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e-LEARNING: A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

A thesis presented by

Julia E. Antoine

to The School of Education

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

This phenomenological investigation focused on the exploration of the lived experiences of students who had dropped out of traditional four year colleges and returned to complete their degree by e-Learning. The goal of this investigation was to gain a new understanding of the psychological, motivational, and ethical aspects of continuing a four year college education through an e-Learning environment.

The data included in-depth interviews with the participants on their perceptions and experiences in achieving a baccalaureate degree by e-learning after dropping out of a traditional four year college program. To enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, the researcher engaged in member checking, reflexive and methodological journaling, and analysis. Phenomenological data analysis procedures followed recommendations by Creswell (2005) and Moustakas (1994). Specifically, the analysis was conducted using the modified van Kaam method proposed by Moustakas (1994), with a semi-structured interview format (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010).

Results of the study are presented as descriptions of how participants perceived the impact of e-Learning on their educational, personal and professional lives. Five thematic categories emerged from the interviews: (a) flexibility; (b) academic integrity; (c) satisfaction; (d) the importance of the teacher; (e) a diminishing need for support as the learner proceeds through the e-Learning process. Categories consisted of one or more related themes. Consideration is given as to how the researcher's experiences and beliefs played a role in the study. Strengths, weaknesses, and considerations of the study findings are offered as are implications of the study for practice and for future research.

Keywords: phenomenology, connectivism, e-Learning, ethics, motivation, psychological, perceptions

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Some of adjectives used to describe the growth of e-Learning include explosive, unprecedented, and disruptive, to name a few. Nonetheless, e-Learning is the most rapidly expanding area of education, particularly, in higher education (Imel, 2002). It is viewed as having the potential to (a) improve the quality of learning, (b) improve access to education, (c) reduce the cost of education, and (d) improve the cost-effectiveness of education. Decidedly, the advent of the Internet has made e-Learning more acceptable as an educational option; however, there is still a great deal more research needed to establish a place for e -Learning that is not only driven by educational objectives, but that is also geared towards student learning and the ethical issues involved in e-Learning.

Thus, the choice of college dropouts as participants for this study provided an opportunity to gain an insight into their decision, after having dropped out of a traditional college, to return to school via e -Learning. In particular, the ethical issues involved in acquiring a degree in such a non-traditional manner, need to be examined. As Banthamai (2009) noted, the asynchronous nature of e-Learning and the perceived, associated "freedom" provided to e-Learners, can affect the system of ethics incorporated by e-Learners. This is sometimes manifested by the learning behaviors of the students (i.e., discipline and participation). The nature of e-Learning lends itself to these speculations on all sides; however, this study focused on the students' perspectives.

The use of qualitative data collected from e-Learning students will hopefully give an insight into their perceptions, expectations, and commitment, to their e-Learning experience. The students chosen for this study are working adults who were enrolled part-time in a Connecticut based undergraduate program. According to Holmberg (1995), they are typical of the students for whom it is widely proposed that e-Learning is the most convenient and appropriate mode of delivery.

The question under investigation is:

What is the lived experience of students who return to complete their degree by e-Learning, particularly in terms of the factors that have influenced the decision to return to school via e-learning and the perceived quality and effectiveness of the e-Learning experience, in terms of, providing a quality educational experience, as well as, the means to obtain a degree?

This chapter provides a discussion of the problem statement, which demonstrates the significance of the problem by referencing earlier works of e-Learning practice and evaluation, the theoretical framework, and research questions. The methodology is presented and a rationale is provided. The chapter concludes with a brief summary. The goal of the study is to develop an understanding of the decisive factors applied by students in evaluating their e-Learning experiences and key aspects of the way in which they engage with an e-Learning course.

Problem Statement

The importance and value of a college degree cannot be overstated, yet many individuals drop out of college for one reason or other and never complete their degree program. However, with the advent of the Internet and the availability of e-Learning, many of these individuals have chosen to return to college to complete their degrees via e-Learning. Several studies have been conducted in regard to dropouts from on-campus and distance education courses; for example, Levy (2007) concentrated on comparing dropouts and persistence in e-Learning. Keller and Cernerud (2002) examined students' perceptions of e-learning in university education, and

Yukselturk and Bulut (2007) focused on examining the factors affecting student dropouts in an online certificate program.

These are all relevant studies however, none of the studies focused on traditional college dropouts and their decision to return to school via e-Learning. I work at an exclusively online school based in Connecticut and my issue or problem of practice is how to best serve this population. Consequently, this study aims to understand and explore the lived experiences of these unique students, who having dropped out of a traditional college, academic program, made the decision to return school to complete their education and obtain their degrees, via e-Learning.

The volume of both implied and applied theories on e-Learning, designed to make e-Learning more acceptable to institutions of higher education and indirectly to business and industry, is growing by leaps and bounds. However, most of these theories are based either on earlier theoretical frameworks or on empirical studies, which identify the factors that need to be considered in pursuit of the creation of acceptable e-Learning experiences. Initial work on my part, did not find earlier studies that have investigated and documented the deciding factor or factors that influence the students' choice of e-Learning to complete their degree, as opposed to their returning to the traditional on-campus experience.

Significance of the Problem

The Sloan Consortium's third annual report on on-line higher education in the U.S. in 2005, reported an enrollment growth rate of 18.2%, which represents a rate more than "ten times that projected by [the National Center for Education Statistics] for the entire postsecondary student population" (The Sloan Consortium, 2005, as cited by The American Council on Education [ACE], 2009). Recently, the 2008 Sloan Survey of Online Learning attested to the fact that the growth in on-line enrollment rose by more than 12% from a year earlier (ACE).

Nevertheless, not much attention has been paid to the students of e-Learning in regard to their expectations and outcomes.

So far, the research has shown that much of the study on e-Learning has focused on assessing the e-Learner, evaluating the instructional practices utilized by e-Learning, the efficacy and practice of e-Learning, and the drop-out rate of e-Learners, compared to traditional college students, which is higher due to enrollment of nontraditional students (Pontes, Hasit, Pontes, Lewis, & Stiefring, 2010). However, the psychological and motivational aspects behind a student's decision to attend college via e-Learning after he/she had previously dropped out from a traditional college have for the most part remained undocumented.

The documentation of this aspect of e-Learning is critical given that employers and society at large have to make an informed decision in dealing with e-Learners and their academic experiences, and indirectly their qualifications. To illustrate, the availability of e-Learners with college degrees in every conceivable area of academia is becoming more widespread and more readily acceptable by society. However, little is known of the e-Learner and their college experience. Have they achieved what Batson (1994) referred to as "an ultimate goal...an end in itself" (p. 612). Can their motives be discerned by the achievement of that ultimate goal? Thus far, the e-Learner's voice is essentially silent. Therefore, I believed it was important to investigate this issue. Through this study, I gained insight into issues that may or may not be hindering the performance and/or the overall experience of students who return to school via e-Learning to complete their degree program, and hope that those concerns will be addressed before they become major issues.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the lived experiences of students who had previously dropped out of a traditional college and selected e-Learning to complete their degree program. In particular, this study focused exclusively on the perspectives of students attending an exclusively online school that is based in Connecticut and who have obtained a four-year degree via e-Learning. Therefore, the following question is central to this study: What is the lived experience of students who have dropped out of traditional college and who return to complete their degree via e-Learning? To answer this overarching question, the study was guided by the following three research sub-questions:

- What perceived factors do students, who have previously dropped out of a traditional college and have returned to complete their degree via e-Learning, see as influential to selecting e-Learning to complete their college degree?
- 2. What perceived moral issues in terms of academic integrity do students returning to school via e-Learning, to complete their degree, perceive as relevant to e-Learning students' behavior and conduct, as well as, to faculty and administration?
- 3. What psychological needs are perceived to be satisfied from participation in the e-Learning model by students returning to college via e-Learning to complete their degree?

Theoretical Framework

Perspectives of practitioners of technology and online learning have provided the theoretical framework for this study, such as Ally (2004), who wrote about virtualization in education, and Dede (2007), who discussed information and communications technologies (ICT) in teaching and learning in response to the changes taking place in education. In addition, this

study was informed by November (2001), presenting the concept of "digital natives," stressing that educators should allow children exposure to the Internet as early as the fourth grade, as well as Mayes (2006), who posed his insightful questions: "How should technology transform learning?" However, the most direct contributions to this study came from Ally, and the concept of connectivism and its association with online learning; Dede (2007), who challenged us to "prepare students for the 21st Century" by utilizing ICT technology; and Mayes for his concept of "interactivity" and theoretical perspectives on e-Learning. In addition, earlier theorists, such as Piaget (1960) and cognitive development theory and how it is applicable to e-Learning, as well as Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and how it can be applied to present day education (i.e., the "STAR Reading software" and how it is used with ZPD), also informed this study. These all provided conclusive evidence that education has come full circle, and the theories of earlier practitioners are being utilized in modern educational theory, particularly, with the advent of the Internet and e-Learning.

Learning Theory

Learning theories can be used to understand learning and how learning is accomplished. According to Hoadley and Kilner (2005), those who create learning environments consult learning theory to create dynamic educational settings. Three main learning theories are discussed, which include behaviorist learning theory, cognitive learning theory, and constructionist learning theory. In addition, connectivism is discussed as a learning theory in relation to these main learning theories and specifically incorporating computer and digital technologies. Although each theory presents unique concepts, many concepts overlap among the theories (Ally, 2004). An understanding of these different learning theories is important in order to develop an understanding of why students may choose e-Learning to continue their education in an e-Learning venue.

Behaviorist Learning Theory. Behaviorist theory attempts to explain learning as resulting from conditioned responses (Hoadley & Kilner, 2005). According to Ally (2008), the early systems for computer based learning were designed under the behaviorist theory of learning. Behaviorist learning theory assumes that the objective of learning is the transfer of knowledge from instructor to learner; therefore instructors are central to learning (Hadjerrouit, 2007).

The behaviorist theory asserts that learning is an observable behavioral change that is the result of external environmental stimulus, where observable behavior is the evidence as to whether or not a student has accomplished the learning (Ally, 2008). Behaviorist theory assesses the individual learner's observable behaviors in terms of the response to the stimulus, which can be measured quantitatively to assess learning success (Ally, 2008; Mergel, 1998). Although the behaviorist theory promotes sustainable learning in the form of knowledge acquisition, the theory does not account for individual thought and ideas stemming from the learner, and therefore has been criticized as providing for shallow learning and the regurgitation of information (Ally, 2008; Hadjerrouit, 2007; Mergel, 1998).

Learning may not always be observable, and; therefore, learning must encompass more than merely changing behavior (Ally, 2008). The weakness of behaviorist theory presents in the possibility that the learner may not be able to respond to a problem if the particular required stimulus for the correct response is not present (Mergel). The strength of the theory is that the learner remains "focused on a clear goal and can respond automatically to the cues of that goal" (Mergel, p. 20). **Cognitive Learning Theory.** Cognitive learning theory is inclusive of thinking, reflection, abstraction, and the acquisition of memory within the learning process of the individual (Ally, 2008). According to cognitive theory, learning is a process that is internal and unique to the individual (Ally, 2008). "The creation of fresh psychological images and inclinations are results of cognitive learning" (Hoadley & Kilner, 2005, p. 31). This learning process is affected by the capacity of the individual to process the material, the depth of such processing, the amount of effort put forth by the individual, and the existing knowledge of the learner (Ally, 2008). Repetition and reinforcement in the learning process is highlighted in cognitive theory (Good &Brophy, 1990, as cited by Mergel, 1998).

Cognitive learning theory incorporates information processing (Ally, 2008). The learner receives information through the senses, which is temporarily stored in the sensory store before being transferred to the working memory (short term memory), and then further processed and transferred to the long term memory for permanent storage (Kalat, 2007). Information that is stored as long term memory connects with other stored information to form relationships, or networks (Ally).

Within cognitive theory, learning interactions (i.e., instruction) provide support for the individual discovery process and develop an individual's independent learning skills by increasing the learner's internal motivation, which in turn increases potential retention and retrieval of information (Ling, 2006). Cognitivist theory assumes that the information is acquired by the individual from the teacher or environment through experience. When this information is effectively processed by the mind, it constitutes retrievable knowledge (Ling, 2006). The cognitive theory is weak in that although the learner learns to accomplish a task, it may not be the way most suited to the learner or the circumstances (Mergel, 1998). The strength

of the theory is the consistency of the learned task in terms of training learners to do a task the same way.

