

3-26-2015

# A Basic Interpretive Study of the Experiences of University Students Who Have Dropped or Failed an Online Course

Natalie Paul  
npaul005@fiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Paul, Natalie, "A Basic Interpretive Study of the Experiences of University Students Who Have Dropped or Failed an Online Course" (2015). *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1828.  
<http://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/etd/1828>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by the University Graduate School at FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [dcc@fiu.edu](mailto:dcc@fiu.edu).

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A BASIC INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS WHO HAVE DROPPED OR FAILED AN ONLINE COURSE

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

by

Natalie Paul

2015

To: Dean Delia C. Garcia  
College of Education

This dissertation, written by Natalie Paul, and entitled, A Basic Interpretive Study of the Experiences of University Students Who Have Dropped or Failed an Online Course, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

---

Leonard Bliss

---

Charmaine DeFrancesco

---

Maria Fernandez

---

M. O. Thirunarayanan, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 26, 2015

This dissertation of Natalie Paul is approved.

---

Dean Delia C. Garcia  
College of Education

---

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi  
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

© Copyright 2015 by Natalie Paul

All rights reserved.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends who have always encouraged and supported me in this effort.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Jesus Christ, first and foremost, for his continued love and support. I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Leonard Bliss, Dr. Charmaine DeFrancesco, and Dr. Maria Fernandez, for their guidance, comments, and willingness to help with this dissertation. I, also, would like to thank Dr. Linda Bliss for all of her help. Finally, I would like to thank my Major Professor, Dr. Thirunarayanan for his constant encouragement and direction in completing this degree. I know academic coursework in the Curriculum and Instruction program will prove to be invaluable to me.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A BASIC INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS WHO HAVE DROPPED OR FAILED AN ONLINE COURSE

by

Natalie Paul

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor M. O. Thirunarayanan, Major Professor

Online courses have increased in enrollments over the past few decades. As the number of students taking online courses have increased, so has the number of students who have dropped or failed an online course. According to the literature, online courses may have higher drop rates than traditional, face-to-face courses. The number of students who fail an online course is, also, of concern. As online courses may continue to grow over the next few decades, studies on persistence in online courses may benefit students, administrators, instructional designers, educators, and researchers. Although previous research studies have addressed persistence in online courses, very few examine it from the perspectives of students who were unsuccessful in their courses. These students may have unique insights about the online experience that may have related to their lack of success. The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of university students who have failed or dropped an online course through the lenses of transactional distance theory and Kember's model of dropout in distance education. Transactional distance theory discusses the dialog, structure, and learner autonomy involved in an online course, while, Kember's model presents categories that may relate to dropping an

online course. Together, the theory and model may help in understanding the experiences of students who have dropped or failed an online course. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 participants from a large Southeastern university in the United States. Based on the participants' responses, the data was sorted and ranked according to the amount of transactional distance in their courses, as well as the categories of Kember's model. Many of the participants who experienced low or high transactional distance have, also, expressed an issue with the goal commitment category of Kember's model. Additionally, there were important differences in the student characteristics of those who dropped or failed an online course. Furthermore, suggestions for improving online courses were given by the participants. Some of these suggestions included more student-instructor interactions, the use of more technology tools in their online course, and for orientations to the online environment to be offered.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER .....	PAGE
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Background of the Study.....	1
Statement of the Problem .....	3
Purpose Statement .....	5
Significance of the Study .....	5
Theoretical Framework .....	6
Research Questions .....	7
Definition of Terms.....	8
Delimitations.....	9
Assumptions.....	9
Organization of Study .....	9
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	10
Kember’s Model of Dropout in Distance Education .....	10
Student Characteristics.....	13
Goal Commitment.....	17
Academic Environment and Integration .....	20
Social and Work Environment and Integration.....	28
Cost-Benefit Analysis .....	31
Decision to Persist or to Drop .....	31
Summary .....	32
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS.....	33
Research Questions .....	33
Research Design: The Basic Interpretive Study.....	34
Participants and Setting.....	36
Data Collection.....	36
Data Analysis .....	37
Trustworthiness .....	38
Summary .....	40

CHAPTER FOUR: STUDENT PROFILES AND THEMATIC PRESENTATION.....	41
Student Profiles .....	41
Undergraduates Who Dropped an Online Course .....	41
Elsie .....	41
Jeanne .....	44
Lilian .....	48
Roswell.....	53
Annette .....	55
Jacqui.....	60
Eve.....	64
Billie .....	67
Meadow .....	70
Sawyer.....	73
Enola.....	78
Undergraduates Who Failed an Online Course .....	82
Mackenzie .....	82
Tyson.....	87
Kerena .....	90
Kym.....	93
Amber .....	99
Ivy.....	103
Davin .....	108
Graduate Students Who Dropped an Online Course .....	112
Cheryl .....	112
Genesis .....	116
Journal Entries .....	121
Thematic Presentation.....	122
Overall Experience.....	122
Themes from Kember’s Model of Dropout in Distance Education.....	124
Student Characteristics .....	124
Goal Commitment .....	125
Academic Environment and Integration .....	127

Social and Work Environment and Integration.....	129
Cost-Benefit Analysis .....	130
Themes from Transactional Distance Theory.....	130
Outcome in the Course.....	131
Suggestions for Improving Online Courses.....	133
Connection between Kember’s Model and Transactional Distance Theory .....	134
Summary.....	134
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS .....	135
Themes from Kember’s Model of Dropout in Distance Education.....	135
Student Characteristics.....	135
Goal Commitment.....	136
Academic Environment and Integration .....	138
Social and Work Environment and Integration.....	140
Cost-Benefit Analysis .....	141
Themes from Transactional Distance Theory.....	142
Outcome in the Course.....	142
Suggestions for Improving Online Courses.....	143
Connection between Kember’s Model and Transactional Distance Theory .....	144
Recommendations for Future Research .....	144
Conclusion .....	145
References.....	147
APPENDICES .....	154
VITA.....	164

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

Distance education has proliferated with the advent of online education. The number of college students who take some or all of their classes online in the United States was expected to exceed 22 million in the year 2014 (Nagel, 2009). With the growth of online offerings has come a surge of online students who take these courses for various reasons. Although students are enrolling in these courses, research studies have found that the rates of dropout in online courses are high (Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2002). The number of students who fail an online course is also of great concern (Hyllegard, Deng, & Hunter, 2008).

### **Background of the Study**

Students take online courses for several reasons. Online education is a practical option for students starved for time, opening the educational world to individuals with careers and families (Moody, 2004). Lee and Choi (2011) asserted that online courses are attractive because they are not restricted by time and place. Online students can work from anywhere at any time with a computer and Internet access. Online learning allows students flexible schedules when they also have jobs and families (Park & Choi, 2009). Online education is just plain convenient (Moody, 2004). The convenience and the accessibility of online learning make it appear to be a viable alternative to traditional face-to-face education.

However, not every student will persist in the online environment (Harrell & Bower, 2011). For example, in the spring semester of 2014, 18,314 out of about 54,000 students (33.9%) enrolled in online courses at a large public Southeastern university in the United States. There were 559 online courses offered that semester. Although online

courses have large enrollments at this university, the number of students who drop or fail an online course is of concern. Of those who enrolled in an online course during the spring 2014 semester, 2,666 (14.6%) dropped and 4,968 (27.1%) failed an online course. Thus, those who have dropped or failed an online course during the spring 2014 semester at this university comprised over 40% of the total number of students taking online courses.

Online courses may have higher dropout rates than traditional face-to-face courses (Jun, 2005; Lee & Choi, 2011; Nistor & Neubauer, 2010). According to Hart (2012), many colleges offering online courses face the problem of dropout. Dropout rates are unusually high despite the flexibility of online education (Hyllegard et al., 2008). Diaz (2002) indicated that drop rates for distance education courses are consistently higher than face-to-face courses. Additionally, Carr (2000) estimated course dropout rates for distance education courses to be 10% to 20% higher than for traditional courses.

Many quantitative studies attempt to identify the factors that relate to drop or failure in online courses. These studies often recommend qualitative follow-up work in this area (Aragon & Johnson, 2004; Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). A few qualitative studies have been conducted on this topic, but the participants rarely included those who have dropped or failed online courses (Heyman, 2010; Koehler, Mishra, Hershey, & Peruski, 2004; Muller, 2008). Thus, gathering the experiences of students who dropped or failed an online course can add to the body of knowledge in this area.

## Statement of the Problem

Although there is an increase in the number of students taking online courses, it is indicated in studies that some students taking online courses have a tendency to drop or complete the course with a failing grade (Carr, 2000; Diaz, 2002; Hyllegard, Deng, & Hunter, 2008). Dropout and failure point toward economic problems, curriculum design concerns and human value issues. A problem behind dropout and failure is that the experiences of students who have dropped or failed an online course is lacking in the literature. These students may have unique insights into what factors may relate to dropout and failure in online courses and what aspects of the courses might be improved upon for future students. This information may be useful, but many studies on online education often involve persistent students as their participants. Students who have dropped or failed an online course may have experiences that differ from those who persist. This study was undertaken because the literature was lacking in providing information on the experiences of students who drop or fail an online course. Although some researchers have recommended it, few qualitative studies have been conducted with students who have dropped or failed an online course (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Patterson & McFadden, 2009).

This lack of knowledge on the experiences of students who drop or who fail online courses can be problematic for (a) institutions that offer online courses and administrators who want students to continue enrolling in them (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004), (b) professors who must plan the curriculum and receive training in how to teach online (Koehler et al., 2004), and (c) students who spend their time and funds on online education (Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Online education provides low-cost, flexible options for an institution to reach a larger student population (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem & Stevens, 2012). Dropout is a major problem for institutions offering online courses because online courses can be strategic to many long-term university plans (Morris & Finnegan, 2008). Dropout is one measure of the quality of education at an institution (Howell, Laws, & Lindsay, 2004; Moody, 2004). In order for the quality of online education to increase at an institution and to warrant the budgetary costs of offering online courses, students must enroll and complete these courses. If the rate of completion could improve, fiscal budgets could become more predictable because institutions receive financial support based on enrollments (Parker, 2003).

Professors who teach online face unique challenges (Stanford-Bowers, 2008). According to Stanford-Bowers (2008), such challenges include designing online courses that provide meaningful learning experiences and meeting the needs of students without face-to-face contact. Dropout and failure could possibly reflect poor course design or lack of professor training in instructional design (Boling et al., 2012). In this study, suggestions for improving online courses were gathered by the participants.

Professors of online courses must be able to reassure students that their engagement in online studies will be effective and rewarding (Chao & Hamilton, 2010). On the one hand, students who spend their time and funds on online courses can increase the enrollment of an institution (Moody, 2004; Stanford-Bowers, 2008). On the other hand, high dropout rates may negatively affect recruitment of new students and the promotion efforts of the institution (Willging & Johnson, 2009).

The participants of the qualitative studies regarding online persistence include students who have passed an online course or professors who teach online courses (Heyman, 2010; Koehler et al., 2004; Muller, 2008). Very few qualitative studies have students who have dropped or failed an online course as participants and request participants to provide feedback about course design (Gwekwerere, 2004; Wyman, 2012). The exploration of the experiences of university students who have dropped or failed an online course may introduce new insights that can be added to the body of literature on the topic of persistence in online courses.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of students at a large Southeastern university that relate to their dropping or failing an online course through the theoretical lenses of transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education. Interviews were conducted with students who have dropped or failed an online course. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed.

### **Significance of the Study**

The experiences of students who have dropped or failed an online course could give researchers an understanding about what factors may relate to their lack of success. This study could provide insight for instructors and course developers about improvements that can be made to online courses. Improved online courses may relate to higher enrollments, which attracts new teaching staff, reduces the need for campus and university buildings, and signals that the institution is technologically advanced and forward-thinking (Matthews, 1999).



## **Theoretical Framework**

In distance education, the student and the instructor are physically separated. Moore (1993) argued that with this separation, there exists a psychological and communications space of potential misunderstanding between the student and the instructor. Moore (1993) called this space transactional distance. Transactional distance is a function of three variables: dialog, program structure, and student autonomy. In the course of interactions, dialog occurs when one gives instruction and others respond (Moore, 1993). Dialog consists of only the positive interactions, even though interactions can be negative or neutral (Moore, 1993). Moore (1993) explained that the direction of dialog is toward student understanding. Program structure includes the elements of course design, such as course goals, and instructions. Program structure, also, refers to how well a course's design matches to the needs of the students. If a program is highly structured and teacher-student dialog does not exist, then the transactional distance between students and teachers is high (Moore, 1993). By contrast, if there is low transactional distance, there is much dialog and less structure (Moore, 1993). According to Moore (1993), the greater the structure and the lower the dialog, the more autonomy the student must exercise with regards to deciding the goals and experiences of the program.

Within transactional distance theory, Moore (1989) distinguished between three types of interactions that take place in a distance education program. These interactions include student-content interactions, student-instructor interactions, and student-student interactions. Moore (1989) described student-content interaction as the defining characteristic of education. It is the process of interacting with the content that leads to

changes in student perspective, understanding, or cognitive structures in his or her mind (Moore, 1989). Moore (1989) pointed out that student-instructor interaction is a highly desirable interaction between the student and the expert. Student-student interaction is between one student and other students with or without the presence of the instructor.

Different factors affect the decision to persist or to drop an online course.

Kember's (1989) model related the dropout process in distance education to a number of variables. These variables involved student characteristics, goal commitment, academic environment and integration, social and work environment and integration, and cost-benefit analysis. According to Kember (1989), students decide whether to drop or persist based on these factors influencing each other. Kember (1990) asserted that dropout from distance education is complex and affected by the multitude of variables.

Transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model have important connections. Non-persistence seems to be accounted for by insufficient interactions described by transactional distance theory. The academic and social integration variables in Kember's (1989) model are accounted for by these interactions. One may say that academic integration is the culmination of student-content interactions and that social integration is a result of student-student and student-teacher interactions.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How can transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout help explain the experiences of university students that relate to their dropping an online course?

2. How can transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout help explain the experiences of university students that relate to their failing an online course?
3. What suggestions do university students who have dropped an online course have for improving online courses?
4. What suggestions do university students who have failed an online course have for improving online courses?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were used throughout this study. The definitions have emanated from the literature.

**Academic integration.** Academic integration includes all facets of an institution's course offerings, whether the content and curriculum design fits the student's need and the compatibility between the academic expectations of the teacher and the image of those expectations by the student (Kember, 1989).

**Distance education.** Distance education occurs when the instructor and the student are separated geographically, and communication is accomplished by technological media (Schulte, 2011).

**Dropout.** Dropout refers to the action of officially withdrawing from an online course (Hyllegard, Deng & Hunter, 2008; Levy, 2007).

**Failure.** Failure refers to the act of receiving a failing grade of a "D" or an "F" in a course (Hyllegard, Deng & Hunter, 2008).

**Goal commitment.** Goal commitment relates to students' commitment to an institution and their motivation for completing an online course (Kember, 1989).

**Social integration.** Social integration is how well students manage the demands of work, family, and social commitments and their studies (Kember, 1989).

**Student characteristics.** Student characteristics include demographic data that are easily collected, such as individual, work, and family responsibilities (Kember, 1989).

### **Delimitations**

Out of the large potential population of online students of various ages all over the world, only undergraduate and graduate students from a large Southeastern university in the United States participated in this study. These students had dropped or failed an online course in the past but were still currently enrolled as students at the time of the study.

### **Assumptions**

In this study, it is assumed that the participants answered all questions honestly and to the best of their ability.

### **Organization of Study**

This document is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 presented the introduction to the problem. Chapter 2 consists of a review of the literature on dropout and failure in online classes through the lenses of transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education. The methods, participants, and setting comprise the third chapter. The fourth chapter includes student profiles and a thematic presentation. The fifth chapter contains the conclusions, limitations, recommendations for future research, and a discussion.

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Online courses are a prevalent form of distance education. Distance education has increased its visibility over the first part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Shulte, 2011). However, distance education began in the 1800s originally with correspondence courses. Within a century after Pitman's first correspondence course in 1840, the first department of corresponding teaching was established at the University of Chicago in 1990 (Matthews, 1999). In 1969, the United Kingdom developed the Open University, which sent materials to students by mail. With the widespread availability of the Internet, online courses have become popular. During the fall 2010 academic semester, 31% of students surveyed from 2,500 universities and colleges participated in an online course (Lyte, 2011).

To understand the factors that relate to dropping an online course, Kember (1989) developed a model of dropout in distance education. In conjunction with transactional distance theory, Kember's (1989) model could provide a lens to help educators, administrators, instructional designers, students, and others interested in online courses better understand the experience of dropping or failing an online class. In this review of the literature, Kember's (1989) model and transactional distance theory are examined in order to highlight the important connections between them. Together, the model and the theory may give insight into dropout and failure in online courses.

### **Kember's Model of Dropout in Distance Education**

Distance education distinguishes itself from traditional face-to-face classes by the use of technical media to unite the physically separate teacher and student and contains the educational course content (Kember, 1989). Online learning has proliferated as the

primary means of distance education (Hart, 2012). The decision to persist or drop an online course can be explained and predicted by Kember's (1989) model. Kember's (1989) model was derived from Tinto's (1975) student integration model in higher education, in which Tinto (1975) discussed persistence and dropout of the college system as pertaining to student characteristics and external factors.

In 1975, Tinto formulated a theoretical model that explains the processes of interaction between the individual and the institution that can lead differing individuals to drop out. Tinto's (1975) theory is rooted in Durkheim's theory of suicide and in the economics of education, which discussed how suicide is more likely to occur when an individual does not integrate within the fabric of society. One can treat dropout from a college system in an analogous manner (Tinto, 1975). In Figure 1 below, Tinto's (1975) model of student integration is outlined. One can see the groupings of student background characteristics, commitments, and integration and how they influence the decision to persist or drop. Kember (1989) kept the variables of Tinto's (1975) model, but defined them differently to correspond to distance education.

Many factors affect the persistence of students in online courses. Kember's (1989) model related the dropout process in distance education to a number of variables. These variables included student characteristics, goal commitment, academic environment and integration, social and work environment and integration, and cost-benefit analysis. Students decide whether to drop or to persist based on these factors influencing each other. Kember (1990) asserted that dropout in distance education is complex, being affected by the multitude of variables. Figure 2 illustrates Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education.

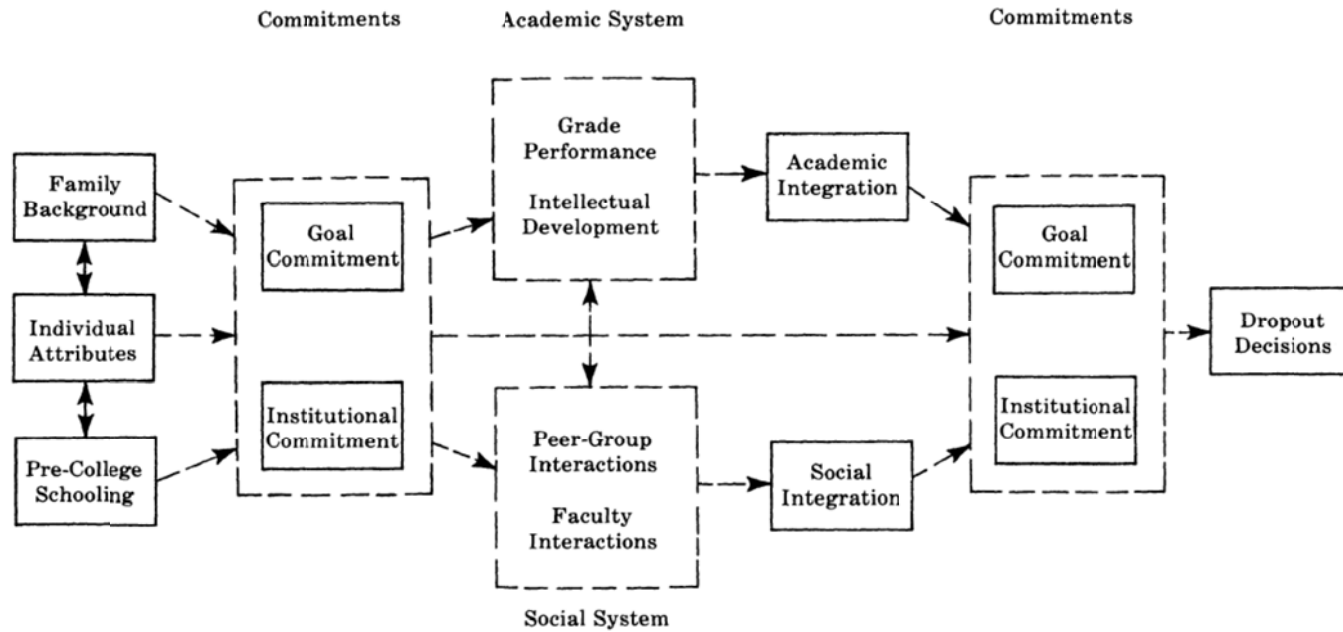
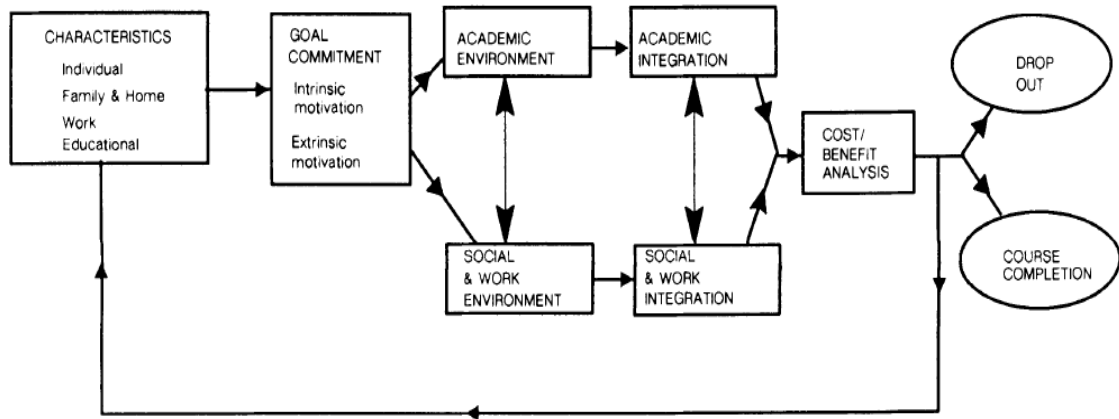


Figure 1. Tinto's (1975) model of student integration. Adapted from "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research" by V. Tinto, 1975, *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), p. 95.



*Figure 2.* Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education. Adapted from "A Longitudinal-process Model of Dropout from Distance Education" by D. Kember, 1989, *Journal of Higher Education*, 60(3), p 286.

### **Student Characteristics**

Student characteristics are at the beginning of Kember's (1989) model. These characteristics include age, gender, educational status and history, employment status and more (Park & Choi, 2009). Studies show that demographic data such as age, gender and ethnicity, do not significantly affect the decision to drop, nevertheless, student characteristics tend to moderate the factors that directly impact the decision (Aragon & Johnson, 2004; Park & Choi, 2009; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Kember, Lai, Murphy, Siaw, and Yuen (1994) conducted a study to test Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education. The researchers studied three online programs offered to adult part-time students in Hong Kong. The first two programs were courses in for an undergraduate education degree, and the last program consisted of courses in arts, business, and science. Questionnaires based on the Distance Education Student Progress (DESP) inventory were mailed to participants. The DESP measures demographic variables and integration variables in the distance education context (Kember et al.,



1994). The questionnaires contained items using a 5-point Likert-type scale. A total of 555 responses were used from a sample of 1,087 (a response rate of 51%). The researchers concluded that the social and academic integration variables act as intervening variables between student characteristics and persistence (Kember et al., 1994). According to Kember (1990), student characteristics influence the social and academic integration variables rather than have a direct statistical relationship to dropout.

Through the use of a survey, Park and Choi (2009) questioned 147 adult students who completed or dropped out of one of the online courses offered at a large Midwestern university in the United States. These adult students were enrolled in job-related online courses at that university. The purpose of the study was to compare persistent students and dropouts in terms of their individual characteristics, such as age, gender and educational level, as well as external factors such as family and organizational supports, and internal factors like satisfaction, relevance, and motivation. Family support and organizational support were measured by six items on a 5-point Likert-type scale. To measure satisfaction and relevance, the researchers based their items on Keller's Instructional Materials Motivation Survey. An introduction to the survey was sent to 234 participants via email. The message was sent three times and 161 students showed interest. Data from 147 out of 149 responses were used. The persistent group and the dropout group were compared. The researchers found that there were statistically significant differences between persisters and dropouts with respect to family and organizational support, relevance, and satisfaction. Students are more likely to drop if they do not have family or organizational support when taking online classes (Park & Choi, 2009). They are also less likely to drop if courses are satisfying to them and

relevant to their lives (Park & Choi, 2009). There were no significant differences for age, gender, and educational level, which are considered student characteristics. These results support Kember's (1990) idea that student characteristics do not directly affect the decision to persist or to drop.

Furthermore, Aragon and Johnson (2004) examined the differences in student characteristics between students who completed undergraduate online courses and those who dropped them. The sample consisted of 305 students from a rural community college in the Midwestern United States. Students were enrolled in online courses at the Midwestern community college during the spring 2002 semester for at least 10 days. The subjects of the online courses were not specified, and it was not clear whether the sample consisted of all students who were enrolled in online courses or just some who received information about the survey. The response rate was not listed. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether demographic, enrollment, academic readiness, and self-directed learning characteristics differed between persisters and dropouts. Demographic data included age, gender, ethnicity, and financial aid eligibility. These variables were collected from the course Management Information System at that community college.

Using a survey, the researchers collected information about learning readiness from the participants. They based their survey on an online version of the Bartlett-Kotrlik Inventory of Self-Learning. Course completion and GPA were collected from the Management Information System. Phone interviews were conducted with non-completers. The findings indicated that only gender had a significant association with completing online courses. Women completed courses at a higher rate than men, but the difference was small. No statistical significance was found between persistence between

persisters and non-persisters with respect to academic readiness and self-directed learning. However, from the phone interviews, the researchers found that personal problems and time constraints ranked highest as the reasons related to students not completing their online course.

Educational status and grade point average (GPA) have been found to indirectly impact students' decisions to persist in an online course. Students with less academic aptitude and a history of poor academic performance are more likely to enroll in online courses, but were less likely to persist in them (Lee & Choi, 2011). Students with lower college status and who are further from graduation are more likely to drop an online course (Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011). According to Aragon and Johnson (2004), the GPAs of completers and non-completers were different. With an online questionnaire to community college students, Harrell and Bower (2011) found similar results, concluding that an increase in GPA was associated with a decrease in course withdrawal.

Although student characteristics do not directly impact the decision to drop, there are differences in the profiles of students who persist and those who drop. Hyllegard, Deng, and Hunter (2008) investigated the differences in student characteristics between students who officially withdrew from online courses and those who unofficially withdrew at the Borough of Manhattan Community College. The researchers compared demographic information between students who officially withdrew from the course (i.e., dropped out), those who unofficially withdrew (i.e., received a failing grade in the course), and those who completed the course. This information included characteristics such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, major, class standing, and grade point average. All the demographic data were obtained from student records. A web survey was completed

1 month into the semester. A total of 685 students were sent the survey, and 155 completed it, giving a response rate of 23%. Another end-of-term survey was administered. An email about this web survey was sent to 162 email accounts, and 56 students responded, a response rate of 34.6%. Of the 56 students who responded, 35 had officially withdrawn, and 21 had unofficially withdrawn. The researchers found that the students who officially withdrew had similar demographic profiles to those who completed the course. Students who unofficially withdrew (i.e., failed the course) had different profiles. For example, they had lower grade point averages and fewer credits. This was the only study in this review that examined unofficial withdrawal in online courses or, in other words, failure in an online course.

