, but in multiple different contexts. There did not seem to be a unanimous consensus as to what online work could or should be asynchronous while still maintaining the academic and student experience graduate students were expecting. Some participants felt as though the program was a
bit too independent and they were “teaching themselves” for the most part. Sarah, an actively enrolled student, explained:

In fact, if anything, I think it's kind of harder in some ways, because you end up having to teach yourself a lot of concepts because there are a lot of lectures that are prerecorded. So, if you don't understand something, you can't just raise your hand and most of the time you don't really want to email it. Cause it might take them 48 hours to get back to you. And you're like, I need to know this for the homework. So, you end up having to teach yourself something, Google stuff. So, it is very much in some classes self-taught which is, I think what makes it harder.

Sarah’s response may have suggested that, although there was help and support available, since it was not immediate, participants chose not to take advantage of it. In addition to flexibility and convenience, participants like Sarah also expected immediacy in responsiveness from their faculty in the online program.

Other participants, however, thrived on the autonomy and independence that the online program afforded them, even from an academic perspective. Jill said:

I got to assess whether or not I needed to sit through this lecture or if I could skip this one or if I wanted to do one of the lectures twice or pause and look up and write down in that moment, I found that to be a really effective way for me to learn. I liked that a lot. So that autonomy, that autonomy, the ability to control kind of your schedule your world. Yeah. Very much so. And yeah. And, and really just the, seeing the information they want you to know saying, well, I know that I don't know that I good on that and being able to adjust accordingly was great.

Again, being able to control their worlds and find the right balance between everything worked for a number of participants. Moreover, some participants found value in being able to pause, reflect, look something up, write something down, then go back to the material. This is something most participants struggled with in a live classroom setting. Jill explained:

All of the materials for the entire semester were available at the beginning of the semester. So, you aren't constricted to like, to their time slots, like their due dates were finite and strict and the exams and the live sessions, but nothing prevented you from working ahead. So, I like on day one when there wasn't actually anything due, I had two
hours, so I worked for two hours and each day I worked for the two hours just like sequentially through the material. And then I did the assignments and they let you turn them in early. So, I just turned them in as I completed them. So, I didn't forget about it. And then I still participated in the scheduled online sessions to the best of my ability. All of the lectures were prerecorded and everything. So, I did very much appreciate that I could work ahead. So that way I never got behind. And even if there was like a bigger project, odds are that I'd already done it by the time it rolled around. So, because there wasn't any way to eke out more time because I was, I had two babies. You can't really do schoolwork whenever you want.

As Jill points out, the online program created flexibility from a convenience standpoint.

However, the ability for online learning to also meet the learning style needs of participants in this unique way was another way in which online learning increased access for participants, beyond just admissions criteria.

Another layer of the conversation around asynchronous work was regarding what participants called “live sessions.” For example, Naomi pointed out:

Another thing that I've really liked about this program was that it was very flexible. So, like sometimes even like, it was like eight, nine o'clock at night, I would have to pick up my mom from work sometimes. And I couldn't attend class, like while I'm driving my car, which is something that you can't really do in person. So, I was able to go to class at different times.

Participants noted that live sessions were held at varying intervals depending on the course and the instructor. Depending on the course and the other obligations the participants were juggling, being able to choose whether they logged on live or watched the recording later was another example of how participants’ needs were met using the online modality.

Participants noted that throughout their program they had mostly independent work, but from time to time they did have assignments that they worked on with other students, either in groups or in pairs. Sarah said:

I think that group work is where we tend to learn the most because it's the closest, we get to a true classroom environment where you are actually being forced to think out loud or
answer questions or, you know, that kind of thing. So, I think that the classes that have
the most forced engagement are the ones where students are getting the most out of it.

There was not much feedback from participants on their experience working in groups,
but the participants who did comment on groupwork felt as though it enhanced their experience
by simulating the “traditional” in-classroom experience. It also gave them less of an opportunity
to hide behind their computer screens and work too independently without having to interact
with others in their program.

Flexibility and the Need to Balance Competing Priorities

The ability for participants to complete their degree in a flexible way meant that they had
to be more intentional about how they balanced their worlds blurring together. Students
attempted to strike this balance by communicating with their families and children about their
new priority, though that did not always work. Other students attempted to manage their time by
creating routines and schedules that balanced school, work, and home life. Regardless of the way
students attempted to juggle their competing priorities, doing so was made easier as well as more
complicated by the flexibility of online learning. For example, the presence of other people in the
house when participants were trying to do coursework meant that they had to be creative about
how to balance their schedules and set boundaries with their families. Penelope explained:

So, I think like that's something that people forget that if you are going to do an online
program and you're going to do it with your family around, you have to find time. And
like times that work for you where it's quiet, where people don't bother you. I don't think
they [parents] realize how important it is. I can be studying—it was just last like, like last
week my mom was like, ‘I never see you doing the dishes.’ Like mom I’m taking an
exam. And like I said, it’s, it’s just, I think, because living, being at home for the last few
months and everybody’s at home [due to COVID-19], I think we all just have been
getting in everybody’s like stress level, but it was hard for my parents. I don’t think they
thought school its real school.
Even the families who were supportive of participants’ decision to go back to school, at times appeared to forget that they were, in fact, in school. To some extent there was a need for changed expectations around what the participant was able to contribute to the household, but that did not always happen. Similarly, Naomi, an actively enrolled student, recollected:

And then like when you’re living at home, like peace and quiet, you don’t realize how important that is. Especially like, I don’t know how I did it in high school, parents making so much noise and like living at home, my mom like would have friends over, like while I had like class going on and like was like her and her friends were supposed to dance, like do a dance performance. And they were like practicing in my living room and like, they would mess up steps and they would all start like talking over each other. And I’m sitting here like trying to have a discussion about something that’s going on in the world. Like it drove me crazy.

Naomi found it challenging to set boundaries when she needed to study or be logged in for a lecture because her family did not always recognize that she was unavailable because she was physically there. Again, much of this was due to the fact that because participants were online, they were physically with their families and their family members could see first-hand how balancing everything may have been impacting the student. Responses such as Penelope’s and Naomi’s suggest that while family members, especially parents, were supportive of the participant pursuing a degree in concept, the logistical aspect of them doing so, especially at home, sometimes blurred the lines of normalcy in a unique way.

Despite their best efforts and even success at creating a schedule that worked, some of the aspects of their lives before starting their degree ended up taking a temporary backseat because it just became too much to juggle everything. Children, for example, were a major influence on participants’ experience in the online program. Alison, an alumna of the program, reflected:

And then I just didn’t sleep because it’s like I would do work and then family stuff. And then once the kids went to bed at like eight o’clock, that was when I studied. So, I had like eight o’clock to like one in the morning and then I’d wake up the next morning at six
because that’s when the kids are up and, you know, do it all over again. So, I just didn’t sleep for two years.