Constructivist Learning Theory. Constructivist theory builds on cognitive learning theory, asserting that the individual learner interprets the learned information through their personal reality (Ally, 2008). The theory emphasizes individual construction of personal understanding, building knowledge through the process of learning (Hadjerrouit, 2007; Hoadley & Kilner, 2005; Mergel, 1998). However, constructivist theory asserts that learning is accomplished actively on the part of the learner through a process of observation, internal processing, and personal interpretation, rather than passively as suggested in cognitivist and behaviorist theories. This learning process is used to transform the information obtained into an individual's personal knowledge by utilizing their prior knowledge and constructing new knowledge (Hadjerrouit, 2007). Rather than knowledge simply being received from an outside source through passive transmission, according to the constructivist theory, the learner processes and interprets the information received, creating knowledge. The assembling of meaning by interaction is a characteristic representation of the constructivist approach (Ling, 2006). According to constructivist theory, an individual learns best when that individual is able to contextualize material for immediate use and understanding.

Constructivism is a learner-centered learning theory in which the learner develops their own meaning of what they have learned (Dalsgaard, 2006). This idea of situated learning, in which learning is seen as contextual, is a major tenet of constructivist theory; Hadjerrouit (2007) argues this stems from the assumption that learners, when required to self-discover, experience enhanced learning. In the context of the constructivist theory and situated learning, learning is the result of construction and discovery creating knowledge (Ally, 2008). Teachers in the constructivist model serve as guides and facilitators, rather than sources for the transmission of knowledge, the principle practice of e-Learning (Hadjerrouit, 2007).

Mergel (1998) cited six assumptions of constructivism, originally presented by Merrill (1991). These assumptions include that (a) information is created from experience, (b) learning is an individual understanding of the world, (c) experience is the foundation for the formation of meaning, (d) collaborative learning fosters the growth of a variety of perspectives as well as alters our intrinsic understanding, and (e) assessment should be a part of the learning rather than an unconnected action, and learning ought to occur in pragmatic circumstances. The strength of this theory lies in the fact that because learning is constructed in real life, the student is more apt to problem solve and apply knowledge.

Connectivism. Another learning theory is that of connectivism (Bessenyei, 2007; Siemens, 2005, 2006). Connectivism blends the theories of self-organization, complexity, network, and chaos. Connectivism is presented as a learning theory for the digital age, in which learners function within a networked environment. There is a constant change in the network in terms of environment, technology, and types of learning; therefore, the information that must be absorbed and learned is continually changing and is determined and controlled by others (Ally, 2008). That is, as others in the network constantly change the information, the learner must adapt learning new information as well as old.

The traditional learning theories of behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism are generally built on the organization of individual knowledge, although constructivism includes external influences (Siemens, 2005), particularly in terms of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), which incorporates the concept of learning as a product of social interaction. Connectivism is built on network organization of knowledge. The connectivist theory has a view of learning as an uninterrupted permanent system of network activities (Bessenyei, 2007). Siemens asserted that the traditional learning theories focus on the process of learning, rather than what is being learned and the intrinsic value of that knowledge.

Through a connectivist framework, the behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist elements of online curriculum development can be examined in terms of perceived quality of instruction received. While the behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist learning theories provide a basis to explore the learning process in an e-Learning format, connectivism allowed for an examination of the perceived satisfaction and value of learning as it relates to the online environment. An essential element to this exploration was the social factors involved in the learning process, which were examined using a framework of social constructivism and connectivism.

Siemens (2005) explained that connectivist learning theory is a function of the network system that surrounds the individual, and that learning occurs within this ever-changing environment. Siemens defined learning as *actionable knowledge*, and asserted that the learning process occurs in an environment that is constantly changing. He went on to note, that it can happen outside of ourselves, consisting of connecting sets of information, which enable further learning. The theory of connectivism is therefore, focused on the fact that the foundation for decision is quickly changing fundamentals. Due to the fact that information is being gained on a continuous basis, the individual's ability to decipher whether information is important or unimportant is critical. The individual's ability to decipher and recognize when new information changes the environment, is also important.

Powell, Conway, and Ross (1990) believed, "As e-Learning moves from a marginal to an integral part of the overall educational and training arenas, questions and interventions related to

learners' success are of both theoretical and practical importance" (p. 20). Scholars have adapted various theoretical frameworks to construct models that explain, describe or predict student persistence, attrition, and retention. These models provide a theoretical framework that might explain why students drop out of a traditional educational program, and why they choose e-Learning to continue their educational experience, after having made the decision to drop out.

One of these theories is Tinto's Student Integration Model, in which persistence is hypothesized to establish a correlation between the individual's academic motivation and the institution's responses to that motivation. The student integration model, as proposed by Tinto, describes persistence as a function of two commitments, commitment to complete college, and the commitment to the institution (Carbrara, Castaneda, Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Tinto, 1994). However, a gap exists in the Student Integration Model in that the model does not account for external factors that may affect the students' perceptions, commitments, and preferences (Carbrara et al., 1992).

Addressing this gap, Bean's (1980) Student Attrition Model asserts that the student's behavioral intention can be used to explain attrition and persistence and stems from the individual beliefs and attitudes of the student (Willging & Johnson, 2004). According to this model, individual beliefs and attitudes, resulting from the individual's personal experiences within the context of the institution, generate *intentional behaviors*, which in turn affect student attrition (Carbrara et al., 1992). Therefore, Bean's model suggests that attrition and persistence are related to both individual internal factors and external factors, which serve to affect the attitudes and decisions of the individual student.

The third related theory, connectivism (Ally, 2004), was described previously. Ally purported that behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist theories have contributed in different

ways to the design of online materials, "and they will continue to be used to develop materials for online learning" (p. 39). Ally referred to the "what", the "how" and the "real-life and personal applications of contextual learning factors", and related each to different theorist strategies. In addition, Ally suggested a shift toward constructivist learning, in which learners are given the opportunity to construct their own meaning from the information presented during the online sessions.

In order to understand student attrition and retention among e-Learners, one must understand the motivating factors of these students (Wittrock, 1986). As such, Houle (1961) provided a framework for understanding adult learners and the motivations and decisions to pursue continuing their education. Houle suggested the following three categories of motivators for adult learners: learning-oriented motivations, goal-oriented motivations, and activity-oriented motivations. Boshier and Collins (1985) expanded on Houle's framework to include social constructs of social contact, social stimulation, professional advancement, community service, external expectations, and cognitive interest.

Gibbs, Morgan, and Taylor (1984) derived a framework for student motivation to learn, incorporating both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Gibbs et al. utilized four categories, or educational orientations of student motivations which included vocational, academic, personal, and social motivations. Each of these four categories was further broken down into extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Kawachi combined Boshier and Collins' (1985) framework with Gibbs et al.'s framework to form a complete framework for understanding the motivational aspects involved in adult e-Learning (Kawachi, 2002).

Several elements affect the attrition and retention of students, as well as, the reason students choose to learn in an online modality. Moreover, student perception and satisfaction

with the e-Learning environment have been shown to affect both attrition and intent to use an e-Learning format (Lee, Cheung, & Chen, 2005; Levy, 2004). Further, globalization has also affected what students learn and how they learn, affecting the flexibility to meet the needs of diverse learners (Ally, 2004). In addition, upholding moral principles lends itself to the very nature of e-Learning, in which effective delivery and learning process of e-Learning need to be ensured (Batson, 1994). E-Learning success therefore, is intricately linked to the commitment and motivation required to fully participate in an e-Learning program.

Finally, in addition to the framework provided by the traditional learning theories and connectivism, and to explore the various elements related to satisfaction within the e-Learning experience for participants of this study. The study examined the factors perceived by participants to affect the attrition from traditional college and persistence in an online environment. Of note, when looked at through the lens of the Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1994) and the Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980), participant perceptions and experiences within the context of the institution reveal factors, both internal and external, that have affected the intentional behaviors (and therefore attitudes and decisions) of the participants. A framework combining that offered by Gibbs et al. (1984) and Boshier and Collins (1985) was used as a guide to the formation of the interview questions, with the intention of obtaining an understanding of the factors influencing the attrition from traditional college and revealing possible vocational, academic, personal, and social motivations of participants for choosing e-Learning to fulfill their educational needs.

Summary

With a focus on the motivational framework inclusive of both intrinsic and extrinsic vocational, academic, personal, and social motivational aspects for adult e-learners, the study

was designed to investigate whether e-Learning satisfies a psychological need that going to school and acquiring a degree triggers in individuals. In addition, the exploration included understanding the students' expectations, whether the e-Learning experience lived up to those expectations, and whether the prior expectations and current level of satisfaction are perceived by the student to contribute to the decision to continue to pursue their degree within an e-Learning environment. In studying these questions, theories on attrition and retention and literature of student motivation needed to be better understood.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This qualitative study was used to explore the perceptions and experiences of adult students who have chosen to return to school to complete their degree via e-Learning. This chapter reviews the existing literature and knowledge base relevant to the research topic. This review begins with a discussion of online distance education, computer-mediated instruction, the online classroom, and online education in postsecondary institutions. Background information on e-Learning, general learning theory and learning theory, as it relates specifically to e-Learning is also provided.

A brief review of student course completion related to e-Learning versus traditional instruction is given, along with a discussion of Tinto's (1994) seminal work on student integration and attrition. Research addressing issues related to the adult student population, with regard to e-Learning activities and experience is examined. Key components that influence quality of the e-Learning experience, as well as, students' perspectives of their e-Learning experience are presented. Finally, this review discusses research on the ethics of e-Learning and research on the acceptance and non-acceptance of e-Learning by students and employers.

The review describes current research in relation to the research problem. The sources for this literature review include peer reviewed journals such as *Distance Education, Education Psychology, American Journal of Distance Education,* and *International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning.* Germinal works included *Empowering Students with Technology* (November, 2001), *Reinventing the Role of Information and Communications Technologies in Education* (Dede, 2007), and *Leaving College: The Causes and Cures of Student Attrition* (Tinto, 1994). Information and educational statistics were also retrieved from the Sloan Consortium Report (Allen & Seaman, 2007) and the National Center of Education Statistics (2003).

Background on Online Education and e-Learning

E-learning has roots in corporate employee instruction, which started using e-Learning formats in the mid-1990s; the e-Learning modality rapidly expanded to include a vast array of online educational opportunities, offered by many educational institutions (Moore, 2007). Although distance learning has been used for over 100 years, the dawn of Internet capability allowed for interactive communication via personal computers, enabling development of learning communities and asynchronous learning environments, which provide additional opportunities to learners who may otherwise be unable to enroll (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxier, 2005). Consequently, with the rapid growth of availability and access to the Internet, in the United States, web-based e-Learning has demonstrated an associated rapid growth with over 2 million students enrolling in online postsecondary courses and millions more participating in some sort of web involved blended or mixed method delivery of education at various levels (Dickey, 2005).

e-Learning incorporates a range of modes of delivery and use from complete courses taught online in an asynchronous method of delivery, offering students access on an anytime/anywhere platform, to situations where the web-based content is used to supplement the education delivered in a traditional setting (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006). The use of web-based learning tools in traditional classrooms, as well as, in distance education, demonstrates the growth of e-Learning and asynchronous learning networks (ALN), which focus on Internet based learning (Moore, 2007). The focus of distance education, and particularly online education, is on providing opportunities to non-traditional learners, such as students over 25 years of age, with a full time job or students who are homebound or otherwise unable to attend traditional classes due to time or location constraints (Dron, 2007; Mayadas, 1997).

e-Learning and online education is often equated with distance education. Given the definition of online education, as presented by the Sloan Consortium, as equated with distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2007), the terms have been used interchangeably (Halfond, 2008). However, where distance education may include a variety of delivery media, online instruction refers to exclusively computer based instructional delivery (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Keegan, 1990). According to Kaplan-Leiserson's (2000) e-Learning glossary, e-Learning is a tool that provides

A wide set of applications and processes such as web-based learning, computer-based learning, virtual classrooms, and digital collaboration. It includes the delivery of content via Internet, intranet/extranet (LAN/WAN), audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV, and CD-ROM.

According to the Sloan Consortium, online education encompasses, education where 80% or more is accomplished via a computer mediated environment (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

Online education or e-Learning, offers opportunities for equal access within education, providing opportunities for workforce training, degree completion, and other learning opportunities (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Li and Irby (2008) report that advances in technology have provided easy access to online courses and coursework for e-Learning students. They further argue, that freedom of asynchronous education in terms of the anytime, anywhere, access to class and related materials is an advantage of online education.