### **Goal Commitment**

The next aspect of Kember's (1989) model is goal commitment. Kember et al. (1994) found that a student's commitment to an institution is an important factor relating to persistence. The higher the goal commitment that a student has, the more likely he or she will persist in a course (Tinto, 1975). Persistence is directly related to goal commitment, thus, the lower the commitment, the more likely a person may drop (Tinto, 1975). Goal commitment is divided up into two categories, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

**Intrinsic motivation.** Intrinsic motivation pertains to the student's interest in a subject. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), motivation occurs when an individual is moved to do something, and intrinsic motivation refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable. When intrinsically motivated, a person may act for the fun or for the challenge of doing so rather than being influenced by external rewards

or pressure (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Online courses should have direct relevance to a student's individual interests, vocational position, or situation in life to provide intrinsic motivation (Kember, 1990).

Students with higher levels of self-motivation, self-efficacy, satisfaction with courses, and confidence in their computer skills were more likely to complete online courses (Lee & Choi, 2011). Lee and Choi (2011) remarked on how student motivation significantly predicted their decision to drop out. In a phenomenological dissertation, Meyerhoeffer (2009) explored eight undergraduates' perceptions about successfully completing an online course. Participants were enrolled in a community college in a rural state. The researcher used purposive sampling to recruit four traditional students and four nontraditional students. The college registrar was contacted and sent out an email to all students enrolled in undergraduate general education courses online during the Fall 2008 semester. Interested students were screened to determine if they fit the criteria of the study. The researcher examined course design, whether students were traditional or nontraditional, instructor teaching strategies, and gender. Meyerhoeffer (2009) found that self-efficacy influenced undergraduates to complete an online course. Traditional students noted that course availability motivated them to take an online course, while nontraditional students cited the convenience of the online setting.

**Extrinsic motivation.** Kember (1989) commented on how students who lacked intrinsic motivation in an online course may still persist if the rewards for completing the course are high enough. Extrinsic motivation is the student's commitment to obtaining the qualifications at the end of a course, such as credentials and course credits. Instructors should consider giving rewards, such as a certificate or praise (Park & Choi,

2009). Kember (1990) determined that institutions should ensure awards to maximize extrinsic motivation.

Furthermore, Stanford-Bowers (2008) investigated the perceptions of administrators, faculty, and students about online persistence factors using a series of questionnaires on an online survey website. Thirty-nine participants volunteered from various community colleges in Alabama. Results of the study showed different perspectives about online persistence between the faculty and administrators and the students. Faculty and administration promoted intrinsic motivation in the forms of self-motivation, self-discipline, adequate time, technology skills, and the like as requirements to learning. Students reported extrinsic motivators, for example, obtaining a degree, career advancement, and convenience as major reasons for taking online courses. According to respondents, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators influence persistence.

**Academic locus of control.** Goal commitment can also include locus of control. Harrell and Bower (2011) expressed how students with an internal locus of control perceive that events are determined by their own behavior, while those with an external locus of control credit events to fate, luck, or other external circumstances. In a quantitative study consisting of 133 participants from the college of business administration at a major state university in the Southeastern United States, Levy (2007) found the drop rate to be 18% for online courses versus 8% for their on-campus counterparts. Levy (2007) explored academic locus of control and students' satisfaction with online courses and concluded that locus of control did not differ between persisters and dropouts. This lack of differences may be attributed to the idea that students with either types of locus of control are still motivated. Students with an internal locus of

control may have more intrinsic motivation, whereas, those with an external locus of control may have more extrinsic motivation to complete an online course. However, Lee and Choi (2011) found that an internal locus of control positively predicts persistence and successful completion of an online course. The researchers did not state whether there existed a relationship between an external locus of control and completion of an online course.

Motivation is an important aspect of goal commitment. Overall, goal commitment focuses on the student, who is at the center of interactions in transactional distance theory. A lack of goal commitment could signify that the student has not fully interacted with the instructor or the content.

### **Academic Environment and Integration**

Academic environment and integration follows goal commitment in Kember's (1989) model. This variable includes all facets of the courses offered by the institution (Kember, 1989). Academic environment includes course content and curriculum design. These components are related to Moore's (1993) program structure in transactional distance theory. Moore (1993) concluded that high predetermined program structure and low dialog leads to high transactional distance. Kember (1989) described this same idea in terms of collective affiliation, which relates to the packaging of the study and the administrative support. Students must perceive that they are integrated into a course (Moody, 2004).

Students must be comfortable with the online format (Hart, 2012). While computer skills are required for online courses, the research is inconclusive as to whether or not the degree of computer literacy influences persistence. One aspect of Harrell and

Bower's (2011) study examined whether computer skills affected online persistence. The researchers found that those students with more computer skills were more likely to drop, surprisingly. However, in Harrell and Bower's (2011) study, the data on computer experience was self-reported and was based on perceptions, which could mean that some participants exaggerated their level of computer expertise.

Furthermore, Dupin-Bryant (2004) identified six pre-entry variables related to online course completion at Utah State University, including grade point average, class rank, the number of previously completed online courses, searching the Internet training, operating systems and file management training, and Internet applications training. A total of 464 students returned a mailed survey (which was a 46% response rate based on over 1,000 selected participants). Results indicated that prior educational experience and computer training distinguished between students who complete online courses and those who do not. Dropouts tended to be lower-division students with lower grade point averages and fewer computer training courses than persisters. However, the researcher did suggest that years of computer experience was not crucial to persistence. Overall, the academic environment must suit the students' needs.

In a dissertation, Wyman (2012) described the phenomenon of the dropout of 10 doctoral candidates who were enrolled in online programs. Wyman (2012) used purposive sampling and snowball sampling to select individuals. The researcher sent emails to known contacts and to a listserv of superintendents and employees from all of the school districts in Massachusetts. The results of the study indicated that institutions should help doctoral students to academically and socially integrate as well as provide the content and the administrative facets of an online course. The participants in Wyman's



(2012) study dropped an entire program. This study differs in that the students have dropped or failed an online course or courses, but not the entire program. Wyman's (2012) study also does not address students' feedback for improving the courses as this study considered it.

**Course design.** Course design is an important aspect of the academic environment. Through the use of case study research, Boling et al. (2011) identified supports and hindrances to online teaching and learning. Ten adult students who had completed several online courses and six online course instructors participated in interviews. The researchers found that courses that were multimedia-rich and interactive created more positive experiences than text-based content with limited interaction. Limited interaction implies low dialog, high program structure, thus, high transactional distance. Murray, Perez, Geist, and Hedrick (2012) examined student access to course materials online and noted that well-designed, high-quality online courses can be as effective as face-to-face classes. The online experience can be attractive and inspiring by incorporating media such as text, audio, video, and images.

As media evolves and improves over time, online instructors should make use of new technologies in their courses to increase student engagement. Tirrell and Quick (2012) suggested that faculty and course designers must develop a new approach to teaching and learning that takes advantage of modern information technology capabilities to promote student success in the online environment. The researchers studied whether or not instructional strategies had an effect on student attrition in online courses. Faculty members at three community colleges in Virginia participated in an online survey. The survey was based on the Inventories of Good Practices in Undergraduate Education,

which examines if instructional practices are consistent with the seven principles for good practice. This survey was shortened when implemented online to a 35-item questionnaire on a 5-point Likert-type scale. Scores on the questionnaire described the participants' teaching styles. Results indicated that faculty who actively engaged students using principles of good practice such as giving prompt feedback, had lower student attrition in their courses. The use of various technologies to diversify content can reduce transactional distance and promote a student-centered environment.

The online learning environment has features that set it apart from other types of distance learning. Revere and Kovach (2011) discussed these features. The researchers indicated that discussion boards, chat sessions, blogs, and wikis facilitated learning and social activities online. Discussion boards are a forum for peer review and exchange; however, they can be problematic when students lurk (i.e., do not actively participate) (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Discussion boards are asynchronous in that the students can post messages and respond to each other at any time that is convenient for them. Revere and Kovach (2011) noted that blogs allow students to post their own content, and wikis are simple pages that groups can edit together. Chat sessions are synchronous and can encourage positive interaction (Revere & Kovach, 2011). This positive interaction is the essence of dialog in transactional distance theory. Thus, insufficient use of the features mentioned or a lack of dialog in an online course can lead to non-persistence.

Components of course design affect persistence. Course design is a critical ingredient for deep learning and the success of online programs (Gazi, 2009). It involves formulating the intended learning outcomes, designing activities that allow students to meet the outcomes, and creating assessments to measure these outcomes (Gazi, 2009).

Gazi (2009) conducted a qualitative action research study that examined how to prepare and to design online courses. Sixteen participants consisted of directors, tutors, and technical staff at Eastern Mediterranean University. Though Gazi (2009) recommended collaborative learning in the online setting, none of the study's participants were students, thus, one cannot determine if the students felt collaborative learning was important.

In contrast, Brinkerhoff and Koroghlanian (2007) surveyed 249 online college students from 13 institutions across the United States to find out what course components and features they valued and desired. The researchers did not state whether or not the participants were undergraduates or graduate students. Participants completed a 55-item survey that had four sections: demographics and computer experience, ratings of online courses, features used in online courses, and prior experiences. The ratings and features sections consisted of 42 questions on a 4-point Likert scale. The researchers found that there were differences between student desires for an online course and current course design. For example, the researchers found that team assignments were inconvenient for the online students. Lee and Choi (2011) determined that collaborative learning did not demonstrate any influence on persistence. Depending on the perspective of the participant, there may be a discrepancy in the belief that online collaborative learning is essential to good course design. The use of "about me" pages is another example of an inconsistency in the literature. Although Kember (1990) and Boling et al. (2011) recommended such biographical pages, Brinkerhoff and Koroghlanian (2007) demonstrated with their survey how students in their study did not value such pages, often seeing them as busy work.

**Instruction in online settings.** The instructor plays an important role in the academic environment. Instructors take on the responsibilities of being mentors, coordinators, and facilitators of learning in the online environment (Boling et al., 2012). Lee and Choi (2011) presented the online teacher's role as facilitating effective communication and interactive experiences within classes. Instructor characteristics that are important to students are promptness, feedback, and meeting students' needs (Hart, 2012). A good instructor is accessible, flexible, and gives feedback (Boling et al., 2012). Instantaneous and frequent performance feedback is relevant and useful (Murray et al., 2012). Interactions with the instructor are likely to be most valuable when there is feedback (Moore, 1989). In a phenomenological dissertation, Sperry (2009) investigated the online experiences of eight rural, community college students in Washington State. The researcher selected students purposefully, choosing only students who had the lived experience of participating in an online class. Sperry (2009) found that flexibility, clear course content, instructor feedback, and motivation affected the student experiences. Students liked that they could choose when and where to do their work; they appreciated timely feedback from instructors; and they were motivated by their individual goals to complete a course (Sperry, 2009).

If faculty give timely and appropriate feedback, provide interactive activities, and prompt supports to students, then they will more likely persist (Lee & Choi, 2011). The more interactions students had with their instructors, the more satisfied they were and the more they thought they learned (Swan, Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett & Pelz, 2000). The case study of Boling et al. (2012) demonstrated that if there is disconnect between students and their instructors, then, the online experience becomes less enjoyable and

more frustrating. This statement is consistent with Moore's (1993) idea that student-instructor interaction is highly valuable and desired. The lack of student-instructor interactions may lead to failure of a student to academically integrate, which may result in non-persistence.

Instructors can take advantage of the various features that different technologies can offer to promote academic integration. Revere and Kovach (2011) synthesized information about new technologies that can be used in education and asserted that technology that is appropriately integrated with content promotes engaging activities in a student-centered environment. This technology integration can reduce transactional distance by decreasing high program structure and promoting student-content interactions. Course management systems like Blackboard or Moodle are platforms where instructors can interact with students through asynchronous and synchronous formats like bulletin boards and chat sessions (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Information should be presented in short, focused lectures followed by engaging and reflective activities (Revere & Kovach, 2011). Lee and Choi (2011) stated that presentations should be interactive, flexible, and self-directive.

Instruction in the online setting differs from the traditional face-to-face classroom. The difference between classroom teaching and online instruction are prominent in the course development and delivery processes (Wang, Gould, & King, 2009). Chao and Hamilton (2010) used a case study approach to examine how quality standards can be effectively implemented in online courses. Their four cases consisted of two undergraduate courses and two graduate courses. Faculty members and instructional designers at a Royal Roads University in Canada were surveyed and interviewed in

groups. The researchers recommended that instructors adopt a collaborative approach to designing and developing online courses. This would include the help of the instructional designer. The researchers found that high-quality online courses require various sources of expertise and were highly regarded. Whether or not instructors work in teams, institutions must provide faculty members with the support they need to design and teach courses online (Wang, Gould, & King, 2009). Therefore, a lack of persistence by students may sometimes reflect a lack of training on the part of instructors.

**Normative congruence.** Academic integration also consists of normative congruence. Normative congruence is the compatibility between the academic expectations of the lecturer and how the student views these expectations (Kember, 1990). Kember (1990) stressed that integration will not occur if a student is unaware of an academic convention or has different perceptions of tasks or conceptions of knowledge than the instructor. Although they do not use the term explicitly, other researchers discuss the concept of normative congruence in their studies. Brinkerhoff and Koroghlanian (2007) considered the mismatch between student's expectations and actual course features. Hart (2012) discussed how any disconnect between learning style and the nature of the online environment could lead to frustration or withdrawal.

Furthermore, Harrell and Bower (2011) used a survey that was based on the Barsch Learning Style Inventory, the Abbreviated Measure of Internal-External Locus of Control, and a computer experience scale developed by the researchers. The purpose of the study was to discover how student characteristics can help predict the persistence of community college students in online courses (Harrell & Bower, 2011). Instructors at five Florida community colleges were contacted by email and asked to disseminate the

link to the survey to their students. In total, 431 instructors were contacted and 42 responded. The total number of students enrolled in these courses was 1,593 and 544 responded yielding a response rate of 34%. Only 225 of the completed surveys were eligible to use in their study. Findings indicated that auditory learning style, grade point average, and computer skills were significant predictors. An increase in auditory learning style corresponded to an increase in course withdrawal. Higher grade point averages associated with a decrease in course withdrawal. Harrell and Bower (2011) noted how an increase in auditory learning style leads to a higher likelihood of dropping out. Thus, certain aspects as to how students learn may not lend themselves to online instruction, which may result in drop or failure from online courses or a student never registering for them.

### **Social and Work Environment and Integration**

Students have external responsibilities outside of their academic program that influence their performance. In his model, Kember (1989) conveyed the parallel of Tinto's (1975) social integration in the face-to-face setting to that of social and work integration in the online environment. Kember (1989) explained that social integration involved familial and employer support. The anytime-anyplace nature of online education suits students who work and have families. Asynchronous components of the online format allow students to maintain family and work schedules because there is no set time for students to participate in the course (Hart, 2012). Adult students view online learning as a valuable option now available to them as they have work, family, and other responsibilities (Holder, 2007). Holder (2007) surveyed 259 students enrolled in degree programs varying from associate's to master's levels in distance learning courses in the

Midwestern United States to measure predictors of persistence. Persisters scored higher on emotional support, self-efficacy, and time-study management. Persisters tended to have a supportive group of family and friends and had higher expectations to do well. They practiced good study habits, such as keeping up with the required readings and assignments. However, online students must learn to balance the demands of study with family, work and social commitments (Kember, 1989).

Too many time commitments outside the course could lead to dropout or failure. Hyllegard, Deng, and Hunter (2008) suggested that non-persistence in online courses could be a consequence of busy lives rather than the online format. From an electronic survey of students who dropped out of an online master's program, Willging and Johnson (2009) concluded that the reasons for leaving an online program were either personal or program related. Jun (2005) listed the success factors of online learning as budgeting time, being self-motivated, and having supportive family and friends. Students must perceive that family and friends are supportive of their academic pursuits (Hart, 2012). Having a supportive group of family and friends and the comfort of knowing they are not alone is important to persistence (Holder, 2007). Perry et al. (2008) commented on how an online program should fit students' career aspirations. Students also need support from employers. Together, supportive social and work environments may lead to a student being more likely to persist.

In a phenomenological thesis project, Gwekwerere (2004) identified factors affecting persistence in online courses from the perspectives of the nontraditional student. Seven women from Athabasca University in Canada were surveyed and interviewed. Four women were persisters and three were dropouts. Gwekwerere's (2004) study used



Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education as its theoretical model. The findings included that family, online peers, and work life influenced persistence.

Even though Kember (1989) redefined social integration for the purposes of his distance education model, he did not take into account how social integration in the fashion that Tinto (1975) described does take place in the online environment. Kember (1989) did not account for student-student interactions. This could largely be due to the time of Kember's (1989) work and the technologies available at that time, which were in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many social media technologies emerged, allowing students more ability to interact with other students. These tools can be incorporated into the online course design, creating a sense of presence and online community that is essential to an online environment (Rovai, 2003; Stepich, 2003). Rovai (2003) explained that feelings of disconnectedness and isolation adversely affect persistence in online courses. Yet, the opportunity to socially integrate with other students exists in online education. Lee (2009) investigated the perceptions of graduate students on the effectiveness of learning activities in online courses and found that the use of Web 2.0 and other 21<sup>st</sup> century technologies enhanced learning. For example, the researcher mentioned using video chat about the readings as a means of communication from students that could replace chapter questions. The social integration resulting from the use of these social media tools may help students to overcome feelings of isolation and disconnectedness that can overwhelm them.

In a phenomenological dissertation, Hultgren (2008) examined the online experiences of six doctoral education students in the effort to understand online interaction from the student's perspective. The themes that emerged in this study were the

perceptions of the instructor and classmates and the assumptions about the role of the instructor and students. Students thrive online when instructors and classmates are present and are contributing to the course in a positive manner.

### **Cost-Benefit Analysis**

Borrowing from the economics of education, Tinto (1975) and Kember (1989) incorporated the cost-benefit analysis into their student integration models. According to Tinto (1975), individuals make the decision to drop or to persist in any activity by weighing the perceived costs and benefits of that activity and alternative activities. An individual will opt for an activity that has maximized benefits-to-costs ratio given over time (Tinto, 1975). A student may withdraw from college if he or she perceives an alternative activity will yield greater benefits, relative to costs, than staying in college (Tinto, 1975). The student must decide if the time spent studying and the qualifications to be obtained from study are worthwhile in light of other potential time commitments (Kember, 1989). Tinto (1975) declared in the cost-benefits analysis, it is the individual's perceptions that are most important. A loop was included in the model to account for changes and developments throughout the course (Kember et al., 1994). Thus, students might go through the cost-benefits analysis of the model at more than one point in time during the course.

### **Decision to Persist or to Drop**

At the end of Kember's (1989) model lies the decision to persist or dropout. No single set of variables can predict persistence or attrition in an online course (Street, 2010). However, researchers have identified strategies and helpful ideas to promote persistence (Gazi, 2009; Lee & Choi, 2011; Park, Perry & Edwards, 2011). Park, Perry,

and Edwards (2011) explored strategies aimed at minimizing attrition in online graduate level courses. In a qualitative Delphi study, Heyman (2010) questioned expert panelists about online education. The researcher found that the experts felt that online education had the potential to bring educational experiences to more students than ever before. The panelists identified the need for a range of support services to be available to students. In addition, students need a sense of community that can be built by the instructor's presence and responsiveness (Heyman, 2010).

### **Summary**

The review of the literature led to the creation of the research questions. Both transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education may help explain the experiences of university students who drop or fail an online course. Transactional distance theory was formulated at a time when non-web-based distance education courses were growing and being improved upon. However, this theory can offer insights into how learning takes place in the online setting. Moore (1989) discussed three types of interactions that take place in distance education. These types of interactions consist of student-student, student-teacher, and student-content. Non-persistence seems to be accounted for by insufficient interactions in one or more of these types. The academic and social integration variables are accounted for by these interactions. One may say that academic integration is the culmination of student-content interactions and that social integration is a result of student-student and student-teacher interactions.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

This study was a basic interpretive qualitative study. According to Stake (2010), qualitative means the research relies on human perception and understanding. Stake (2010) commented on how qualitative studies emphasize personal experience in described situations. Yin (2011) described qualitative research as studying people's lives in the real world context. The purpose of this basic interpretive qualitative study was to understand the experiences of university students that relate to their dropping or failing an online course through the lenses of transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education. Although recommended, few qualitative studies have been conducted with students who have dropped or failed in the online environment (Dupin-Bryant, 2004; Patterson & McFadden, 2009).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How can transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout help explain the experiences of university students that relate to their dropping an online course?
2. How can transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout help explain the experiences of university students that relate to their failing an online course?
3. What suggestions do university students who have dropped an online course have for improving online courses?
4. What suggestions do university students who have failed an online course have for improving online courses?

## **Research Design: The Basic Interpretive Study**

Research is inquiry and the use of a deliberate study to seek to understand phenomena (Stake, 2010). Merriam (2002) indicated that qualitative researchers make meaning of what people have constructed about their experiences. Merriam (2002) asserted that the product of qualitative inquiry is rich as the research attempts to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of participants. In qualitative research, the research participants are the experts and not the researcher (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). However, in qualitative research, the researcher is seen as the primary research instrument (Merriam, 2002; Stake, 2010).

According to Stake (2010), qualitative research draws on the interpretations of researchers, of the people they study, and of the readers of their reports. Stake (2010) identified the researcher as the research instrument because he or she uses personal experience to make interpretations. Yin (2011) remarked that the researcher serves as the primary research instrument because some important real-world phenomena cannot be measured by external instruments. Yin (2011) suggested that these types of phenomena can only be revealed by making inferences on observed data and by talking to people.

The researcher being the main research instrument in qualitative research leads to the concern of researcher bias. Marshall and Rossman (2006) concluded that the challenge of the qualitative researcher is to demonstrate that the study is not biased by personal interest. One cannot avoid his or her own research lenses (Yin, 2011). The researcher's life influences how he or she approaches important aspects of a study (Saldana, 2009). Merriam (2002) recommended identifying and monitoring researchers' biases and how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of data.

To minimize researcher bias in this study, a reflective journal was kept. According to Ary, Jacobs, and Sorensen (2006), reflexivity, demonstrated through the use of a reflective journal, helps the researcher to recognize his or her biases. Reflexivity is examining how one's subjectivity influences one's research (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). According to Saldana (2009), what the researcher thinks and feels during the research process should be recorded and is also considered data. Other researchers can better evaluate one's conclusions if one's personal perspectives are made known, such as through the reflexive journal (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). The researcher should refer to this journal during the data analysis process (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2006). Entries from the journal were included in this study as part of the audit trail and also in the findings to help readers evaluate the conclusions. In addition, the journal was used to make decisions about conducting the research. For example, at one point, the decision was made to only conduct phone and face-to-face interviews as students who wanted electronic interviews did not complete the interview. Additionally, the journal was useful in deciding to make announcements in face-to-face courses to recruit participants, as before that, only online announcements were made. An excerpt from the researcher's journal was included in chapter four of this dissertation.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. A semi-structured interview has formulated questions but the interviewer may modify the questions during the interview (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorenson, 2006). The interview questions were designed to answer the research questions. The Interview Schedule can be found in the appendices.

In a basic interpretive qualitative study, the researcher is interested in how people make meaning of and interpret their experiences (Merriam, 2002). The focus of this

study was the experiences of university students, in an effort to understand the experiences that related to their dropping out of or failing an online course. Merriam (2002) indicated that the basic interpretive qualitative study is always framed by some concept, model, or theory. The interview questions and data analysis for this study were based on Kember's (1989) model and Moore's (1993) transactional distance theory.

### **Participants and Setting**

The sample for this study was taken from a large Southeastern university in the United States. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who have experienced dropping or failing an online course. Participants were recruited across educational levels and subjects. According to Xu and Jagers (2013), there is no information as to which subjects are more effectively taught online than others. With approval from the Institutional Review Board, the contact information of current students who fit the criteria of having dropped or failed an online course was requested from online professors at the university. Professors were also encouraged to make announcements in their online classes. In addition, the researcher made announcements in several face-to-face courses in order to recruit participants. Fliers were disseminated to students in the populated areas of campus, and, also, left in offices, and in the library for students to pick up. An informational letter was emailed to students who were interested in participating.

### **Data Collection**

The mode of inquiry in this study was interviewing. Stake (2010) remarked that one interviews to find out about a thing that a researcher was not able to observe. Oftentimes, researchers are interested in the stories of other people (Seidman, 2006). "At the root of interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other

people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p.9). Seidman (2006) declared that interviewing enables people to make meaning through language. Seidman explained that the goal of an interview is the participant’s reconstruction of experience within the topic in question.

A total of 20 subjects participated in this study. Redundancy was reached by the 16<sup>th</sup> interview. Redundancy occurred when each new interview did not add any new information to the study. New codes were not generated after the 16<sup>th</sup> interview. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), redundancy usually occurs by the 12th interview and definitively by the 20th. Thus, 20 interviews were conducted in this study. Anonymity was ensured and pseudonyms were utilized. Pseudonyms were generated on a website - <http://www.behindthename.com/random/>. The data from this study will be kept in digital format for 3 years on a flash drive and will be discarded after that time frame. The flash drive will be locked away in a filing cabinet owned by the researcher during those 3 years.

### **Data Analysis**

In qualitative research, data analysis occurs simultaneously with data collection. The interviews in this study were recorded and transcribed. The researcher transcribed the first six interviews and the remaining 14 interviews were sent to a transcription service. To check for accuracy, the researcher listened to each interview while reading the transcripts. Quotes from the raw data were used in the student profiles of this study. Microsoft OneNote was used to keep track of the data and the journal.

The first step to coding is recognition. Recognition is where the concepts, themes, events, and topical markers in the interviews are found (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).



Rubin and Rubin (2005) defined concepts as words or terms that represent important ideas. Themes are defined as summary statements and explanations. Events are occurrences that took place and topical markers as names and important numbers. Coding involves systematically labeling these concepts, themes, events and topical markers (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The individual responses to each question by the participants were considered a unit of data for coding. The categories from the theoretical lenses of transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model were used from the literature as themes. The coded data were sorted, ranked, and used to develop a thematic presentation.

### **Trustworthiness**

How can a researcher persuade his or her readers that the findings of a study are credible? A number of strategies identified in the literature pertained to this issue of trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) summarized how trustworthiness occurs when the researcher carries out the inquiry in such a way that the findings are likely to be credible and are approved by the participants. Trustworthiness is explained further when Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Trustworthiness is a matter of concern to consumers of research reports (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following sections describe the strategies that were used to enhance trustworthiness in this study.

### **Credibility**

Several strategies have been recognized that promote the credibility of a qualitative study. A strategy used in this study consisted of peer debriefing.

**Peer debriefing.** Peer debriefing may add to the credibility of this study. Peer debriefing occurs when colleagues of the researcher assess whether or not the findings make sense based on the raw data (Merriam, 2002). Peer debriefing allows for researcher catharsis because the colleagues of the researcher may help him or her in finding his or her next steps in the study if the next steps are unclear to him or her (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, peer debriefing occurred after the first draft of the final write-up. A colleague was asked to review the initial draft and the raw data in order to provide questions and comments. The colleague agreed that the information in the transcriptions corresponded to the interpretations in the write-up. Additionally, he added his thoughts about what he gathered from the participants' transcripts. These thoughts can be found in the concluding chapter.