Again, the flexibility of the online program did not always equate to not having to make difficult choices about priorities. At times, being able to complete schoolwork and care for their children meant adhering to creative schedules that may not have been what participants were accustomed to. Some participants were more proactive in their approach to developing a schedule and balance with their families. Jill stated:

I essentially had my plan that I had, the kids went to bed at 7:30. So I had from 8:00 PM till 10:00 PM, cause I had to go to bed on four nights a week. Cause I worked three days and I didn't want to plan on spending on my three workdays. So, I had two hours, four nights a week and I best get it done. And with the exception of one semester, that worked.

Examples such as Jill illustrated how the need to keep familiar routines for children despite their being in school had an impact on the choices she was able to make regarding her degree. Even those without children found that their experience in the online program was heavily influenced by their ability to develop a routine that incorporated the many different elements of their lives. For example, Luciele explained:

The first year I was a little bit better about going to the gym still because that was my stress relief. It felt pretty stressed. I would just go to the gym, burn it off. And that helped a lot. Second year is where it got a little bit busier. So, you get in the harder classes. So that's where it kind of got a little bit chaotic and, you know, worked later into the night had more stressful weekends, so didn't work out as much. So that's, that's where it went to hell if I'll be honest.

Striking the right balance and developing a routine that worked was a reoccurring theme across interviews. For those who were able to anticipate how pursuing their degree would impact their personal lives, developing a regimented schedule allowed them to have more control over each aspect of their life. Participants not only had to consider their own schedules but the schedules of others as well, such as their family and jobs. To some extent, the flexibility offered
to them by the fact that their degree was online was offset by the fact that they still only had a finite window of time to complete their coursework. However, the participant being able to determine when that period was, was what made online learning accessible.

The word “flexibility” is not used on the website, but the spirit of flexibility is prominent across the site. For example, the website includes several references to the choices students have being part of the program. The website also highlights that students can complete their coursework 100% online and they are never required to come to campus. This suggests that the program found flexibility and providing options to be appealing aspects that prospective students would be looking for.

Perceived Legitimacy and Maximizing the Degree Yields a Return on Investment

Participants were aware that a stigma of online education exists. For that reason, it was important to participants that the degree they were pursuing would be viewed as legitimate by the larger society. Participants intentionally sought to pursue their degree at an institution that was known for academic rigor and excellence and where they would have access to world-renowned faculty. In addition to earning a legitimate degree, participants who were able to maximize their experience in the online program, in turn, felt as though they had earned a return on their investment.

Participants shared in their interviews that they were concerned about legitimacy. Many perceived a certain stigma around online learning and were concerned how that may impact the value of their degree. Some of this stigma did come directly from participants’ families and colleagues, as well as from subtle comments and interactions with the larger society, which then influenced participants’ internalized beliefs. Mary, an alumna of the program, recalled:
It's just so funny because there's still this like stigma that it's like, ‘Oh, well you're in the online program. So, it probably was easier to get into it probably wasn't the same. It probably wasn't as hard or whatever.’ And I even, I even sometimes get that way too, but I'm like, I worked so hard and I got a good GPA and they're like, ‘Oh, but it was online.’ Like I still sometimes get like embarrassed, which is such a bummer, you know?

Despite her academically excelling in a program and university known for academic rigor, Mary still felt the impacts that came with the stigma around online learning. Subtle comments from friends and colleagues did not necessarily demonize online learning but worked to discredit the accomplishments she had made, citing that somehow they were not as challenging.

Moreover, there was an internal fight that existed because of the messages she was receiving from the outside world. So, while she recognized the benefits of online learning from a practical and logistical perspective, she was still wrestling with the negative perceptions of online learning that she herself had even internalized to an extent. Another participant, Jill, noted:

Realistically, I had two small kids and I was a single mom. So, I had to still work full time. And there was no, you know, I worked 12 hours unpredictable shifts. So online was the only feasible option, but then I still, I didn’t want anyone to be able to look at my diploma and say, oh, you went to one of the “pay-for-school” schools. So, I didn’t, I didn’t want to do like one of the predatory schools. So, I wanted a brick and mortar that had a good reputation.

While participants like Jill had a need and desire to pursue their degree online for several reasons, they wanted the degree they earned to be taken seriously and not thought of as a lesser degree than their peers or potential competition in the job market. When it came to their degree, participants wanted to make it clear that there was a difference between programs that were entirely online (““pay-for-school’ schools”) and online programs connected to well-respected and established institutions.
Furthermore, participants were concerned that their degree would be viewed in ways like those of “degree mills” where the academic rigor of the program and institution has been called into question. Jill explained:

...and then fighting for the, no, I'm working really hard at this. This is not some easy thing that I'm doing. But since I was able to do it while working with, and having kids and whatnot, it was perceived as quite easy.

The ability that online learning afforded participants to juggle multiple aspects of their lives seemingly challenged the legitimacy they felt their degree held. On the one hand, Jill had access to a higher education because the program was online and allowed her flexibility. On the other hand, however, because she was able to do it while balancing everything else, she was worried that her degree was perceived as somehow less rigorous and thus less valuable. There was an implication here that not only was her degree in question because it was online but also because nontraditional students could succeed at it, yet another stigma in itself.

To offset this, participants had opted to pursue a degree from an institution that has traditionally been known for its academic rigor and reputation. For example, Luciele shared:

So, I think the main deciding factor was it was a quality school because I was worried about it being online, that it wouldn't be taken as seriously. Which is interesting now that we're in COVID everyone's doing online. So, I think that whole stereotype is going to go away anyways. So, if I was going to do it online, I just want to kind of that name brand school.

Similarly, Abigail, an alumna of the program, explained, “I wanted it to be backed up by a program that I thought would be really you know, professional and rigorous and had a reputation within the field.” The brand of the brick-and-mortar institution was one of excellence and scholarship, qualities that participants felt were important. As selective as the program was, many participants appeared to be equally selective and reputation mattered to them. They wanted an online program, but not just any online program.
The website also reinforces the academic rigor of the program by having a heavy emphasis on the access to resources, immersion and excellence students would have by joining the program. Information focused on being taught by world-renowned faculty in the field, faculty-led trips, and hands-on research, as well as international and local community engagement opportunities. The rankings and accreditation of the program are also displayed on the website and distinctly indicate how both the institution as a whole as well as the program specially compare to their competitors.

In addition to the multiple references about faculty support and engagement, there is also an intentional effort to connect prospective students with current events happening in the world and how it relates to the field of study. Infographics with current events and trending topics in the industry were the main focal point on the website, which engaged website visitors to think about how the topic and the field interacted with each other. Each of these infographics were cited from reputable data sources and also branded with the logo of the college as well, implying that there was a backing of the data from the institution.