Online education is defined as a type of education in which the teacher and student are physically separated by an undefined distance, and where technology is used to facilitate instruction across the distance (Dalsgaard, 2006). According to Moore (2007) asynchronous learning networks (ALN) are a sector of online learning that has an emphasis on the use of computer, specifically Internet technology, to enable the interactive instruction between teacher and student. Through the use of electronic communication, students and teachers participate in instruction that is outside of the physical classroom, in an anywhere, anytime, modality (Moore, 2007).

However, according to Ally, online learning encompasses more than the availability of course materials in a web-based mode of delivery (Ally, 2008). Ally defined online learning as interaction between the content, students, and teacher, using the Internet as the means to access the needed content and materials. In this process, Ally believes, growth and knowledge is acquired. Hence, e-Learning is more than merely technology used to access course material; e-Learning encompasses the use of technology by students to facilitate learning through human interaction. "e-Learning isn't about digital technologies any more than classroom teaching is about chalkboards. e-Learning is about people using technology systems to support constructive social interactions, including human learning" (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory [NCEL], 2002, p. 7).

As a type of online learning, asynchronous learning networks (ALNs) provide learning opportunities through self-study and interactive technologies that enable remote access asynchronously from any location (Mayadas, 1997). Mayadas asserted that ALN should be thought of as a network of people, with every person associated with the network functioning as both a user and a resource, which provides the power of the ALN. By definition, the ALN is, therefore, an interactive learning community not bound by space and time.

Online Education in Postsecondary Institutions

Dalziel (2007) suggest that online learning, or e-Learning, tends to appeal to nontraditional students; students who are limited by work obligations, location, disability or family commitments, are often drawn to e-Learning. This mode of delivery affords students opportunities within a wide range of courses, which are not bound to their local area (Halfond, 2008). According to Chaney, Chaney, Stellefson, and Eddy (2008), the essential medium for managing instruction within the realm of on-line education is communication technology.

Postsecondary institutions have grown over the last decade in their on-line education course offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Among two and four year institutions, over half offered on-line education courses (National Center for Education Statistics, 2003). According to Bryant, Kahle, & Schafer (2005), on-line education is expected to continue to grow. Bryant et al further discussed that on-line education in postsecondary intuitions can vary in scope, from that of a portion of a course, to the entire degree programs offered on-line. However, despite the growth and advancement in e-Learning education at the postsecondary level, online education continues to experience increased attrition rates when compared to traditional classroom settings (Adams, 2007; Anderson, 2008; Bryant et al., 2005; Carr, 2000).

Allen and Seaman (2006) report as of the fall of 2005, 3.1 million students were enrolled in at least one online course. They further add that institutions that have more than 15,000 enrollments have more than doubled their rate of online course offerings. The majority of students in online courses are non-traditional, over the age of 30, with roughly 20% of them over the age of 50 (Hoskins, 2008). In addition, Hoskins (2008) reports that the majority of students enrolled in online courses live within 75 miles of the campus offering the course.

The convenience of online courses enables students to take courses via e-learning for a variety of reasons (Dykman & Davis, 2008). Students can complete a degree program, earn a certificate in job training, or complete a course to further personal goals (Dykman & Davis, 2008). According to Allen and Seaman (2007), the highest growth rates for online education are

in two year associates degree institutions; these institutions account for more than one half of all online enrollments over the last five years.

Online education takes place primarily in an asynchronous environment (Dalziel, 2007; Groen, Tworek, & Soos-Gonzol, 2008). Students log on at their convenience, unless a synchronous meeting is scheduled, to attend class and complete their course work. Although students share the same due date, when they choose to complete the assignment is at the discretion of each individual student. Consequently, as postsecondary institutions segment their curriculum into specific degree program components, they become able to deliver large portions of each program online (Dykman & Davis, 2008).

Online Perspectives on Learning Theory

Scholars have adapted various theoretical frameworks to construct models that explain, describe or predict student persistence, attrition, and retention. Several of these online learning theoretical frameworks suggest key components that influence the quality of the e-Learning experience. These frameworks include three theories, which provide a comprehensive theoretical framework that might explain why students drop out of a traditional program, and why they choose e-Learning to continue their educational experience.

Tinto's Student Integration Model, describes persistence in relation to the individual's academic motivation and the institution's responses to that motivation. Tinto (1994) wrote, "It is the interplay between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether or not the individual decides to drop out" (pp. 89-90). Tinto's theory of the Student Integration Model proposed that the match between an individual's characteristics and those of the institution result in two commitments, the commitment to complete college, and the commitment to the institution (Carbrara, Castaneda,

Nora, & Hengstler, 1992; Tinto, 1994). Persistence, therefore, is a function of these commitments (Tinto, 1994) and persistence relates to the degree to which a student's motivation and academic ability match with the institution (Willging & Johnson, 2004). However, experts have found, a gap exists in the Student Integration Model proposed by Tinto, in its lack of accounting for the external factors that affect perceptions, commitments, and preferences of the student (Carbrara et al. 1992).

Bean's (1980) Student Attrition Model attempts to explain attrition and persistence according to the student's behavioral intention and stems from the individual beliefs and attitudes of the student (Willging & Johnson, 2004). According to this model, Carbrara et al (1992) postulate, individual beliefs and attitudes, resulting from the individual's personal experiences within the context of the institution, generate *intentional behaviors*, which in turn affect student attrition. Therefore, according to Bean's model, attrition and persistence is related both to internal factors and external factors (i.e., those outside of the institution) that may affect the attitudes and decisions of the individual student (Carbrara et al., 1992).

In an analysis of the two theories, Student Integration Model and Student Attrition Model, Carbrara et al (1992), noted the ideological similarities between the two models. Their study concluded that the two theories were not mutually exclusive, but rather were complimentary, particularly, in terms of the role of the institution and the student commitment to the institution. Both models regard persistence as the result of a complex set of interactions over time.

The third theory uses the learning theory of connectivism (Ally, 2004). Ally purported that behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist theories have contributed in different ways to the design of online materials and that they will continue to be used to develop materials for online

learning. Ally referred to the "what", the "how" and the "real-life and personal applications of contextual learning factors", and related each to different theorist strategies. For example, the "what" can be learned from behaviorist strategies; the principles and processes of "how" can be learned from the cognitivist strategies, and real-life and personal applications and contextual learning can be learned from the constructivist strategies. Ally further believed there is a shift toward constructivist learning, in which learners are given the opportunity to construct their own meaning from the information presented during the online sessions.

Therefore, the understanding of student motivation is essential to understanding attrition and retention among this population of e-Learners; "Teaching exerts its influence on achievement through students' motivational processes" (Wittrock, 1986, p. 306). Houle (1961) provided a framework for understanding adult learners and the motivations and decisions to pursue continuing education. Houle suggested three categories of motivators for adult learners, which included program content (learning-oriented), personal acuity and enjoyment of learning (goal-oriented), and social interaction (activity-oriented). Boshier and Collins (1985) expanded on Houle's framework to include social contact, social stimulation, professional advancement, community service, external expectations, and cognitive interest.

These motivations can be intrinsic or extrinsic in nature. As such, Gibbs, Morgan, and Taylor (1984) derived a framework for student motivation to learn. Gibbs et al. utilized four categories, or *educational orientations*, of student motivations, which included vocational, academic, personal, and social motivations. Each of these four categories was further broken down into extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. Boshier and Collins' (1985) framework can be incorporated into Gibbs et al.'s typology, to offer a broad framework for understanding the motivational aspects involved in adult e-Learning (Kawachi, 2002).

Student perception and satisfaction with the e-Learning environment have been shown to affect both attrition and intent to use an online or e-Learning format (Lee, Cheung, & Chen, 2005; Levy, 2004). Lee et al. (2005) included a motivational aspect to a technology acceptance model to examine student acceptance of an Internet-based learning model, accounting for both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, in an attempt to describe intention to use the e-Learning program environment. Lee et al. demonstrated the importance of student perception in that both perceived usefulness and perceived enjoyment affected the intent to use. Similarly, student satisfaction has been found to be a key factor in the decision to complete or not complete e-Learning courses.

In considering the effect of globalization on what students learn and how they learn, Ally (2004) noted, "The use of learning objects to promote flexibility, and reuse of online materials to meet the needs of individual learners will become more common in the future" (p. 39). It would appear then, e-Learning is competing for the available students who are electing to return to college to complete their college degrees; however, on closer examination this may very well prove to be only illusory, meaning that the pool of former college dropouts returning to school only exist because of e-Learning.

Online Program Completion

Most institutions consider non-completion or a student who does not complete an assigned program of study, as dropping out, regardless of the cause (Tinto, 1994). The term *drop out* has a negative connotation and implies failure on the part of the student. However, Tinto postulates that there is a multitude of causes for student non-completion.

The perception of non-completion on the part of both students and institutions can vary greatly (Tinto, 1994). An educational institution may perceive the program non-completion as

failure, whereas some learners may perceive the cessation of program enrollment as a success because their goals have been met or there was a change in goals, a change in the field of study or an institutional change in program (Tinto, 1994). In addition, students who do not have the ability to continue in online or e-Learning classes, respectively, and switch to traditional ground classes, are also considered to have withdrawn or dropped out (Tinto, 1994). Consequently, because of the negative connotation to the term drop out, program non-completion and drop out are not synonymous. The term drop out, according to Tinto (1994), should be used to describe when individuals perceive failure upon exit from higher education; however, program non-completion is still defined differently for different educational areas and institutions (Frydenberg, 2007; McGivney, 2004; Tinto, 1994).

Accordingly, student program completion in online programs is a particular area of concern for many postsecondary institutions, given the increased dropout or non-completion rate (Carr, 2000; Frydenberg, 2007; Kemp, 2002; Levy, 2007; McGivney, 2004). Research has suggested that factors that promote program completion, include, motivation, family support, financial support, academic counseling, tutoring, study groups, and attention to those learners at risk for program non-completion (McGivney, 2004). Kemp discussed the importance of coping skills as a significant benefit for on-line learners. Kemp also highlighted the importance of external factors as predictors of student program completion.

Nevertheless, despite increased levels of attrition in the online or e-Learning formats, e-Learning has enjoyed phenomenal growth (Imel, 2002). Several studies have been conducted in regard to dropouts from on-campus and on-line education courses, and the literature suggests that student satisfaction is a critical component in retention and attrition, and is directly related to the decision to continue or dropout of e-Learning courses (Levy, 2004). This finding was further supported by Levy (2007), who concentrated on comparing dropouts and persistence in e-Learning. Findings of the study by Levy suggested student satisfaction with e-Learning was a major factor in the decision to either complete or drop out from e-learning programs and courses. Levy reported that non-completers had significantly lower satisfaction levels than completers within the same e-Learning course. Levy also contended that the academic locus of control had no impact on the decision to drop out of e-Learning courses.

Gilbert, Morton, and Rowley (2007) expanded on the concept of student satisfaction and the relationship to attrition and retention, providing insight into student expressions of satisfaction and dissatisfaction within an e-Learning modality. Gilbert et al. presented that student satisfaction was expressed as "success in promoting synergy between theory and practice; specific themes in the module that widen their horizons and experience; discussion forums and interaction with other students; and other learning support with a focus on access to documents and other resources" (p. 570). In addition, Gilbert et al report, dissatisfaction was expressed by students as "robustness and usability of delivery platform; access to resources, such as articles and books; currency (and implicitly relevance) of study materials; and student work scheduling" (p. 570).

Similarly, Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004) explored e-Learners' perceptions of the online learning environment. Song et al. identified both helpful and challenging aspects of the experiences of the e-Learners in the study. Findings revealed that a successful online learning experience was related to course design, student motivation, student time management skills, and the level of comfort of the student with the technology involved (Song et al., 2004). In addition,

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the challenges cited by participants included technical difficulties, a lack of a sense of community, time constraints, and lack of complete understanding of course objectives.

Keller and Cernerud (2002) examined students' perceptions of e-Learning in university education. The study examined perceptions of 150 students at a Swedish university, utilizing a questionnaire incorporating both quantitative and qualitative measures. Keller and Cernerud concluded that the implementation strategy of the e-Learning system was more influential on student perceptions than individual background variables such as gender, age, previous knowledge of computers, attitude towards new technologies and learning style. Similarly, Yukselturk and Bulut (2007) focus on examining the factors affecting student dropouts in an online certificate program, found the same to be true.