### **Transferability**

In studies that are qualitative in nature, the question of transferability rather than generalizability often arises. One can use what was learned from an in-depth particular situation and transfer and apply the knowledge to another situation (Merriam, 2002). Merriam (2002) discussed user or reader generalizability (also called case-to-case transfer), where the readers determine the extent to which findings of a study can be transferred to their contexts. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted the burden of transferability is less on the researcher and more on the reader. A researcher must provide a thick description in order for readers to easily identify and match their contexts to that of the study, to see if transfer is a possibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

With respect to dependability, qualitative researchers seek to take into account the factors of instability in a study as well as factors of change from the design (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher is also interested in whether or not the data were confirmable. One strategy that addresses both dependability and confirmability is the audit trail. The audit trail relates to the transparency of methods (Merriam, 2002). It is the residue of records from the inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher examines and describes the process of inquiry and the data, interpretations, and recommendations. The audit trail will be employed in this study in order to assist readers on issues of dependability and confirmability.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, the research methods and design of this study were presented. This study was a basic interpretive study that was framed by transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education. A total of 20 participants participated in semi-structured interviews in person and over the telephone. Issues of trustworthiness were addressed through the strategies of member checking, peer debriefing, the audit trail, and the reflexive journal.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: STUDENT PROFILES AND THEMATIC PRESENTATION**

The purpose of this basic interpretive study was to understand the experiences of students at a large Southeastern university that relate to their dropping or failing an online course. A total of 20 students who have dropped or failed an online course at the university participated. In this chapter, the student profiles and the themes from the data provided by these participants are presented.

### **Student Profiles**

The following paragraphs contain information about each participant. Pseudonyms have been used. The student profiles are presented in order of outcome in the course and by age. Raw data, in the form of quotations from the transcripts, were included in the student profiles. The categories of Kember's (1989) model are listed for each participant, as well as their overall experience in the course, and their suggestions for improving the course. A statement on the amount of transactional distance in the course, based on the participants' descriptions of the course, was in each profile, also. The levels of transactional distance was ranked as low, moderate, and high. Rubin and Rubin (2005) suggested this type of sorting and ranking data to help researchers generate additional ideas about the data.

### **Undergraduates Who Dropped an Online Course**

The following profiles were of participants who were undergraduates and who dropped an online course. The participants were ordered by age from youngest to oldest.

#### **Elsie**

**Student characteristics.** Elsie was a 19-year-old undergraduate student who dropped a course entitled, "Teaching Diverse Populations." She expected to graduate in

the year 2017. She was not working and she was a full time student at the university at the time of this study.

**Overall experience.** The first question of the interview was about the participants' overall experience in the online course. Elsie was overwhelmed by her online course. "I believe it was too much to handle online, indeed overwhelming, but in the end I dropped it to take it in real life next semester," Elsie stated. "I saw the first assignment and it was a lot of work... So, it was too much," she continued.

**Goal commitment.** The interview questions on goal commitment related to the participants' reasons for taking the course online, their level of motivation at the start of the course, the extent that factors beyond their control accounted for their outcome in the course, and how important it was to finish the course. Elsie enrolled in an online course to do her schoolwork during the day. The course was a requirement for Elsie. At first, she was motivated about her course. "Well, I was motivated, really excited that I didn't have to sit in an actual class, but, then, it got overwhelming."

**Academic environment and integration.** Questions on academic environment and integration ranged from asking the participants' thoughts and feelings about the institution, the course instructor, and the course itself, to what type of student the participants feel they are, and if the features of the course matched the way that they learn. In addition, participants were asked to describe the features of the course and what types of supports that were available to them. Elsie had positive thoughts and feelings about the institution. Elsie stated, "If you are focused, you are going to get a lot out of [the university]." Elsie had reviews of the course from others. "Well, I had heard the instructor was really good, so, I was really excited to take it with him... I'm sure it would

have been good, but I got too overwhelmed,” Elsie explained. Elsie described herself as a visual student. As a visual student, she felt that she should have taken the face-to-face version of the course. In her online course, Elsie mentioned that there were weekly assignments where students had to respond to each other. She did not stay in the course long enough to note all the features.

**Social and work environment and integration.** The questions about social and work environment and integration referred to how supportive the participants’ families and jobs were to them while taking an online course. Additionally, there were questions about the nature of the interactions with the instructor and with other students. Elsie felt that her family was supportive of her taking an online course, but she did not stay in it long enough for her to know the full extent of their support.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** The questions that followed in the interview asked the participants about the personal, social, and economic benefits of taking an online course. Elsie did not know of many benefits of taking an online course. She listed a personal benefit of saving gas and time not driving to school, but she did not know of any social benefits or economic benefits. She stated that online courses are more expensive.

**Transactional distance.** Questions about the amount of interactions in the course and the features of the course were used to rank the amount of transactional distance that appeared in the course from the interviews. From her responses, Elsie may have experienced a moderate amount of transactional distance in her online course. Elsie did not stay enrolled for a long time in her online course and she stated there were no instructor interactions for her. Thus, no dialog occurred for the duration of time she was enrolled in the course. She stated that there were weekly assignments and discussion

posts due in her online course, giving the course some form of structure. The lack of dialog and the amount of structure in the course may indicate a fair amount of learner autonomy in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** The last two questions asked about the factors that the participants felt related to their outcome of dropping or failing an online course, and the suggestions they had for improving online courses. Elsie pinpointed a lack of time management as a factor that related to her dropping the online course. “I guess, I couldn’t time manage correctly to keep up with the class.” For Elsie, having to respond less to other students’ postings would improve the course.

For Elsie, the lack of academic integration in her online course may have related to her dropping the course so early. She felt overwhelmed by the packaging of the study, which Kember (1989) described as a component of academic integration.

## **Jeanne**

**Student characteristics.** Jeanne was a 20-year-old undergraduate who dropped an online course entitled, “Latin American Civilization.” She stated that she expected to graduate in the year 2015. She reported that she has taken either four or five online classes. Jeanne was employed part time and was a full time student at the university.

**Overall experience.** For this question, Jeanne focused on the consequences of her online course being taken in the summer. She felt overwhelmed by the amount of work in the course. Jeanne stated the following:

With that course specifically, it was a summer class, so, it was rushed. And it was humanities with writing, which meant I had to read several chapters a week and I had to write papers weekly. It was too much to handle.

**Goal commitment.** Jeanne took her online course because it was a requirement. She explained that she needed it for the university's core curriculum, which is the first two years of classes. Jeanne felt motivated at the start of the course because it was the only course that she was taking that summer. She focused much on her schedule. Jeanne went on to state the following:

I took it because that was before I was driving. The way I was getting to here was my mom works right by here. I would make my schedule from 9-6 and since it was summer, I took it online.

When asked about factors beyond her control that may have affected her decision to drop, Jeanne discussed the time commitment to the course as opposed to her jobs. Jeanne commented, "I was working and I didn't really have time to read the books that I was supposed to read and write all the papers I had to write. It was a lot of time." Although she could not commit the time to the online course, she did feel that the course was important to finish. Jeanne asserted, "It was important because that was the last class I needed for the [university core curriculum] and since I dropped it, it took me longer to finish it."

**Academic environment and integration.** Jeanne had a positive experience with the university. "I like it. I think it's a really good school. I am learning a lot and I am happy going here." However, she lacked interest in the course. Jeanne commented, "I mean like the videos that he showed us were not that interesting... it was like boring and too much to handle." She felt the instructor was difficult to reach and gave her thoughts on instructors of online courses in general. Jeanne made the following statement:

I think he was pretty hard to get in contact with and a lot of other online classes have the TAs (teaching assistants) and they are much tougher than the actual



teachers. It makes it harder because you look on [a website] and it's like "This teacher is amazing" and then you get a TA that is different than the professor.

Moreover, Jeanne stated that she is an auditory learner, which may be to her detriment in an online class. She likes the physical presence of the instructor. Jeanne remarked:

I like to go to class and listen. I am not a huge fan of reading the book or anything. That's why I always come to class. I pay attention. I learn based on whatever the teacher says and I go back and kind of skim through the actual information that I need.

Furthermore, online courses are different for Jeanne. She mentioned, "A lot of teachers don't really put the lectures [online]. It's more of read the chapters and take a quiz and take a test. Write a paper. It's pretty much that." Jeanne specified, "It was like week 1... basically, a calendar. This is what you're going to read. You should have this done by this time. Watch these videos for week 1 and write this paper by this day."

Additionally, Jeanne was aware of different supports that were available. She stated that she could contact the teacher if needed, that she had books and the notes, and that there were, also, technical supports available for those having trouble with the learning management system, Blackboard.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Jeanne discussed how her mother did not really know of her school schedule and how she was not questioned about it. She stated that her employer was supportive of her taking an online course to an extent. Jeanne made the following statement about her employer support:

I guess supportive because it wouldn't be conflicting with work. And I guess they wouldn't need to change my schedule, but it's not like I could take off work because I need to write a paper or something like that.

Although Jeanne had some interactions with the instructor, she felt that it was not needed as much in an online course. She stated the following:

I did speak to him a couple of times... but other than that, there's no real relationship with the instructor because everything was kind of laid out for you. A lot of the questions that you need to ask him is not really getting help, it's more like clarification.

Additionally, Jeanne did not interact with the other students.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Taking an online course was beneficial to Jeanne because, at the time, she could not get to campus. Although she did not interact with the other online students in the course that she dropped, she did go on to state that she does in other online courses:

Online classes hold a lot more people so if you do a discussion and things, you can get into contact with more people because they are always online so you can ask them questions... Like in the discussion boards, people post questions and other people answer.

Jeanne did not believe that there were any economic benefits to taking a course online. She stated that the fee made it more expensive than a face-to-face course.

**Transactional distance.** Jeanne may have experienced some transactional distance in her online course. She indicated that the instructor was hard to get in contact with and that she only spoke to the instructor a few times through Blackboard messaging. Thus, the dialog in Jeanne's online course was moderate. She mentioned that her course had a lot of structure and that everything was organized in a calendar. She, also, stated that there were books to read, papers to write, and videos to watch. Given the amount of dialog and the structure of the course, Jeanne may have experienced a moderate amount of transactional distance and learner autonomy in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Jeanne explained that she dropped her course so that she would not fail it. She discussed how she was missing tests that she may have forgotten to take. She suggested, “[Have] more interactions with the professor instead of having the whole course laid out for you, and they just go in and grade.” Jeanne wanted more synchronous activities like real-time chats with the professor. Jeanne remarked, “I took another class... and the teacher would webcam us, so I really liked it. She was really available for us and a lot of online professors usually aren’t...”

Jeanne may not have completely academically integrated in her online course. The mismatch between her auditory learning style and the features of the course indicated a low level of Kember’s (1989) normative congruence, or academic compatibility between the course and the student’s needs.

## **Lilian**

**Student characteristics.** Lilian was a 21-year-old undergraduate student who dropped a course entitled, “Individuals in Society.” She expected to graduate in the year 2015. She reported taking four online classes. She works part time and is enrolled at the university full time.

**Overall experience.** Lilian thought that her online instructor was not detailed enough when giving assignments. Lilian described her overall experience as follows:

Well, when I was taking the course, pretty much it's not very descriptive like you have to do everything on your own and the professor is not descriptive in the assignments he or she wants you to complete, then you're pretty much on your own. The only good thing about it that there would be it's an online course so it's always on the computer.

**Goal commitment.** Lilian enrolled in an online course during the summer semester. She lived a distance from the university and did not want to drive to campus.

Thus, taking an online course was convenient for her. She asserted that she was “really motivated” and “really excited” at the start of the course, but that it was not too important to finish. “It wasn't like ridiculously important but I would've liked to have finished it,” Lilian commented. She had failed the face-to-face version of the course, as well. Outside factors that she reported that affected her decision to drop the course included technical difficulties with Blackboard. “Blackboard, sometimes, didn't work... so, you want to do an assignment, like, close to the due time and Blackboard decides to not work, then, I wouldn't get my assignment done,” Lilian stated.

**Academic environment and integration.** Lilian had positive feelings about the university, but had some reservations about its online courses. “I love [the university]...The teachers are great as well as staff... I'm taking an online course right now and it's really hard to understand exactly what the teacher wants,” Lilian stated. “I mean she wasn't very... what could I say about her? I'm not trying to be mean... she helped us the best she can, but I don't think she understood what she was doing,” Lilian added. When asked to expound on her thoughts about the course instructor, Lilian made the following comment:

Like for instance, I got to ask her something about an assignment and she would be like "Oh, it's in the syllabus" or she would answer a question I wasn't even asking in the first place. But she would answer something else and I would still be sitting there waiting for answers to be... waiting for my question to be answered. And for one, she doesn't know... you know how some people don't know how to teach? I think she is one of the people that knows what she's doing but she doesn't know how to convey it to someone else.

Lilian gave the following response when asked about her thoughts and feelings about the course itself:

It's so much information. Like I said before, I took it before on campus and the only reason I didn't pass it was because of a discrepancy in the grading system because there on some on campus courses that still have their grading system online. And when I checked online, it said I had an A, so you know I saw the A then you tend to don't do certain assignments because you know you are pretty much good in the class. But when it came to the end of the semester, let's say online I had a 98 out of a 100, she would say I have a 98 out of 400 points, it was out of a hundred, it was not a percentage, and it was out of points. And she wouldn't say that at the beginning of the semester. So, when it came to the online class, I was a little discouraged. Even though it was the same information and I really liked the information at the beginning, it was just the grading system they had and the amount of work that they wanted me to do online. It was very different from the actual course.

Furthermore, Lilian stated that she was a hands-on student. Lilian made the following comment:

I'm more hands-on. I would say like if someone shows me or if I have an example of something, I am really good at mimicking... like seeing something and then being able to articulate it in my own words pretty much but telling me to do things from scratch... I'm like ok... Y'all just need to be descriptive in how you want the information.

The course lacked the type of features that Lilian preferred. She compared the discussion portion of an online course to that of a face-to-face class. She felt that it may be more difficult for some students to type out their thoughts online as opposed to just speaking in a class. Lilian described the features of the course in the following statement:

It was just reading... I still don't like to read. I read to do it not for the fun of it. So, it was like really taxing. It was like three chapters a week and I had other classes to do and, then, it wasn't like a discussion where you... unless you read it, you do the discussions and then to share. It's based on their perspective of a discussion. It's not like there were any tests but it's just answer right or wrong. It's all discussions and how the teacher feels you convinced your point, and some people don't know, some people aren't as good at conveying on paper or typing what they actually say in their head. And in the course I have right now, I can talk in class, I am able to get what I'm saying and I can go based on everyone's reactions and adjust what I am saying to make them understand. You can't do that in an online course because you have to type up the discussion and submit it, you don't get a second chance. It depends on how the teacher feels. If they are in a bad mood that day, they may be like this is not good enough. It's all on their

emotions and I don't like that about online courses when it comes to discussion boards.

She further described the features of the course. Lilian stated the following:

Pretty much, you read a chapter and, then, there was those discussions. There wouldn't be any exams, any quizzes. There was one discussion and one project where you have to meet up with other members of the group and that was it. It was just discussions and readings. I mean it sounds simple but when you try to read your discussions and the teacher doesn't like it, then, that gives you a bad grade and that sets you up [for failure].

Lilian dropped the course before the end of the group project.

To continue, Lilian mentioned the writing lab on campus as a support that was available but not practical for her situation. She was not able to drive to campus to attend sessions at the lab. She questioned about students who lived farther away than she did – how would they attend the writing lab?

**Social and work environment and integration.** Lilian's family supported her taking an online course to an extent. Lilian made the following comment:

My parents don't like online courses but seeing that it was summer, it was fine. But If I were to tell them that I am taking all online courses and none on campus, oh no. "What's the point of going to campus if you are taking online courses?" But in the summer it was fine. They would make sure that there's one time a week where I could go online and do it and not distract me. If my aunt or something knew about the topic, she would help me. My mom would proofread my discussions in terms of like grammatical errors and stuff.

Her employer was, also, supportive of her. Lilian stated, "I mean at my job, there's a computer, and they, also, let me use the computer to do homework even for the exams. I can do like my classwork... it wasn't all a big issue."

For Lilian, the instructor's delayed response to her email related to her dropping the course. Lilian remarked, "I think I emailed her once and there was no return email, so, that's when I dropped the course." Although she mentioned an open forum, Lilian did

not interact with the other students. She stated that she probably should have when she thought about it.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Lilian named a few personal benefits to taking an online course. Lilian stated the following:

Saving gas. Being able to do assignments on your own time, but most of them, yes, sure, there are due dates, but you have all week to do... what is being done within the week... everything's not due at one time. You can spread it over the week. So, that's one thing I liked about it...

Lilian, also, mentioned that online course are “anti-social.” “You don’t talk to anybody else unless you choose to, but you don’t talk to anybody else.” Lilian, like Billie and Sawyer, noted that the amount saved in money for gas and the fee for taking an online course would balance each other.

**Transactional distance.** Lilian experienced some transactional distance in her online course. She indicated that there were student-instructor interactions, but that these interactions were not positive for her. She stated that the instructor did not answer her questions. Thus, the amount of dialog was low for Lilian because dialog consists of only positive interactions with the instructor. Lilian stated that she had to do everything on her own in her online course. However, her course had a variety of features other than reading and writing. From her responses, she had discussions and group projects in her online course. These features provide a less rigid structure to the course, which lowers the amount of transactional distance she may have experienced. The increased amount of student-student interactions may lessen the amount of learner autonomy in her online course. Therefore, Lilian may have experienced a moderate amount of transactional distance in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** According to Lilian, there were a few factors that related to her dropping her online course. Lilian stated, “The professor not being more open, not replying to my emails. The course is not interesting. I need a book, you do the discussion, you read a book, you do the discussion... there's nothing in between.” To improve the course, Lilian suggested the following:

Well, actually, now I think they're been better because, now, they have like those videos. I think, what it's called, but just video or something on Blackboard, they can, it's more like you could... the face recognition you know who you're talking to... and then each video... there is a discussion or they discuss the end theme of the video whatever they choose but the video is really helping... Then, at the beginning of each course, you have to do an introduction so you'll know who your peers are, and you can talk to them...

Lilian, also, suggested to decrease the fee for taking online courses.

Lilian may not have academically integrated well with the online environment. She felt as though her professor was not descriptive enough when giving instructions to the assignments and that typing out one's thoughts in a discussion post in an online course may be more difficult for students than just speaking in the face-to-face environment. In addition, Lilian was a hands-on student and her online course did not cater to her learning style.

## **Roswell**

**Student characteristics.** Roswell was a 21-year-old undergraduate who expected to graduate in the year 2015. He dropped a course in Kinesiology. He has enrolled in three online courses altogether. He works part time and is a full time student.

**Overall experience.** When asked about his overall experience in the course, Roswell stated, “I mean, it's just, I thought that, like, it required, like, a lot and, then, I had questions, but it seems like it could have been easier if you go to the classroom.”



**Goal commitment.** Roswell enrolled in an online course because it was the only class that was open. Then, he obtained the opportunity to swap for the face-to-face version of the course. He was not motivated at the start of his online course. Roswell stated, “Not that motivated since it was online.” It was important to him to finish the course, but not necessarily in the online environment.

**Academic environment and integration.** Roswell had neutral feelings about the university. “It’s okay,” he stated. The course made him feel overwhelmed and he thought the course instructor must be new because there were no comments about that person on a popular professor rating website. “Just kind of knew it would be my hardest class and on top of that it was online,” Roswell remarked.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Roswell’s family and employer were not too involved in his effort to take an online course. “They don’t mind at all. Just as long as I graduate, really,” Roswell stated about his family. “They don’t care at all,” Roswell noted about his employer.

Roswell did not have any interactions with the instructor or other students.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Roswell did list some of the benefits of taking an online course. “Having a lot of free time than having to go sit in front of a dude,” Roswell remarked as a personal benefit. “More time that I can hang out with people and not be in the classroom,” Roswell explained was a social benefit. Roswell named not driving to campus as an economic benefit.

**Transactional distance.** Roswell may have had some transactional distance in his online course, but this transactional distance may have decreased if he stayed in the course longer. He stated that he knew he was going to drop the course and was not sure

of all the course features that the course offered. He had no interactions with the instructor and, therefore, no dialog. He thought the course was mostly reading, thus, giving it high structure. From Roswell's description, there may have been high transactional distance in the course, however, he did not stay enrolled long enough to adequately determine the amount of transactional distance he may have experienced.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Perhaps, Roswell should not have enrolled in an online course. The main factor that related to him dropping the course was that he does not like to be on the Internet. "I don't like virtual or, like, online stuff. I don't like that." He suggested that online professors introduce themselves with videos.

Roswell seemed to have lacked the goal commitment required to complete the course in the online environment. He preferred traditional courses and did not like the online environment.

### **Annette**

**Student characteristics.** Annette was a 22-year-old undergraduate who dropped an online course entitled, "General Decision Making in the Classroom." She expects to graduate in 2015. She reported taking at least one online course for every semester that she has been at the university. She is employed part time and enrolled full time at the university.

**Overall experience.** Annette took an online course during the summer semester.

Annette stated the following about her overall experience:

I kind of dropped it early in the beginning because I was taking four classes, summer A, and that was kind of an overload. That was one of the ones I dropped because I saw it had way too much content for such a short amount of time, and I couldn't handle four classes in summer A, so, that was one of the ones I dropped.

Annette felt it was too much to handle.

**Goal commitment.** Annette enrolled in an online course for flexibility in her schedule. Annette stated the following about her taking an online course and her schedule:

It's a lot more beneficial for me with work because I work after school hours from 2 – 7 at an after school care program type thing, and it was a lot easier because all the times in person were just conflicting completely with my schedule.

Annette focused much on her schedule.

Annette was “extremely motivated” at the start of her online course, yet this motivation changed as she realized the amount of work involved in the course. Annette stated, “I always say I can handle everything until I start getting syllabi and realize that I can't.” She identified her part time jobs and other classes as factors that were beyond her control that may have affected her decision to drop the course. Annette commented, “Pretty much how I work, if they need me for overtime. I babysit as well. Depending on other courses, how heavy their coursework is is another... If the class is really heavy, then I might not do so well in the online one...”

In addition, Annette discussed how it was important for her to finish the course. She decided that she would not take it online the second time. “It's necessary for the Elementary Education degree. Eventually, I will have to come back around to it, but not online, hopefully.”

**Academic environment and integration.** Annette had positive feelings and thoughts about the institution and the professors. Annette commented, “I like [the university]... It's very easy. Not easy like the coursework, but a lot of teachers,

particularly in this major, are very easy, they are very nice, they are understanding. They are very easy to communicate with.”

Although Annette likes the university, she disliked the way the instructor of her online course taught. Annette stated the following:

I don't particularly love the way she teaches. I think it's good that teachers talk a lot about their personal experiences, but it was all about personal experiences, so, I didn't really understand... She, also, focuses too much on grammar, which I understand is necessary, instead of like content, which kind of frustrated me... I spent so long researching over things and, then, I am getting deducted on things like small errors.

Annette did find the course to be “straightforward,” but she felt there was too much content. Annette continued, “I am going to take it with another teacher and, hopefully, it will be easier, and in person, definitely.” Additionally, Annette felt that email was not the best form of communication for her. “There were a lot of micro-teaches that I had instructions through email, but I like to communicate with the instructor in person to understand my coursework.” She explained that micro-teaches were lesson plans that, as a future educator, Annette had to create and teach.

Annette reported on having a combination of learning styles. “I like visual, I like doing hands on, I like writing things down.” The mode of communication mattered most to Annette. “I just like how the communication works a lot better in person,” she stated.

Annette further stated the following:

I like coming in to class a lot better. The only reason I do online is because I am on my own time. I know that, “Oh, I am bored right now, I am sitting at home, let me go see what's online... What I can do to maybe get ahead,” but I do prefer in person.

Annette indicated that the technical support was available to her in the online course. She, also had the instructor's office number and email. Annette thought the instructor responded well to emails but not to calls. Annette stated the following:

There were tech always. I have had to call them only once. They were really helpful and very quick. The teacher gave her number, but she gave her office number when she's not really in her office. That was kind of frustrating. And then, email. She was very on top of email, I can't complain.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Annette's family was not overly involved in her academic life. Annette described her family support as follows:

I am kind of on my own. I mean like I live with my parents but I am 22, so they don't really get involved. They just kind of ask me at the end of the semester, "Did you pass? How'd you do?" They don't really know what classes I take or how I take them. They don't really know until after I pass or not.

However, one of Annette's employers preferred when she enrolled in online classes. The other allowed her to do school work on the job. Annette described her employers' support as follows:

Obviously, she loved it because I can come into work and wouldn't have to take time out. I, also, work at a ballet studio. I am an assistant. I pretty much issue the paperwork while the ballet instructor is teaching. I usually just sit there and do work on my computer and she doesn't really get mad at me about that. So, I will do homework while at work when I am not needed. So, she's supportive in the sense that she understands that I am in college, I am a full time student. So, she doesn't really complain about that. I really appreciate that.

Although Annette received employer support, she still dropped her online course.

Contrary to her earlier statement of the instructor responding well to emails, Annette went into detail about the frustration with her instructor interactions:

The only way we interacted with the instructor was through email and sometimes she would take a few days to answer one of my emails... and it was kind of frustrating because this would be coming up soon and I haven't talked to you yet.

When asked about the interactions with other students, Annette admitted that she could have done more in reaching out to them. Annette stated the following:

I mean, honestly... I mean it showed all the emails of the students in it, so if I wanted to, I probably could reach out and email another student, but people don't really go out of their way to talk to each other unless they are doing group work.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Annette liked the flexibility of taking a course online.

She liked how online courses fit in her work schedule. When asked about the personal benefits of taking an online course, Annette stated:

Obviously, [online courses are] very easy with time, like I have time for it. Pretty much the flexibility with time. I don't have to drop work and it's not in the way of another class that maybe I really need because sometimes that happens with classes, they conflict with work.

Annette, also, enjoyed the flexibility online courses gave her with her time for social activity. Annette described it as follows:

Like with my friends. Like being able to go out and stuff. I like to dedicate a certain day or night to do homework. Let's say that everything is due on Sundays, I will work on Friday nights or Thursday nights. So, it kind of helped me schedule things out for myself. The other thing that I really enjoy about online classes is that the syllabus is laid out, straightforward. So, you can really put everything in your organizer since the first day. So, you know what's coming up, when it's coming up, if the teacher doesn't stray from that.

She mentioned that her friends would help her in her online course. "Sometimes they would even help me on things. I remember I had a past class...They would help me do the projects," Annette stated. Additionally, Annette thought that online courses were more expensive, thus, not having much economic benefit.

**Transactional distance.** Annette experienced some transactional distance in her online course. She did email the instructor of the course, but she explained that it took the instructor a few days to respond. She felt that the syllabus was disorganized because

the instructor would send emails apart from the syllabus about the assignments. Her course had micro-teaches and discussions, giving it a variety of features other than reading and writing, and the opportunity to interact with other students. This type of structure may lower the amount of learner autonomy required in the course. Overall, Annette may have experienced moderate transactional distance in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Annette realized that taking an online course in the summer was too much to handle for her and stated that was the main factor related to her dropping her online course. She suggested that there should be more ways to reach the instructor. “Maybe better communication with the instructor, so I’m clearer on things. And more office hours because she barely had office hours...”

Annette may not have academically integrated in her online course. Her learning styles of being visual, of having to write things down, and being hands-on may not have been supported by her online course.

## **Jacqui**

**Student characteristics.** Jacqui was a 22-year-old undergraduate who dropped a course entitled, “General Decision Making.” She anticipated graduating in the year 2016. She was a full time employee and a full time student.