Additionally, in the downloadable brochure, there are student testimonials speaking to the benefits of the program directly from students who have completed it. Specifically, the student testimonials speak to the support students got from their faculty, not only from an academic perspective but also in accommodating their needs as they balanced other areas of their lives, such as their careers. There was also a focus on the opportunities students were able to engage in being part of the program, including traveling and community-based work. Students also spoke of the way in which they were able to take what they were learning in their classrooms and apply it in the work they were doing in the field. Overall, the main themes from the student testimonials serve to reinforce the messaging across the website and brochure.
Concerns about legitimacy did not only impact students as they were selecting a program. Once in the program, participants sought to ensure their degree was maximized and legitimized in several ways. Specifically, participants felt it was important that they engage with their faculty and receive regular feedback on their assignments. There were some mixed feelings among participants in regard to the asynchronous aspect of the program and the degree to which this was beneficial or not. Some participants appreciated the flexibility working at their own pace and relatively independently afforded them, whereas others felt as though it exacerbated feelings of alienation and isolation.

In addition to the reputation of the institution, participants also cited that the faculty were an important factor in legitimizing their degree and reassuring their decision to pursue their degree online. Jill said:

I think, I don't know that that's as common in an online degree that you're going to still get those professors that are the people doing stuff in the field, you know, like, and I felt a lot of them were very active in [degree field] and in their areas of research. And so you still got that level of education and that level of experience, which I thought was worth it. And you know, I think that you would get that too. If you went to a good in person program, I thought that was more unique to this online program. That it was run by the same people who were running the on the ground program.

Having access to the world-renowned faculty who are leaders in their field, without being physically on campus, made participants feel that the education they were receiving and degree they were earning were equal to that of their on-campus counterparts. There was also an assumption here that because faculty also taught in person (as well as online) they were “better” faculty. From her response, it appeared Jill had also made some of her own assumptions about online programs and the faculty that teach in them. Seeking out a program where online teaching faculty also taught on campus suggested that Jill had internalized some of the stigma around online learning, even having attended an online program herself.
While strong faculty instructors were important to participants, there was some disconfirming evidence that came out of the interviews that suggested that renowned faculty teaching online did not always equate to a positive student experience. Abigail stated:

I definitely think that [Koda University] in particular has a couple of faculty members who are exemplars in that respect and just do a fantastic job in their role as online, you know, as mentors so that that's nice, but you do have to work so much harder to build that. And that can be really hard when you're working full time and, and you don't get to sit in their office.

Participants like Abigail felt there was more intentionality needed when they were online in order to develop relationships with their faculty and access the wealth of knowledge and opportunity that came from them. Abigail elaborated:

And I think, I think that's just, that has to be the foundation of online programs in general is understanding like the importance of, of good faculty and those programs because graduate education just can't be done theoretically...I would think that the higher level sort of critical thinking skills that come out of graduate training just do not lend itself well to, you know, purely asynchronous, complete-as-you-like, tight delivery structures. I really think there has to be the opportunity for feedback and engagement for students to really feel like they learned or mastered any material. And I don't really see the point of going to graduate school at all if you aren't trying to do that; it just makes no sense, it's too expensive.

The same asynchronous aspect of the online program that many participants cited as being the reason for pursuing the degree was at times a concern for participants when it came to receiving feedback from the faculty on their assignments beyond just a grade. Some participants did not always feel they had access to their instructors in the same way they might if they were physically in a classroom or office together. In the case of Abigail, for example, she found that specific instructors were great at creating environments for students to engage in and were timely with feedback, but others did not. Arguably, participants could have a similar experience on campus with faculty, but it appeared as though participants felt it was an easier occurrence online without the accountability of seeing each other face-to-face.
A handful of participants mentioned that they had been able to develop at least surface-level relationships with their classmates and this was sufficient for the purposes of graduate school. Yet and still, other participants acknowledged that the experiences shared between classmates are different online than on campus. Jill said:

Yeah. I guess isolation and realizing that, that shared experience that, you know, in the moment shared experience is more important than initially thought that that was, that was a component of the enjoyableness of school. Like without that kind of social comradery, it became very much just a thing I was doing. I'm just going to, you know, do these assignments, check them off, get them done and get out.

Not being able to build relationships with peers and faculty negatively influenced Jill’s experience in the program. School became something she did, something that was checked off her to-do list, but not something she truly engaged with. Similarly, Claire, an alumna of the program, commented:

They didn’t have a ton of time to just, you know, like network and hang out or touch base on this or that it was all very efficient because everybody had a ton to be doing outside of the program. Participants like Claire and Jill may have wanted to connect with their classmates to some degree, but they did not find that the online environment lent itself to establishing these dynamics without a lot of effort and intentionality. Moreover (and a challenge of being online), because participants had so much going on in addition to school, even if the program found a way to offer virtual options, participants may not have been able to (or wanted to) go due to limited time.

Interestingly, participants also shared that personality had some influence on their experience in the online program. When asked about whether she thought her classmates had similar experiences in the program, Luciele responded:
I do think it depends on the person because I've talked to other people who have tried to do online school and they've said they had to drop out because it wasn't for them. So, I really think it depends on the personality. Like some people really need that in person interaction.

She, however, acknowledged:

I have a personality that's very built for online learning. I think it's less of a need for, in person interaction, which sounds kind of strange, but some people really need that like live debate or just seeing people face to face. I don't know. I think, especially since I was more in the [elective] track it was more, it was less about discussion and more about learning these programs and this math. So, I think it was the subject and the personality that made, made my experience successful.

As someone who identified as not needing a lot of in-person interaction, she found that learning online suited her and her learning style. Additionally, the content she was studying was less discussion based and so she was able to successfully work independently. However, her response also suggested that she felt as though she should need those face-to-face interactions and, in some ways, seemed to apologize for not needing them. Instead of accepting the nuances between online and in-person programs as being appropriate, she credited her personality for being different and that was why online worked for her. This may have been another reflection of the stigma of online learning, such as the lack of connection and interaction, and the way in which she had internalized them.

Furthermore, when asked about their connection to the institution as a whole, most students said that they did not necessarily feel tied to the institution the way they did to their undergraduate university. Sarah mentioned:

You know, I think that a lot of that college pride is a lot more based off of like, if you went there for undergrad, I think for graduate programs, I think it's a little more, less socially based and a little more, I need to do research and get a job kind of a thing, you know? So I think that's why people are a little more focused probably on their, their department focused on kind of building those, those relationships.
Sarah viewed her attendance at the university in a more utilitarian way rather than in the sense of community. There was clearly a distinction made between the value of networking and the connection to campus from a comradery perspective. What is not as clear in her response was whether these differences existed because of the differences between on-campus and online graduate programs or between undergraduate and graduate programs that she has experienced.