Adult e-Learners

Due to the nature of online education, in that it provides equal opportunity and access to education (Dykman & Davis, 2008), certain demographics may likely be more involved in online or e-Learning versus traditional education environments. Studies have demonstrated differences in the age demographic between traditional and online or e-Learning learning environments (Allen & Seaman, 2006; Hoskins, 2008). However, despite a higher rate of females than males in the U.S. who are earning high school diplomas, the rate of males earning bachelor's degrees was higher than females (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). This could be attributed to males being more technology oriented and with advanced technology, learners now have anytime access to their courses (Li & Irby, 2008), providing the potential for increased workforce training, degree completion credit, and learning opportunities (Dykman & Davis, 2008), which can be attractive to a new demographic of students, particularly older professionals. This is demonstrated by the

higher ratio of graduate level students who are enrolled in online or e-Learning courses (Allen & Seaman, 2007).

As noted previously, studies have shown, the majority of students in online or e-Learning courses are non-traditional students over the age of 30, with roughly 20% over the age of 50, who tend to live within 75 miles of the campus offering the course (Hoskins, 2008). It had further found that non-traditional students tend to enroll in online courses at higher rates than traditional college age students (Dabbagh, 2007). Peltier, Laden, and Matranga (1999, as cited by Flores, 2009) found students over the age of 24 tend to be more focused, career minded, and motivated. The authors also noted that these older students tend to be part-time students with commitments of family and employment, who had not been enrolled in school for several years.

Dabbagh (2007) differentiated between the preconceived notion about on-line or e-Learning education learners, who are frequently seen as older and employed, and the actual characteristics of online or e-Learners. In 2000, the on-line or e-Learner was given the following profile: "Average age is 34 years; 66% are male; 25% have a college degree; over 50% have had some college education; and over 75% are married" (Lambert, 2000, as cited by Dabbagh, p. 218). In actuality, Dabbagh asserted that online or e-Learners comprise a diverse population.

Studies have found that adult learners returning to complete a postsecondary degree must have both opportunity and motivation to enroll (Kortesoja, 2009). Continuing education for the adult learner has become increasingly important in the global workforce. However, for many adult learners, barriers of cost and time prohibit participation. E-Learning environments and the asynchronous model can eliminate the barrier of time for many adult learners. Understanding the motivational aspects of participation for adult e-Learners is important in addressing the needs of these learners. Such understanding is critical in order to address barriers, availability and
access, retention and, ultimately, successful completion. Although extrinsic motivators may be easily understood through concepts of vocationalism and societal prestige, Kortesoja contends; personal intrinsic motivators may be equally important in the pursuit of continuing education. Personal intrinsic motivational aspects of challenge, such as, fantasy, and curiosity were discussed by Kawachi (2002) as well as, how these intrinsic motivations can be sustained by faculty and course designers.

Efficacy and Course Completion

Thus far, most of the literature on e-Learning is geared toward the various types of e-Learning available and the impact e-Learning has on teaching and learning, particularly, in the field of higher education. However, the perspectives and experiences of the students of e-Learning have yet to be investigated and documented. Several of the aforementioned online learning theoretical frameworks suggest key components that influence the quality of the e-Learning experience. For example, Ally (2004), Mayes (2006), Dede (2007), and November (2001), identified the key components of such online learning theory: the integration of technology into learning, critical thinking, and communication. Steeples and Jones (2002) suggested that attention to pedagogy, technology, and creativity is critical if higher education pursues a future networked in learning. Wright-Smith (2002) noted that although teachers may think they designed a virtual environment conducive to learning, the students' experiences may provide a completely different perspective. Other authors, such as Britain and Liber (2004), worked on theories for analysis and evaluation of e-Learning environments.

Additionally, Cooper (1993) examined the history, characteristics, and value of designed instruction that is grounded in behaviorist, cognitivist, and constructivist theory. Tobias and Duffy (2009), focused on paradigm shifts, behaviorism, cognitivism and constructivism using

four criteria: appropriateness, design, interaction, and evaluation. These authors cover a myriad of instructions and guidelines, which range from what is appropriate for student learning, for faculty and student interaction, for student to student interaction, as well as reinforcement strategy, and achievement and evaluation practices.

However, although explorations of e-Learning activities at the postsecondary level have been ongoing for over two decades (Feenberg, 1989; Hiltz, 1984; Hiltz & Johnson, 1989; Hiltz & Turoff, 1994; Hiltz, Turoff, Johnson, & Aronovitch, 1982); e-Learning is still considered to be a relatively new phenomenon, by the majority of educators within higher education. Further, according to Hughes and Attwell (2003), practitioners have questioned whether the scarcity of credible scientific evaluation has negatively impacted our knowledge of e-Learning. Blass and Davis (2003) gave credence to this when they noted that there is a lack of availability of good e-Learning resources. Still others, such as Chen and Macredie (2002) and Moore and Aspden, (2004), reminded us that it is not yet clear how learners perceive e-Learning environments, and in what ways e-Learning assists or hinders learners in their learning. Green (2007) discussed the acceptance or non-acceptance of graduates of e-Learning by employers. Given the growth and rapid increase in the popularity of e-Learning, the efficacy of e-Learning has been questioned by experts such as, (Willging & Johnson, 2004). They questioned course and program completion rates, which are frequently used as a means of measuring the success and effectiveness of the programs; noting that online or e-Learning programs have consistently demonstrated lower program and individual course completion rates compared to traditional classroom environments (Willging & Johnson, 2004).

Conversely, according to Mupinga et al. (2006), several studies have been done to evaluate the quality and effectiveness of online or e-Learning programs, resulting in mixed findings. In an attempt to assess more accurately the success and efficacy of the online or e-Learning education modality, Moore (2007) developed a unique "five pillar" evaluation for online learning programs. The "pillars" described by Moore as a means to evaluate e-Learning included (a) learning effectiveness, represented by interaction, and higher order learning; (b) student satisfaction, encompassing student expectations, student evaluation of interaction and discourse, and graduation and retention rates; (c) faculty satisfaction in terms of moral support and advances in information and instruction technology; (d) cost effectiveness; and (e) access.

However, some, such as Kanuka (2006), have questioned whether the efficacy and quality of e-Learning is the same as teaching and learning in the traditional classroom. Most importantly, Imel (2002) gave voice to the e-Learner by reporting on the facts that much of e-Learning fails to live up to learner expectations. Gold (2001) looked at the role of the teacher in on-line or e-Learning, and examined the training required to make the transition from traditional classroom education to online instruction. Finally, Sharpe et al. (2005) reported that there is a general scarcity of studies of the e-Learner's experience, particularly, one in which the learners' expressions in his/her own voice is the focus of the study.

In terms of course content and perceptions of students with regard to traditional versus online courses, the majority of the students perceived no difference between the two environments (Meyer, 2006; Mitchell, Gadbury-Amyot, Bray, & Simmer-Beck, 2007). Mitchell et al. found students perceived equal course content in the online or e-Learning classroom, compared to the traditional classroom. On the other hand, Meyers, 2006 noted, despite the perception of equality and similarity in terms of course content, many students prefer a face to face learning environment over the online or e-Learning environment (Meyer, 2006). Frydenberg (2007) took it further, by citing elemental differences between online or e-Learning and traditional courses, noting that in a traditional class, students receive their syllabus and course material concurrently at initiation of the course, whereas online students receive these course components progressively.

Ethics in e-Learning

According to Toprak, Ozkanal, Kaya, and Aydin (2007), ethics relates to morality, value and justice, in terms of what people should do and how they should behave. However, within the realm of learning environments, "...There is a social contract about norms and expectations" (Toprak et al., 2007, p. 2). The asynchronous nature of e-Learning and the perceived associated "freedom" provided to e-learners can affect the system of ethics incorporated by e-Learners, which is manifest by the learning behaviors of the students (i.e., discipline and participation) (Banthamai, 2009). Banthamai noted that e-Learners require ethical characteristics of responsibility, class participation, team work, regular class attendance, honesty, and respect for intellectual property. He further suggested, university students within an e-Learning model should exemplify studiousness, respect for the rights of others, responsibility, and class attendance; as well as, providing a self-control and social cognitive theory based guide, for ethical development within this group.

Upholding moral principles lends itself to the very nature of e-Learning, and it is proving to be fundamental to the effective delivery and learning process of the program; namely, the institution and faculty, and the receiver, the students and ultimately, the public (Batson, 1994). Equally significant, are the theories of Dewey (2001), who emphasized educating the "whole" child and Hirsch (2000), who advocated for "lifetime learning," demonstrating the progress or lack thereof, in teaching and learning, which focused on the students and their perception towards education. In this instance, e-Learning resonates because of the commitment and motivation required to fully participate in an e-Learning program.

The Association for Computing Machinery (ACM), an organization responsible for the exchange of ideas and information across 100 different nations, developed a code of online ethics (Lengel, 2004, as cited by Tropek et al., 2007). The ACM code of ethics for online communication includes (a) contribution to society and human well-being, (b) avoidance of harm to others, (c) honesty and trustworthiness, (d) fairness and non-discrimination, (e) honor of property rights and proper credit for intellectual property, (f) respect for the privacy of others, (g) honor of confidentiality, (h) professional responsibility, (i) access of computing and communication resources provided authorization, and (j) articulation and support for policies that protect dignity of users and others. Breaches in Internet etiquette (*netiquette*) can include harassment, defamation, and infringement of intellectual property, and these breaches can be either intentional or unintentional (Tropek et al., 2007). According to Tropek et al.,

Netiquette issues are related with the psychological distance. During face-to-face interaction, one can see the results of inappropriate and unethical behaviors immediately. In case information technology is utilized in a way that does harm to others, this act feels less personal since the other person in the exchange is not generally seen or heard. Educational institutions can solve this issue in two ways: (1) set a policy that provides a model for students to follow and (2) involve technology ethics issues in the curriculum.

(p. 5)

The findings of Tropek et al. showed that students expected a flexible response from instructors when breaches in behavioral netiquette occur, such as probation or removal from discussion forums as opposed to lowering grades or points.

Another critical ethical concern that Tropek's et al study reported with regard to e-Learning or on-line in general is academic fraud. There may be questions as to whether the student who is getting credit for the course is actually the person completing the assignments. The study suggested that institutions provide education for students on collegiate ethics and academic honesty. The authors specifically suggested inclusion of the following elements in the student guide or handbook: ethics of examinations, use of sources on papers and projects, writing assistance and other tutoring, collecting and reporting data, use of academic resources, respecting the work of others, computer ethics, giving assistance to others, and adherence to academic regulations.

Tropek et al. (2007) suggested that institutions provide clear e-Learning policies and guidelines for the prevention of privacy infringement, plagiarism, and copyright issues. Results given in their study demonstrated a difference between students and instructors' opinions with regard to the regulation of cheating and plagiarism. Possibly, due to the fact that the students in the study were not required to take the online or e-Learning courses. Therefore, the students expressed punishment for the failure to abide by etiquette rules and/or cheating as unnecessary; whereas, instructors in the study felt these regulations were necessary for the achievement of effective and efficient instruction in the online or e-Learning environment.

Acceptance of Online Degrees

It is evident from the foregoing, dispute over the general quality and efficacy of online or e-Learning education remains. Although the staggering growth in online adult learning models at the postsecondary education level has provided a large population of online or e-Learning program graduates, who are earning respect in some workplaces, where most human resource professionals view online or e-Learning degrees as acceptable (Magjuka, Shi, & Bonk, 2005). However, employers who have limited knowledge of online or e-Learning degrees and programs, still remain skeptical (Carnevale, 2007). The increasing acceptance of e-Learning or on-line degrees may be due in large part, to the general populace acceptance of online or e-Learning education as being equivalent in terms of quality, to traditional education. In addition, graduates from online or e-Learning programs offered by traditional colleges and universities need not specify the degree as attained online or via e-Learning.

Carnevale (2007) reports some major corporations have initiated partnerships with online or e-Learning institutions to foster continuing education among employees. These corporations offer continuing education through a specific online or e-Learning university program, as a benefit to the employee, while the university provides a discount to the corporation (Carnevale, 2007). Carnevale suggests that corporate interest in these types of partnerships, may be due to recognition of the quality of the programs, as well as, the importance of the convenience of an asynchronous delivery to employees.

Nevertheless, despite the seemingly increased acceptance of online or e-Learning education degrees, 55% of managers surveyed in 2006 favored applicants who attained their degrees from traditional universities and colleges, with 41% stating they would equally consider both traditionally obtained and online degrees (Carnevale, 2007). The problem, he adds, may stem from universities that are known solely for online or e-Learning educational formats. He further states, these universities may be seen as not credible or the programs deemed low quality. However, while some degree of lack of acceptance remains, the research suggests a general movement toward increased acceptance of online or e-Learning degrees, and programs by corporations and employers in general (Carnevale; Magjuka et al., 2007).