**Overall experience in the course.** Jacqui did not work well with the amount of student-student interactions in her online course. Jacqui made the following statement:

The reason for dropping it was, there was numerous of students in the same course, and we had to be on top of the other students as well as doing discussions back and forth, and sometimes they weren't even done with their assignment. That's why we couldn't do ours, in the sense of responding and collaborating with them and stuff, so very confusing.

**Goal commitment.** Jacqui listed avoiding the “horrible traffic” and “horrible parking” as reasons for taking an online course. She thought it would be convenient for her. She stated that she was “super motivated” at the start of the course. Jacqui continued, “I was saying, ‘Oh, this is the best thing... don’t have to get dressed for class.’ I thought it was going to be very convenient.” Jacqui compared aspects of online classes to face-to-face ones in the following statement:

If you’re in class, you could actually pay attention to the teacher and listen to what she’s having you do...the lectures, whereas, when you’re online, you don’t have that little push from the teachers themselves. They’re just telling you...they’ll email, “Oh, do this, this, and this, and have it due by this date.” But you don’t really have that physical teacher there constantly reminding you throughout the week, “Don’t forget to do this.” You know what I’m saying? A physical reminder from the teacher themselves.

This need for a “physical reminder from the teacher” may have spurred Jacqui’s swap from the online environment to the face-to-face course.

**Academic environment and integration.** For Jacqui, the university class times were important. She, also, had positive feelings about the instructors. Jacqui stated the following:

I really like the professors that they have in the school. I like the fact that they have a lot of morning classes, where I went to [another university] my first two years, and it was very difficult to find morning classes. Just to think that [the university] is so much bigger, that means they have that much more teachers that are at least offering morning classes for those students that have work in the afternoon like I do.

Jacqui was enrolled in the online course during her first semester at the university. She did not recall the name of the professor of the online course, but she remembered that it lacked the features she expected. Jacqui made the following statement:

I just think that they could've done something a little different in the sense of...I was expecting a lot of video, chatting, in the sense of, they record themselves, and



introduce themselves to the whole entire personnel of students that are taking the course, so they could kind of put a face to the lesson.

To continue, Jacqui felt that she was frustrated with the lack of face-to-face communication in the online course. “I got really frustrated. Frustrated in the sense of, I felt like I couldn’t communicate face-to-face to the person, so, it was very difficult to express yourself,” Jacqui stated.

Furthermore, Jacqui expressed that she is a visual student. Although there were student-student interactions in her online course, she needed the visual of features like video or live video chat from the instructor. Jacqui explained this idea in the following statement:

I believe I’m more of a visual student. And that’s why it affected in the sense of I didn’t have the teacher specifically there to tell me what to do, and whenever I needed a question, I had to email rather than come up to the teacher and ask them themselves... The first couple of assignments were basically to introduce yourself and to talk to at least five students in the class through messages...kind of collaborate with them in a sense that you want to get to know them. We had another assignment that we had to read the chapters and then do a test, but there was never any connection with the teacher and ourselves. It was more like, “Do this, this, and this, and you’re going to have a test.”

Jacqui did state there was a helpline available that she could call if she needed help with the website.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Jacqui had a supportive fiancé and employer. Her fiancé told her that in taking an online course, she can avoid the traffic and parking at school. Her employer allowed her to do school work during her breaks.

Jacqui emailed the instructor of her online course but did not receive a response in the time frame she expected. Jacqui made the following comment:

E-mail wise, we e-mailed, I think it was one or two times, but it was, I assumed, the reason why he didn't e-mail right away was, obviously, because they have so many students in online courses, I don't even know what's the limit for an actual professor to have in one online course, how many students, because there must have been several students in that course.

Jacqui had interactions with the other students, however, she felt that they were not authentic, but mandatory. Jacqui stated the following:

They were just trying to respond to get it out of the way type of thing, because we were supposed to respond to each like five students in a class, and it was like short and simple, wasn't really detailed or anything like that, so looks like you were just trying to get it out of the way, you know.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** The benefits of taking an online course were described by Jacqui. She mentioned that online courses are a personal benefit for students who lack transportation. She did not think of any social benefits to an online course. Jacqui stated the following:

I think it's better socially to have a class physically than online... because you don't see the students, you don't see the teacher, and to get a response back form an email... not everyone's online at the same time. So, socially, it's not beneficial, it's not beneficial socially. Whereas, in class, you can just turn around and ask a student a question.

When asked about economic benefits, Jacqui mentioned saving gas and saving money on textbooks, sometimes.

**Transactional distance.** Jacqui had some transactional distance in her online course. She felt that the instructor should have used videos in her course. In addition, the responses to her emails to the instructor were delayed. These factors may have lowered the amount of dialog in the course. From her responses, Jacqui's course featured discussions, group work, assignments and tests. With this variety of features, the amount of structure may be lowered in her online course. Given the amount of dialog and

structure, Jacqui may have had a moderate amount of learner autonomy and transactional distance in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** The factors that Jacqui stated related to her dropping the course were lack of communication, the stress of not knowing whether she would pass the course, and delayed responses from the instructor. Jacqui considered improving her online course in the following statement:

I think I would improve them with what I said before, teachers actually lecturing and recording themselves while lecturing, so, you have the feel that you're in class but you're really not, you know what I'm saying? Because you can go online to YouTube and Google a lecture on a certain topic and you'll see an actual professor going out of their way to record a topic that they're trying to teach. I think that, I think all online courses should have that, because of the simple fact that there's people who do learn better visually than kinesthetically or auditory wise, you know. So, I think it is very important to them to having, what they call accommodations, on for those students who don't learn in that way, but yet they want to get the benefits of having online courses.

In addition, Jacqui suggested adding a "visual helpline" for online students. Jacqui made the following statement:

Maybe for cases that you'll don't understand a certain topic, or a certain date, that you have to turn in something by, or something technical, maybe you can actually do the Skyping and stuff with other teachers, other than calling on the phone. Yeah, basically the visual part, maybe not the teacher exactly but the help line, you know about the help line that I was mentioning earlier, maybe it could be a visual help line...

Jacqui may have needed more goal commitment to the online environment. She indicated that she liked the physical presence of an instructor who could remind her about the logistics of the course.

## **Eve**

**Student characteristics.** Eve was a 24-year-old undergraduate who dropped an online course entitled, "History of Architecture." She anticipates graduating in the year

2016. She reported taking 3 online courses in her undergraduate career, thus far. Eve works full time and is enrolled in the university part time.

**Overall experience.** Eve was not engaged in her online course. “It was just really boring,” she stated. She thought the lectures were really long. “He has like a PowerPoint and he just talks to you thought the PowerPoint,” Eve noted, “but it wasn’t really interesting.” She went on to add that, “It was very monotone and it wasn’t made to be interesting.”

**Goal commitment.** First, Eve stated that she enrolled in an online course because it was required. When asked whether a face-to-face version was offered, Eve responded, “They offer a face-to-face, but since I work full time, I thought online would be easier.” She discussed that she was “really motivated” at the start of the course, but that her work load for her job made it difficult for her. Finishing the course was “really important” to Eve, but she failed to complete an important assignment on time, and decided to drop the course.

**Academic environment and integration.** To continue, Eve thought and felt that the university was “overpriced” and “extremely expensive.” She emphasized again that the instructor of the online course could have made the lectures more interesting. The course was boring to her. Eve stated that she is a visual student and that the course matched the way she learns “moderately well.” She discussed how the instructor uses PowerPoint. “He speaks as if he is taking me the PowerPoint and he draws on the PowerPoint.” In addition to the presentations, the course included practice quizzes, three exams and a term paper. Eve reported that she could email the instructor as she needed.

**Social and work environment and integration.** In response to these questions, Eve made several points. She asserted that her family was supportive of her taking an online course and that they showed her this support. “If I needed to study,” Eve stated, “they would leave the room...” She, also, believed her employer was supportive of her taking an online course because, “If I needed to leave work early for an exam, they would allow me to do it.” Furthermore, Eve interacted with the instructor mostly through emails, but only the emails that he would send the entire class. She did not have any interactions with the other students.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Eve commented on the benefits of taking an online course. Having her own schedule was a personal benefit to her. She stated that online courses are flexible. She believed that there were no social benefits in taking an online course. In addition, she felt that online courses were expensive, more expensive than face-to-face courses.

**Transactional distance.** Eve may have experienced some transactional distance in her online course. Eve stated that she knew she could email the instructor, however, the only interactions that took place were one-directional, when the instructor emailed the entire class. Thus, the amount of dialog was low. Her online course had structure. It consisted of PowerPoints, quizzes and exams, and a term paper. There were no student-student interactions, and the learner autonomy may have been high. Therefore, Jacqui may have experienced a moderate amount of transactional distance.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** For Eve, not finishing a proposal on time related to her dropping the online course. Although this was her primary reason for

dropping the course, her lack of interest in the course shone throughout the interview.

Eve concluded the interview with the following statement:

Just to make them, the lectures themselves, more entertaining and not so monotone. Try to make it engage, so that I want to learn... It was just pictures and he would explain that this is an important part of architecture in this time frame and they did this, and, then, the next slide... it was very boring.

Eve may have not have academically integrated with her online course. She felt that the lectures needed to be more interesting even though the features of the course matched her visual learning style moderately.

### **Billie**

**Student characteristics.** Billie was a 24-year-old undergraduate who dropped an online course entitled, “Teaching Exceptional Students in Inclusive Settings.” He expected to graduate in the year 2015. He has reported taking 5 or 6 online courses. He reported that he was not working and was enrolled in the university full time at the time of the interview.

**Overall experience.** Billie briefly stated that the online course was different than his face-to-face courses. “It was, it was, okay, it was a lot more, I guess, like, paperwork than I had experienced unlike the regular class.”

**Goal commitment.** Billie enrolled in the online course because it was the only course available at the time. He stated that he was pretty motivated at the start of the course. Billie stated, “Pretty motivated because the... at the time that was one of the few courses that I had to take, I guess, that semester and I'm trying the get the field work out of it. But I was pretty motivated...” Billie, also, felt that it was important to finish the course. He explained that it was a prerequisite for another class that he needed to take.

Billie did not name too many outside factors that related to his dropping the online course. “Not that many, outside of family, you know, that stuff. Nothing else, really... The work load got pretty intense after a while”

**Academic environment and integration.** Despite the work load in the course, Billie had positive thoughts and feelings about it, the institution, and the instructor. “I enjoyed the course. I’ve never really been exposed to students with disabilities or their history, so I was pretty intrigued by the course,” Billie stated. He felt that the course instructor always made herself available and was straightforward. Billie went on to state, “I love the school, love the university, love the, I guess, work load. I guess it pushes me as a teacher. As a teacher I will be, you know, a teacher in the classroom.”

Furthermore, Billie mentioned that he learns by note-taking. “I can’t just hear... but I, also, kind of have to take notes about that. I have to write down everything,” Billie remarked. He thought that the features of the course matched the way he learned. He described the use of PowerPoint, Prezi, and YouTube videos in his online course. In addition, Billie stated that there were office hours with the instructor and the writing lab was available as a support to him.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Billie received support from his family. Billie stated, “Very supportive... stuff like keeping the Internet on, giving me that time, that space, that privacy that I needed to complete my course, that kind of thing helped a lot.”

Billie had several interactions with the course instructor and the other students. He previously stated that the instructor made herself available. Billie added to that, “I think usually when I, yeah, usually when I will send an email, I would get a response on

the same day. If not, it would probably be like, early the following morning. But it wasn't like, a big delay in between, you know?" Billie commented on how there was group work with the other students:

Our group members, or the group members that I had for the time being, we were always interacting with each other through email and, then, text messaging. After the first project, we kind of had the first group meeting, we kind of exchanged what we had...

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Billie discussed the benefits of taking an online course.

For him, the personal benefits also related to flexibility in schedule. "I guess the flexibility in turning in an assignment. We had two weeks in between every assignment that was due," Billie stated. Saving time was a social benefit for Billie. "I mean, I guess, a lot of your time is free from not having to come to class, I guess, allowing time for social activities," Billie noted. Billie, like Sawyer, decided that the economic advantages and disadvantages even out. "Well, I mean the online classes are more expensive than the actual physical class... It weighs itself out, it's just kind of, just about, and it's cheaper than what you would spend in gas or for arriving to the school..."

**Transactional distance.** Billie may have had some transactional distance in his online course. He stated that his instructor made herself available to her students, making dialog high. He indicated that there were a variety of features in the course, such as PowerPoints and Prezi presentations and group projects. These features may lower the amount of structure in the course. With opportunities to interact with the instructor and other students, Billie may have had less learner autonomy and low transactional distance in his online course.



**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Billie concluded that it was his lack of time management and lack of careful consideration of the nature of online courses that affected his decision to drop the course. Billie stated the following about dropping the course:

I guess, just not carefully looking at my time management with that particular semester. Not, I guess, assessing, properly assessing my workload before I took on that class. I think an online class is a commitment that you have to, kind of have to think about before... You can't just jump into it without understanding what it is that you're getting into...

Billie did not have suggestions for improving the course. Billie's statement about course improvement went as follows:

Nothing really, I mean, I appreciated it, but I mean, more than anything, she was pretty hands-on, pretty direct, and everything was kind of laid out as far as like the expectations, and course policies, and stuff like that you know, that kind of thing.

Billie reported having a lack of time management and commitment to the course, thus, he may not have had the goal commitment required to complete the course.

### **Meadow**

**Student characteristics.** Meadow was a 28-year-old undergraduate who dropped an online course entitled, "Physics 1." She expected to graduate in the year 2014. This course was her only online course. She was not employed and was a full time student.

**Overall experience.** Meadow was not engaged in her online course and she described her overall experience as follows:

Well, supposedly you have to listen to these videos where the teachers given like the lecture but they were very boring because like the voice was very flat so you couldn't concentrate on what the person was saying... And so what you have to do is you just go online. You look at, like you hear her videos, and, then, you practice some problems, and, then, you have to do this called Mastery of Physics where they put like problems for you to solve... I did that, but, then, after the first

test, I realized that I wasn't going to be able to pass the class because let's say that I wasn't prepared, so I just dropped it.

**Goal commitment.** Meadow enrolled in her online with the recommendations of her peers. She thought that online would be easier. Meadow stated the following:

At first, other people telling me that the class was good online and I was taking a lot of classes where I had to go to a classroom, so, I said like: "You know what I don't have to show up and just like do the work and everything. It will be easier for me."

This course was required for Meadow in order to graduate. Thus, she stated she was very motivated at the start of it. In addition, this was Meadow's first online course. She emphasized that this factor related to her dropping the online course. Meadow commented on this factor in the following statement:

Probably, the fact that I had never taken an online class before, so, I didn't know how to do all the time management and I didn't have the commitment of like: "Okay let's say once a day, I'm going to sit down and I'm going to try to do as much as possible or stuff like that." So, I would say that.

**Academic environment and integration.** Meadow stated she had an overall good experience with the university and its instructors. "I think it's a good school... I have not so many complaints," Meadow stated. Although Meadow had positive thoughts and feelings about the university, she did not think or feel the same way about the course and its instructor. Meadow made the following response about the course and the instructor:

I really didn't like it at all. I felt that there wasn't an effort to make the class an original... That it was like there was only videos of the person talking about, given like lecture, but it wasn't like so appealing... Her videos are totally useless, you know like no one can stand 2 hours of the person talking because it's just unbearable, so, I think that if like the person can do like, I don't know like, a different way to explain the lecture or if you could go and talk to someone. I don't know I just think that it wasn't very approachable...

Meadow concluded that the features of the course did not match her visual and methodic learning style. Meadow stated the following:

Not at all because as I told you the only way I had to visualize, like, the only way that I had. I'm a very methodic person so I like to have like 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and I didn't have that, so, like, the only tool that I had to learn were her videos.

Additionally, Meadow discussed the "Mastery of Physics" portion of her online course.

Meadow stated, "It's like a homework site, where you go and have to solve problems, but I mean, without the basics, how are you going to solve the problems, you know?"

However, there was an on campus Teaching Assistant available on days before exams in that course, according to Meadow.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Meadow's family was not very involved in the classes she took. Also, she did not have many interactions with the instructor or other students, Meadow stated that she did not actually know the instructor but the Teaching Assistant. "Like, I don't know who she is. I saw her pictures once, but, like, that's it... because you never have contact with her. You have contact with the TA." She mentioned that she did not interact with other students.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Meadow thought online courses would save her time. Meadow stated, "If it had worked out then, more time since you don't have to go to lectures, then, it would be more time to put in my other classes. That was the main benefit I was looking for." She stated that there would, also, be more time to allot to one's social life. Meadow did not name any economic benefits of taking an online course. Instead, she responded that online courses are more expensive.

**Transactional distance.** Meadow may have experienced some transactional distance in her online course. She felt as though she did not know the actual instructor,

but only the Teaching Assistant, making her student-instructor interactions and dialog low. Meadow explained that there were only videos in her online course that were not engaging. Her learner autonomy may have been moderate because she had to review the videos on her own, but she did have the help of the Teaching Assistant when needed. Overall, Meadow may have experienced moderate transactional distance in her online course. However, the interactions with the TA replace the student-instructor interactions, then, Meadow may have had low transactional distance.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** When asked about factors that related to her dropping her online course, Meadow felt she was not prepared for the first exam.

Meadow made the following statement:

Just the fact that there wasn't a way for me to get the material clear enough to pass the test, so, I was like: "This is not going to work out for me. I need to go class and sit down" because Physics is also like a hard topic, so, I needed to go and sit down and have a teacher explain to me step by step.

Preparing for an exam was important to Meadow. She suggested having study sessions in order to improve the online course. Meadow wanted to go over "everything you need to know for the test."

This was Meadow's first and only online course. This student characteristic may have related to her decision to drop the course. She took the course online from the recommendation of her peers, but she was not fully prepared for it.

## **Sawyer**

**Student characteristics.** Sawyer was a 32-year-old undergraduate student who dropped an online course entitled, "Spanish 1." He expected to graduate in the year 2014. He worked full time and was enrolled at the university full time.

**Overall experience.** From the start of interview, Sawyer mentioned the lack of an auditory component in his online class. This missing feature frustrated him. Sawyer stated the following:

It seems simple but it was pretty overwhelming because there were all these modules, and there was a big layout of what they expected from you. But because it was Spanish, I didn't really feel like it was – I was trying, but not being able to hear someone speaking the stuff that we're supposed to learn, and not hearing the vocabulary or how it's supposed to be learned, all the visuals for me were not working. I felt like I needed a lot more auditory stimulation when it came to learning a language.

**Goal commitment.** Sawyer enrolled in an online course for reasons of convenience and flexibility. Sawyer stated the following about his reasons for choosing an online version of a class:

It's because I work full-time, and I was doing some other classes. I kind of thought it was going to be like a breather for me, like an opportunity for me to do one of my classes whenever I wanted to do one of my classes because with my full-time work and full-time school schedule, it's already really, really hard as it is... So, I kind of expected that it was going to be something. It wouldn't be easy, but it would be something that I could do when I needed like when I have an hour and I have to work tonight at 11 o'clock, I'm going to do school for an hour. I felt like it was going to fit into my schedule.

Sawyer emphasized that he was very motivated at the start of the course. "I was very motivated because I was excited to have something that was different," Sawyer remarked.

This online course was an elective for Sawyer. When asked about outside factors that may have affected his decision to drop the course, Sawyer, again, focused on the lack of auditory features in the course. Sawyer stated the following:

I was just not getting it because I was not hearing it. I expected when I took the class, I would like press a button and it would say, "milk... leche." Like hearing it being said, but because I didn't get any of that auditory, I was so lost.

**Academic environment and integration.** Sawyer expressed his positive feelings towards the university:

I love [the university]... When I came to [the university], I was pleasantly surprised when I got in and had challenging courses and professors that seemed to care about me and the thing is they care more in my education major, also.

Although Sawyer loved the university, he had less positive feelings for the online course and its instructor. Sawyer explained the following:

I reached out to the instructor. I tried to figure out ways to get the stuff done on it. I didn't have any interaction. They referred me to this person, they referred me to this person, someone else that was supposed to be in charge of the questions about online... I kind of felt like I was being given the run-around.

Sawyer thought the online format did not suit the course. "I thought that it was overwhelming. I think that maybe a course like that is too broad, and too extensive to do it justice online," Sawyer stated.

As a visual and kinesthetic student, Sawyer felt the features of the online course did not match the way he learned. He, also, mentioned having an auditory side. Again, he concluded that he could not stay in the course because of the missing auditory features that he expected in the course. Sawyer described the features of the course as follows:

There was an online textbook, there was online PowerPoint's, there was online discussions, there was the emailing back and forth, there was the summary of the subject you had... Except for the once every other week, there was a group online web discussion, and you were talked to other people, and they're not the professors, but the sub-professor, whoever they had in charge for that. At that point, that's when I realized I couldn't do it because all the stuff, I never said it. I didn't know how to say these things. I could identify those things in sentences. I could see that this is butter, this is food, this is ice cream, and this is whatever, but I couldn't say it. I didn't know how it would sound. I haven't heard a lot of the stuff before.

Sawyer compared the supports in the online course to those of a face-to-face course. He stated that in his online course, there was not as much support. Sawyer continued,

“When I tried to contact someone, it always took forever. There really wasn’t much support, unlike a classroom when you have a question about something, you can raise your hand.”

**Social and work environment and integration.** Sawyer’s family were not involved in his academic life. “I’m 32. I pay for school myself. My family doesn’t have anything to do with my school,” Sawyer commented. Sawyer did have a supportive employer. Sawyer stated, “They were completely supportive. I had moved my schedule around to where I was most accommodating.”

Sawyer discussed his interactions with the instructor and the other students.

Sawyer stated the following about the interactions with the instructor:

There wasn’t any with a specific instructor. When I tried to contact the person that the instructor said I needed to speak to... I emailed him and I got a snippy... rude response to me asking questions. But since that was the beginning of the course, that told me that they had a negative impact on the way I initially viewed the course.

Sawyer, also, elaborated on his interactions with the other students:

That was interesting. Like I said, I hadn’t heard it nor had I said it so I don’t even remember, it was just a bunch of garble because I didn’t really know how to say or understand truly what was being said. It was like a chat with two or three other students.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Sawyer explained the benefits of taking an online course. Sawyer thought that one of the personal benefits of taking an online course was the timing. He noted how they met his scheduling needs. “Schedules that meet my schedule. There was just timing,” Sawyer stated. When discussing the social benefits of taking an online course, Sawyer contrasted the actions that take place in a face-to-face class as opposed to an online course:

I'm big in my class. I raise my hand. I talk. I contribute. I do all that kind of social stuff in the classroom. Usually, I have teachers who love me because I was into my classes, but you can't do that when you take an online class. I was, socially, taking three steps back.

When concerning economic benefits, Sawyer considered two factors. "Because you still have to pay a little more for online classes, but you don't have to drive to school, I felt it all kind of evened out," Sawyer commented.

**Transactional distance.** Sawyer may have had some transactional distance in his online course. The amount of dialog may have been low because he indicated that his student-instructor interactions were negative and delayed. There may have been some structure as he mentioned there were features, such as visuals, PowerPoint, and chats. However, the course lacked an audio component. Sawyer's course may have had a moderate amount of learner autonomy and transactional distance.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** The online course overwhelmed Sawyer. "I felt like I didn't have the support that I needed from the instructor, and it didn't fit my learning style," Sawyer explained. He made a suggestion for improving the course that related to his major complaint of the course not having auditory features. Sawyer stated the following:

Having more modules that are equipped with auditory, with things that are audio.... This is bathroom, its spelling "b-a-n-y-o" and, then, you press the button and hear it go "banyo." That's something that would have gotten some ahead because it's new.

Sawyer may not have academically integrated in his online course. He stated from the beginning of the interview that the lack of auditory features in the course frustrated him.



## **Enola**

**Student characteristics.** Enola was a 35-year-old undergraduate student who dropped a course on the topic of teaching practices. She expected to graduate in the year 2016. She has taken a total of 4 online courses. She worked full time and was a part time student.

**Overall experience.** Enola expressed that there was much to do in her online course. Although she did not stay in the course for too long, her feeling was to drop it. “I didn't have much experience, but my initial experience was that it was a lot of work. There's a lot of things going on in the course so I decided to drop it,” Enola stated.

**Goal commitment.** Enola was a fully online student. She mentioned that she wanted the flexibility that comes with online learning. Enola made the following statement about taking courses online:

Okay, well I'm a fully online student, so, my degree, so, my classes are online, and one of the reasons is, I guess, the flexibility. I didn't think I would have time to go and sit down in a classroom because I have a full time job and I'm a mother of two children. So, I guess the flexibility of being able to do my school work at home.

Enola was very motivated at the start of the course, but she was not fully prepared for it.

Enola stated the following:

It's a combination of a few things. I didn't have the textbooks for any of my classes at the time. I also didn't have, my laptop crashed about a week before, so, I started off with having to go to the library until I ordered a new one, and, now, I have the access at home. Yes, I guess I wasn't fully prepared in the beginning... that may have played a part, also, in me ultimately dropping the class.

Her online course was a requirement for her degree. Enola felt that it was very important to finish the course. Enola made the following comment:

I felt really bad about dropping it. It was really important that I did the full time, have my 12 credits. But, ultimately, I have to make the decision about whether I can handle all four, just getting by is not an option for me. I like to be focused enough, and pass my classes, and gain enough knowledge that I come out getting something out of it. So it was very important to me.

**Academic environment and integration.** Enola had positive thoughts and feelings about the university. She had previously enrolled as a student without finishing. She has returned to complete her program. Enola made the following statement:

Well I think [the university] is a well-known university. I have a lot of respect for [the university]. When I think of [the university], I think a university where their graduates are revered. That the professors are great. I just have an overall good perception of straight out from the high school years ago that was the university I went to straight out of high school and I really like it but unfortunately I didn't finish. At that time I made a different decision, so, now, I'm back. So I really have a lot of respect from my past experience with [the university] as far as trusting that I'm going to get a good quality education. It's what I think of it a good quality education from a good university.

Although Enola thought it would not be fair to comment on the instructor of her online course, she remarked on the course itself. Enola stated, "I thought the course was fine it's just that the course load, the amount of work that I saw that was required, it just seems a little overwhelming to me at that time."

Moreover, Enola reported being a visual and hands on student. She stated that she benefits from having examples. Enola made the following comment about her learning and the online environment:

Yeah, I think online classes, in general, for me, and this is my first semester actually going fully online, but I chose it because I felt that was my best option with the position that I'm in now. Because I'm working full time and having children, this would be a good way for me to finish my degree. However, it's very challenging for me being online not having the professor there right in front of me. In general I would say that course and even my courses now, even though I've kept it, it's still a work in progress. It's so challenging but I'm trying my best to get through it. Because, to me, I feel like more is required and that's just how I feel online.

I can remember doing my AA degree and going physically to classes and it just seemed easier for me, but I can't do that right now. I have no choice but to do the online, but it's a challenge. I have to admit it's a challenge having to come home and taking that time, and focusing, and my children need me. And coming home from working all day, so, in general, I don't think it's really my learning style of being fully online student. So I would say the same for that class.

Furthermore, Enola discussed the features of the course in the following statement:

Weekly discussions, some of the other things, the weekly discussions and video introductions, which wasn't that easy for me. I have a class now where we have to do that but now I've kind of got used to it, like, I learned, but in the beginning just that class requiring it and then my other class requiring it... We have to do some projects. Some of the same things that most online classes require.

Also, Enola stated that she had supports available to her in her online courses. She explained that fully online students are matched with success coaches. Enola stated, "If you have issues, time management, trying to manage your time, just anything, in general, you can reach out to them and they would try to help you get through."