Similarly, Ann, an alumna as well as an employee of the university, said:

"Cause you know, [Koda University] has all these like alumni networking events and in a sense, I really don't feel like an alumni. Cause I feel like for me, I feel like an alumni or alumnus would be someone who actually got their undergraduate degree there. You know what I mean? Like maybe someone who had an undergraduate degree from [Koda University] would have more investment, you know, would feel more invested because I only got my graduate degree there, you know?"

So even though Ann worked at the institution and earned a graduate degree from the university, she still felt as though she was on the periphery and really did not feel the sense of connection to the institution. Again, the comparison between undergrad and graduate school came out in Ann’s response as well. This may have suggested that some students were more likely to have chosen an online program for graduate school because their focus was different than it was in undergrad.

On the other hand, Brooke, an alumna of the program, acknowledged:

"But you know, I definitely feel like I've been supported by the institution and, you know, a lot of people told me when I did get my [current] job, that [Koda University] popped out at them. So, I was like, thank goodness."

Brooke was able to credit the institution for helping her resume stand out but went on to say, “So yeah, it, I feel supported, but I don't necessarily feel the same passion or whatever around it that my friends did that went there.” Even though there was a tangible benefit to attending the university she did, it still did not change the fact that the disconnect from campus she felt remained. This suggested that alumni connection is not just about what students got out of the
program (i.e., tangible outcomes such as a job), but there was some other element that created “alumni pride” that may be missing from the online student experience.

Overall, the majority of participants felt like they had gotten a return on their investment, but there were a couple of participants who did not. Whether participants felt they got a return on their investment appeared to be influenced by whether or not they had seen tangible outcomes, typically in the form of their career. Regarding whether she felt she had gotten a return on her investment, Luciele shared:

Yes, absolutely. For me it really worked out because it got me where I wanted to be. So, six months into the grad program, they had it an opening in the monitoring and evaluation unit. So, I managed to switch over into the unit as a coordinator, so very entry level. It was a lateral move, but finally in the department I wanted to be in and then after I finished, it took about 10 months. And they gave me a promotion. So now I'm an [occupation] which is a position that requires a masters. So, I wouldn't be here if I didn't do that.

Luciele directly credited the program with her career advancement and thus she felt as though she had gotten a return on her investment. Completing her degree resulted in her being qualified to pursue a position in the department she wanted to be in, which she was not eligible for before pursuing her degree.

Some participants assessed that they had gotten a return on their investment in a broader sense, for example, in the form of having access to campus resources. Referencing back to the legitimacy aspect, the ability to utilize the same resources their on-campus peers could justified to the participants that they were having a comparable experience in a slightly different modality. Naomi stated, “So, we had access to like the virtual library, which is something that I use more than the regular library.” Again, it was not a financial gain, and it did not seem like this was an
overwhelming reason for them to select the program, but it did seem to reinforce their confidence in pursuing their degree online.

Some participants said that they did not feel as though they had gotten a return on their investment specifically because their job prospects had not manifested themselves the way they expected. Claire stated:

There's definitely elements that maybe kept me from being able to fully leverage every aspect of getting a degree from [Koda University] online. So, and those kinds of things would be the networking when I was in the job market for a very long time after I graduated and a lot of that was just, I didn't have that baseline network whereas other people who are on campuses do.

Claire felt that the lack of network due to having completed her degree online hindered her ability to advance her career after graduation. Similarly, Joshua, an alumnus student, said:

Granted I enjoy what I'm doing and that's, that's not the issue, but it's more of, if I'm going to spend a lot of money to go back to school and did a, an advanced degree you definitely would like to see the returns quicker. I do see the potential future, but I also, the timeline of that is nerve wracking because there's no guarantee that you'll get a job, or you'll move. There will be an opening that allows for your skill set and then also for the, for the amount of money that you need to be making to pay off your student loans. So in short, no, not yet, but do I see potential? Yes. Is that nerve wracking? Yes.

Participants like Josh and Claire felt as though they did not get a return on investment because of how cost correlated to the lack of career advancement. Somewhat similarly, participants who had never been able to go to campus spoke to their experiences of feeling disconnected, albeit grateful to have attended the university. Jill commented:

One of my professors had a job that I would have loved, but it was in [US city]. I live here. The job sounds great, but I, I live here. So that was also a bit problematic. Like the, like the few connections I did make and, you know, and she had a job that I would have loved, it would have been great. But with that disconnect of location, you know. Had she been here and offered that job I would have taken it in a heartbeat; but I knew that going into it.
At times participants felt a disconnect from the institution because they could not take advantage of the same resources their on-campus or even local online peers were able to. This did not change their feelings around having a return on their investment, but it was something that was noted by more than one student. For example, Luciele also mentioned:

[I] was using the [Koda University] job board using the job board. I think everybody that I graduated with, they were kind of in the same position. Everyone is job hunting. I did go to [US city] for a job fair at one point. Wasn't the most helpful because most jobs were in [US city] and I didn't want to live in [US city].

It does not necessarily discredit the return on investment that the participants felt they received, but it was something that a few participants cited as a reason they did not feel as strong of a connection to the institution.

Overall, when considering whether or not participants have seen a return on their investment, the majority of participants felt as though they had. Abigail said:

So, my circumstances are different and I'm really grateful for the program. I might be paying off that debt forever, but you know, for, for me, I was so relieved when I started looking at you know, careers and research and felt like that matched my personality one and really what I wanted to accomplish two, which was the most important thing. And I had faculty at [Koda University] that even in the online format in the [degree] program could identify that within me and help foster that.

Abigail continued:

So, I wouldn't make a different decision the second time round. I absolutely would have done it the same way there might've been like individual things like trying a little bit harder with my cohort to make things more, you know, more connected. You know, maybe those things I would have done, but as far as making the choices that I did, I, I wouldn't.

Most participants did not necessarily associate a return on their investment from a financial standpoint, but rather a holistic approach when they were able to consider all that had come from their decision to pursue their degree online. Abigail’s comments suggested that the responsibility for building connections is not squarely that of the program, staff, and faculty; students were also
active participants in that and Abigail acknowledged that there was more she could have done to create those connections she was hoping for.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Throughout this dissertation, the concept of balance shows up again and again. The reality of online education is that there are pushes and pulls at play each step of the way for students, and finding the happy medium is the key to having an overall positive experience. As this dissertation maintains, online learning is a series of dichotomies and juxtapositions and I would argue that this particular case does a good job of highlighting those in a realistic way.