Gaps in the Literature

Given some mixed results evidenced in the literature review, more research needs to be done on evaluating online or e-Learning programs; focusing on their efficacy, and success rates, as well as, the ethics and general acceptance related to that perceived efficacy. In particular, research with regard to the perceptions and experiences of the e-learning students themselves could provide the potential to identify certain perceived influences and a better understanding of the reasons for students choosing the online or e-Learning environment to continue their education. Although studies have examined attrition from on-campus and on-line education courses in terms of causes, persistence, student perceptions, and factors affecting attrition (Keller & Cernerud, 2002; Levy, 2007; Yukselturk and Bulut 2007), there is a gap in the literature with a focus on traditional college dropouts and their decision to return to school via e-Learning.

The volume of both implied and applied theories on e-Learning, all designed to make e-Learning more acceptable to institutions of higher education and indirectly to business and industry, is growing by leaps and bounds. However, most of these theories are based either on earlier theoretical frameworks or on empirical studies, which identify the factors that need to be considered in pursuit of the creation of acceptable e-Learning experiences. Thus far, no earlier studies have investigated and documented the deciding factor or factors that influence the students' choice of e-Learning to complete their degree, rather than returning to the traditional on-campus experience.

Summary

Research on e-Learning indicates that the infrastructures of education are being reshaped by e-Learning and it is up to higher education to adjust and accept the inevitable. As the tools provided by Information Technology (IT) have become more robust, these have affected all aspects of our lives, specifically, in the area of academia. More importantly, the use of technology in higher education in the form of e-Learning and teaching have now become standard issue. One can attend, and complete an entire college degree without once setting foot inside a physical classroom. Mayes (2006) stated it more appropriately in the following passage:

The term interactivity is used so loosely that, in the field of e-Learning, it has become almost synonymous with the notion of learning itself. Nevertheless, there is a widely-shared feeling that if only we could bring the concept into sharper focus we would gain real insight into the nature of learning in general, and of e-learning in particular. Usually, when asked to define the term, colleagues refer to the implication that there are two agents involved in some action, and there is an influence of both on the outcome. (p. 1)

Unfortunately, the influence of the e-Learner is negligible, in so far as e-Learning concepts, delivery, and student satisfaction, including value for money, are concerned. There is a need to investigate whether the students of e-Learning have any influence on the outcome of their educational experience and their perspectives on the overall experience, by giving them a voice. Institutions that embark on the path of online or e-Learning go through a process, with the concern and focus on every aspect of e-Learning and very little, if any, attention is given to the individual student of e-Learning. The concern should not be just with whether online learning or e-Learning is conducted successfully using the technological tools available, but more on

whether the institutions did what they set out to do i.e., educating students and giving value for money.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this exploration was to understand the motivations and factors influencing students' decision to return to school, to complete a four-year degree via e-Learning, rather than pursuing the traditional route. Fundamental to that are the perceptions and expectations of such students on the quality of learning and the level of satisfaction provided in e-Learning environments. This study has found that a gap exists in the literature with regard to traditional college dropouts and their decision to return to school, via e-Learning. Through an examination of the perceptions and experiences of these students, the study presents a better understanding of their decision to return to school to complete their education via e-Learning.

A qualitative, phenomenological design was used to investigate the perceptions and lived experiences of the student participants to reveal the psychological and motivational aspects of their decision to return to school via e-Learning. The level of satisfaction with e-Learning, and the perceived expectations and efficacy of the program, in terms of quality of instruction and ability to provide curriculum in an anytime/anywhere modality, while providing the necessary social experiences and communication/interaction for learning, were also examined. A theoretical framework based on connectivism and social cognitivism, was used to guide the exploration of the perceived efficacy of the e-Learning program, and the levels of satisfaction of the students with the overall experience. It is acknowledged that online or e-Learning curriculum has developed from the traditional learning theories of behaviorism, cognitivism, and constructivism (Ally, 2004); therefore, an understanding and conceptualization of all these learning theories have aided in the data gathering process, and individual progression of each interview.

Research Method and Design

Research Method

The goal of the study was to investigate the experiences, perceptions, and beliefs of participants who are seeking to obtain four-year degrees via e-Learning. According to Creswell (2005), qualitative research "is best suited for a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore" (p. 45). The qualitative research method was selected for this study because the research explored the lived experiences of participants rather than quantifying variable relationships (Creswell, 2002).

Qualitative studies focus on the importance of the participant's perspective and how it informs the personal meaning held by the participant (Creswell, 2002). The qualitative method also provides flexibility in exploring an isolated subject (Yoshikawa, Weisner, Kalil, & Way, 2008). Qualitative exploration allows for an in-depth study, which may lead to the potential development of a new observation, providing an opportunity for further exploration of a study's prevalence, predictors, and sequence in other studies (Yoshikawa et al., 2008). The methodological approach of a qualitative study is inquiry-based, exploring an occurrence through questions, narrative descriptions, and analysis of emerging themes (Creswell). As such, the qualitative method provides a representation of the specific focus of the study, based on the interpretation of lived experiences of participants (Creswell; Neuman, 2003).

Research Design

The origins of phenomenology are rooted in the philosophical work of Edward Husserl (1931) and have developed as an approach to qualitative research (Moustakas 1994). McCaslin & Scott (2003) defined phenomenology stating, "Phenomenology is described as the study of the shared meaning of experience of a phenomenon for several individuals" (p. 449). Creswell

(2007) discussed the phenomenological approach to qualitative research as, "...a

phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (pp. 57-58). A phenomenologist maintains a focus on the commonality found among participants and their experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Creswell discussed several philosophical assumptions of phenomenology, which included (a) a search for knowledge and understanding as originally conceptualized in Greek philosophy as the *idios*, or applying to the individual, in which the search for knowledge focuses on in-depth understanding of the individual as a complex being, (b) the suspension of any preconceived conclusions until based on exact information gathered through the research, and (c) respect and validity for a subject's consciousness to both shape and define their reality according to their lived experience (Creswell, 2007).

Phenomenology, in which the researcher attempts to understand a phenomenon from a context-specific perspective, is rooted in philosophies of social constructivism. The basic tenet of social constructivism is that reality is socially, culturally, and historically constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). Phenomenological researchers are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved (Welman & Kruger,1999). Phenomenology emphasizes a focus on participants' subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. Within a phenomenological perspective, the researcher attempts to understand others' lived experiences and how their world appears to them. Phenomenology is descriptive rather than experimental with a goal of better understanding or illuminating a process or a problem (Hart, 1998).

Phenomenology seeks to answer the question, "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people" (Patton,

2002, p. 104). The goal of phenomenology is to capture the lived experiences or how individuals perceive and experience a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2005; Patton). "Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences" (Van Manen, 1990, pp. 9-10).

A phenomenological inquiry assumes that meaning is derived from the commonality of shared experience (Patton, 1990). The phenomenological research method will be used as a means for attempting to reveal the uniqueness of the phenomenon of being an e-Learner after dropping out of a four year program at a traditional college. The phenomenological design involves investigating the experiences of individuals in order to obtain "comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portray the essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Researchers use phenomenology to arrive at the essential meaning of lived experience as it pertains to a particular research focus. Thus, based on the aforementioned, a qualitative phenomenological design was chosen to meet the goals of the present study.

Phenomenological research identifies themes that capture the essences of the experience based on the statements, words, and expressions used by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, interviews were conducted in which participants were asked to respond to semistructured, open-ended questions. Their responses to these questions served to reveal the common themes in the experiences of the participants. The data obtained through the interview process and responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed for themes and served as the basis for the phenomenon, representing the essence of the lived experience of the participants (Moustakas). Specifically, the study used Moustakas' modified van Kaam method of phenomenological induction.

Site and Participants

The present study maintained a focus on the perceptions of the specified students who had returned to school to obtain their four-year degrees via e-Learning. The students chosen for this study were working adults who were enrolled in an undergraduate online program based in Connecticut. These online programs were not blended or hybrid programs; rather, these degree programs consisted of completely online or e-Learning format programs. According to Holmberg (1995), these undergraduate e-Learners represent typical students for whom it is widely proposed that e-Learning is the most convenient and appropriate mode of delivery. Additional criteria for the participants included, the students must have at least five years since departure from a traditional college, and have acquired their degrees via e-Learning, at an accredited school. The rationale for these requirements was to ensure adequate time for each participant to have developed and be able to identify his or her own personal perceptions and experiences with regard to previous enrollment at a traditional on-campus college, working without degree attainment, and choice of e-Learning for completion of his or her degree program.

Selecting qualitative samples requires a focus on a collection of participants who provide specific narratives to clarify and deepen the exploration of the study (Neuman, 2003). In addition, qualitative samples are selected to provide the depth of information needed for descriptive research (Morrow, 2007). Therefore, the study utilized a purposeful sampling method in which the particular research locations and participants are selected by the researcher in order to increase the probability that they will be able to provide the information necessary to answer the research question of the study (Creswell, 2005). Qualitative research normally involves small sample sizes of participants, as opposed to quantitative research, which relies on larger sample sizes (Creswell, 2005). Creswell recommended that the size of a qualitative sample should range from 1-25 participants, and Polkinghorne (2005) suggested that qualitative research include sample sizes of 5 to 25 participants. Patton (2002) stated that there are no specific rules for sample size, and stated, "Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what's at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources" (p. 244).

Using purposeful sampling of participants from the selected population, the sample size included four participants. A sample size of four participants was based upon the recommendations listed previously as well as the overall need to provide an in-depth analysis from descriptive information provided within an interview format, the availability of participants, and the time to complete the analysis. Participants were sought through email contact.

Data Collection

I contacted all Connecticut based online schools offering online degree programs that are not hybrid or blended in nature but completely online based, to solicit email addresses of potential participants. Once potential study participants had been identified and email addresses obtained from the appropriate Connecticut-based online programs, I emailed an initial communication to potential participants. Once willingness to participate was established, participants were sent an "unsigned consent form," which provided detailed information regarding the study. This was followed with a telephone call to set up a date, time and location for the interview. Initially, five email inquiries were sent out; however, only four participants responded to the "unsigned consent form". In the event fewer than four responses to participate had been received, additional emails would have been sent to additional potential participants.

Data for this study was collected within semi-structured, open-ended interview questions to permit narrative responses from participants (Creswell, 2005) thereby, yielding more detailed and pertinent information. Open-ended interview questions included, inquiry into the reasons for dropping out of the traditional college and choosing to return to school via e-Learning, how has e-Learning served to satisfy individual needs associated with learning, the expectations in terms of support within the e-Learning environment, and how these expectations were perceived to have been met or not, how expectations or needs have changed during the course of study in an e-Learning environment, and perceived academic integrity issues within the e-Learning environment. The "unsigned consent form" remained with the participant for their record. The interviews were conducted following the specific interview protocol.

As the interviewer, I took notes and observations during the interview process in order to record non-verbal communication. In addition, each interview was audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim into a Microsoft Word® document. Use of semi-structured questions guided the interview process, but also allowed for participant directed conversation in order to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences. Finally, a second telephone interview, as well as follow-up emails, was utilized for further clarification and discussion of questions and responses.

Data Analysis

In qualitative phenomenological research, the researcher searches for common patterns shared by particular instances (Polit & Beck, 2006). Once the collection of the interview data for

the study was complete, the data was analyzed using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological data analysis, as described by Moustakas (1994). Phenomenological analysis provides a method of capturing the perceptions of participants and exploring the phenomenon to generate a vivid depiction of the experiences of the individual, as well as, the group as a whole (Moustakas, 1994).

The phenomenological analysis model, as presented by Moustakas (1994), focuses on four elements, which include *epoche*, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences. The concept of epoche or *bracketing*, requires the researcher to refrain from personal judgment and to view the phenomenon under investigation in the absence of bias and preconceived notions (Moustakas, 1994). The epoche begins as a personal and self-reflective process in preparation for the data analysis and phenomenological reduction; however, the epoche is a continuous process that does not end with phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994).