**Social and work environment and integration.** Although Enola assumed her family was supportive, she was not receiving much support from her family or employer.

Enola made the following response with regards to her family support:

I guess they are supportive. They are supportive, I guess with my children, I guess, they're supportive but, at the same time, they're children, so, they require a lot from me. I don't know because, at times, I was doing my homework the other day and I was trying to record the video which takes me sometime because, again, I'm not used to that way of communicating, and he comes to the room screaming, him and his sister, and I'm like really? So, I had to start all over. So, when you say supportive, I guess they're happy and interested that I'm back in school and it's cool to them, it's interesting, but they're very needy of me still. I guess I would just say, yes, they are supportive, I guess, I don't know.

Furthermore, Enola's employer was not aware of the delivery mode of her courses. She stated that her employer did know that she was in school, but she had not discussed with her employer the fact that she was enrolled as an online student.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Again, Enola discussed the flexibility of online courses as a personal benefit of taking an online course. Enola made the following comment:

The personal benefits, I would say that it gives me more control over when I do my assignments, when I log on to Blackboard to deal with whatever I need to deal with even though it takes a lot of time. Yeah, I guess, it gives me a little more leeway, as to oppose to having to go into class 6-9 in the evening, Monday and Wednesday. I can log in my class at nine in the morning and see what's going on and do a little something here or I could pick them later on maybe four in the afternoon and go to class. It's more flexible.

Enola stated that she could not think of any social benefits and that there was not a big difference economically for an online course in comparison to a face-to-face course.

**Transactional distance.** Enola may have experienced some transactional distance in her online course. There may have been little dialog as Enola stated she did not have enough time to know the professor. Her course had features like projects, discussions, and video introductions from the students. These types of features may have decreased the amount of structure and learner autonomy in the course. Enola may have experienced a moderate amount of transactional distance in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** The amount of work required in her online course coupled with being enrolled in other online classes may have played a major role in Enola dropping her online course. In addition, this was her first semester as an online student. Enola made the following statement:

The thing is I could have dropped any one of them. It came down to I think it was just one too many of class courses, at least I think that's what I thought at that time. It may have been also the fact that this was my first time. Being a fully online student, I wasn't really prepared for how things were done. It's very different than what I'm what used to and what I know. So, the first week I felt very overwhelmed because when I logged in and I saw all these things, you need to do this, you need to have this done by such and such, it just kind of like, "Wow! Oh my goodness." I'm going to get these things done, I would log in to that specific course and it would take me about half an hour to go through what is

needed and understand on my own, what is needed, what is required. So, I think it was ultimately the amount of work, the course load but all combined because if I was taking that class by itself, then, maybe I may not have dropped it. But combined with all the other classes it seemed too much for me. When I added in my other three classes, so, I decided to drop that one because I took a look at what was required and it seemed like a lot.

Moreover, Enola's only suggestion was to decrease the number of assignments. She, also, stated that she had felt "isolated" in her online course. Although Enola expressed, "I don't know how to fix it." Indirectly, she was in need of some kind of orientation. Enola concluded, "I don't know what the solution would be... So, for me being a mom and having a full time job and not being used to being online, and it's been a challenge for me."

Enola was overwhelmed by the amount of work in the course, which may indicate that she did not integrate academically. What Kember (1989) called collective affiliation, or the packaging of the course in addition to the academic supports, may have related to Enola's decision to drop. Although she had a success coach, her suggestion to decrease the number of assignments in the course and her feelings of isolation reflected how the packaging of the course may have not fulfilled her expectations of an online course.

### **Undergraduates Who Failed an Online Course**

The following were participants who are undergraduates who failed an online course. The participants were ordered by age from youngest to oldest.

#### **Mackenzie**

**Student characteristics.** Mackenzie was a 24-year-old undergraduate who failed an online course in Physical Education. He planned on graduating in the year 2015 and

reported taking 4 or 5 online courses. He was employed part time and enrolled at the university full time.

**Overall experience.** Mackenzie explained that his overall experience in the course was related to his performance and his instructor's policies. Mackenzie stated the following:

With that course, it wasn't my overall experience. It was a bad one overall, because I failed it, obviously, but I can't say that it was due. I think that the blame really in that case, I had to pick it on me. Our syllabus and our requirements for the course, it was not a very demanding course whatsoever and I just failed to keep track of it. Maybe, because it worked in the opposite way, because it wasn't challenging. My other courses took priority and the one thing that the professor really proved was a late policy. There was no if's or but's about it. He had a deadline for everything and if it was a minute late, not accepted and not up for conversation or debate.

**Goal commitment.** Mackenzie enrolls in online courses for flexibility in his schedule. Mackenzie stated the following:

I was working and because I'm a substitute, the more days that I can say I'm available, the more work that I'll get, so, at that time, I was trying as many online courses as possible so that I would be free during the day to work.

He, also, was motivated at the start of the course. Mackenzie commented on his motivation as follows:

I'd say I was pretty motivated. I was pretty motivated because first of all, I was anticipating an Education course which something I've always liked and I knew it was going to be the only course and formal education I was going to get on it. I could say that I was a little more interested and motivated by that curriculum than other classes for example.

Mackenzie conveyed the message that his lack of performance was the main factor related to his failing the course. Mackenzie stated, "It was pretty much laziness. Not laziness but procrastination that made me miss deadlines on some very important assignments."

Furthermore, it was important to Mackenzie to finish the course. Mackenzie stated the following:

It was pretty important. It was pretty important instead of dropping it. By the time things started getting bad and my performance really started going down the drain, I'm pretty sure it was after add/drop period or I tell you I would have dropped it.

**Academic environment and integration.** Mackenzie, also, had positive thoughts and feelings about the institution. Mackenzie stated the following:

My thoughts and feelings about it are actually pretty positive. I've had a really good experience in the education program and I think it's a pretty darn good one... I've had but I think all of my classes have been pretty valuable except for the one here and there...

However, Mackenzie felt as though online courses did not demand much from the instructor. "Like once you have an online course setup, it's concrete and you don't really have to give much attention," he stated. Mackenzie did find his online course interesting and he explained his thoughts and feelings in the following response:

It was interesting because it dealt with stuff that pertains to my own interest like athletics, exercise, and things like that. P.E. class which is just fun but the actual curriculum, the course consisted of reading chapters of the textbook and doing quizzes and then a few assignments here and there that required us to actually like use critical thinking like doing design and athletic drill and make all healthy snacks and post a picture of it with the recipe...

Mackenzie asserted that he is a very independent student. Mackenzie conveyed his learning style in the following response:

I'm a very independent student. I feel that I actually learn best not when I'm in class listening to a lecture, I've sat through very valuable lectures, too, but I feel like I really start to get the stuff and learn the stuff when after hearing the lecture, I go home and I read the chapter myself and I gauge it myself, is really when what I think that I've learned it... and a visual student or listening, I've never really been... I've always done well when it's just me and the material and I can focus on it completely.

Mackenzie discussed the features of the course in the following:

Two literature reviews, which we're were to go to the library database, find academic journal on a physical education topic and write a one-page summary on it. So, it was a very mild literature review because entire academic journal in physical education and then your summary on it is one-page long, how much can you really write about and explore or how much do you really need too, you know? The healthy snacks assignment that I mentioned earlier. We were asked to make a healthy snack, post a recipe of the healthy snack, and a picture of the healthy a snack as proof that we have made it.

He stated that there were supports on Blackboard, if needed, but he never really used this support.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Mackenzie explained how his family reacted to him taking classes online:

I can't say that they explicitly showed me support or showed non-support. It was just kind of a neutral topic. I guess I was 22 at the time or already so. My parents, they don't stay on top of me and what courses I'm taking as much as they would want when I was younger, they kind of trust me to this responsibility for myself now.

His employer did not inquire of his classes. Mackenzie stated, "It's not something that we really have ever spoken about or came up. It just never came up."

Mackenzie had one email interaction with the instructor. Mackenzie discussed this interaction as follows:

I think I may have e-mailed once to try to submit a late assignment which is when I learned, even though it says it in the syllabus, when I learned that he really meant it... but like I said, there was never really a reason to e-mail him or get in contact with him or ask him questions because the syllabus was laid out so clearly and because all of the assignments were pretty self-explanatory...

He, also, mentioned one interaction with his peers, in which he had to post an introduction about himself on the discussion board.



**Social and work environment and integration.** Taking an online course had its benefits for Mackenzie. He mentioned flexibility as a personal benefit. Mackenzie stated the following:

Some of the personal benefits were having more time to work at my job and on assignments. When you have a class in the middle of the day, 2 and a half hour class, every class is important, but some more than others. There are times when those 2 and a half hours will probably be better spent actually completing the course work than being in the class. So, that was a benefit for me in terms of time.

He further stated that having “more time to myself, not spending in the classroom” was a social benefit to him. There was, also, an economic benefit for Mackenzie to take an online course. Mackenzie mentioned the following:

Economic benefits, I definitely had that semester I believe I took three online courses and that’s when obviously I gained the most money at work because I was able to work Mondays through Fridays for the entire semester whereas in other semesters, I’ve only been available 3 days out of the week.

**Transactional distance.** Mackenzie may have experienced some transactional distance while in his online course. He only emailed his instructor once. He indicated that there was no real reason to email because all the course materials were presented in an organized manner from the beginning. Mackenzie had several types of assignments, such as a literature review, a healthy snack assignment, and quizzes. Having little dialog and some structure in the online course may suggest increase learner autonomy. Thus, Mackenzie may have had moderate transactional distance in his online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Mackenzie summed up the main factor that related to him failing an online course as, “Probably, online courses can be easy to forget about.” Mackenzie went into further detail, contrasting online courses to face-to-face ones in the following statement:

If you're going to the class and you're hearing about the assignments and they're just in your mind more... once in a while, there'd be a week there where I realized that this assignment needs to be turned in by Sunday night, and it's Saturday, and the whole thought of that online course haven't even entered my mind up until that point, you know?

Mackenzie concluded that the course could have been improved by being made more challenging. Mackenzie stated the following:

For improving the course, I would say I guess for the professor to maybe be, it's a very simple class. I understand it may not be relevant to most people in my position and maybe I only am as interested in that because I'm interested in like I said, athletics and exercise, but it was almost too simple... I think the course could be improved by maybe just putting a little more effort and critical thought into the planning and creation of the course work...

Mackenzie may have lacked the goal commitment needed to successfully complete his course. He mentioned that he procrastinated and missed assignments, which may relate to the amount of motivation he exhibited in the course.

## **Tyson**

**Student characteristics.** Tyson was a 26-year-old undergraduate who failed an online course in Accounting. He expected to graduate in 2014. He reported taking about 20 courses online. He worked part time and was enrolled at the university full time.

**Goal commitment.** Tyson thought that his online course was "really boring." The course was a prerequisite for another course he wanted to take. Tyson remarked that he is a "slacker" and was not very motivated at the start of his online course. Perhaps, by this term, he meant that he procrastinated often. He believed that there were no factors beyond his control that affected his outcome of failing the course and he stated that it was, indeed, important for him to finish the course.

**Academic environment and integration.** Tyson usually liked online courses and thought the instructor was just fine. He retook the course with the same instructor in the online mode of delivery. Tyson does not like the subject of accounting and did not like the course. Tyson stated, “It’s not my type of math.” Tyson went on to state, “I guess I am an auditory student. I listen, which is kind of ironic.” It appeared that the online course had some auditory features that would suit Tyson’s learning style, however, he mentioned, “I mean it did have Adobe Connect and it had lectures, but they were not mandatory... you know how that happens.” This last part of the statement reinforced the idea that Tyson tends to be a slacker. He stated that the course met the needs of auditory and visual students. Tyson described the features of the course as follows:

They had discussion board, so you can chat with other students and or the teachers themselves. Messaging, kind of like an email thing. What else? Group dates for group projects, like a group session. They had resources that I never touched like the library and stuff like that.... I know the teacher had PowerPoints, too.

Tyson was somewhat aware of the support services available to him and other online students. Tyson stated, “I didn’t really utilize them, but I think I had access to I think [the university] library using my [university] card if I wanted. Stuff like that. I didn’t really utilize it.”

**Social and work environment and integration.** Tyson has a supportive wife. He stated, “My wife. She supports me by helping check in to see if my comments are on task.” Tyson’s employer may have been indirectly supportive. He suggested that, “I guess they were very supportive because I was available to work because I was online... They kept giving me work, so I’ll take that as supportive.” Tyson did not interact with the instructor nor the other students in his online course.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** The benefit of him taking an online course was the flexibility. He was able to work his job at the same time. Tyson commented, “Really the only benefit, the only thing I cared for was the job. That was the only benefit of me taking an online course.” Ironically, Tyson felt he did benefit socially from taking an online course. He declared, “It benefited me because I am anti-social.” Also, he thought the course was a little bit cheaper than the face-to-face version, but he was not sure.

**Transactional distance.** Tyson may have had some transactional distance in his online course. He did not interact with the instructor although he had the opportunity to with Adobe Connect. His course had other features such as a discussion board, messaging similar to email, and group sessions. With the potential for dialog and the amount of features in the course that provide interactions, learner autonomy may have decreased and transactional distance may have been low.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** When asked about the factors that related to him failing the course, Tyson briefly stated, “Laziness, really... I, personally, did not put too much effort.” In order to improve the course, Tyson suggested that the problems in his online course have more real-world contexts. “I mean, make sure the subject is relatable, like especially for accounting. Use the balance sheet and invoices of real places... instead of some made up name that they just throw in the problem,” Tyson remarked.

A lack of goal commitment may have related to Tyson being unsuccessful in his online course. According to his responses, he described himself as a slacker and that he was not too motivated in his online course.

## **Kerena**

**Student characteristics.** Kerena was a 26-year-old undergraduate who failed a course in classroom management. She graduated in 2014. She worked full time and was, also, a full time student.

**Overall experience.** Kerena disliked not being able to talk to the instructor of her online course. Kerena stated the following about her overall experience:

It was difficult in the sense that I couldn't really talk to the teacher. That everything had to be through email. I don't feel like she knew who I was or my integrity toward the class. Also, there was that barrier like it didn't seem like she wanted to help much with the issues I was telling her I was having with the course. So, I felt like that was a problem.

**Goal commitment.** Kerena reported that she enrolled in an online course because it was required. She felt that she was very motivated at the start of the course. She pinpointed that a misunderstanding between her and the instructor may have related to her failing grade in the course. Kerena stated the following:

Well, there was actually... the reason... I would have passed the class with a C, but there was a misunderstanding in one of the assignments that was due. I thought that the assignment that week was one that was due later on, so I submitted that one and didn't do the one for that week. So, when I spoke to the professor and I told her even though I had submitted one that was due later on, she still, she didn't allow me to get credit for the one that was due that week.

Kerena stated that this assignment was worth many points. She, also, thought it was important to finish the course.

**Academic environment and integration.** Even though Kerena failed her online course, she had positive thoughts and feelings about the institution still. "Overall, I think [the university] is a good institution. I've learned a lot throughout my years here," Kerena concluded. However, Kerena did not have the same thoughts and feelings toward

the course. “Not very positive,” Kerena stated, “And I had her for another course, so she actually knew me and the fact that, you know, she didn’t give me credit, even partial credit for that assignment It was... I feel unfair.” She had a different feeling toward the course. “The course... It was a good course. I felt I learned a lot throughout the course.”

Kerena stated that she is a visual, auditory, and tactile student. She felt as though the online course was difficult and did not match her learning styles in some ways.

Kerena commented as follows:

They didn’t really match the way I learned. I guess... well, for that class, I had to do hours at the school as well. I guess I learned more through that... teaching my lessons to the students and getting their feedback... As far as the online part, for me it was harder, just because of the fact that I was... I had to read all the material on my own and I had to basically do everything on my own. I didn’t have the teacher there to explain things and to ask questions to in case I didn’t understand something. So, in that aspect, it was harder for me.

Kerena described how the course mainly had articles, the textbook, tests and quizzes.

She emphasized that there was no review for the tests and quizzes. She noted that the instructor was available to contact via email and office hours, but Kerena did not attend the office hours.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Kerena did not receive support from her family. “It didn’t really... I mean they knew I was taking it but it wasn’t like it mattered. As long as I was taking something. They didn’t care whether it was at school or online,” Kerena explained. Yet, Kerena had a supportive employer. Kerena stated the following about her employer’s support:

They are, thank God, very understanding of the fact that school comes first for me... The hours at work, like if I needed to do assignments or if I needed to leave early to do something, they would allow it. Or if I needed to go in later.

Kerena had email interactions with the instructor. The interactions revolved around her grades. Kerena went into detail into how the interactions went:

Even though I had explained to her my... well, it was the semester before I would go ahead and graduate... she showed no interest in trying to help me out. I even asked her if there was any extra credit that I could do or anything that I can, basically, do to pump up my grade. There was nothing.

Additionally, Kerena mentioned the use of discussion boards to interact with other students. "It was forums that we had to respond to and just read each other's," Kerena stated.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** There were benefits to taking a course online for Kerena. Kerena discussed the personal benefits of taking an online course. She reported that, "The fact that I didn't have to come to school. I didn't have to drive to school. That allowed me to be at work longer hours. So, that's really the main reason why I took the online course." Kerena further stated that there were social benefits. "It was more flexible because I didn't have a time that I had to come into class, I was able to hang out with my friends or go on vacation. Like it was flexible in that case." Additionally, Kerena decided that online courses were not economically beneficial because they were more expensive.

**Transactional distance.** Kerena may have had some transactional distance in her online course. Although she emailed the instructor often, she felt as though those student-instructor interactions were negative, making dialog low. Her course consisted of reading articles and the textbook, discussion posts, and tests. She stated that she had to do everything on her own, thus, the structure may have been high as well as the amount

of learner autonomy. Kerena may have experienced high transactional distance in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Kerena concluded that the factor that most related to her failing her online course was not receiving at least partial credit for the last assignment. Her major suggestion for the course revolved around the instructor. Kerena gave the following suggestion:

I guess for the teacher to have more understanding for the student. I have taken other online classes and they haven't been bad because the teacher has understood that you're obviously taking the online class because you can't make it to school because you trying to work for other situations or whether you have a family at home, young kids... and they have understood that and have been willing to work with me... This professor for this course didn't have that mentality. It was more like I'm not going to work with you... she was strict on that aspect. So, I feel like it has to do with the professor that is teaching the course.

Kerena may not have academically integrated with her online course. There lacked what Kember (1989) called normative congruence, or compatibility between the instructor's expectations of the course and the student's image of the expectations. For example, Kerena was concerned with the grade she received on an assignment that the instructor had made due on another date. When the instructor would not negotiate with her, the expectations of the instructor and Kerena's image of them mismatched.

## **Kym**

**Student characteristics.** Kym was a 28-year-old undergraduate student who failed a course entitled, "History of Ideas." She expected to graduate in the year 2015. She took most of her courses online. She worked full time and was enrolled in the university full time.



**Overall experience.** Kym stated that the type of work in her online class was different. “What caught me off-guard was the importance of the discussions on a weekly basis,” Kym stated. She discussed the type of interactions in the course and how she was not accustomed to online courses. Kym made the following statement:

[The professor] would post his lectures as a document and, then, we would gather [or make sense of everything] from that based on, also, the readings, the textbooks. But unfortunately at that point, I wasn't used to that. I guess it was the beginning of when I first started taking online courses. And I wasn't used to having to write, on a weekly basis, on a discussion post, too, and that's like your participation in the class, basically.

Kym attributed her failing grade in the course to her being new to online courses. Kym continued in the following statement:

So that's what caused me to actually fail it but I mean, I guess, now, looking at it after more experience with online courses, the lectures that he provided us were just fine because I took his class again and some as well, online and I passed it with a great grade, that's all.

Thus, it may not have been anything about the course itself that related to her failing the course.

**Goal commitment.** Kym, like many of the other participants, wanted flexibility in her schedule. For this reason, she enrolled in her online course. Kym made the following statement:

Time, time. I needed more time, flexibility, really. Time and flexibility just because I could read his lectures at 11 'o clock at night if I needed to without actually attending a specific time and day of the week on campus, a lecture that's there, I could do it in my own time, so, the flexibility.

Kym discussed how her online course was not related to her actual degree, but required for the university, nonetheless. She was not as motivated as she would have been in a course that was required for her degree program. Kym stated, “The one I failed, I don't

think I was that motivated just because it wasn't in relation to my actual degree, that was still part of the core requirements of the University, so, actually, my motivation wasn't that high.”

During the semester of her online course, Kym had outside factors that may have related to her failing the course. Kym made the following statement:

I mean, honestly, the course that I mentioned about the discussion post and I was relatively new at that point to online courses but the external factors, I was working full-time, things I had moved also. I was going through a move. There was other factors that, I guess, also, added on to the fact that I did not receive a passing grade. Yeah, it was like work issues and also, I was relocating, things like that.

It was important to Kym to finish the course. It was so important that she did not drop it. Kym stated the following about her effort in the online course, “Well, it was important to finish it and I actually didn't even drop it. I really did try. I did know that I had the option of taking it again and it wasn't important to finish it...”

**Academic environment and integration.** Even though Kym failed an online course, this did not deter her positive thoughts and feelings towards the university. She discussed her feelings in relation to the online course and its instructor. Kym made the following statement:

Oh, I love the [the university]. I actually really, really do and I don't think it's anything about them because the teacher that actually was assigned to that online course is very, very resourceful and he actually, in his lectures, he takes the time to read it... that was it because that course actually, I don't know if I mentioned it before but it does require a lot of your time at home although it's online. So, yeah, in addition, to the discussion post and what not, you really need to go in-depth in the textbooks and not only read them once, but read them more than once, and it's like eight books at a time for the course and it was an online course... I took it in the summer. So, I underestimated the course, I think that's what really it comes down to... But the teacher himself was very resourceful, very knowledgeable of the material and he actually did add funny comments and even in the tests, one of the multiple choice question would be actually humorous. And

so if you prioritize the course as much as you should, you will get the full-on experience.

I took this course again with the same teacher. I took it in the summer, I did the exact same thing and I'm not sure if I passed with an A or B but I know I passed and I actually gave it more attention than the any other course because I knew that it required that much. But I underestimated it the first time around, but I thought [the university] is great, the teachers, even not only in that course but in other courses, they're just I feel like the teachers in [the university] think outside-of-the-box so they actually make it very engaging for the most part and interesting, so, it's been a fun experience...

Kym is a visual student. She thought the features of her online course matched the way she learned to an extent, but that the instructor could have used more tools to connect with students. She compared the online course she failed to other online courses that she had taken after it. Kym made the following comment:

I've had other courses that the teacher actually connects to the Adobe Connect where you can see and discuss with her or him...But in this one, he just posted his lectures, written down and whatnot, which when you read them, like I said, they were humorous, they were engaging but it definitely wasn't, he didn't use the actual, physical Adobe Connect discussion method which was new to me at that point. Usually, online courses are good, at that point, with that specific one I thought it lacked that connection with the teacher, at least having the possibility to be able to connect that way. Because that will limit you to a specific time as well, so, sometimes, students won't be able to practically sit and connect with the teacher at that point but I could feel that with that course, I mean that was something that it lacked at that point if you didn't know how to handle it any other way.

She noted that the supports common to all online courses were available in her online course. However, Kym added, "I noticed that in other online courses, there's additional tools that are added to the course by the teacher though..." Kym continued, "It didn't have the Adobe Connect, for example, or some features at a blog, or things like that. But usually, I mean, I like the online course, I like Blackboard... it's good. It's easy and there's technical support, it's good."

**Social and work environment and integration.** Kym received support in taking her online course from her family. She thought they were very supportive. Kym made the following statement about her family support:

I think they are supportive. Definitely very supportive. If I was taking an exam and they were at home, they'd give me the time I needed or the level of sound as well around the house that were appropriate for if I was taking a test at the moment or if I was reading to fulfill the assignment of the course or whatnot. So actually, they were very helpful.

Her employer was not aware of her taking an online course.

Kym had interactions with the instructor and other students in the course. She interacted with the instructor on Blackboard through email and with the other students through discussion posts. Kym felt the discussion posts were the heart of the online class. "The discussion post was, basically, the class. It was very, very... that was the center of it all, I think," stated Kym. Kym explained how the discussion posts worked in the following:

So, depending on the students' last names, that's how you would know what group you were assigned to. So, like, for example, the people whose last names end in R were assigned to a particular discussion and that's where we would discuss each of the ideas that would come or arise depending on the reading.

Kym described the readings and assignments in the following statement:

There was one week that you had to read almost two books, they're small books but still, they were hard to read just because they were written back in 1500 and whatnot so... The verbiage that they would use and the language that you would find in the textbook sometimes was hard to understand, you have to go back and re-read and re-read so there was a small textbook that required a lot of reading time just because you would have to go back to try and comprehend. But the course advanced though, the textbooks, the ages, they were like the time period that they were written in, also, advance with it. So by the end, you reach the modern era so it did get easier to read the books as you went through the course. But yeah, that's what it was, it was reading a lot of, I think it was eight books and three exams and two papers.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Several types of benefits were presented by Kym. She explained that flexibility in her schedule is the main personal benefit. Kym made the following comment:

Well, time, time. It allows you to continue to have a job, full-time if you need to and it just accommodates your schedule, really. You can plan yourself accordingly on your own time without basing it on somebody else's time. So, I think that's definitely time and flexibility, that's definitely the benefit of it.

She, also, mentioned the social benefits. Kym expressed her thoughts on social benefits in the following statement:

I think that you still interact somewhat when you gather in the discussion posts. You interact so much with other people and sometimes you really go in depth into topics and you get to hear out classmates, even more so than in a regular classroom, to be quite honest, because in a regular classroom, sometimes, discussions like that don't really arise or go in depth from my experience. It's actually very hard, people get shy or whatnot but once it's a requirement to discuss and you're not in public or whatever, a lot of people have speech-fright or whatnot or afraid of public speaking, they won't feel about with discussion posts online or on online courses. So I actually think that socially, it may be a little bit better, online courses, if it is required. If it's pushed to actually go into discussions with your classmates through that route.

In addition, Kym described the economic benefit of taking an online course. Kym made the following statement:

It is more expensive than a regular course, so, but I guess, well actually, no, there is an economic benefit, if you live far away, you will save in gas. So, it actually might be cost efficient, depending on your location to take an online course just because you can save on things like gas, gas prices that are so high, you could actually save on that end. So sometimes it may come out even the same so you might as well do it from home.

**Transactional distance.** Kym may have experienced some transactional distance in her online course. She used the email tool in Blackboard to message her instructor, but she received delayed responses. The dialog may have been moderate in her online course. Kym's online course had readings from a textbook, lectures, writing

assignments, exams, and discussion. The structure may have been moderate as well as the amount of learner autonomy. Kym may have experienced a moderate amount of transactional distance in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Kym stated that being new to online classes was a factor that related to her failing the course. Like Cheryl, she wanted to communicate with the professor weekly. She, specifically, named Adobe Connect as the tool of choice to communicate. Kym made the following statement about improving the course:

Maybe, once a week, having the opportunity to be able to Adobe Connect with the teacher to see if, to answer any questions or go into a deeper debate, to understand a little more in depth, especially at the beginning of the course when the readings are so difficult to go through, just because they were written in such a long time ago. So, what I would change is at least once a week, have the opportunity to set up a class discussion online with the teacher through Adobe Connect to kind of have like a virtual lecture just if needed, like, maybe the students can sign up or whatnot, if they're interested. I mean, and with a specific time, each week, like one of my other online course that I've taken, each week can offer a different time just because some other people work so maybe, one week it could be like 8 'o clock or 9 'o clock in the morning and then the following week, could be in the afternoon and then the following week could be a little closer to the evening, and so forth just so that everyone gets access to be able to ask questions prior to an exam.