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore what influences students’ decision to attend an online program and their experiences while pursuing their graduate degree. Based on responses from 16 participants, I found that there were multiple influences on participants’ decisions to pursue an online graduate degree. In addition, the findings suggested that balance was necessary between autonomy and engagement. Furthermore, flexibility meant that there was greater need to balance competing priorities. Finally, participants feeling that their degree was legitimate and that they were able to maximize their degree resulted in participants feeling as though they had earned a return on their investment.

When considering Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) framework, the findings from the interviews showed that students do navigate through the four strategic categories at various
points in the student lifecycle within the online program. As the model suggests, engagement during the recruitment, coursework, post coursework, and alumni stages of the student journey influences the way students experience the program overall. Additionally, external influences also impact their decisions within each of these categories as well their decision to pursue an online degree in general. I discuss these connections to the conceptual framework as well as connections to existing literature next.

Connections to the Existing Literature and Conceptual Framework

Existing literature focuses on aspects of students’ experiences such as access, time management, teacher presence and support. This study adds to and expands on the existing literature of higher education, highlighting the complexity of student experiences in an online program. The findings highlighted common challenges online students face, consistent with previous research (e.g., LaPadula, 2010; Levine & Sun, 2002; Lynch-Holmes, 2013; Richardson et al., 2015; Scheuermann, 2012; Tait, 2000), such as isolation and alienation, time management, and lack of connections with faculty. The findings also reinforced what previous literature says about the benefits of online programs such as providing increased access to students who otherwise may not be able to pursue a higher education (Frenette, 2004; Tait, 2000).

In addition, the findings highlight the nuances of online students’ experiences, emphasizing the importance of balance, something that has not found much attention in online higher education literature. Specifically, the findings of this study provided a holistic portrayal of participants’ experiences, both in and out of the classroom. Without the right balance between all of these, the student experience is jeopardized.
Within each of the main themes identified throughout interviews, the concept of balance consistently came up. Balance was seen in the influences on participants’ decision to pursue an online degree, particularly when it came to participants having to balance their desire to pursue a graduate degree with their existing realities and obligations. For example, participants had to balance wanting to pursue an advanced degree for the purposes of career advancement with the reality that their jobs limited their ability to do so. Similarly, the need to balance autonomy and engagement was a main theme that came out of the findings as well. Participants appreciated the ability to work independently but also wanted a certain level of engagement in the classroom.

To that end, participants realized that the flexibility that the program afforded them meant they had to make an extra effort to balance all of their competing priorities. For example, the flexibility of being able to do their schoolwork at home meant that participants had to put in an extra effort to balance family routines and schedules. Finally, participants who found the right balance between their degree being viewed as legitimate and who were able to maximize their degree felt as though they had earned a return on their investment.

**Recruitment**

Within Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) model for engagement of the online learner, the recruitment phase is the catalyst for student engagement. In the model, the emphasis is on developing a marketing strategy and making the initial contact with prospective students (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). When making contact with potential students, program staff are looking to assess whether or not students are a good fit for the program (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). It is at this point where the students’ goals and obligations are identified to help the student decide whether or not the online program is the right choice for them.
As it pertains to engaging students during the recruitment phase, practitioners must consider the various influences that are impacting students’ decisions to pursue an online degree. The findings from the interview suggest that students’ jobs have the biggest impact on their decision to pursue an advanced degree. Students are motivated to go back to school by the prospect of promotion and advancing in their careers (Tait, 2000). Each student interviewed mentioned their career was a motivating (if not the solely motivating) factor in their initial interest in pursuing a graduate degree.

Family was the other aspect that came up most frequently as a deciding factor for students. Students’ families were not necessarily the motivating factor for students to pursue their graduate degree in the way career was, but family was one of the main reasons students opted to pursue their graduate degree online. Students had an array of family obligations ranging from small children to elderly parents, to partners who had career opportunities across the country (Tait, 2000). Students were drawn to online programs in an attempt to balance their own goals while still maintaining their familial obligations.

Student engagement during the recruitment phase also involves students wrestling with the stigma that somehow an online degree is less valuable than a “traditional” degree because it is earned online (Etherington, 2018; Miller, 2018). It was clear during the interviews that participants put stock into how pursuing a degree online might be perceived by others. For example, participants gave a lot of consideration to how potential employers would view an online degree. Several participants noted that they believed there was a stigma surrounding online education, mostly tied to the idea that online degrees were easier to obtain than those earned in traditional programs on campus.
The program’s marketing materials and website sought to circumvent these stigmatizations by highlighting the high rank of the program and the university as a whole, in addition to citing the credibility of the teaching faculty. Based on the finding of this study, this seemed to have been a successful tactic. By choosing to complete their graduate degree at a Research I institution, albeit online with increased flexibility, students felt as though this added an element of legitimacy to their online degree. As previously mentioned, participants’ families and jobs were the biggest influencers for students choosing to complete their degree online, rather than on campus. However, the perceptions of the larger society that students anticipated appeared to be the driving factor behind the specific place students selected (Etherington, 2018; Miller, 2018).

That said, each participant noted that had the online degree program that they selected not been an option, they would have been forced to make a different decision regarding their academic goals (Frenette, 2004; Tait, 2000). For example, one participant related that as a first-generation college student, relying on her parents to help her pay for graduate school was not going to be feasible; she had to continue working full time and her graduate program would have to be factored in around that reality. Another participant mentioned that if the online program had not been an option she would have had to wait until her children were older, perhaps even out of school, before she would have been able to pursue her graduate degree. This finding illustrated how holistic access to higher education came in a variety of forms. It went beyond just being able to get into a program from an admissions standpoint to pursuing a degree and a program that would afford them the ability to complete their degree within their current limitations.
When considering the demographics of the program and how this may have influenced participants’ perspectives, gender also becomes a salient part of the findings. Of the 16 participants, 15 (94%) identified as women. It is worth noting that none of the participants specifically cited their gender as being an element of their decision making. However, considering the large number of women participants, it is likely that gender influenced the findings of this study.

First, it is possible that the need for flexibility due to family obligations and career advancement plays a role in the decision to pursue an online degree (MacSporran & Young, 2001). Women are more likely to make decisions based on their existing children or the desire to have children in the future (Mason et al., 2009). For this reason, the flexibility that online learning affords students may be appealing to women and is reflected in the findings of this study. This flexibility also allows for women to find their way into the field or maintain their place in the field while pursuing their degree, something that appeared to be an important driver for participants (Duncan et al., 2020).