... a solitary activity in which its nature and intensity require my absolute presence in absolute aloneness. I concentrate fully, and in an enduring way on what is appearing before me in and in my consciousness ... everything becomes available for self-referral and self-revelation. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 87)

Phenomenological reduction requires the researcher to bracket out presuppositions and assumptions, providing for the discovery of the data in its purest form (Patton, 2002), thus the term *bracketing*. Bracketing, according to Moustakas (1994), is a process in which elements within the focus of the study are "placed in brackets" while other elements are "set aside" (p. 97). This bracketing enables the research process itself to be rooted in the research questions,

reflecting solely the specific topic under investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction was described by Moustakas as follows:

Each experience is considered in its singularity, and for itself. Within the brackets, the phenomenon is perceived and described in its totality, in a fresh and open way, a graded series of reductions coming from a transcendental state, a total differentiated description of the most essential constituents of the phenomenon. (p. 97)

The next step in phenomenological reduction is horizonalizing, which involves treating the data with equal value (Moustakas, 1994). All participant responses are initially reviewed and examined as potentially relevant (Moustakas, 1994). Data found to be irrelevant to the research topic and questions or repetitive are removed, leaving the textual meanings and unchanging elements of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Following phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation is used. In the reduction phase, where the invariant themes extracted from different frames of reference and divergent perspectives are analyzed, according to Patton (2002) imaginative variation allows for the enhancement and expansion of the themes to provide a more vivid picture of the experience and perceptions, but not quite the essence of the phenomenon. Imaginative variation is a process in which the researcher is able to "shift various aspects of the description around and re-see the experience and its many aspects in as many ways as possible...The purpose of imaginative variation, 2002, p. 486).

Using the textual descriptions, structural descriptions of the phenomenon are derived (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Through the steps of imaginative variation, the underlying and precipitating factors are discovered, allowing the researcher to answer how the experience came

to be (Moustakas, 1994). The final step in phenomenological analysis is termed *intuitive integration*, which involves the integration of the individual textual and structural descriptions developed in the previous steps into a single manifestation of the essence of the experience of the group with regard to the phenomenon under investigation (Moustakas, 1994).

Data for the study was obtained from interview responses from four working adults who have completed an undergraduate degree via an e-Learning program, based in the state of Connecticut. NVivo8® software was used to synthesize the data and allow for a comprehensive phenomenological exploration adhering to the previously described four steps. Accordingly, the data analysis followed the detailed seven step process outlined by van Kaam and modified by Moustakas (1994) as follows:

- 1. *Listing and Preliminary Grouping*: List every expression relevant to the experience (Horizonalization).
- 2. *Reduction and Elimination*: To determine the Invariant Constituents: Test each expression for two requirements:
 - a. Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?
 - b. Is it possible to abstract and label it? If so, it is a horizon of the experience.
 Expressions not meeting the above requirements are eliminated. Overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions are also eliminated or presented in more exact descriptive terms. The horizons that remain are the invariant constituents of the experience.
- 3. *Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents*: Cluster the invariant constituents of the experience that are related into a thematic label. The clustered

and labeled constituents are the core themes of the experience.

- 4. Final Identification of the Invariant Constituents and Themes by Application: Validation: Check the invariant constituents and their accompanying theme against the complete record of the research participant. (a) Are they [themes] expressed explicitly in the complete transcription? (b) Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed? (c) If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the co-researcher's [participant's] experience and should be deleted.
- Using the relevant validated invariant constituents and themes, construct for each co-researcher [participant] an *Individual Textural Description* of the experience. Include verbatim examples from the transcribed interview [or other qualitative data].
- Construct for each co-researcher [participant] an *Individual Structural Description* of the experience based on the Individual Textural Description and Imaginative Variation.
- Construct *for each research participant* a *Textural-Structural Description* of the meanings and essences of the experience, incorporating the invariant constituents and themes. From the Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions, develop a Composite Description of the meanings and essences of the experience, representing the group as whole. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121)

The process allows the researcher within a set of clearly defined steps, to reveal the essences and lived experiences of the participants. NVivo8® qualitative software assisted in the processes of storage, coding, and comparing data; however, the researcher performed the actual

analysis utilizing these seven steps of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994) as a framework for an effective and valid analysis.

Validity and Reliability

Validity is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant or the readers of an account, whereas reliability indicates that the approach is consistent across different researchers and projects (Creswell, 2005, 2007). Yin (1989) suggested reporting a detailed protocol for data collection and analysis so that the procedure of a qualitative study might be replicated in another setting. Therefore, in order to ensure reliability of the study, the collection and analysis of data followed the procedure as described in the previous data collection and analysis sections of this chapter. The interview process adhered to the interview protocol for each interview in terms of introductions and inclusion of all interview questions; however, while each interview gathered data resulting from the interview questions, the data flowed differently and in different directions depending on the responses and details given by the individual participants.

Qualitative validity is also improved by the use of NVivo8[®] qualitative analysis software to aid in the coding and categorization of the data. Although the researcher must conduct the coding and categorization of the data, the software program allows the researcher to attach codes to the invariant constituents, as well as search for codes and regroup coded invariant constituents, while maintaining the integrity of the data (i.e., not breaking up the source data by constituents). Use of the qualitative software provides a system to reduce human notation error and maintaining sources of information or textual data because the software automatically tags all invariant constituents with source information, serving to improve validity. In addition, the process of *member checking* (Creswell, 2009) was used to ensure the validity of the data obtained. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), member checking is the single most important means for improving validity in qualitative study. For this study, the individual participants received a copy of the transcribed text of their interview(s) and later a copy of the analysis and asked to review these documents to ensure accuracy of the transcription and that the analysis was an accurate representation of their perceptions and experiences, as obtained through the interview process.

Lastly, interview data included the collection of demographic data in terms of gender, age, and race/ethnicity. The demographic data was used comparatively to determine if the data obtained (themes uncovered in the analysis) are consistent across these demographic variables, or if the data demonstrate differences across the variables.

Protection of Human Subjects

Prior to the interview, participants in the study received an introductory email solicitation and an unsigned consent form, which they were asked to review prior to the interview appointment. The "unsigned consent form" included the purpose of the study, a description of the interview protocol, identification of whom will view the data collected, identification of any risks associated with the study, identification of the time commitment needed for participation, a discussion of the confidentiality, and the option to withdraw from participation at any time. By reading the "unsigned consent form," the participants demonstrated awareness of their rights and involvement in the study (Neuman, 2003). Each participant was required to review the "unsigned consent form" with the researcher at the time of the interview, if the intent was to continue with participation in the study. Once the agreement to the "unsigned consent form" had been given to the interviewer, the interview began. Confidentiality, the process of holding personal information of participants in confidence without disclosure to the public, is a highly important responsibility of the researcher when conducting a research study (Neuman, 2003). Participation in this study was voluntary, there was no payment given to respondents for their participation and there were no foreseeable risks to participants during the study. A fifteen dollar gift card to Dunkin Donuts was given to participants to thank them for their time and cooperation. Special precautions were established to protect the confidentiality of the responses. Participants were notified that for research purposes, transcribed interview data will be archived by the researcher on a computer disc and kept in a secure, locked file cabinet for five years, after which all electronic documents and data will be destroyed. To maintain confidentiality of participants, each participant was assigned a pseudonym for purposes of the research study and the interview data did not include personal identifiable information such as the name or address of the participants.

Conclusion

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of a sample of students who had previously dropped out of a traditional program and sought to go back to school and earn their degree in an e-Learning format. Data received from interviews incorporating semi-structured, open-ended questions with four participants was analyzed using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis, as proposed by Moustakas (1994), a trusted and reliable method for phenomenological analysis.

This qualitative, phenomenological research study provided data, in terms of the perceptions and experiences of participants, which enabled a rich and detailed understanding of the students' decisions to return to school via e-Learning, as well as, individual assessments of personal satisfaction and the efficacy of e-Learning. The study enabled the students to voice

their perspectives on the experience of e-Learning, thus adding to the literature on the topic. The findings of the study provide elements for the improvement of e-Learning programs.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological research was to explore the phenomena of students who return to college via e-learning after having dropped out of a traditional college program. The phenomenological study was two-fold: first, to gain insight into the lived experiences of these students and second, to discover the psychological, motivational, and ethical aspects of continuing education through an e-Learning environment, as perceived by these students. The study focus was on the exploration of the lived experiences of four adult students, utilizing e-Learning programs based in Connecticut, to continue their educational goal to obtain a four-year degree.

This study was conducted using the modified van Kaam method proposed by Moustakas (1994), with a semi-structured interview format (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The data included interviews with four adult e-Learners about their perceptions and experiences in achieving their academic goals via e-Learning. Chapter 4, documents the phenomenological method in terms of implementation of the processes for data collection and data analysis using the van Kaam method as modified by Moustakas.

Chapter 4 begins with the data collection process. The data collection procedure is followed by a review of the data coding and analysis, which includes a presentation of the invariant constituents and thematic categories relevant to the research topic. Individual texturalstructural descriptions and the following structural composite descriptions address the perceptions of participants about the subsequent themes revealed in analysis. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Data Collection Process

Data collection followed the process outlined in chapter 3. Four individuals who completed their degree(s) via e-Learning after having previously dropped out of a traditional college, and who fulfilled the eligibility requirements as outlined in chapter 3, were contacted and recruited for participation in this study via telephone, email, or face-to-face interactions. This sample size aligns with recommendations of Patton (2002) and Polkinghorne (2005).

Each participant in the study was given an informed consent form that indicated the purpose of the study as well as the expected length of time for participation commitment. They were also informed that the interview would be audio taped. All participants gave their consent, prior to beginning the interview. Each interview took approximately one hour and a half to complete to complete.

Individual identification numbers were used in order to distinguish between participant data resulting from the semi-structured interview questions; for example, Participant #1, etc. Upon completion of the interviews, the responses were transcribed into Microsoft® Word format. The transcribed interviews were then reviewed and compared to the recorded interviews to ensure accuracy. Each participant received a copy of the interview transcript to ensure that the transcription was an accurate account of the participant's thoughts and perceptions. This process, termed *member checking*, increased the validity of the study by allowing participants the opportunity to confirm that the information was realistic and complete (Creswell, 2005). The data collected from each participant was placed in a secured and locked filing cabinet and will be retained for a period of five years, after which time the data will be destroyed.

Research Questions

This phenomenological research study explored the perceptions and lived experiences of participants in regard to utilizing an e-Learning format to return to college and complete their degrees. The research study focused on the insights and lived experiences of four participants who have used e-Learning to attain four-year college degrees. To accomplish this goal, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- What perceived factors do students, who have previously dropped out of a traditional college and have returned to complete their degree via e-learning, see as being influential in selecting e-Learning to complete their college education?
- What perceived moral issues as they relate to academic integrity, do students returning to school via e-Learning, perceived as relevant to e-Learning students' behavior and conduct, as well as, to faculty and administration.
- 3. What psychological needs are perceived to be satisfied from participation in the e-Learning model, by students returning to college via e-Learning to complete their degree?

Data Coding and Analysis

A phenomenological analysis was conducted with data from transcribed interviews with four participants. The goal of the study was to investigate the experiences and perceptions of participants who have obtained four-year degrees utilizing e-Learning. In order to identify the experiences and essences of the student participants, the seven step modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994) was employed.

The modified van Kaam method by Moustakas (1994) is a tested and reliable method for extracting key words and phrases (invariant constituents) and themes from textural data provided from interviews in a phenomenological study. Invariant constituent is a term with a particular meaning in the context of the modified van Kaam method by Moustakas. Invariant constituent is defined as an essential element of the phenomenon. It may be tied to only one participant, but if it is deemed essential to the experience of that participant, it is therefore defined as an invariant constituent (Moustakas, 1994, p. 129).

NVivo8® computer software was used in conjunction with the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas) to aid in the storage, organization, and representation of the qualitative data. The seven step van Kaam process of phenomenological analysis, as described by Moustakas, included listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents, final identification of the invariant constituents and themes, generation of individual textural descriptions, construction of individual structural descriptions, and the production of textural-structural descriptions. As a final step, the analysis used composite descriptions to represent the group as a whole.

The first four steps of the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) were used to reveal the invariant constituents and thematic categories in the data. The invariant constituents are textural meanings of the phenomenon, elements that are fundamental to and constants of the experience (Moustakas, 1994) and therefore, represent the experiences and perceptions of the participants with respect to the psychological and motivational aspects of the decision to return to school via an e-Learning format, and the participants' level of satisfaction with the e-Learning process. This analysis process was assisted by the use of the NVivo qualitative software program to code the transcribed text of the interviews, note the location and frequency of each relevant occurrence (invariant constituents) within the transcribed texts, group the invariant constituents into categories, and generate frequency percentages for the invariant constituents as

represented by the participants. This process generated key invariant constituents, which were separated into thematic categories under five major headings (see Table 1).