Kym's student characteristic of being a new online student may have related to her failing her online course. According to Kym, she was not accustomed to online courses at that point and she passed the course the second time she enrolled in it.

## **Amber**

**Student characteristics.** Amber was a 29-year-old undergraduate student who failed a course entitled, "Teaching Exceptional Student in Inclusive Settings." She

expected to graduate in the year 2015. She reported taking 6 or 7 online classes. She worked full time and was enrolled in the university “super full time.”

**Overall experience.** Amber had failed her online course during her first semester at the university. She commented on her overall experience in the following statement:

It wasn't a very good one, but it was, also, my fault because I enrolled in that course, that was a six weeks course. That was my first semester at [the university]... First summer semester period and it was a six-week course and I didn't even realize it was a six week course when I signed up for it. So, it was something that was going way too fast for me. Way too loaded and it was a little unorganized which didn't help.

**Goal commitment.** Amber mentioned flexibility as a reason for her taking an online course. “Because it was flexible for me to be able to work and I could just do it at home whenever I wanted,” Amber stated. She was very motivated at the start of the course. “Well, I was motivated because it was my first semester here, so I was very excited and I really wanted to do good but it was just too fast and too much all at once,” Amber concluded.

Furthermore, Amber commented on external factors that may have related to her failing the course:

Well, I mean, I was starting a new job at the same time that I was starting the semester her, that could have had to do with it. Other than that, it was... I mean, I have a family but that really didn't come between me and my school, really.

She thought it was important to finish the course. “Important. It cost a lot of money. I really wanted to pass it but it just didn't work out.”

**Academic environment and integration.** Amber had positive thoughts and feelings about the institution. “I like it a lot.... It's very organized. You actually get help

when you need it,” Amber stated. She, also, had positive things to state about the course although she failed it. “It’s a good course, I mean, it teaches you a lot of things that you need to know, but I think it was just too fast.”

Nonetheless, Amber felt the features of the course matched the way she learned. She professed to be a visual and a kinesthetic student. She stated that there was a lot of writing in the course, which she considered worked well with her kinesthetic side. In addition, she had to create a video where she was teaching a lesson. Furthermore, Amber stated that emailing the professor was a type of academic support. However, Amber stated, “the professor that would take forever to write back.”

**Social and work environment and integration.** Amber had received support from her family and from her employer. Her family helped her. Amber stated the following:

Well, they tried to help me by, like my husband, for example, he tries to help me with my daughter, so that way, I could focus on school. I mean, I don’t complain about it but he tries to help me. My mother in law takes care of my daughter when I’m here in school whereas for that class she didn’t have to, but whatever they can they help me.

Amber stated that her employer would allow her to leave early from work when she needed to do school work.

Other than email, Amber did not have interactions with the instructor of her online course. She stated that there were discussion forums to interact with the other students, but that they were not really useful.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Amber discussed the personal and economic benefits of taking an online course. “It’s flexible. Like I said before, it’s flexible, so you can do what you need to do and then work on that... You do it at your own pace pretty much as



long as the course is organized, you get to do that,” Amber stated as a personal reason. Amber explained that the economic benefit of taking an online course was, indirectly, getting her degree and making more money.

**Transactional distance.** Amber may have experienced some transactional distance in her online course. She mentioned that she emailed the instructor and the response was delayed, but that there were discussion posts, videos, and readings from the textbook in her online course. There was some dialog in her course, some structure, and some learner autonomy. Amber may have experienced a moderate amount of transactional distance in her online course. **Outcome in the course and feedback.**

Perhaps Amber also needed an orientation to online courses. She stated the following about failing the course:

That was my first semester. My first, first, first semester and I didn't know... I didn't know the importance of Taskstream. I had never used Blackboard here. I had used the online system that I had at [another university] but I had never used Blackboard's, so, Blackboard was, like, a new thing.

When discussing the idea of an orientation, Amber stated, “An orientation, but not like the kind of orientation that I was supposed to do on the computer there. At the end of the story, you don't really pay attention to it.” Amber made the following suggestions for improving the online course:

Like, not having everything open at the same time like crazy, like, everything at its due time. Because when you have 500 hundred different folders of stuff, it's kind of crazy. It's just like open one folder at a time. This is this week; this is what we're doing that's it. And I guess giving the due dates enough time so you're not this is going to be do this time like a calendar or something that you know not too much overwhelming stuff... Respond quickly to emails because that's pretty much the only way we get to talk to the professor, so, if they don't respond then we don't get the help we need.

Amber's student characteristic of being new to online courses during her first summer semester may have related to her failing her online course.

## **Ivy**

**Student characteristics.** Ivy was a 30-year-old undergraduate who failed an online course in the subject of educational psychology. She anticipated graduating in the year 2014. She reported taking a total of 3 online classes. She was employed full time and took 3 classes per semester.

**Overall experience.** Ivy described her overall experience in the course as stressful due to factors other than the course itself. She mentioned the flexibility in schedule that online courses have, however, this attribute made it easier for her to forget her responsibilities in the course. Ivy made the following statement about her overall experience in the course:

That semester I was working at a job that required a lot of overtime and it was making a lot of stress and it affected my studies overall, like in general, my GPA went down entirely that semester. And what I found with online courses, because I don't have to show up, it's kind of my own schedule and my own discipline. I would just forget about it, completely out of my mind, the week would pass and I would say, "Oh my God, I never did that thing" and it's been two weeks since I logged in. I would just forget about it because I had so much going on. That was my overall experience.

I took it the following semester and I did better, obviously I passed it, but, even though it was a relatively easy course... it was just a matter of... I always said I'd discipline myself instead of time to go online and it was just kind of, life would just take over and I didn't. I cannot let myself be branded by others instead of running my time.

**Goal commitment.** Ivy discussed her reasons for taking the course online. Ivy stated the following:

To save time. It's just, obvious reason, I figured that I don't have to go to school, it saves me time from driving and it saves me time from sitting in a class the

entire time. I could just do the work, submit it and do my part and be done with it. So, it's supposed to be a time saver, and that's why I selected online.

Although Ivy stated she was very motivated at the start of the course, she felt as though outside factors consumed her. Ivy stated, "Pretty much, mostly, I let external factors completely overrun me. I just let external factors completely take over my time and I didn't have the internal discipline and motivation or commitment to overcome the external factors." In addition, she felt that it was very important to finish the course. Ivy remarked, "It was very important to the very end, I was trying to save myself to make-up for time lost and then I just didn't. It just didn't work out."

**Academic environment and integration.** Even though Ivy failed her online course, she exhibited positive thoughts and feelings about the institution and the course.

Ivy stated the following about the institution:

I have excellent thoughts and feelings about the institution. For the online course, I liked the interface on black board... I like open communication via e-mail with the professors, the fact that everything's in one place, my communications with the professor, the resources and everything that's listed by the week - that helps me a lot.

Ivy, also, made the following statement about her online course:

It was a very interesting course. It was very interesting when I did make time to read the material. It was very enjoyable... I was very engaged in because educational philosophy and psychology, I don't know why I keep saying philosophy, psychology is interesting, it's one of the reasons I got into education. I just think it's fascinating, so I actually like the course material...

However, Ivy missed the human interactions that face-to-face courses offer. Ivy concluded, "It's the human contact like face-to-face, it makes a big difference, too, for me, I think." She didn't have many interactions with the course instructor for that online

course. “I just felt like I was dealing with the computer, I didn’t... I have nothing to say about the course instructor other than there was a picture of her and her name was there.”

Furthermore, Ivy thought the course features did not match the way she learns.

First, Ivy stated the following about her learning style:

I have come into terms with the fact that mostly a kinesthetic student, or like audio-visual combined. I have to do, I have to see and hear. I have to be in the experience. I learn the most through experience or like the tie in to personal experiences.

Next, Ivy commented that the course features lacked variety. Ivy made the following statement:

It was mostly read or write. I think maybe at one point they may have had video, but it was very short, not very engaging. It was a read/write type of course. So, it wasn't very catered to different kind of students.

However, Ivy did mention that there were supports available to her. Ivy stated, “I think they have the black board office that I could call and they had a tutorial, some information I can read. And people that I can contact to set things up.”

**Social and work environment and integration.** Ivy expressed that her family was not very supportive of her studies. Ivy stated the following about her family support:

My family, they’re supportive in the sense that they think they’re very supportive... They didn’t understand that I needed to read. They didn’t understand that I couldn’t help around the house because I was studying, doing homework. I have always been in a huge struggle. So, as much as they wanted to be supportive and with their words that were supportive, they didn’t realize that they weren’t supportive at all.

In addition, Ivy’s employer was not supportive of her academic endeavors either. Ivy made the following statement about her employer:

My employer, my direct supervisor wasn't very supportive about school period. Sometimes, I would leave work late because she decided to have a meeting and it didn't matter that it went into class time. Or I would be expected to come early

and stay late despite the fact that it interfered with my courses or life in general. I would say not very supportive at all.

Ivy had a few minor interactions with the instructor and the other students. Ivy described her instructor interactions as follows:

Brief e-mails, general e-mails about what the class should do and me submitting my homework, or submitting my quizzes and what not. It was very dry, you got this or like... It was based on, very structured. But there wasn't a lot of communication and feedback, but the type of assignment didn't really call for that either.

Ivy noted that the course was not very interactive. "There were some posts required. For that course, in particular, I don't remember interacting with students really much. There were some like forum posts, but it wasn't very interactive that I recalled," Ivy stated.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Ivy noted the different types of benefits that online courses offer. Ivy discussed flexibility in schedule again as a personal benefit. Ivy stated the following:

Just the fact really, that I needed to do something on the weekend I could if I could. If I needed to write something at 2 o'clock in the morning and submit it before it was due, it was accessible to me. Obviously with this course, in particular, didn't work out because I failed, but when I re-took it, it was a pleasant experience. Later on, when I did take another course, even this past semester, online, it was very pleasant, I could just submit my work, send an e-mail... and it didn't interfere or conflict with other areas of life.

When considering social benefits, Ivy made the following remark:

Well, at that course, I had very little interaction so I guess the benefit was that, I could submit my work and be done with it and have more time for my family. Ever since, I have gotten married, so, more time for my husband... that would serve as a social benefit.

Ivy argued that online courses have the following economic benefits:

Yeah, I saved a lot of money on gas and the time of travel. The time to travel from home to campus. At that time I was living about 20 minutes away from campus, it wasn't so bad, but now I live 30 minutes away, so it helped a lot. The whole

parking, if there wasn't a parking, I didn't have to pay for the meter or even having to leave work early to make it to school on time and miss out on making money because of that.

**Transactional distance.** Ivy may have faced some transactional distance in her online course. She had a picture and the name of her instructor but did not have many student-instructor interactions. Her emails with the instructor were brief, perhaps, making the dialog in the course moderate. She stated that her course was only read and write, which may have made the structure and learner autonomy high. Ivy may have experienced a high amount of transactional distance in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Ivy pinpointed a lack of discipline as a factor related to her failing her online course. Ivy stated the following:

What factors, I wasn't disciplined enough. I didn't have enough discipline, I didn't have enough commitment and one of my main issues and this is like a personal issue across the board is that I have to learn how to say, "No" to the other people's things. I value family. I value friends. I'm... very committed to the people I love. Almost at the cost of things that mattered to me. So, that's an internal issue that I had to deal with and I had to say, "I can't go to this birthday party, I cannot go to..." but that's just across the board. I needed to learn that my schooling was very important and in some cases more important than other people, events or favors or the time that it takes to invest in a relationship. I had to come to terms with that.

To improve the online course, Ivy suggested to have assignments due on Wednesdays instead of the weekend. In addition, Ivy stated, "I guess, also, more video tutorials where you actually, you know, practice quizzes, more interactive, I think that would've helped me as well."

Ivy may not have had a strong sense of goal commitment for her online course. As she stated, she let external factors interfere with her performance and she mentioned that she was not as disciplined as she would have liked.

## **Davin**

**Student characteristics.** Davin was a 38-year-old undergraduate who failed a course in Accounting. He expected to graduate in the year 2014. He was not employed and was a full time student.

**Overall experience in the course.** Although he failed, Davin expressed positive feelings toward his online course and the instructor. For Davin, the amount of content in the course may have related to his failing grade in the course. Davin clearly stated, “I enjoyed the course. The teacher was very helpful, very knowledgeable. The subject matter was difficult. I kind of felt like the subject matter should have been broken up into two courses as opposed to being in one.”

**Goal commitment.** Davin liked the flexibility and the convenience of taking an online course. Davin’s family responsibilities were important to him and he did not want to spend a lot of time on campus for face-to-face courses. Davin commented, “I’m unemployed, but I have a lot of family responsibilities. So, I needed the convenience of not having to physically drive to all my courses. That time, I had three online courses.” Davin felt that he was very motivated at the start of the course, but factors beyond his control may have played a role in his failing the online course. He considered these external factors to account for “probably 80%” of all the factors that affected his performance in the course. Davin stated the following:

This is actually the second time that I’m registered for graduation. Actually, I...walked on stage in 2004, I’ve been trying to return to retake those classes and graduate. And the relationship problems, both times. Major contributing factor to having difficulty with those classes.

Davin went on to state, “That course, I could say I was having external factors influencing me on that one because it was the hardest to learn or to grasp.” Davin was not taking this online course because it was required. He mentioned that it was an elective.

**Academic environment and integration.** Even though Davin may have had some frustration in completing his program, he had positive thoughts and feelings about the university and its professors. “I like [the university]... I like the professor a lot. Not so thrilled with the type of advising you get from different advisors. But the school itself is an outstanding school. I love the professors...”

Davin enjoyed the online course to an extent. He had a positive experience with the course instructor. Davin stated the following about the course instructor:

She was very nice. At the end, she proctored the finals. I remember she proctored the midterms, or not. I think she proctored both, the midterms and the finals. She allows for in-person meetings, she did lab recordings, she set up conference presentations, she gave a lot of feedback.

The amount of material presented in the online course was his only qualm. Davin made the following comment about the course:

It was a lot of information crammed into a course. I felt that the subject matter could’ve been split into smaller pieces...So it’s not the materials, maybe it’s the way it was presented or the amount that was being presented.

Davin stated he is a “verbal” student. “I do very well with interactions. Not straight lecture, but the back and forth communications with teachers,” Davin elaborated. He admitted that he could have done more in the course. “I didn’t make it to as many of her weekly online chat on Adobe Connect that I should have,” Davin remarked. Davin stated the following about the other features of the course:



She gave us websites to self-study and to test our knowledge on. She gave extensions, she gave help on all of the homework and stuff. She used the person in my accounting lab... She used very friendly software to help our homework and quizzes.

Davin discussed that the professor had supports in place for her online class. “About midway through, when she saw people were having difficulties with the lab hours at the school in the accounting lab, she posted that to the class so everyone took additional methods of studying,” Davin stated.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Davin was unemployed, but he felt like his family was supportive of him taking an online course.

Davin thought the professor was “wonderful” but he did not interact with the other online students in his class. Davin explained, “I didn’t really have a chance to interact with the other students. I didn’t participate much on the message boards. I didn’t manage to meet any of the study groups that the other students held before.”

**Cost-benefit analysis.** For Davin, face-to-face courses have an advantage over online courses. Davin stated, “I did better with the classes in person because you get a better field for the interaction, for having to see someone repeatedly just keep reminder at place, it’s just easier on campus.” This statement adds to his proclaimed style of being a verbal student who likes the interactions between the instructor and the student.

However, according to Davin, online courses had the economic benefits of saving gas and travel time to campus for him.

**Transactional distance.** Davin may have experienced some transactional distance in his online course. He stated the instructor was wonderful and gave a lot of feedback, which could have made the dialog high. He felt the course was crammed, but

there were a variety of features, such as external websites, software, and a lab. Thus, learner autonomy and structure may have been lower. Taken these factors together, Davin may have experienced a low amount of transactional distance in his online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Davin expressed that he could have passed the online course. He was taking another course in accounting during the same semester as the one he failed. Davin contrasted the two courses in the following statement:

Mainly there's a possibility I could have passed the course. I just had two accounting courses at the same time. The one I failed was the core accounting course for accounting majors, and the one I passed was the accounting course for managers. It was a more overview, a more general overview of accounting material. That class is less specific in addressing content, and that's the reason I did significantly better. It seems like if I took two accounting courses, that maybe my brain would have been closer (the two subjects may have made more sense being taken together). If I failed one, I would have failed the other. Or if I did so-so, I would have did so-so but I made a B in one and I failed the other one. Terribly.

Furthermore, Davin made the following statement on how the course could be improved:

I don't know how everyone else did because I'm not an accounting major, and it's not something I'm doing and breathing every day. I majored in Public Administration and I feel fully confident I can sit with any Public Administration class and have a grasp of the general knowledge fairly well. But this was something totally different so I think it's really precluding people from taking it. Maybe they should make harder prerequisites? And maybe offer additional classes for people that think they want to do accounting but aren't sure. So maybe they can give a slower version similar to like one accounting for managers, that one class I took. They can get a longer class that's broken down into smaller pieces for people who think they want to do accounting but aren't sure. It's kind of a waste of money if people take that class who are not sure if they want to do it or they don't know if they want to do it and they find out for certain when they're failing it, "I don't want to do this."

Davin may not have had a strong sense of goal commitment in his online course. He stated that external factors may have accounted for 80% of his performance in his online course.

### **Graduate Students Who Dropped an Online Course**

Two graduate students who dropped an online course participated in this study. The graduate student profiles were ordered by age from youngest to oldest. The graduate students were included in the analysis and interpretations because their experiences were similar to those of the undergraduates.

#### **Cheryl**

**Student characteristics.** Cheryl was a 29-year-old graduate student who dropped a course about politics in curriculum. She anticipated graduating in the year 2015. She has taken two online courses. She worked full time and was enrolled as a part time student.

**Overall experience.** Cheryl found the course to be challenging. She had trouble with the instructor. Cheryl stated, "I found it to be difficult and the teacher not willing to help. And that was my first online course ever." Cheryl went on to state, "It's just a bad experience, overall."

**Goal commitment.** This online course was the only option for Cheryl. She had to take it. She stated that she was very motivated at the start of the course. According to Cheryl, a technical problem was a major factor related to her dropping the course. Cheryl stated the following:

Umm, I guess that was the main reason because I had problem that I had to upload a video. And she couldn't see it but she found that I did post it on time and there was a video just she couldn't play it. She gave me an F for the assignment

and like it was if it was my fault that she just, I don't know maybe because I have a Mac, it wasn't compatible.

Cheryl thought it was important to finish the course for financial reasons. "I had already passed through, and dropped it, so, I was going to lose the money, and I did. I ended up losing it all," Cheryl explained.

**Academic environment and integration.** Cheryl had negative thoughts and feelings about the university and its online courses. Cheryl stated, "[It's] a big mission to get any classes and when you do get a class, sometimes, they're only online... honestly, at [the university], they're not on my great list." However, she does want the structure that an online course could provide. Cheryl stated the following:

I like the structure and that's why I said I would like an online class because it's very structured, and you know when, what it's doing, what time, and everything is already there for you. So, I like the structure of it. I just had a bad experience, I guess.

Although online courses can have structure, Cheryl felt that there was room for misunderstandings. Cheryl discussed this idea in the following statement:

I don't know because the second class that I took I had an instructor where every assignment that I would do she would say, "Oh, I think you misunderstood what I meant" and it's like I don't understand because if she is posting what she wants, and I did exactly what she says she just, I guess, there is a lot of misinterpretation when you do things online and you are reading something you can read it in a different manner than when you are in class and you ask a question and they answer it like there and you get a better idea of what they want.

Being a visual student, Cheryl felt that the features of the course matched the way she learned fairly well. Cheryl stated the following:

She did a little bit of everything. We had to post a video dialog of ourselves. We had to look at PowerPoint. She did also, like, a video interview where she just talked to us through a video. It was a little bit of everything.

Yet, she had positive feelings about the general layout of the course. Cheryl continued as follows:

Oh, it was good in the sense that I had everything laid out for me... They [the course features] were filed by date or by modules, sorry, so every module, every week, we would click on a module and it would tell us everything that was due, that month, that week, or when it was due, and what was in that module.

However, the room for misunderstandings between the instructor and the student negatively affected Cheryl. “It was bad because I guess every time I did an assignment there was a teacher telling me that she wanted something different,” Cheryl stated. She noted that the support services available to her were technical services.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Cheryl described how supportive her family and employer were while she was taking an online course. With laughter, Cheryl stated, “Nobody in my family has taken an online course, so, nobody really can help me.” Her employer was not involved as a support of her academic endeavors. “They don’t really know what classes I take or what I do,” Cheryl responded.

The interactions that Cheryl had with the instructor and other students were not beneficial. Cheryl made the following comment about the instructor:

Very rude, very cold, and too reserved... I asked her, “Well, can I send you the link [to an assignment]?” Because it was posted I don’t know why you can’t see it,” she goes, “You can, but I’m not going to change your grades,” and well, okay, then, there is no point, so, not supportive at all.

Although Cheryl had a colleague in her online course, she stated that there were barely any student interactions in her online course. “I even had a friend that was taking it with me, but you’re kind of on your own so we really didn’t even talk that much,” Cheryl commented.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** For Cheryl, the benefits of taking an online course were few. Cheryl discussed the personal benefits of taking an online course. “Not having to go into school and doing it at your pace,” Cheryl stated. There were no social benefits of taking an online course according to Cheryl. She, also, thought that the courses are more expensive, thus, making them of no economic benefit.

**Transactional distance.** Cheryl may have experienced some transactional distance in her online course. Dialog may have been low in her course because her student-instructor interactions were negative in her opinion. The course may have high structure as Cheryl stated that everything was laid out for her including all the due dates in every module. The high structure and low dialog increases learner autonomy. Cheryl may have had high transactional distance in her online course.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Cheryl associated her dropping the course with her instructor’s lack of support for her. When asked what factors related to her dropping the course, Cheryl stated, “The teacher not being supportive... I guess, not making it clear what she specifically wanted in each assignment as you are going to be so detailed in grading and she should be more detailed in what she wants.” To improve the course, Cheryl made the following statement:

If I would change everything, I think it should be video dialogs that like you can talk to a professor at least once a week. And you can have questions and answers, even if it’s just an hour or something and like we’re taught with other members in a class because some people might provide a question that you maybe even think at all today or during the assignment. I guess I would change it in that sense. I want interaction with the teacher.

Cheryl may not have academically integrated in her online course. There lacked normative congruence in her course because what the instructor expected on the assignment she failed and Cheryl's image of this assignment mismatched.

## **Genesis**

**Student characteristics.** Genesis was a 34-year-old graduate student who dropped an online course entitled, "Instruction: Theory and Research." Although she had prior experience with online courses at a different institution, this was her only online course at the university. She anticipated graduating in the year 2016. She worked full time and was enrolled part time at the university.

**Overall experience.** Genesis's dual role as an online learning employee at the university and a student taking an online course made her views about online courses very interesting. As a designer and an online course instructor, Genesis knows what should go into an online course. She expressed that the course she dropped was not designed well and that the instructor needed more training in teaching online courses.

Genesis stated the following:

My experience in the class was that part of it was designed very poorly... so things were not intuitive. The whole course design was not intuitive. The syllabus didn't match things that were in the course.

Genesis went on to give a specific example of what bothered her in the online course:

I think that one of the last straws was they used Adobe Connect to review. The professor had an online meeting with Adobe Connect and she was reviewing the syllabus and the only thing to use was the chat. She didn't use the microphone to talk to people. She didn't share documents. There's a lot of things you can do with Adobe Connect and she didn't do any of them. It was very difficult to communicate.

**Goal commitment.** Genesis took her course online because it was only offered online at the time. She mentioned that she prefers online courses over face-to-face courses, anyway. Genesis was not motivated at the start of her online course. Genesis stated the following:

Probably not very motivated, which is probably why I dropped. And I will tell you that my motivation drastically went down as I went through. I ended up staying in for about two weeks, and as I was going through the course, it drastically went down.

Genesis had many external factors that affected her decision to drop the course. She expressed that these factors affected her “a good amount.” Genesis commented as follows:

I would say it was a combination of everything. I had just moved. The book hadn't come in and I couldn't find the book at the time that the first assignment was due. And the course design was so thrown off that I would get anxious. I would get anxious because I knew it was wrong. Knowing with my background. Like I knew things were supposed to be in certain places and they weren't. That really got to me.

Although Genesis was not motivated in the course, she recognized that it was a required course that she would need to take eventually. Genesis concluded, “I needed it for my doctorate. And it definitely set me back. In hindsight, I mean I made a good move, but I needed to finish it and I am not one to just drop a course.”

**Academic environment and integration.** Genesis felt that she was not passionate about being a student at the university. She thought that her course instructor needed training in how to teach online. Genesis made the following statement about her thoughts and feelings about the course instructor:

I thought that the course instructor should have gone through some sort of training. I don't think her class was designed pedagogically for online and I don't think that she was not technologically trained and I could tell that just by



watching her and how it worked, but I knew that she wasn't because she would have gone through that training.

Also, she thought that her online course had poor course design. Genesis stated the following about the online course when asked her thoughts and feelings about it:

I mean it was the course design. The course design was bad. It was nothing that engaged me. There was no videos. It was read and write. Read this, write. Read this, write. There was no engaging content. The content to student engagement was nothing. The professor again... did not know how to teach fully online... When people can't find things, it's annoying. That was a big piece of it.

Genesis asserted that she is a visual student and, also, a hands on student. She prefers online courses because of the flexibility. Genesis commented on her learning style in the following statement:

I am a visual student, but I'll tell that I am a visual student. But I like online classes because I like to read and do things on my own... I like to do things at my own pace. I like to engage in the content when I want to engage in the content, which is why I like online classes... I like to do research on the content how I like to do research. I am a visual student, but I am, also, a hands on learner. I can learn any way.

Genesis discussed how the online course had reading, writing, placing items in a software application called Dropbox. Overall, she felt that the course was "very boring." She stated that the course lacked features that the professor could have utilized. Genesis stated the following:

Well, she used Adobe Connect, but she used Adobe Connect only as a chat. There was no audio, there was no voice, there was no video, there was no shared documents, no sharing of collaborative spaces, which is all stuff you can do with Adobe.

Adobe Connect is a web conferencing software that allows its users to communicate in different ways, such as a synchronous chat, which Genesis was referring to, where students and instructors can write to each other and receive responses in real time. In

addition, Genesis noted that there are support services in every online course but she was not certain if the instructor made students aware of them in this course.

**Social and work environment and integration.** Genesis mentioned how her family knows she is taking classes but are not very involved in her academics in the following statement:

I don't know that they care. I'm single. I don't have an immediate husband or kids that would be or not be supportive. My family, like my mom and my brothers... they just know that I am in school. It is different because I am on the doctorate level. It's not like I am an undergrad where my family is really involved. They are like you're okay taking classes, okay, good luck!

Her employer was very supportive of her, but the nature of her work as an online employee made it difficult for her to do both. Genesis detailed, "Online was very supportive about the courses I take... They had to definitely make some changes in what I could do on Blackboard, which makes sense because as an administrator, I had access to everything."

Furthermore, the interactions that Genesis had with the instructor and other students revolved around her Adobe Connect experience. Genesis made the following statement:

The one major interaction we had was in Adobe Connect and it was in the chat room, which is very difficult because she had the entire class in there, which was about 15 students... It was just a chat. But even in Adobe Connect, I'll try to put this in words... There's a big screen where you would usually share a whiteboard or share your screen or a document. And then, less than a third or fourth of that screen, there's a list of participants, which is everybody's name on the first half of that... and at the bottom is where the chat is... you can change those pods and move them, but she didn't. We were all chatting in this little pod, this small space, which made me think that she had never gotten the training.