Second, participants’ emphasis on wanting their degree to be taken seriously and seen as legitimate may be due in part to gender as well (MacSporran & Young, 2001). Women are more likely to pursue online learning as a way to get into their respective field, and thus how their degree is viewed by others matters (Duncan et al., 2020). Reflecting back on the aspect of imposter syndrome mentioned in Chapter 2, women are more likely to experience imposter syndrome and women are more likely to endure the stigma that they are less serious about their goals if they choose to have children (Duncan et al., 2020; Mason et al., 2009). Thus, ensuring that their degree is seen as legitimate is one way students may try to combat these sentiments (Duncan et al. 2020). In this way, we see access come into full focus in that merely being able to
get into a program is not the only barrier women in particular must navigate in pursuit of a degree. In turn, however, higher education professionals can better identify what support and engagement may need to look like, particularly for women online learners (Angelino & Natvig, 2009).

Moreover, participants shared that not only did it matter to them that they were able to get into their desired graduate program but that they were able to see tangible outcomes as a result. The online program provided access (Frenette, 2004; Tait, 2000), and participants who were overall satisfied with their experience in their online program indicated that earning their degree resulted in career advancement. Other participants, however, who did not see the program leading to the outcome they had hoped (e.g., a new job), questioned the return on their investment.

Whether or not this would have been different if they went to an in-person program is unknown; the sentiment may have remained if earning their degree did not directly result in career opportunities. However, because of the stigma that exists around online learning, students may be more likely to blame the online modality for their lack of success in the program. So online programs, to some extent, face more pressure to make sure that they are helping students achieve the vocational goals that bring them to the program. It isn’t enough to merely get students in the door; students have an expectation that obtaining an advanced degree will have a direct impact on their careers. This finding is consistent with the literature that access to higher education must be considered holistically (Frenette, 2004; Tait, 2000).

Regarding access, it is clear that for the students who choose to pursue their degree online, this is the only feasible option for them to be able to pursue graduate education. The idea of access manifested itself in a few different ways during interviews, but it did not appear to be
tied to academic rigor or admissions criteria. Participants felt equipped to do the work but had some specific limitations that needed to be accounted for in order to do so. Flexibility around where and when they could complete their coursework was the biggest factor. Participants needed flexibility so they could continue working, either because they were a first-generation student who could not afford to stop working or because they did not want to leave their field and risk job placement when they returned. Participants needed flexibility so they could continue caring for their elderly parents or young children while pursuing their goals. So, access, in its purest form, is about choice and having the options to choose what path optimizes one's opportunities.

While these were all realities that played into their decisions to pursue a degree online, the concern around legitimacy also played a role as well. Participants needed flexibility, but they did not want that to come at the cost of their degree being taken less seriously (Etherington, 2018; Miller, 2018). This dichotomy justified the cost of tuition and their willingness to spend more to earn their degree from what they perceived society would view as a reputable institution. However, this lends itself to the question of whether or not the access element becomes watered down. If the cost of tuition is higher but the legitimacy piece is accounted for, how is access affected? Arguably, one is led to conclude that in its most basic form, flexibility adds to access, whereas legitimacy detracts from access.

However, as higher education professionals, it is not lost that this binary is overly simplistic at best. This dichotomy influences how students determine that they have received a return on their investment. Participants in this study felt as though they had gotten a return on their investment when both access and legitimacy were in balance with one another. Thus, online programs are faced with finding a balance of their own: delivering a program that is perceived as
legitimate while also providing flexibility and creating access for students who otherwise could not have pursued their degree in the same way.

As mentioned previously, access is not just about admission criteria and selectivity, but rather a holistic approach to the student journey. In this sense, participants were first admitted to a program that allowed flexibility and autonomy but which they deemed to be reputable. Once in the program, they continued to have flexibility and autonomy, and they were also taught by leading scholars in their field and had support throughout the program. After graduating, participants were able to advance within their careers, particularly in a way that they would not have been able to without their degree. Successfully striking this balance between access and legitimacy is a way of using academic capitalism for the greater good.

Coursework

Angelino and Natvig’s engagement model (2009) suggests that in the coursework phase, students are most engaged when they have consistent support and instruction. Since online teaching faculty may not be able to easily assess whether there is a gap in knowledge, clear instructions and feedback are crucial. Students are encouraged to find information to complete assignments through readings, internet research, and discussions with others.

The findings fit within the framework, particularly as it relates to ensuring students have access to information as well as clear and consistent instructions for assignments (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). To this end, the findings were also consistent with existing literature as well. Specifically, teacher presence was key to student engagement when it came to the student experience in their courses. Participants did also share that faculty were a part of what drew them to the program they selected, but it was really once they were in the program that students’ engagement levels were influenced by the faculty.
The importance of teacher presence was clear during interviews and consistent with existing literature (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015). Multiple participants noted that the faculty were one of the factors that drew them to the specific program that they selected. However, participants also mentioned that it was clear to them which faculty members genuinely enjoyed teaching online and those for whom teaching, particularly online, was forced upon them by the department. Participants noted that the teachers they enjoyed the most and had the most positive experience with were those who engaged students in a very intentional way (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015). The instructors whom students spoke most highly of were responsive to emails, created discussion-based live-session environments, and allowed students to connect with each other, for example through group work (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015). The most important element of this was that they still allowed for flexibility and for students to work autonomously.

Again, referring to the concept of balance, while some participants had positive experiences, others did not. Even when faculty were intentional about engaging them, a lack of connection still existed for some students. While some participants were drawn to the program because of the faculty, some were disappointed once they were in the program because they were not able to engage with faculty in the way they would have liked.

The concept of support and proactive outreach was a theme that was found throughout interviews but was not an explicit theme that came out of them. For example, some participants noted that when they needed their advisors, they always had the support they needed and received the necessary information. Participants mentioned that their advisor would reach out to them periodically throughout the program and they would get announcements about events from the program, but it was not really a major aspect of their experience in the program. This may
suggest that an opportunity exists to be even more intentional from an administrative perspective so that students utilize the resources they have available to them.

**Beyond Coursework**

The post coursework category in Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) engagement model focuses more on aspects outside of coursework that influence the students’ experience as well as their ability to persist through the program. This includes midterm grades, registration and securing financial aid for the next semester, and evaluations of their current course (Angelino & Natvig, 2009). These aspects were not explicitly identified in the findings; however, elements could still be found in participants’ experiences in the program specifically as it related to alienation and isolation as well as time management.