Table 1

Thematic Categories and Invariant Constituent Distribution for Interviews

Thematic Categories	# invariant constituents
Reasons for returning to school via e-learning	3
Perceived advantages and disadvantages	6
Perceived personal gains	3
Perceptions of ethics and academic integrity	2
Psychological needs and gains	5

The first step of the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) is a subjective process in which the relevance of statements made by participants to the research topic is evaluated. This step included *horizonalization*, the listing and preliminary grouping of relevant expressions made by the study participants. In this process, the researcher evaluates certain elements, horizons (or invariant constituents) are essential to describing the phenomenon, treats these elements with equal value, listing the horizons prior to grouping. According to Moustakas, horizons encompass the textural meanings of the phenomenon; thereby, these elements are constants of the experience, termed invariant constituents.

The next step of the data analysis using the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994) included the reduction and elimination of the invariant constituents resulting from the first step. In this process, each invariant constituent was re-evaluated in terms of relevance to the phenomenon under investigation. In addition, each invariant constituent was then evaluated

against the other invariant constituents to identify and prevent overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions.

Clustering and thematizing of the invariant constituents into thematic categories served as the third step in the process. In this step, the invariant constituents considered related were grouped together into thematic categories representative of a common theme in the data. The thematic categories that emerged from the analysis are representative of the common experiences of the study participants. Nvivo8® software aided in the process of grouping the invariant constituents into appropriate categories and also generated frequency percentages for each of the invariant constituents within the thematic categories.

The fourth step of the analysis process, according to Moustakas (1994) was the validation of the invariant constituents and thematic categories. Invariant constituents were valid if they were demonstrated to be either explicitly expressed in the transcription or definable as compatible. Compatible constituents are defined as responses that clearly indicate a reference to an explicit invariant constituent (Moustakas).

Following the validation of the invariant constituents and thematic categories, individual textural descriptions of the participants' experiences were generated and provided the completion of the fifth step in the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas, 1994). Nvivo8® also aided in this step through the documentation of the location of textural examples for specific invariant constituents within the interview text for each participant. Following the modified van Kaam method (Moustakas), *Imaginative variation* was employed for each description (sixth step) in order to more clearly express the relevant experiences of the participants. The seventh and final step in the modified van Kaam process involved the development of composite textural-structural descriptions; the composite textural-structural descriptions served to present the

experiences of the group of participants as a whole and therefore represent the conclusions of the data analysis and are used to answer the research questions of the study.

Findings

This section presents how participants responded to the associated interview questions. In responding to the interview questions, the participants revealed their perceptions and experiences while participating in e-Learning. The findings are first presented by providing a description of each participant's experience and perceptions, followed by a presentation of the thematic categories revealed in the analysis of all the participant responses within the context of the research questions.

Research Question 1

The thematic categories related to the first research question include (a) reasons for returning to school via e-learning, (b) perceived advantages and disadvantages of the e-Learning environment, and (c) perceived personal gains. These thematic categories shed light on the internal and external factors that may affect the personal decision to return to school for degree attainment via the e-Learning modality. The relevant constituents related to the first research question of the four participants interviewed were clustered and thematized, according to the modified van Kaam process (Moustakas, 1994), which resulted in these three thematic categories as noted.

The first thematic category related to the first research question, reasons for returning to school via e-learning, was determined by three key invariant constituents. The key invariant constituents included (a) flexibility, (b) professional advancement, and (c) unfulfilled desire to return to college. All invariant constituents representing the variety of participant responses are presented in Table 2.

Although the fundamental reasons for returning to school may be varied, the common theme with all participants in this study was the importance of the flexible and convenient nature of the e-Learning academic format. This element may be critical to the choice of e-Learning as a mode of delivery. In the words of Participants 3 and 4,

By the time I again had an opportunity to return to school my life had changed considerably. With a family and a job, distance learning allowed me to work on an academic schedule that was more flexible than traditional, on-ground classes.

(Participant 3)

I chose to go to school online because it allowed me to do my school work at any time of the day, no matter if I was home or traveling on business. I was on a mission to complete my degree, and I felt I had the passion, and I was self-motivated to complete my degree. (Participant 4)

Some participants in the study also noted the need for advanced education in order to achieve professional advancement. For example,

Without a college degree my ability to advance in the workplace was limited and I also had an unfulfilled desire to return to college because of my love of learning. Not having a degree felt to me like unfinished business. (Participant 4)

One particularly striking notion was that of an expressed unfulfilled desire to return to college in addition to the need for career advancement. Participants 1 and 4 allowed for insight into this notion:

I started my undergraduate years and years ago, and did not complete it, and that had been a nagging issue with me. Returning to school via e-Learning allowed me to complete, what I saw as unfinished business. It also gave me the educational credentials

I needed to move forward and grow in my professional career. (Participant 4) The data reflect the perceived need and desire for educational advancement in order to obtain career advancement opportunities, while at the same time, expressing the real life situations that limit many adults in achieving postsecondary degrees. The essential aspect of the e-Learning environment, therefore, seems to reveal the importance of the anytime/anywhere functionality of e-Learning and the ability to meet the needs of working adults seeking to advance their careers and education.

Table 2

Reasons for Returning to School via E-learning

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to	% of participants to
Invariant Constituents	# of participants to	% of participants to
	offer this experience	offer this experience
Flexibility	4	100%
Professional advancement	2	50%
Unfulfilled desire to return to college	2	50%

The second thematic category related to perceived influential factors affecting the decision to complete a degree via e-Learning, and included the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the e-Learning environment and related to the perceived quality of the educational experience and associated level of satisfaction. Table 3 illustrates the responses and associated frequencies of the participants. Central to this theme, include the advantages of the flexibility of schedule, time, and place in the e-Learning environment and the disadvantages of time/communication restraints, particularly, with less communicative teachers.

As students, participants noted several advantages and disadvantages to e-Learning. Among the common perceived advantages was the element of flexibility and convenience in terms of anytime, anyplace education, which was also cited as a reason for returning to school via e-Learning, within the first thematic category. Participant 3 described this in depth:

I had a family and we had a young child at the time so I definitely needed the flexibility...That is the biggest thing, the flexibility... Once you become a non-tradition college student and you lose that window, you know, that four year window, and then return to school, all of a sudden, you have all these other concerns. You may have a job, you may have a family, you have to make a living, and you have other responsibilities so that being a young college student is like being part of the aristocracy. That is what you do. That is your job. Going back, I find that students really, really love the e-Learning environment. It opens up a door that had closed for most people, when they either dropped out of college for whatever reason or decided to leave college for life circumstances, and this e-Learning environment, really, I think is the way to go. (Participant 3)

As with the first thematic category, the notion expressed in that the flexibility of time and space allows for participants, who are adult e-learners, to continue their education, where this would not have been possible under traditional classroom circumstances, due to time and place, and commitments of job and family. The data suggests a feeling of doors being closed to the adult e-Learner. Participants in the study reported that e-Learning gave them the ability to combat that sense of being closed out, by giving providing an availability of learning within a mode of delivery that works with their personal schedule of commitments. Participant 4 also offered perceptions of the advantage of flexibility: I feel it is the convenience of being able to fit school into your schedule, instead of having to fit your life into the campus's schedule that influences students to participate online. It's very convenient for a working adult who may also have a family. However, it does require a great deal of discipline to attend school e-Learning, and I feel much more class work is involved, compared to going on-campus. (Participant 3)

Other advantages noted were the support provided as well as a general atmosphere of learning. Participant 4 described the support received from many sources:

What's most contagious is the process that they enveloped you with. Your support from your classmates, support from your faculty, and from the administration, all of which make it extremely easy to continue as a student there. It is what brought me back to school, it is what will continue my presence there at the university; right on through what I hope will eventually be my doctorate. (Participant 4)

In terms of disadvantages, two participants cited time and/or communication restraints, specifically in terms of less communicative teachers (e.g., teachers that do not utilize the available technologies and techniques for communicating in an e-Learning environment, respond slowly to email or message boards, or are available for virtual meetings/discussion less often). As an example, Participant 1 noted,

In some instances, my expectations were met and surpassed and in others I found it sadly lacking. For example, if I had a question about a particular assignment, I could not walk into the instructor's office after class to have a one-on-one. I had to send an email or post on the bulletin board and wait and hope that I got an answer in time for me to complete my assignment. (Participant 1)
Participant 1 also noted difficulties with communications and specifically teachers who tended to be less communicative. For example, "I've had teachers who took several days to respond to questions or who were not keeping information like due dates accurate as each semester changed" (Participant 1). The other perceived disadvantage, related to this notion, was noted by Participant 1 and included the lack of physical presence in terms of a physical teacher to see when the student was struggling.

Although, the fact that there was not a physical body to go to make it a bit difficult at times but that was the price I had to pay for the convenience of going to school on my time and schedule. I quickly learned to adapt. (Participant 1)

The findings seem to suggest the positive perceptions of students related to a physical presence of the teacher, and the resultant ability to assist in the problem solving process for students. Table 3

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to	% of participants to
	offer this experience	offer this experience
Advantages		
Flexibility/Convenience	4	100%
Atmosphere of learning	1	25%
Support for continuation	1	25%
Online access to academic resources	1	25%
Disadvantages		
Time/Communication restraints & less	2	50%

Perceived Advantages and Disadvantages of the e-Learning Environment

communicative teachers

Lack of physical presence	1	25%	
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The final thematic category related to the first research question is the perceived personal gains of participants. Participants expressed what they felt their participation in e-learning has provided them on a personal level. A single key invariant constituent related to this theme was identified, which included academic advancement/degree attainment when unable to via traditional means. This invariant constituent closely resembles that of the previous cluster in terms of the flexibility of program that was able to offer the pursuit of degree completion despite career, home, and other social commitments, where it was thought to be otherwise not possible. Table 4 illustrates all of the invariant constituents and related frequencies for this thematic category.

Participants expressed the importance of the degree attainment and academic advancement to their personal and career gains. Participant 2 gave an example of this perception stating, "e-Learning gave me the satisfaction of pursuing my college degree since traditional college was not an option for me." Finally, Participant 2 noted personal confidence gains resulting from participation in e-Learning and the subsequent degree attainment and how that confidence transferred to the work life, adding to career success and advancement. Participant 4 stated,

Returning to school to continuing the pursuit of my education, gave me a certain degree of confidence that I could do anything I put my mind to. I took that confidence back and applied it into my work at my work place and actually experienced some positive results, subsequent to my graduation. (Participant 4)

Table 4

Perceived Personal Gains

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to	% of participants to
	offer this experience	offer this experience
Academic Advancement/degree	3	75%
attainment where otherwise not possible		
Confidence	1	25%
Confidence applied to work and resulting	1	25%
in career advancement		

The perceptions of personal gains seemed to bolster motivation to achieve within the e-Learning setting, which would seem to enhance the participants' likelihood for success. This thematic category seems closely related to that of reasons for returning to school via the e-Learning format in which several intrinsic elements were noted as essential to the experience of the participants. Notably, the elements of being afforded the opportunity to continue their education, achieve personal and career advancement, and fulfill an intrinsic desire to complete their educational goals were noted and also seem to relate to personal gains as witnessed here.

Research Question 2

The relevant invariant constituents as it relates to issues of the perceptions of participants in regard to, ethical behavior and academic integrity in an e-Learning environment were clustered and thematized, resulting in a single thematic category. The thematic category of perceptions of ethics and academic integrity was determined by two key invariant constituents. These key invariant constituents included (a) the perception of no increase in ethical problems in an e-Learning environment versus the traditional environment, and (b) the notion that it is easier to cheat in an e-Learning environment. Invariant constituents representing the participant responses are presented in Table 5. The findings suggest that the participants demonstrate a similar perception that issues with ethical conduct and academic integrity in an e-Learning environment are similar in nature to that of a traditional college environment.