**Cost-benefit analysis.** Genesis emphasized that flexibility was the main personal benefit of taking an online course. Genesis defined it, "Flexibility – Being able to work

on things when I am ready to work on things.” She went on to state, “More like working on my time within my own time constraints.” She compared it to a face-to-face course and proclaimed, “I don’t like to sit still so sitting in a 3-hour class is not conducive to my learning. I can’t focus in that kind of situation.” Genesis expressed that working on a course at her own pace, in her own time, and fitting into her schedule was, also, a social benefit. “So, I can work my social life around my classes,” Genesis commented. She mentioned saving time traveling or driving was an economic benefit to taking online courses.

**Transactional distance.** Genesis may have had some transactional distance in her online course. The dialog in her course may have been low because her instructor did use chat to interact with the students in the course. Yet, there may have been high structure as Genesis discussed there was mostly reading and writing in the course. This may have increased the amount of learner autonomy and Genesis may have experienced a moderate amount of transactional distance.

**Outcome in the course and feedback.** Again, Genesis focused on the course design as what she would change about the course in order to improve it. She argued that the course needs content. “It needs videos, it needs learning objectives, clear outlines, modules...” Genesis decided. Genesis continued, “Modularization was probably the weakest. It was not horrible, but it wasn’t chunked well. More of it was needed. Navigation needs help. The professor needs help in Blackboard and Adobe Connect and probably how to teach online.” She mentioned that the syllabus was not clear to her and there was discrepancies in the directions, timelines, and dates. “It was not organized well,” Genesis concluded.

Although Genesis discussed the course design as being a problem for her, Genesis may not have had a great amount of goal commitment in her online course. She mentioned that she was not motivated and that her motivation drastically went down as the course progressed.

### **Journal Entries**

The journal entries of the researcher agreed with many of the statements made by the participants. The researcher, having taken an online course before, could relate to the comments made by the participants. For example, the researcher made the following comment about an online summer course in interior design:

I remember always having to catch up for the online course. I would still be working on the projects the day they were due. I never seemed to get ahead. This could be due to a number of factors outside of it being an online course. The course was not in my field... I needed a course at the time, so, I enrolled in it and it seemed interesting... There were a lot of videos to watch and the professor had an avatar of herself. I thought that was neat but unnecessary, but I can see how it could make the course more friendly.

The researcher, too, felt overwhelmed in an online course and made the following comment:

I just wasn't prepared for the amount of work it was going to be in the course... The assignments were not too hard but time consuming. I had to think about interior design in a deeper way without being able to discuss it with classmates I never met. I didn't know what interior design would entail... I think the course was designed well, but I wish there were more examples for me to have followed and the opportunity to go back and redo work that I realized after needed to be changed.

Although the researcher passed this course, many of the responses of the participants matched the researcher's sentiments about online courses.

## **Thematic Presentation**

The following section presented the themes that emerged from the data. These themes are the participants' overall experience, the categories of Kember's (1989) model, the participants' transactional distance in the course, their outcomes in the course, and their suggestions for improving their courses.

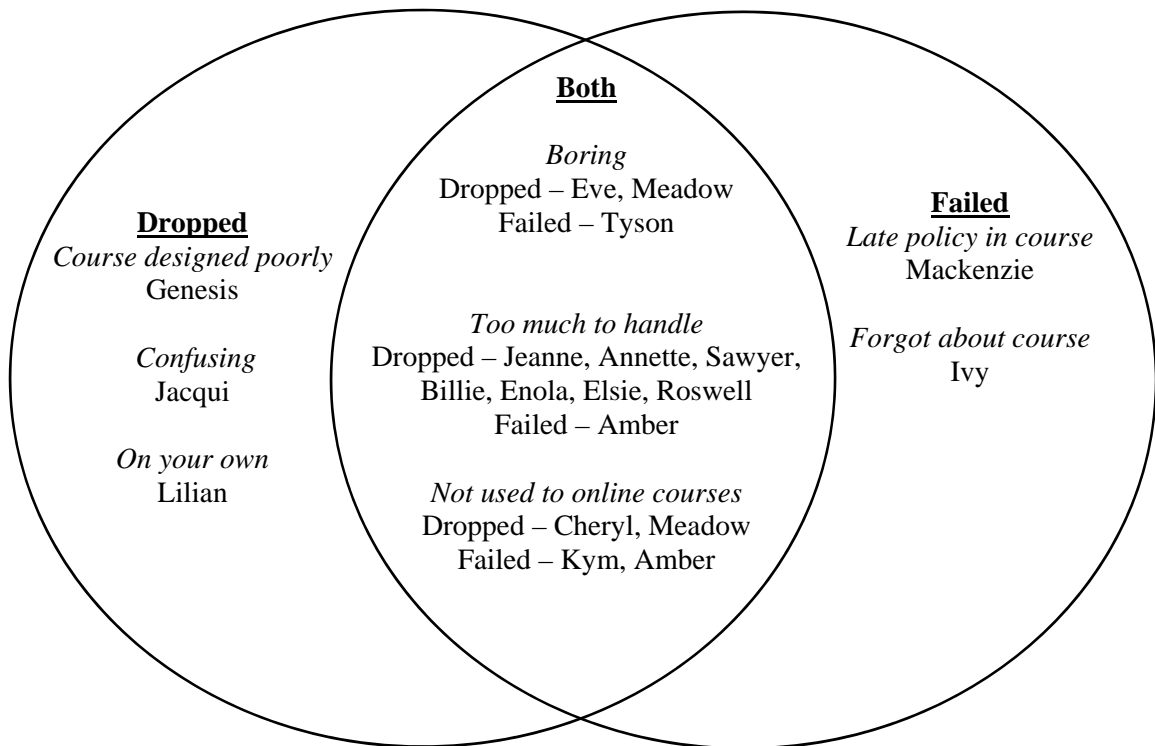
### **Overall Experience**

When describing their overall experience in the course, some of the participants who dropped and some of the participants who failed shared similar experiences. As illustrated in Figure 3, the overall experiences that the participants of both groups shared were that the course was either boring, too much to handle, or the participant was inexperienced with online courses. Participants who thought the course was boring were Eve, Meadow, and Tyson. Although Eve, Meadow, and Tyson had courses in which they explained had a variety of features, they felt bored in their online course.

A number of participants who dropped an online course stated that their online course was overwhelming or too much to handle. These participants included Jeanne, Annette, Sawyer, Billie, Enola, Elsie, and Roswell. One participant who failed, Amber, also, discussed how her online course was overwhelming and too fast. Additionally, Amber, Annette, and Jeanne were taking online courses during the summer, which may have related to their feeling of being overwhelmed. (Kym mentioned, also, that her online course was taken during the summer during a different point in her interview.)

Four participants shared the experience of dropping or failing their first online course. Of these four participants, Cheryl and Meadow dropped their online course, and Amber and Kym failed their online course. The other overall experiences of the

participants are listed in Figure 3. Of the participants who dropped, Genesis felt her course was designed poorly. Jacqui was confused by how the student-student interactions worked. Lilian felt that she was on her own in her online course and that the instructor was not very descriptive about the assignments. Of the participants who failed, Mackenzie stated that he found out that his instructor did not take late assignments. Ivy explained that she would forget to login into her online course and was distracted by other things. From Figure 3, the majority of participants were positioned in the “Both” section of the Venn diagram, indicating that there were similarities in the overall experiences of the participants who dropped or failed an online course.



*Figure 3.* Participants’ descriptions of their overall experiences in their online course summarized by a Venn diagram.

## Themes from Kember’s Model of Dropout in Distance Education

### Student Characteristics

Demographics, such as age, gender, and employment comprised the student characteristics questions in the interview. Important differences arose between those who dropped and those who failed an online course with respect to age. Also, the number of women in the study as opposed to men was noticeable.

Table 1

*Participants’ Student Characteristics and Outcome in an Online Course*

Name	Sex	Age	Outcome	Employment
Elsie	Female	19	Dropped	Full Time
Jeanne	Female	20	Dropped	Part Time
Lilian	Female	21	Dropped	Part Time
Roswell	Male	21	Dropped	Part Time
Annette	Female	22	Dropped	Part Time
Jacqui	Female	22	Dropped	Full Time
Eve	Female	24	Dropped	Full Time
Mackenzie	Male	24	Failed	Part Time
Billie	Male	24	Dropped	Unemployed
Tyson	Male	26	Failed	Part Time
Kerena	Female	26	Failed	Full Time
Meadow	Female	28	Dropped	Unemployed
Kym	Female	28	Failed	Full Time
Cheryl	Female	29	Dropped	Full Time
Amber	Female	29	Failed	Full Time
Ivy	Female	30	Failed	Full Time
Sawyer	Male	32	Dropped	Full Time
Genesis	Female	34	Dropped	Full Time
Enola	Female	35	Dropped	Full Time
Davin	Male	38	Failed	Unemployed

First, none of the traditional-aged (<24 years old) participants failed an online course. Fourteen out of 20 participants could be considered nontraditional-aged (24 years old or older) students. Seven of these participants failed an online course. The

traditional-aged participants preferred to drop an online course if they determined early on that their course load was too much to handle. The names, student characteristics, and outcomes in the course of the participants are listed in Table 1. Only six of the participants were men. The rest of the participants were women.

### **Goal Commitment**

The questions on goal commitment in the interview asked about participants' reasons for taking online courses, their motivation levels, how important it was for them to finish the course, and what outside factors may have related to their outcome in the course. Figure 4 displayed a Venn diagram that includes the similarities and differences in participants who dropped or failed an online course with respect to their reported reasons for taking an online course. Many of the participants enrolled in online courses that could be considered a requirement. Sixteen out of 20 participants enrolled in this type of course. Requirements consisted of general university requirements, requirements for specific degree program, or a course that was only available in the online format. The four participants who were not taking a required course included Mackenzie, Davin, Sawyer, and Lilian. Additionally, participants who dropped an online course, such as Genesis, Billie, and Cheryl, enrolled in an online course because the course was only available online or the only available course.

Participants indicated that the flexibility and convenience of online courses was attractive to them. Eleven out of 20 participants mentioned the convenience and flexibility of online courses during their interviews. Flexibility and convenience included being able to do school work at any time in their schedule, having a schedule that did not conflict with their jobs, and not having to drive to campus. Moreover, three participants



who dropped an online course, Eve, Annette, and Meadow, expressed that their online course would be easier than a traditional course because of the flexibility that the online courses offer.

High levels of motivation at the start of the course was not an indicator of which participants would fail or drop an online course. Thirteen out of 20 participants were highly motivated at the start of the course. Eight dropped and five failed. Those who were not highly motivated at the start of the course were Annette, Sawyer, Meadow, Roswell, Tyson, Kym, and Genesis.

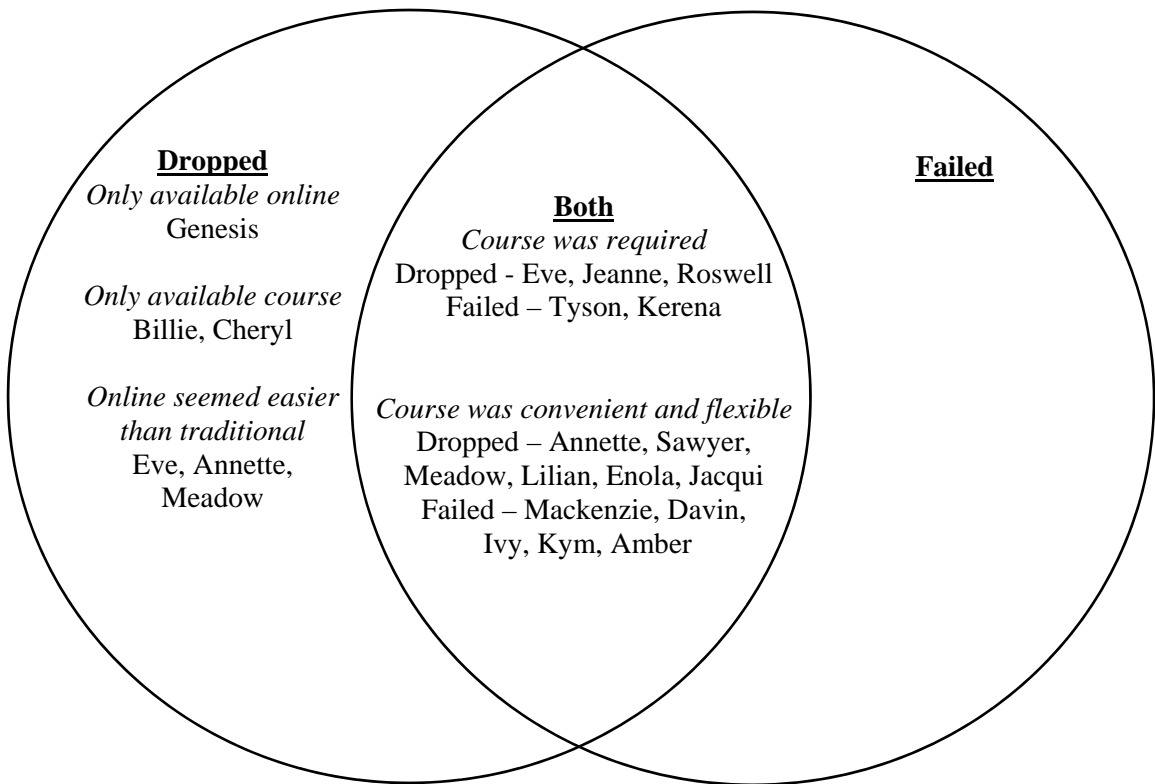


Figure 4. Participants' reasons for taking an online course summarized by a Venn diagram.

A strong sense of wanting to finish the online course may have played a role for the participants who received a failing grade. All of the participants who received a failing grade thought it was important to finish a course, but a few of the participants who dropped a course did not think this way. Mackenzie conveyed the message from his comments that it was more important to finish than dropping. He stated, “It was pretty important instead of dropping it.”

Having an internal locus of control may relate to persistence in the course but not success. Three out of seven participants who failed an online course exhibited an internal locus of control, in which they did not attribute external factors as factors affecting their outcome in the course. These three were Tyson, Mackenzie, and Amber. Twelve out of the 13 participants who dropped an online course suggested external factors affected their outcome in the course. The only one who dropped who did not suggest external factors was Billie.

### **Academic Environment and Integration**

The questions on academic integration asked the participants about the thoughts and feelings about the university, about their learning styles, about the features of the course, and how well the features matched their learning styles. Sixteen out of 20 participants had positive feelings toward the institution despite dropping or failing an online course in the past. Those who did not have positive thoughts and feelings about the institution included Eve, Genesis, Cheryl and Elsie.

Participants who dropped an online course felt there was a mismatch in the features of the course and participant learning styles. Four out of seven participants who failed an online course felt that the course features matched their learning styles to an

extent, while, only three out of 13 participants who dropped an online course felt this way. These four who failed were Tyson, Kym, Amber, and Davin. The three who dropped were Eve, Billie, and Cheryl. From Table 2, all of the participants younger than 24 years old thought the features of the course mismatched their learning styles, whereas, it was a combination of matching and mismatching with the participants 24 years old and older.

Table 2

*Learning Styles and Features of the Course*

Name	Age	Outcome	Matched	Mismatched
Elsie	19	Dropped		x
Jeanne	20	Dropped		x
Lilian	21	Dropped		x
Roswell	21	Dropped		x
Annette	22	Dropped		x
Jacqui	22	Dropped		x
Eve	24	Dropped	x	
Billie	24	Dropped	x	
Meadow	24	Dropped		x
Cheryl	26	Dropped	x	
Sawyer	26	Dropped		x
Genesis	28	Dropped		x
Enola	28	Dropped		x
Mackenzie	29	Failed		x
Tyson	29	Failed	x	
Kerena	30	Failed		x
Kym	32	Failed	x	
Amber	34	Failed	x	
Ivy	35	Failed		x
Davin	38	Failed	x	

Failure to use available features in Blackboard may relate to participants' dropping or failing an online course. Nine out of 20 participants wanted to add features

to the course such as video, audio, or content released over time. These nine participants were Genesis, Jeanne, Cheryl, Kym, Jacqui, Roswell, Amber, Sawyer and Davin.

A lack of interactions, negative interactions, or delayed interactions with the instructor may relate to the participants' outcomes in the course. Nine out of 20 participants experienced interactions with their instructors that were not positive in their online course. These participants were Jeanne, Annette, Kerena, Mackenzie, Sawyer, Cheryl, Meadow, Lilian, and Jacqui. Participants indicated a want for regular video communications with the instructor. The participants who wanted such instruction were Genesis, Jeanne, Cheryl, Kym, Jacqui, and Roswell.

Many participants were aware of academic supports available to them, but few took advantage of them. Thirteen out of 20 participants mentioned that there was some kind of academic supports available to them. Eight of those 13 did not take advantage of those supports. Genesis, Tyson, Jeanne, Annette, Kerena, Mackenzie, Lilian, and Roswell did not make use of the supports they reported as available in their online course.

### **Social and Work Environment and Integration**

Questions on social integration during the interview included topics such as family and employer supports, and student-student and student-instructor interactions. Both participants who dropped and participants who failed received support from family members. Thirteen out of 20 participants stated that their family was supportive of them. Of those 13, five participants had failed an online course and eight dropped.

Only some of the participants interacted with other students in their online course. Eight out 20 participants had interactions with other students in their online courses. These interactions mainly consisted of posting in the discussion boards. Although the

option to interact with other students more often was available, the participants did not take advantage of this option.

### **Cost-Benefit Analysis**

Saving time was listed as the top personal benefit of taking an online course by participants. Thirteen out of 20 participants discussed how online courses helped them to save time.

The economic advantages and disadvantages of taking an online course balanced each other out for some of the participants. Half of the participants thought that the economic benefits, such as saving money on gas, balanced out with the increased fee for tuition when taking an online course.

### **Themes from Transactional Distance Theory**

Across participants who dropped or failed an online course, transactional distance ranged from low to high, but many of the participants had a moderate amount of transactional distance in their online course. In Table 3, the names, outcomes, and the amount of transactional distance in the online courses were presented for each participant. Only eight of the participants experienced an amount of transactional distance other than a moderate amount.

Additionally, the three participants who were unemployed had low amounts of transactional distance in their courses. These participants were Meadow, Davin, and Billie. This may be due to these participants having more time to devote to their courses because they are not working. Thus, they may have been more aware of the features and supports in their courses, and they may have had the time to have more interactions with their instructors.

### Outcome in the Course

The participants' outcomes in their courses and their relation to Kember's (1989) model are listed in Table 4. Meadow, Kym, and Amber had student characteristics that may have related to their outcomes in their online courses. Roswell, Jacqui, Billie, Cheryl, Genesis, Mackenzie, Tyson, Ivy, and Davin may have lacked goal commitment for their courses as indicated by their responses. Elsie, Jeanne, Lilian, Annette, Eve, Sawyer, Enola, and Kerena may not have academically integrated in their online courses.

Table 3

<i>Amount of Transactional Distance in Course</i>				
Name	Outcome	Amount of Transactional Distance		
		<u>Low</u>	<u>Moderate</u>	<u>High</u>
Elsie	Dropped		x	
Jeanne	Dropped		x	
Lilian	Dropped		x	
Roswell	Dropped			x
Annette	Dropped		x	
Jacqui	Dropped		x	
Eve	Dropped			x
Billie	Dropped	x		
Meadow	Dropped		x	
Cheryl	Dropped			x
Sawyer	Dropped		x	
Genesis	Dropped		x	
Enola	Dropped		x	
Mackenzie	Failed		x	
Tyson	Failed	x		
Kerena	Failed		x	
Kym	Failed		x	
Amber	Failed		x	
Ivy	Failed			x
Davin	Failed	x		

The nature and amount of instructor interactions may have related to the participants' outcomes in their online course. Eight participants discussed how there was either a time delay in instructor responses or had instructor interactions that they viewed as negative. Sawyer, Meadow, Cheryl, Lilian, Kym, Enola, Amber, and Jacqui wanted more positive interactions with the instructor or a response from the instructor in a timely manner.

Table 4

*Kember's (1989) Model and Participants' Outcomes in Online Courses*

Name	Outcome	Kember's (1989) Model Categories			
		<u>Student Characteristics</u>	<u>Goal Commitment</u>	<u>Academic Integration</u>	<u>Social Integration</u>
Elsie	Dropped			x	
Jeanne	Dropped			x	
Lilian	Dropped			x	
Roswell	Dropped		x		
Annette	Dropped			x	
Jacqui	Dropped		x		
Eve	Dropped			x	
Billie	Dropped		x		
Meadow	Dropped	x			
Cheryl	Dropped		x		
Sawyer	Dropped			x	
Genesis	Dropped		x		
Enola	Dropped			x	
Mackenzie	Failed		x		
Tyson	Failed		x		
Kerena	Failed			x	
Kym	Failed	x			
Amber	Failed	x			
Ivy	Failed		x		
Davin	Failed		x		

Participants from both groups felt that a missing assignment or exam affected their outcome in the course. Six participants failed to complete an item in their online course. Eve, Jeanne, Kerena, Lilian, Mackenzie, and Jacqui reported missing an assignment or an exam in their online course.

Participants who reported a lack of time management or discipline tended to drop or fail an online course. Billie, Elsie, Mackenzie, Meadow, and Enola discussed not having the time management they wanted to perform better in their online course. Billie concluded that he had not considered the amount of work that his online course would require.

### **Suggestions for Improving Online Courses**

Participants wanted more video and audio instruction in their online course. Eight participants suggested that their online course could be improved with added audio and video components. These eight participants are Genesis, Jeanne, Cheryl, Sawyer, Kym, Lilian, Jacqui, and Roswell. Participants wanted to have more positive instructor interactions. Nine participants wanted more positive interactions with their instructors. Participants wanted to instructors to chunk information and release content over time. Davin and Amber wanted the information in their courses to not be crammed and to be organized in a fashion where the content is released over time, not all at once. Two participants mentioned being isolated or “on your own” in an online course. These participants were Enola and Lilian. Lilian suggested having video introductions and getting to know her peers, while Enola was not sure how to “fix it.” One participant wanted to change assignment due dates to weekdays and not weekends. Ivy mentioned that the due dates of the online assignments should be moved to Wednesdays instead of



on the weekends. One participant mentioned that online courses should have an innovative orientation for new online students. Amber discussed having an orientation for new students online, but she mentioned that it should be more creative than the orientations she has had in the past that were online.

### **Connection between Kember's Model and Transactional Distance Theory**

An important connection arose when coupling transactional distance to the categories of Kember's (1989) model. When comparing Table 3 and Table 4, those participants who experienced high or low transactional distance, oftentimes, had issues with goal commitment in Kember's (1989) model rather than other categories. These participants were Roswell, Billie, Cheryl, Tyson, Ivy, and Davin. The only one who did not have an issue with goal commitment, but, also, had high transactional distance was Eve.

### **Summary**

This chapter consisted of the participants' profiles. The profiles contained some of the raw data from the interviews. Then, a thematic presentation was given. Themes from Kember's (1989) model and transactional distance theory were explored. The participants' overall experience in the courses and their suggestions for improving the courses were examined, also. In the next chapter, these themes are interpreted with respect to the literature.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this chapter, the themes from the previous chapter are related to the literature. Then, the limitations of the study are presented as well as recommendations for future research. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion section.

### **Themes from Kember's Model of Dropout in Distance Education**

The themes from Kember's (1989) model revolve around the categories of student characteristics, goal commitment, academic and social integration, and the cost-benefit analysis. Each of these themes are presented below along with the ties to the literature that had emerged.

#### **Student Characteristics**

The theme of student characteristics helped answer research questions about how transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of dropout in distance education help explain the experiences of university students who have dropped an online course and failed an online course. Some of the student characteristics of those who dropped an online course and those who failed differed. These differences in characteristics were in congruence with Hyllegard, Deng, and Hunter's (2008) findings, where students who dropped, or officially withdrew from an online course had different profiles than students who failed, or unofficially withdrew.

For example, none of the traditional-aged students failed an online course. Jinkens (2009) mentioned how past research indicates students 24 years old or older as nontraditional, making traditional students younger than 24 years old. Participants who were under 24 in this study did not fail an online course but dropped them. Although Park and Choi (2009) stated that student characteristics have little influence on

persistence, it is interesting to note that traditional-aged participants dropped their online courses. This may indicate that the younger participants made grades more of a priority than completing the course. Jinkens (2009) stated that traditional students may need more motivation, such as grades, than nontraditional students. The researcher found that nontraditional students are self-motivated and more serious than traditional students. This seriousness may have given the nontraditional students a stronger sense to want to finish their courses rather than drop them. Hart (2012) argued that students with a lower college status, who are further away from graduation, were more likely to drop out. Indeed, some of the participants younger than 24 years old were of a lower college status. For example, Elsie fits this description, she was younger than 24 years old and did not expect to graduate until the year 2017.

There were more women participants than men in this study. The greater number of women may be related to how the literature suggested that women take more online courses than men. Rovai and Baker (2005) indicated that women felt more connected to other students in their courses and they perceived they learned more than men. Women had more sense of community and perceived learning than men. Aragon and Johnson (2004) found that women completed more online courses than men.

### **Goal Commitment**

The theme of goal commitment helped answer research questions about how Kember's (1989) model and transactional distance theory explain the experiences of university students who drop or those who fail an online course. Specifically, Kember's (1989) model helps to explain the participants' goal commitment in relation to their outcome in the course. Kember (1989) discussed goal commitment as a student's interest

in a course, which he divided up into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Although Lee and Choi (2011) asserted that online courses are attractive on their own, the majority of participants in this study enrolled in an online course because it was a required either for the university or for their degree programs. The fact that their online course was required may have altered the participants' motivation. Nine out of 20 participants may have had issues with goal commitment in their online courses. Hart (2012) commented on how persistent students are highly motivated. From their responses, it appears that many of the participants were not intrinsically motivated, or had an interest in the subject, but rather, were extrinsically motivated by the prospect of completing a requirement. Perhaps, this type of motivation was not sufficient for successfully completing their online courses. Park and Choi (2009) recommended rewards in online courses, such as certificates, to boost the motivation of students.

Interestingly, participants who had an internal academic locus of control were those who failed an online course. According to Harrell and Bower (2011), these participants perceive their outcome in the course to be determined by their own behavior. Levy (2004) found that academic locus of control did not differ between persisters and those who dropped an online course. In this study, those who dropped an online course exhibited an external locus of control and those who failed had an internal locus of control. Parker (2003) explained that students with an internal locus of control tended to complete an online course. This idea still holds, in that, these participants who failed did complete the course, but unsuccessfully. Also, these participants who had failed an online course tended to take more online courses than those who dropped. Hyllegard, Deng, and Hunter (2008) noted that unofficial withdrawers, or students who failed an

online course, take the majority of their classes online. For example, in this study, Tyson and Kym have failed online courses but they usually take online courses. Most of Kym's courses are online and Tyson reported taking around 20 online courses. This phenomenon may be the equivalent of a student who takes all traditional courses and fails one of them.

Even though their online courses were mostly required, the participants did appreciate the flexibility and convenience of an online course. As Hyllegard, Deng, and Hunter (2008) stated, there is still a problem with students dropping online courses despite their flexibility and convenience. Flexibility and convenience may entice students to take an online course, however, online courses have as much work as traditional face-to-face courses (Murray et al., 2012). The participants such as Annette who thought online would be easier were surprised (and overwhelmed) to find just as much content as a traditional face-to-face course. Perhaps, institutions or instructors should convey the message at the start of the online course that the amount of work is equivalent to that of a face-to-face course to ensure adequate preparation on the part of their students.