Student engagement in this category was more difficult to highlight due in part to the decision-making factors of participants. For example, some participants wanted more support than they felt they got, whereas others were satisfied with the support they received because they were not joining the online program to develop a strong sense of connection with others in the first place. Therefore, the findings were consistent with the literature that online students do tend to experience a greater sense of alienation and isolation (LaPadula, 2010; Richardson et al., 2015; Scheuermann, 2012). During the interviews, many participants noted that they often felt as though they were “teaching themselves” (Richardson et al., 2015) because the online courses were designed to give students maximum autonomy. Other participants felt a lack of connection with their faculty (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015) while others felt a lack of connection with their peers (Baker & Taylor, 2012; Richardson et al., 2015). The same asynchronous aspect of the program that provided participants with the flexibility they needed was the same dynamic that left them feeling a bit isolated.
However, the notion that students feel isolated in online programs appears to only be part of the narrative. Participants did not seem to be pursuing their degrees online in order to feel connected to others. While some participants shared that they did notice a difference between their experience online and their previous experiences, when it came to feeling connected to their classmates, this did not seem to be an overwhelming driver. These findings may also relate to more online students being nontraditional students or that online programs are popular for graduate students who tend to be older and/or at different places in their lives. For many participants, their need to balance competing obligations meant that they had less time to build connections with their peers and instead had more of a focus on managing their time and priorities.

The aspect of balance continues to be at play when considering the push and pull of time management. The choice to pursue their degree online was heavily influenced by participants’ need to still work and care for their families. At the same time, however, working and caring for their families made it challenging for participants to also balance academic demands. Each participant mentioned that managing their time was one of the biggest considerations that they had to make when adjusting to online learning (Cramphorn, 2004). Time management directly impacted their ability to be successful in their courses and thus progress through the program.

As mentioned previously, the same flexibility that drew them to the program was also the same thing that challenged them while pursuing their degree online. Time management did not just show up in how students scheduled their days and weeks to factor in their schoolwork; time management also included how students made sure to still take care of themselves and make time for their families and personal obligations while in school and also working, in some cases full time.
Alumni

The fourth category of Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) engagement model focuses on alumni and the way students should be engaged postgraduation. At this point, students should be introduced to the Alumni Association and actively encouraged to participate in alumni events. Additionally, engaging students may also include reaching out to students who may be good mentors or ambassadors of the program who can help to promote the program to future prospective students. Student engagement in the alumni category was consistent with existing literature and also remains an opportunity for online learning.

This study found that while alumni engagement resources existed, they did not appear to be readily accessed and utilized by students. This may be due in part to findings which also suggested that students did not necessarily have a strong connection to the institution. At the same time, however, students also did not necessarily pursue the program seeking out these connections as well. Even though during the recruitment phase and in the marketing materials available to students the Alumni Association and alumni network were highlighted as a benefit of the program, it did not prove to be a deciding factor for students to pursue the online program or influence their experience much while in the program.

Furthermore, how we look at and measure students’ return on investment does not exist within the current model, but could. The degree to which students feel as though they have gotten a return on their investment may influence the way they engage with the university postgraduation. Several students spoke to career advancement and promotion, but arguably that was not the only thing that was important to them. Students also commented on the fact that they wanted to be taken seriously in their field but without uprooting their lives. The balance between
flexibility, legitimacy, and tangible outcomes by way of career advancement was what appeared to be the indication of whether students received a return on their investment.

**Implications of the Findings**

There are multiple implications of this study, including those for future research as well as for practice. This study focused solely on graduate students in a specific program at a specific institution. Future research could expand the scope of those who are included in the study to understand how the decisions and experiences of different populations may be impacted. In addition, practitioners may consider how students’ realities and what the program can offer can be balanced in a way that offers the most positive student experience.

**Implications for Future Research**

Future research may consider expanding the sample population to include other demographics, such as undergraduate students or even community college students. The needs of students in these populations may differ from those of graduate students. As stated in the limitations, research shows that lower level students are less prepared and more likely to drop out than upper level students (Bawa, 2016; Levy, 2007). Examining how the lived experiences of online students pursuing an undergraduate degree may differ from those pursuing a graduate degree would be an important expansion of the literature.

Future research might also drill into specific categories of the Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) engagement model to understand how students experience each of them in more detail. This study explored each of the four categories at a relatively high level in order to have a great focus on the holistic element of student decision making and experience in an online program.
Future studies might expand on this and drill down into to each of the categories to understand how student decisions and experiences are influenced within those contexts.

Similarly, future research may consider expanding the scope to include more than one institution. The institution selected for this study has a world-renowned reputation for academic rigor and excellence. In addition, many of the responses from students regarding their decision to pursue an online degree from this institution reflected the value students placed on the perceived legitimacy of their degree. Future research could examine whether this phenomenon and need for legitimacy held true with students across multiple types of institutions, or not.

Regarding legitimacy, future research could also examine how the stigma of online education can be mitigated and challenge the perceptions of online learning with data. Specifically, it was evident from the interviews I conducted that students had an internalized fear of their degree not being perceived as legitimate, which in fact influenced their decisions about the degree they pursued. Examples of future research topics might include ways to educate the public and employers on the diversity of online education (online degree mills vs. legitimate programs at reputable institutions) or educating students on how they can present their academic achievement in the best light.

**Implications for Practice**

Colleges and universities have an opportunity to examine the ways in which the public is educated about online learning. With the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic, the market has been catapulted into new territory faster than anyone ever anticipated. Entire universities and colleges have scrambled to put their coursework online as a way to continue course delivery. However, it is no secret that this mad dash to get courses online is very much tied to the looming decimation of institutions if they did not take such swift action.
The market (as a result of COVID-19) demanded that courses move to an online platform, so that is what happened. By allowing the greatest number of students to still access their coursework, engage with their faculty, and continue progressing towards earning their degrees, institutions were able to maintain some semblance of normalcy and revenue stream. Arguably, however, we are not seeing the “best” of online education right now. While people are getting more used to online education, they are also experiencing faculty who are teaching online without training, or do not have an interest in or experience in teaching online. This may have long-term impacts on online learning, potentially turning some students away or further perpetuating the stigma that online education is not as good.

This is not to disregard the major revenue impacts institutions have felt, even leading some to have to close their doors. That said, holistic access where students are engaged and supported while considering their specific needs and limitations can only be a benefit to the institution as it will work to mitigate the stereotypes of online learning.

**Expectations**

Based on the findings, positive student experience is influenced by managed and met expectations. Students are expecting tangible outcomes, often in the form of career placement and advancement. Their decisions to pursue a graduate degree is often tied to this expectation. Students who are choosing to complete their degrees online have these same expectations, coupled with an expectation of flexibility. When these expectations are met, students report a positive overall experience.

However, when these two particular expectations are not met, students were more apt to dismiss the value and benefit of pursuing their degrees online. In a similar vein, students who were still actively enrolled in their coursework were more optimistic about how the degree would
benefit them than their alumni peers were. Alumni were consistently satisfied with their degrees as long as they had experienced flexibility and earning them had directly resulted in career advancement. Alumni who had not had these two criteria met were more critical of their online degree.

Online programs can help manage student expectations by being clear as to what the expected outcomes of the program are. As discussed previously, when considering whether there was a return on students’ investment, there may be more than just financial gains and career advancement. Perhaps it is about becoming disciplined and holistic practitioners in the field as the main priority. Whatever the expected outcomes are, transparent and consistent communication about them over the duration of the student’s journey through the program is key.