### **Academic Environment and Integration**

The theme of academic environment and integration helped answer the research questions how transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model can aid in explaining the experiences of university students who drop or fail an online course. According to Kember (1989), academic environment and integration comprised all the facets of the institution's offering of an online course. This category of the model

included the packaging of the study, academic supports, and interactions between the instructor and other students (Kember, 1989).

Although the participants in this study have dropped or failed an online course, the majority of them had positive thoughts and feelings about the institution. Therefore, a failure to academically integrate in one online course did not correspond to a failure to integrate in the institution or in other courses. Thus, it is imperative to examine the specific factors that may have related to the participants' academic integration in the online courses that they dropped or failed.

First, Hart (2012) explained that disconnect between the learning style of a student and the nature of the online environment may lead to frustration and withdrawal. Brinkerhoff and Koroghlanian (2007) mentioned that mismatches in course features and students' expectations can impact learning. This notion is, also, captured by Kember et al. (1994) when the researchers discussed normative congruence. Normative congruence, or the academic compatibility of the student and the course, can be enhanced by having the features of the course match students' needs (Kember et al., 1994). Not many of the participants felt that the features of the course matched the way they learned. The percentage of participants who failed an online course and felt that the features of the course matched their learning style was higher than that of those who dropped an online course and felt the features matched their learning. Therefore, the course features matching their learning styles may play a role in the participants' completion of an online course, but not necessarily successful completion.

Furthermore, the lack of interactive and enriching media tools may relate to the dropping or failing of an online course by some of the participants. For example, the

participants who had seen a range of capabilities in the use of Adobe Connect in other online courses wanted the same in the online course that they dropped or failed. More interactions with the instructor on video would have pleased some of the participants. Participants did not consider a photo and introduction of the instructor an interaction. Additionally, instructor feedback in a timely manner may have been beneficial. Lee and Choi (2011) stated that if faculty give timely feedback, provide activities that are interactive, and give supports to struggling students, the students are more likely to persist.

Moreover, these types of interactions must be positive in nature as Moore (1993) suggested in transactional distance theory. These positive interactions between the instructor and the student make up the dialog component of transactional distance theory. Moore (1993) asserted that the extent to which transactional distance can be overcome relates to the extent of dialog achieved. Morris (2014) stated that students crave interpersonal relationships with their instructors. Students need dialog to overcome transactional distance. In the case of Sawyer, who stated that he received rude responses to his questions, dialog was not achieved. Morris (2014) suggested that instructors have online office hours to promote instructor-student interactions.

### **Social and Work Environment and Integration**

The theme of social and work environment and integration assisted in answering the research questions on how transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model can help explain the experiences of university students who drop or fail an online course. Kember et al. (1994) defined social integration as the degree to which a student integrates academics with family, work and social activities. The majority of participants who

failed an online course had families that were supportive to an extent, while, about half of the participants who dropped had families that were supportive to some extent. Perhaps, family support does not compensate for the high motivation that Hart (2012) suggested is required of students who persist in online courses. Thus, the participants' outcomes in their courses could be related to a lack of academic integration and not social integration.

To continue, some of the participants had interactions with the other students, while many of them did not. The main form of student-student interaction was through discussion posts. Although Billie worked in a group where there was emailing and text messaging, it did not prevent him from dropping his online course. Lee and Choi (2011) mentioned how collaborative learning does not impact persistence. Brinkerhoff and Koroghlanian (2007) argued that it may even be inconvenient for some students. This inconvenience is reflected in the comments of Jacqui and how she could not progress in the course without waiting for other students to respond to assignments.

### **Cost-Benefit Analysis**

Although saving time was the top benefit of an online course listed by participants, some seemed to not be fully prepared for an online course. The time seemingly saved by students who enroll in an online course can be deceptive. While reading the raw data in peer debriefing, a colleague questioned if the participants understood the credit hours system. He wondered if they realized that a student is expected to spend at least twice as many hours preparing for a course as the number of credits in the course. For example, in a three-credit course, a student should be preparing at home for at least six hours. Many participants thought online courses would be easier for them because of this time saving aspect; however, the only time saved may



have been travel time. Furthermore, the money saved from not traveling may compensate for the initial fee for taking an online course.

### **Themes from Transactional Distance Theory**

Transactional distance theory can help explain how the type and amount of interactions in an online course played a major role in the experiences of the participants who dropped or failed an online course in this study. However, from Table 4, the amount of transactional distance may not fully explain the experiences of these participants. Therefore, tying transactional distance to the categories of Kember's (1989) model may be more beneficial in explaining the experiences of the participants. Many of the participants in this study had the presence of transactional distance combined with a lack of goal commitment or academic integration.

### **Outcome in the Course**

Time management is an integral part of student success in the online environment (Holder, 2007; Jun, 2005; Lee & Choi, 2011). Some of the participants reported a lack in time management. Holder (2007) found that students who persist in online courses had better time management than those who do not. The participants who missed assignments in their online courses or thought their courses were "easy to forget" exhibited a need for better time management skills. Some of both types of participants, those who had failed and those who had dropped, experienced a lack of time management. Perhaps, this lack can be explained by transactional distance theory. The missing student-content interactions due to poor time management can negatively impact a participants' outcome in the course.

Furthermore, the participants wanted better quality instructor interactions. Some of them wanted their instructor to be more understanding, while, others wanted the instructor to have a faster response time. Again, Moore (1993) asserted that a lack of dialog, or positive instructor-student interactions, can increase the transactional distance in an online course. Where there is high structure and little dialog, students must exercise more student autonomy and transactional distance is high (Moore, 1993). Many of the participants in this study demonstrated that they wanted more dialog and lower transactional distance. Lower transactional distance may relate to greater persistence in an online course.

### **Suggestions for Improving Online Courses**

The participants' suggestions for improving online courses helped to answer the research questions about this topic. The participant suggestions for improving online courses concur with the literature. Participants wanted more video and audio in their courses. Kember (1990) discussed how using a variety of media can enhance motivation. Boling et al. (2011) suggested that courses that incorporated multimedia were more interactive than text-based courses. Participants wanted more instructor interactions. Moore (1993) recommended the use of dialog to lower transactional distance. Participants wanted the content to be chunked and released over time. Revere and Kovach (2011) argued that information is processed more effectively through short, focused lectures, and then, reflective activity. If Blackboard's tool to release content over time were utilized in their courses, the participants may have felt less overwhelmed. Participants new to online courses wanted an orientation. Kember (1990) commented on how orientations enhance collective affiliation, or the packaging and supports in an

online course. Boling et al. (2011) recommended introductory and orientation components in designing effective courses. In addition, to overcome feelings of isolation in an online course, Lee and Choi (2011) suggested building an online community. Feelings of alienation were inversely related to classroom community (Rovai & Wighting, 2005).

### **Connection between Kember's Model and Transactional Distance Theory**

Most of the participants with low or high transactional distance may have had issues with goal commitment in their online courses. Participants with high transactional distance may have needed a stronger sense of goal commitment to counteract the amount of learner autonomy in their online courses. Participants with low transactional distance may have needed a stronger sense of goal commitment, in general. Those who had low transactional distance in their online courses, Billie, Davin, and Tyson, also, indicated that the features of the course matched their learning styles. Therefore, it may not have been anything in particular about the course, but a lack of goal commitment that may have related to their outcomes in the courses.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

First, future research on dropping and failing an online course may include the effectiveness of orientations for new online students on the importance of persistence. The participants who were new to online courses felt as though a way to orient them to the online delivery mode may have helped them.

Second, research on factors that relate to drop and failure in specific subjects can be conducted. Many of the participants in this study were enrolled in education courses. Another study can be done with participants in various disciplines or a study focused on

specific disciplines. Additionally, research can be conducted with more students of the graduate level status.

Third, research can be conducted in comparing the various course features to students' learning styles to find out what media tools better equip students for success. A number of participants in this study suggested audio and video enhancements to improve their online courses.

Finally, a national database across universities with data on the rates of drop and failure in online courses by subject and academic levels might be beneficial for administrators and researchers.

### **Conclusion**

Transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model helped to explain the experiences of the participants in this study who have dropped or failed an online course. These experiences and the suggestions that the participants provided may help to improve online courses. Lee and Choi (2011), also, commented on how to improve online courses. The researchers stated to add relevant course content, which is reminiscent of Tyson's suggestion to have real world contexts in online courses. The researchers, also, stated to increase faculty feedback, use technology tools, and encourage an online community. Many of the participants wanted timely instructor responses, the use of multimedia-enriched tools, and one wanted to not feel isolated online. Nistor and Neubauer (2010) stated that few researchers go beyond counting the number of students who drop and relating that to those who completed their online course. In this study, the experiences of university students who drop or fail an online course was investigated through the lenses of transactional distance theory and Kember's (1989) model of

dropout in distance education. These participants, also, gave suggestions on how their experiences in their online courses could have been improved.

Upon reflection, if the researcher of this study were designing an online course, some of the suggestions listed by the participants could be implemented in this course. These suggestions include weekly video interactions with the instructor, chunking information and releasing it over time, and having assignments due during the week instead of the weekends. Additionally, an orientation could be given for credit at the beginning of the course to help new online students acclimate to the environment, and a certificate of completion would be given at the end of each module as a reward system to spur motivation.

Online courses may proliferate even further over the next few years. If enrollments in online courses increase more over time, then, it is important for researchers to understand the experiences of those who were unsuccessful in an online course. This way, the body of literature on persistence in online courses may provide educators, administrators, instructional designers, and students with the best practices for promoting a successful and optimal online experience.

## References

- Aragon, S., & Johnson, E. (2004). Factors influencing completion and non-completion of community college online courses. In L. Cantoni & C. McLoughlin (Eds.), *Proceedings of World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications 2004* (pp. 3498-3505). Chesapeake, VA: AACE.
- Ary, D., Jacobs, L. C., & Sorenson, C. (2006). *Introduction to research in education*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Aud, S., Hussar, W., Kena, G., Bianco, K., Frohlich, L., Kemp, J., & Tahan, K. (2011). *The condition of education 2011*. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Retrieved from National Center for Education Statistics: [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_dhe.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_dhe.asp)
- Auerbach, C. F., & Silverstein, L. B. (2003). *An introduction to coding and analysis*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Baker, S. E., & Edwards, R. (2012). *How many qualitative interviews is enough?* National Center for Research Methods. Retrieved from: <http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/2273/>
- Bean, J. P., & Metzner, B. S. (1985). A conceptual model of nontraditional undergraduate student attrition. *Review of Educational Research*, 55(4), 485-540. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1170245>
- Boling, E. C., Hough, M., Krinsky, H., Saleem, H., & Stevens, M. (2012). Cutting the distance in distance education: Perspectives on what promotes positive online learning experiences. *Internet and Higher Education*, 15, 118-126.
- Bouhnik, D., & Carmi, G. (2012). E-learning environments in academy: technology, pedagogy and thinking dispositions. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research*, 11, 201-219.
- Brinkerhoff, J., & Koroghlanian, C. M. (2007). Online students' expectations: Enhancing the fit between online students and course design. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 36(4), 383-393.
- Carr, S. (2000). As distance education comes of age, the challenge is keeping the students. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 46(23), p A39.
- Chao, I. T., & Hamilton, D. (2010). Using collaborative course development to achieve online course quality standards. *The International Review of Research in Open*

*and Distance Learning*, 11(3). Retrieved from  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10515/sy5377678>

- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). The discipline and practice of qualitative research (N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, Eds.). In *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Diaz, D. P. (2002). Online drop rates revisited. *The Technology Source*. Retrieved from [http://technologysource.org/article/online\\_drop\\_rates\\_revisited/](http://technologysource.org/article/online_drop_rates_revisited/)
- Dietz-Uhler, B., Fisher, A., & Han, A. (2007). Designing online courses to promote student retention. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 36(1), 105-112.
- Dupin-Bryant, P. A. (2004). Pre-entry variables related to retention in online distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 18(4), 199-206. Retrieved from [http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15389286ajde1804\\_2](http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/s15389286ajde1804_2)
- Falloon, G. (2011). Making the connection: Moore's theory of transactional distance and its relevance to the use of a virtual classroom in postgraduate online teacher education. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 43(3), 187-209.
- Gazi, Z. (2009). Implementing constructivist approach into online course designs in distance education institute at Eastern Mediterranean University. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 8(2), 68-81.
- Gokool-Ramdoos, S. (2008). Beyond the theoretical impasse: Extending the applications of transactional distance theory. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*. 9(3). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/541>.
- Gwekwerere, B. (2004). *The persistence of online distance education students* (Master's thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI 1428926)
- Harrell, I. L., & Bower, B. L. (2011). Students characteristics that predict persistence in community college online courses. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 25(3), 178-191. doi: 10.1080/08923647.2011.590107
- Hart, C. (2012). Factors associated with student persistence in an online program of study: A review of the literature. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 11(1), 19-42.

- Heyman, E. (2010). Overcoming student retention issues in higher education online programs. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*, 13(4). Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter134/heyman134.html>
- Holder, B. (2007). An investigation of hope, academics, environment, and motivation as predictors of persistence in higher education online programs. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 10(2007), 245-260.
- Howell, S., Laws, D., & Lindsay, N. (2004). Reevaluating course completion in distance education: Avoiding the comparison between apples and oranges. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 5(4), 243-252.
- Hultgren, L. P. (2008). *The essences of interaction in online education: The experience of six doctoral students* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI 3320551)
- Hyllegard, D., Deng, H., & Hunter, C. (2008). Why do students leave online courses? Attrition in community college distance learning courses. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 35(4), 429-234.
- Jinkens, R. C. (2009). Nontraditional students: Who are they? *College Student Journal*, 43(4), 979-987.
- Jun, J. (2005). Understanding e-dropout. *International Journal on E-Learning*, 4(2), 229-240.
- Kember, D. (1989). A longitudinal-process model of drop-out from distance education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 60(3), 278-301. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1982251>
- Kember, D. (1990). The use of a model to derive interventions which might reduce drop-out from distance education courses. *Higher Education*, 20, 11-24.
- Kember, D., Lai, T., Murphy, D., Siaw, I., & Yuen, K. S. (1994). Student progress in distance education courses: A replication study. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 45, 286-301. doi: 10.1177/0741713694045001003
- Koehler, M., Mishra, P., Hershey, K., & Peruski, L. (2004). With a little help from your students: A new model for faculty development and online course design. *Journal of Technology and Teacher Education*, 12(1), 25-55. Norfolk, VA: AACE.
- Lee, Y., & Choi, J. (2011). A review of online course dropout research: Implications for practice and future research. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 59, 593-618. doi: 10.1007/s11423-010-9177-y



- Levy, Y. (2007). Comparing dropouts and persistence in e-learning courses. *Computers & Education*, 48(2007), 185-204.
- Lincoln, Y. S., Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lyte, R. (2011). Study: Online education continues growth. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2011/11/11/study-online-education-continues-growth>
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (1999). The "what" of the study. In C. Marshall & G. B. Rossman (Eds.), *Designing qualitative research* (pp. 21-54). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Matthews, D. (1999). The origins of distance education and its use in the United States. *THE Journal (Technological Horizons In Education)*, 27(2), 54-67.
- McBrien, J. L., Jones, P. & Cheng, R. (2009). Virtual spaces: Employing a synchronous online classroom to facilitate student engagement in online learning. *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 10(3). Retrieved from <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/605/1264>
- Merriam, S. B. (2002). *Qualitative research in practice: Examples for discussion and analysis*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Meyerhoeffer, T. J. (2009). *Staying the course: An investigation of undergraduate completion of online education* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI 3363305)
- Moody, J. (2004). Distance education: Why are attrition rates so high? *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 5(3), 205-210.
- Moore, M. (1989). Editorial: Three types of interaction. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 3(2), 1-6.
- Moore, M. G. (1993). *Theory of transactional distance*. Retrieved from <http://www.c3l.uni-oldenburg.de/cde/support/readings/moore93.pdf>
- Morris, L., Finnegan, C. (2008). Best practices in predicting and encouraging student persistence and achievement online. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 10(1), 55-64.
- Morris, S. A. (2014). *A qualitative study of self-regulated learning in online learning environments* (Master's Thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI 1567635).

- Murray, M., Perez, J., Geist, D., & Hedrick, A. (2012). Student interaction with online course content: build it and they might come. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research, 11*, 126-140.
- Nagel, D. (2009). Most college students to take classes online by 2014. *Campus Technology*. Retrieved from <http://campustechnology.com/articles/2009/10/28/most-college-students-to-take-classes-online-by-2014.aspx>
- Nistor, N., & Neubauer, K. (2010). From participation to dropout: Quantitative participation patterns in online university courses. *Computers & Education, 55*(2010), 663-672.
- Park, C. L., Perry, B., & Edwards, M. (2011). Minimising attrition: strategies for assisting students who are at risk of withdrawal. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 48*(1), 37-47.
- Park, J.-H., & Choi, H. J. (2009). Factors influencing adult students' decision to drop out or persist in online learning. *Educational Technology & Society, 12*(4), 207-217.
- Parker, A. (2003). Identifying predictors of academic persistence in distance education. *USDLA Journal, 17*(1). Retrieved from [http://www.usdla.org/html/journal/JAN03\\_Issue/article06.html](http://www.usdla.org/html/journal/JAN03_Issue/article06.html)
- Patterson, B., & McFadden, C. (2009). Attrition in online and campus degree programs. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 12*(2). Retrieved from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer122/patterson112.html>
- Perry, B., Boman, J., Care, W. D., Edwards, M., & Park, C. (200). Why do students withdraw from online graduate nursing and health studies education? *The Journal of Educators Online, 5*(1), 1-17.
- Revere, L., & Kovach, J. V. (2011). Online technologies for engaged learning: A meaningful synthesis for educators. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 12*(2), 113-124.
- Rovai, A. P. (2003). In search of higher persistence rates in distance education online programs. *The Internet and Higher Education, 6*, 1-16.
- Rovai, A. P., & Baker, J. D. (2005). Gender differences in online learning: Sense of community, perceived learning, and interpersonal interactions. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 6*(1), 31-44.

- Rovai, A. P., & Wighting, M. J. (2005). Feelings of alienation and community among higher education students in a virtual classroom. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 8, 97-110.
- Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. (2005). *Qualitative interviewing: the art of hearing data*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations: Classic definitions and new directions. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25, 56-67.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. London, England: Sage.
- Saldaña, J. (2011). *Fundamentals of qualitative research*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Santa Barbara City College (2004). Online college classes have highest drop rate. *The Channels*. Retrieved from: <http://www.thechannels.org/uncategorized/2004/03/17/online-college-classes-have-highest-drop-rate>.
- Schulte, M. (2011). The foundations of technology distance education: A review of the literature to 2001. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 59(1), 34-44.
- Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and social sciences*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Sperry, D. L. (2009). *Experiences and descriptions of motivational factors in online learning: Rural community college students' perspectives* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI 3339300)
- Stake, R. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Stanford-Bowers, D. E. (2008). Persistence in online classes: A study of perceptions among community college stakeholders. *Merlot Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 4(1), 37-50.
- Stein, D. S., Wanstreet, C. E., Calvin, J. (2009). How a novice adult online student experiences transactional distance. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 10(3), 305-311.
- Street, H. (2010). Factors influencing a student's decision to drop-out or persist in higher education distance learning. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration*,

13(4). Retrieved from  
<http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/winter134/street134.html>

- Swan, K., Shea, P., Fredericksen, E. E., Pickett, A. M., & Pelz, W. E. (2000). Course design factors influencing the success of online learning. *WebNet 2000 World Conference on the WWW and Internet Proceedings* (pp. 513-518). San Antonio, TX: Chesapeake, VA: AACE. Retrieved from: <http://www.editlib.org/p/6412>.
- Tinto, V. (1975). Dropout from higher education: A theoretical synthesis of recent research. *Review of Educational Research*, 45(1), 89-125.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1170024>.
- Tirrell, T., & Quick, D. (2012). Chickering's seven principles of good practice: Student attrition in community college online courses. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(8), 580-590.
- Wang, H., Gould, L. V., & King, D. (2009). Positioning faculty support as a strategy in assuring quality online education. *Innovate*, 5(6). Retrieved from  
<http://innovateonline.info/index.php?view=article&id=626&action=login>
- Willing, P. A., & Johnson, S. D. (2009). Factors that influence students' decision to dropout of online courses. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 13(3), 115-127.
- Wyman, B. M. (2012). *A hermeneutic phenomenological study of non-completers in online doctor of education programs* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses database (UMI 3552302)
- Xu, D., & Jagers, S. S. (2013). Adaptability to online learning: Differences across types of students and academic subject areas (Working Paper No. 54). Retrieved from: <http://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/adaptability-to-online-learning.html>
- Yin, R. (2011). *Qualitative research from start to finish*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

## APPENDIX 1: Interview Schedule

## Interview Schedule

Date:

Time:

### Interview Questions

Student Characteristics (Kember, 1989; Park & Choi, 2009)

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Online Course \_\_\_\_\_

Graduation Year \_\_\_\_\_

Education Level \_\_\_\_\_ (Undergraduate, Graduate,  
Professional, Year)

How many online courses have you taken? \_\_\_\_\_

Circle one choice.

Gender: M    F

Employment status:    Full-time    Part-time    None

Enrollment:    Full-time    Part-time

Non-persistence:    Failed    Dropped

1. Describe your overall experience with the course?

Goal Commitment (Kember, 1989; Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Intrinsic Motivation

2. What were your reasons for taking the course online?
3. How motivated were you at the start of the course?

Extrinsic Motivation

4. To what extent did external factors, or factors beyond your control, account for your outcome in the course?

5. How important was it to you to finish the course?

Academic environment and integration (Harrell & Bower, 2011; Kember, 1989)

6. What were your thoughts and feelings about the institution?

7. What were your thoughts and feelings about the course instructor?

8. What were your thoughts and feelings about the course?

9. What type of learner are you?

10. How well did the features of the course match the way you learn?

11. Describe the features of the course.

12. What types of support services were available to you?

Social and work environment and integration (Kember, 1989; Lee, 2009)

13. How supportive were your family members about you taking an online course?

14. How did they show this support?

15. Describe the nature of interactions with the instructor.

16. Describe the nature of interactions with other students.

17. If employed, how supportive was your employer about you taking an online course?

18. How did he or she show this support?

Cost-Benefit Analysis (Kember, 1989)

19. What were some of the personal benefits of taking the course online?

20. What were some of the social benefits of taking the course online?

21. What were some of the economic benefits of taking the course online?

Decision to Dropout/Academic Failure (Kember, 1989)

22. Question for students who dropped: What factors relate to you dropping the course?

23. Question for students who failed: What factors relate to you failing the course?

Miscellaneous

24. What suggestions do you have to offer for improving the course so that future students can succeed?

Follow-up questions will be asked based on participant responses.



APPENDIX 2: Informational Letter to Participants

**INFORMATIONAL LETTER**  
A BASIC INTERPRETIVE STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF UNIVERSITY  
STUDENTS WHO HAVE DROPPED OR FAILED AN ONLINE COURSE

Hello, my name is Natalie Paul. You have been chosen at random to be in a research study about the experiences of university students who have dropped or failed an online course. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of students who have dropped or failed an online course as to the factors that related to this experience. If you decide to be in this study, you will be one of up to 60 people in this research study. Participation in this study will take about an hour of your time. If you agree to be in the study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in one interview that will be recorded and transcribed.
2. Check the transcribed data for accuracy.

There are no foreseeable risks or benefits to you for participating in this study. It is expected that this study will benefit society by helping instructors and course designers to understand the factors that relate to dropout and failure in online courses, which could be of use in improving course design.

There is no cost or payment to you. If you have questions while taking part, please stop me and ask.

You *will* remain anonymous. Pseudonyms will be utilized.

If you have questions for one of the researchers conducting this study, you may contact Natalie Paul at \*\*\*.

If you would like to talk with someone about your rights of being a subject in this research study or about ethical issues with this research study, you may contact the \*\*\* Office of Research Integrity by phone at \*\*\* or by email at \*\*\*.

Your participation in this research is voluntary, and you will not be penalized or lose benefits if you refuse to participate or decide to stop. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

APPENDIX 3: Participant Request to Participate

## **Request to Participate**

Have you dropped or failed an online course before? Would you like participate in a research study examining the experience of dropping or failing an online course? Want to make suggestions for how online course design can be improved?

Please take part in this study!

Confidentiality is assured. Verbal consent is required. Interviews will take place either in person or over the phone/Skype. Interviews will be recorded.

Please contact me, Natalie Paul at \*\*\* to schedule an interview.

**APPENDIX 4: Professor Request to Participate**

Request for Professors

Dear [Professor's name],

I am conducting research about dropout and failure in online courses and I am interested in your students' experiences. The purpose of the research is to understand the experiences of students who have dropped or failed an online course and to collect feedback from such students about what could be improved about online course design from their perspective.

I would like your help in recruiting participants. I would like for you to send me your class roster with the students' names and email addresses. The students will be emailed about this study and requested to participate in an interview.

One way to send me the roster is to login to your faculty portal. On the class roster page, change "Enrollment Status" to "All" students to include students who have dropped. Copy and paste the names and email addresses into an email, document or spreadsheet and send them to me. If you find a different way to send the roster, that is fine.

Another way you could help is by posting an announcement in your online course about this study along with my contact information.

This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board. If you would like a copy of the approval letter, please email me.

Please let me know if you are interested in helping with this process. Please feel free to email me at \*\*\* with questions or comments.

Kind regards,

Natalie Paul

VITA

## VITA

### NATALIE PAUL

- 2001 – 2005                    B.S., Humanities and Engineering  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Cambridge, Massachusetts
- 2005 – 2006                    M.A.T., Mathematics Education  
Boston University  
Boston, Massachusetts
- 2007 – 2009                    Mathematics Teacher  
Hialeah High School  
Hialeah, Florida
- 2009 – 2010                    Adjunct Mathematics Instructor  
Broward College  
Fort Lauderdale, Florida
- 2009 – 2013                    Ed. S., Curriculum and Instruction  
Florida International University  
Miami, Florida
- 2013 – 2015                    Teaching Assistant  
College of Education  
Florida International University  
Miami, Florida

### PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

- Paul, N. & Thirunarayanan, M. (2012). Offering functional doctoral degrees: results from two studies. *Journal of International Business Management & Research*, 8(3), 100-110.
- Osterman, M., Thirunarayanan, M., Ferris, E.C., Pabon, L. C., Paul, N. & Berger, R. (2012). Museums and twitter: An exploratory qualitative study of how museums use twitter for audience development and engagement. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 21(3), 241-255. Chesapeake, VA: AACE. Retrieved from <http://www.editlib.org/p/39141>.
- Paul, N., Berger, R., Pabon, L., Osterman, M. & Thirunarayanan, M. (2010). Age and sex



related similarities and differences in web searching behavior: Results of four selective case studies. In *Proceedings of World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications 2010* (pp. 824-831).

Chesapeake, VA: AACE.

Retrieved from <http://www.editlib.org/p/34730>.

Thirunarayanan, M., Berger, R., Paul, N., Pabon, L., Osterman, M. & Ferris, E. (2010). The use of tweets in formal and informal educational settings. In J. Sanchez & K. Zhang (Eds.), *Proceedings of World Conference on E-Learning in Corporate, Government, Healthcare, and Higher Education 2010* (pp. 2231-2234). Chesapeake, VA: AACE. Retrieved from <http://www.editlib.org/p/35878>.