**Networking and Connection**

Another interesting finding was students are not necessarily looking to their graduate institutions to provide them with personal relationships; alumni connections are beneficial insofar as they result in networking and ultimately career placement or advancement. This was interesting because the information available to students on the website and marketing materials highlights the alumni network and the benefits of choosing that institution because of the access students have to a large alumni base. However, this is not a large driver for students when making their decisions about which institution and program to pursue.

Institutions offering online programs have an opportunity to be creative about how students engage with each other and form connections. Students shared that group work was actually one of the ways that they developed relationships with others in their cohort. While most students did not find the lack of connection with their classmates to be a problem, they did
acknowledge that it was something that was missing from their experience. The majority of students said that this lack of connection was mainly due to logistics, for example, their own schedules not allowing for it. However, some students did not take advantage of alumni networking because they did not feel a connection to the campus. Even when they would meet with other alumni local to them, they felt a bit of an outsider, not having the same connections to the physical campus, the memories of being at the institution, that their fellow alumni did.

One way that colleges and universities might combat this is by requiring students to come to the campus at least once during their program (Bawa, 2016; McDearmon, 2011, 2013). However, this of course then challenges the flexibility and convenience piece where students may not be in a position to travel to the campus if necessary. This is where programmatic decisions will need to be made about what it is most important to the overall student experience and what works for the program’s brand.

Program administrators and faculty can also explore better ways to help students understand the value of these events. Students may not see the value in attending an alumni networking event, whether they are in their first year or their last. However, if faculty and staff take the time to explain how to make the most of networking and to highlight how these can help later in the job search, students may be more likely to engage in them. Since students placed such an emphasis on tangible outcomes in the form of job placement and promotion, building aspects of networking and career building into the curriculum may also be a way to meet the needs of students programmatically. Perhaps for online students there is value in emphasizing career preparedness and job search skills in an intentional way.

Students also talked about how advisors and staff were supportive, but many students did not necessarily reach out when they needed help. Knowing that online students are not likely to
reach out when they need support, there is an opportunity to enhance the proactive outreach of the program. Again, this outreach may focus specifically on networking, career preparedness, or job-search skills specific to the field. While these resources may already exist, ensuring that they are intentional aspects of the student experience may be necessary.

Conclusion

This dissertation sought to understand what influenced students’ decisions to pursue a degree online and to explore how students experience an online graduate program and, subsequently, how the program shapes them as individuals. Using Angelino and Natvig’s (2009) conceptual model for engagement of the online learner as framework, it was clear that online students have a number of dynamics to balance as they decide to and ultimately do pursue an online degree.

The findings show that students are influenced by multiple elements in direct and indirect ways. Students choosing an online degree because of their family or job will also have to consider how that decision will be impacted by societal forces such as the perceived legitimacy of their degree. Specifically, students not only make decisions based on practicality and logistics, but they also consider aspects such as legitimacy as well. Students who are looking to do their degree online are looking for the quality experience they would expect to get on campus, coupled with flexibility and tangible outcomes.

As previously mentioned, students are faced with several decisions, sometimes competing decisions, in order to accomplish their goals of completing their degrees. Students must consider their own goals, family, and career obligations when determining whether to pursue their degree. The ability to complete their degree online may offer access to students who
otherwise would not have been able to, given the aforementioned reasons. However, there is a balancing act at play when students also consider how their degree may be perceived by the larger society. As students navigate their way through their degree programs, these realities continue to have an impact on their experience in them. We as higher education professionals can continue to create spaces where students feel supported, engaged, and encouraged to ensure that this balancing act sways in favor of a positive student experience for online learners.
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APPENDIX A

INVITATION EMAIL AND CONSENT FORM ATTACHMENT (EMAIL)
Hello,

My name is Jessica Hill-Jones and I am a doctoral student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs doctoral program at Northern Illinois University. I am conducting research on how students’ decisions to attend and experience in a distance learning program and how the experience impacted students and their environments, including but not limited to their family, work, etc.

I invite you to participate in a one-on-one, 60-minute virtual interview with me to further discuss your experiences as a distance learning student. If you are interested in participating, please reply to this email with the best day and time for us to meet; I also ask that you complete the attached consent form and return it to me by submitting through Google forms.

Please note that all interviews will be recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes. You may opt out of participating at any time if you are uncomfortable with participating in a recorded interview.

This study has been approved by Northern Illinois University’s Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions about this study, you may contact me or my dissertation chair, Dr. Gudrun Nyunt (gnyunt@niu.edu).

Thank you in advance for your time and participation.

Jessica Hill-Jones
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
## Interview Questions

Intro Statement: My overall goal is to understand your experience of pursuing a degree as an online student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Access</th>
<th>Ecological Model</th>
<th>Academic Capitalism</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Demographic Questions</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>1. What is your name?</td>
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<td>2. What is your email address?</td>
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<td>3. What is your phone number?</td>
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<td>4. What program did you complete online?</td>
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<td>5. What level of education did you complete online? Undergraduate? Graduate?</td>
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<td>6. Are you considered a first-generation student?</td>
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<td>7. When did you start your degree in your online program?</td>
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<td>8. If graduated, when did you finish your degree?</td>
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<td><strong>Can we start with you telling me a little bit about yourself?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>a. occupation</td>
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<td>b. family</td>
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<td>c. hobbies</td>
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<td><strong>How did you first decide to enroll in college and specifically in this distance</strong></td>
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<td>learning program?</td>
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<td>a. What impacted your decision?</td>
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<td>b. What was the response from your family/friends/colleagues etc. like?</td>
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<td>x</td>
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<td>c. What were some of the marketing materials you had access to? Did these</td>
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<td>influence your decision to pursue this program?</td>
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<td><strong>How did attending a distance learning program impact the different factors in</strong></td>
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<td>your life?</td>
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<td>a. How did you balance it with work, life, family?</td>
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<td>b. How did distance learning fit into their life for that period of time?</td>
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<td><strong>In general, what was your experience like in your distance learning program?</strong></td>
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<td>a. How would you explain your experience...?</td>
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<td>b. What were some reasons you went to either the main campus or satellite campuses?</td>
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<td>c. What options did you have available to pursue this degree on campus?</td>
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<td>d. How were your classes structured? Know for myself that examples are live</td>
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<td>sessions, etc. (What did participation in the course look like in general how</td>
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<td>engaged did you feel you were with your program?)</td>
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<td>e. What connection do you currently feel to the institution?</td>
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<td>f. What were your interactions with the program administrators and faculty like?</td>
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<td>(i. What were your interactions with program staff?)</td>
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