In describing the ethical conduct of students in general and within the online learning community, Participant 1 noted,

No. I do not see plagiarism as being more prevalent in e-Learning as opposed to a traditional school environment because the same control that is exercised in a traditional school is also exercised and practiced on-line. However, like everything, it needs to be monitored and the rules and regulations strictly enforced. In terms of morality, unethical behaviors and immoral conducts exist in all instances where humans interact with each other. The same favoritism and some of the double standards, which exist in a traditional school environment, can be found in an e-Learning environment. Oftentimes, for no particular reason, the instructor or even some of the classmates, will have his or her favorite, and there is nothing one can do about it except to move on. (Participant 1)

Similarly, participant 2 noted these activities, but also noted these activities applied in a traditional school setting also:

Students have been plagiarizing and cheating their way towards diplomas since well before there was e-anything. Unfortunately, for some, the easy way out is academic cheating. The same people that cheat on-ground will cheat in e-Learning also. I do not think there is a fundamental difference between the two environments. If professors take the necessary precautions to guard against cheating, then, I believe, only a small percentage of people will try to cheat. This situation is reflected in society in general. Although it has been said that there is larceny in everyone's heart, most people abide by the law and only a small percentage commit crimes. I think that this general condition is true about cheating as well. If students are made to understand what plagiarism is, and not given opportunities for casual cheating, then only a small percentage, the same number on-ground or in e-Learning, will cheat. (Participant 2)

It should be noted, however, a single participant described that cheating is easier to accomplish in the e-Learning environment, stating, "It is easier to cheat online as you can have your book in front of you and look up many answers, or ask other people answers to questions. You have to be honest enough not to do this" (Participant 1). Although it may be considered "easier" to participate in unethical behavior in an e-Learning environment due to the lack of physical interaction; the participants generally felt this type of behavior will occur by a certain type of student, regardless of learning environment. This is essentially what Participant 3 noted, stating that one must be "honest enough" to be follow ethical behavior, which can be assumed one would be regardless of the mode of delivery of instruction. (Participant 3)

Table 5

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to	% of participants to
	offer this experience	offer this experience
No perceived increase in ethical	3	75%
misconduct or lack of academic integrity		
in the online setting versus traditional		

Perceptions of Ethics and Academic Integrity

Easier to cheat online	1	25%

Research Question 3

The thematic category related to the third research question provided an understanding of the psychological factors, in terms of needs and satisfaction obtained from participation in the elearning modality for degree attainment. The relevant constituents related to the perceived psychological factors of the participants were clustered and thematized resulting in a single thematic category. This thematic category, termed psychological needs and gains, included invariant constituents related to the need for support and the crucial role of teachers, the changing needs of students as they progress through e-learning, and the satisfaction of students in participation and degree attainment.

The thematic category related to the third research question was determined by five key invariant constituents. These key invariant constituents included (a) the importance of guidance and communication with teachers and advisors, (b) school recognition of the need for student support and school provision of that support, (c) greater self-management and need for less support as students progress through e-learning process, (d) satisfaction of pursuing a college degree, when traditional college was not an option, and (e) satisfaction of intellectual curiosity through a collaborative learning environment.

Invariant constituents representing the variety of participant responses are presented in Table 6. Resulting from this data, the participants demonstrate similar experiences in terms of the initial need for support and guidance, but a general lessening of that need as they progress through the e-Learning curriculum and a certain personal satisfaction obtained from participation and degree attainment.

Table 6

Psychological Needs and Gains

Invariant Constituents	# of participants to	% of participants to
	offer this experience	offer this experience
Importance of the role of teachers &	3	75%
advisors in terms of guidance and		
communication		
Changing needs: became better at self-	4	100%
management of education requiring less		
support		
School recognized and provided for need	2	50%
for student support services		
Personal satisfaction from pursuing a	2	50%
college degree when traditional college		
was not an option		
Satisfies intellectual curiosity through a	2	50%
collaborative learning environment		

Participants gave examples of the importance of teacher and advisor communication and guidance, especially early in the e-Learning process, affecting the quality of education provided. Given the inherent lack of physical connectedness between teachers and students, and students and peers, as described by participants in this study; it appears to be most often referred to as a lack of communication. Participants viewed this as eliciting discussion and deeper thinking

processes and learning accomplished through academic discussion of the learned content. Participant 3 described:

I think going back to an e-Learning environment where the student is much more autonomous, it is important to give them a nurturing environment at the beginning so that you could kind of continue and not fall off the course you started. (Participant 3) Participant 1 stated,

Overall, I would have to say that the context that has most affected my distance learning experience was the professors...It is my opinion that, student motivation and intelligence being equal, the quality of the professor makes a huge difference in the educational efficacy of the on-line classroom. I had professors who did not check in to on-line discussion boards during the entire semester. This was a terrible situation. Although much of the learning in an on-line class comes from student self-direction, professors' feedback and interaction are crucial for motivation and enhanced learning beyond what the student is likely to attain on their own. (Participant 1)

Other participants also noted the general importance of support from not only teachers, but also from classmates and the administration. Participant 4 stated, "…support from your classmates, your support from your faculty and from the administration, all of which makes it extremely easy to continue as a student there" (Participant 4).

All the participants also noted that the need for support changed as he/she progressed through the curriculum and process, necessitating less support. General technology support in terms of how to use and navigate the systems online may help the student adapt to the online environment, which, once mastered, this type of support would become less critical in nature. Participants 2 and 3 provided rich descriptions of this invariant constituent: What did change is that I became more adept at managing the route towards different classes and putting different classes together and managing my own education without so much of the hand-holding, the support system that we talked about earlier. So I found that once I was shown the way, the second sets of needs, those of support, may have diminished a little bit, and I did not need as much support because I became more adept at understanding what was happening, so far as my education was concerned, which remained, I think relatively steady; maybe, even expanded, because once I finished the Bachelors, I then wanted to continue my education. It became such a great opportunity, and a manageable opportunity, that I wanted to continue on, so I would say that my educational needs grew and my support needs maybe diminished somewhat. (Participant 3)

As you progress you need less guidance on how to do the technical aspects (sending files, formatting, how to register for class). You become able to help the new students in class through these things. (Participant 2)

Stemming from this discussion concerning the need for support for students, two participants noted the school's recognition of the need for student support and action to provide that support.

[I was there at] the point where schools were beginning to realize that support was part of the equation and just because a person was coming back as a non-traditional student did not mean that they did not need some kind of student support. They may very well need more student support at the beginning, than a traditional student because they were coming back to school after being away for a while...I felt that there was some kind of a connection, that is the kind of a support environment I found where I went. (Participant 3)

I feel I have a supportive learning environment by having phone numbers and emails to contact my professors. Also, when a professor is very active online and quickly responds to postings and calls, I feel like they care and are there for the students. Also, the services the school makes available online (library, access to records, etc.) is supportive. (Participant 3)

Finally, the participants described feelings of satisfaction with regard to pursuing a college degree when, due to life circumstances, it would not be possible in a traditional setting. "E-Learning gave me the satisfaction of pursuing my college degree since traditional college was not an option for me" (Participant 2). Participant 1 similarly noted,

The e-Learning program, as it were, is the only format that allowed me to work full-time and take all the required courses (the courses on-campus were not all offered at night/weekends). The e-Learning format worked so well for me I decided to continue with my Master's completely online. I have told many people that if there wasn't an online program available to me, I probably would not have continued school after my Associate's as it is exhausting after working all day to go and sit in class for 3 hours. (Participant 1)

This invariant constituent was closely related to other invariant constituents in previous thematic categories, as this notion of allowing for the completion of the degree when otherwise not an option given life circumstances related to the flexibility of the program. This notion seems to run throughout the data and across themes, serving as a central notion of the analysis.

In addition, two participants noted that the online learning environment satisfies an intellectual curiosity through an engaging and collaborative learning environment. Participant 2 explained,

I especially liked being part of an innovative academic atmosphere. The e-Learning interaction between students and faculty; the accommodating course schedule, a collaborative, professional environment, online access to academic resources and a strong networking community, all worked for me. (Participant 2)

Participant 3 provided a detailed perception of this invariant constituent stating the following: Good e-Learning provides a guided process, almost identical to the traditional classroom, satisfies curiosities through an exploratory process. The best e-Learning is Socratic. To be Socratic, the process must be interactive and the professor must answer student questions and question student answers. This process allows students to blossom and think through issues in a critical fashion exploring viewpoints other than those contained in the customary worldview. The process of learning in this way is both psychologically and emotionally satisfying because it expands the way we think and allows growth in a person intellectually and beyond ideology. (Participant 3)

Thus, participants in this study expressed not only the need or desire to return to school for career advancement, but also a psychological motivation in terms of fulfillment of the desire to further satiate their intellectual curiosity.

Individual Textural-Structural Descriptions

Structural Description for Participant 1

The first participant I interviewed, Participant 1 was a woman in her thirties, who was currently working for the Judicial District of Litchfield County. She described her having started at a traditional college after high school but dropping out after two and a half years due to disappointment in the quality of the program. At the age of 27, this participant re-enrolled in an Associate's degree program, eventually transferring to a four-year university for a Bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice, via an e-Learning format that would enable the participant to both work and complete the required coursework. According to Participant 1, the e-Learning format proved to be so effective, she has continued in school, and is working on obtaining a Master's degree within an e-Learning modality.

Participant 1 expressed the opinion that it is the convenience of e-Learning that fits into her schedule rather than trying adjust her life to fit around a campus schedule, stating that it is convenient for any working adult who may also have a family, in that one does not have to sacrifice work, family, or social life. Participant 1 also noted that despite this convenience and flexibility, it requires a great amount of discipline on the student's part. Participant 1 also discussed, this commitment can be supported through a supportive learning environment in which the teachers are reachable via telephone, emails, or online postings, allowing the student to feel that the teachers care and are supportive of the students. Participant 1 noted time and communication constraints as frustrating and a disadvantage to the e-Learning format. This participant further described the support of the school in providing resources to students that are made available online, as a necessity. Participant 1 noted some time and communications restraints within the e-Learning format, but noted these problems primarily with a few teachers who are less communicative and responsive to the students' inquiries in a timely manner.

Structural Description for Participant 2

The second participant I interviewed, Participant 2 was a woman in her late forties, who described starting a work career rather than completing her college education. However, several

years later, she returned to school via e-Learning to complete her B.S. degree, and in 2006, she received her Bachelor's degree, with a concentration in Computer Information Science. She has continued in school and is currently in the Master's degree program at her university, again all via e-Learning.

Despite a job requiring a large amount of traveling, Participant 2 described the online program modality as enabling her to travel for business, attend school, and not miss out on course work. This participant stated that going to a traditional college for her degree was not an option for her because she was not able to sit in a classroom to attend school. She had a family and a career which demanded a lot of her time.

According to Participant 2, e-Learning provided the satisfaction of pursuing a college degree when it would have been otherwise impossible (i.e., through a traditional educational setting). This participant expressed concern over the "checking" for plagiarism among honorable students and that if a student wants to cheat, they will do so regardless of whether the course is online or traditional. Participant 2 describes a self-motivated personality that worked well in an e-Learning environment; "I was on a mission to complete my degree, and am eternally grateful to e-Learning because it would not have been possible without the flexibility, which e-Learning offered." Finally, Participant 2 described that as one progresses through the program, one needs less support and guidance, particularly in terms of the technical aspects such as sending files, formatting, and registering for courses and may be able to help new students with these elements.

Structural Description for Participant 3

This third participant was a gentleman in his late fifties. He was a former Chief of Police here in Connecticut but has since retired. He went on to acquire a PhD in Criminal Justice, and is currently serving as a professor at a local university in Connecticut. Participant 3 claimed that circumstances resulting from getting married during his undergraduate years, at a traditional college, resulted in his dropping out of school. He described a limited ability to advance in the workplace due to the lack of degree attainment as well as an "unfulfilled desire to return to college because of my love of learning," or a feeling of "unfinished business." With a job and family, e-Learning provided the ability to work within a flexible schedule. Participant 3 also noted the critical importance of the professors and suggesting that a distance learning environment magnifies the teacher characteristics of quality of pedagogy and student engagement.

This participant expressed the opinion that the quality of the teacher makes the difference in the educational efficacy of the e-Learning program and that despite the fact that an e-Learning environment requires self-directed learning, professor feedback and interaction are critical for student motivation and enhanced learning. Participant 3 explained that e-Learning satisfies intellectual curiosity through an exploratory process, much like a traditional classroom, and that the best e-Learning is Socratic in nature. The participant further explained that to be Socratic, there must be an interactive process in which the professor, both answers students' questions and questions students' answers, allowing the student to grow and develop critical thinking and providing psychological and emotional satisfaction for the student by expanding individual thinking and intellectual growth.

Participant 3 noted that cheating and plagiarizing have been issues long before the dawn of e-Learning. This participant expressed that if given the appropriate understanding of what is considered to be plagiarism and cheating and not given gross opportunities for cheating; only a

small percentage of students will engage in unethical conduct and that number will be relatively the same regardless of modality, traditional or online.

Participant 3 also noted the importance of providing adequate support for students in the beginning to help ensure course completion. The development of a connection and support environment was felt to be essential to being able to continue. Participant 3 noted the perception, that non-traditional students, in particular, really enjoy the online environment in that it opens the door where it had been closed because of deciding to leave college due to life circumstances. Finally, although Participant 3 noted that the need for degree attainment remained the same throughout the e-Learning program, the participant also noted the ability over time in which students self-manage the educational process; thereby requiring less and less support.

Structural Description for Participant 4

The final participant, Participant 4, is also a gentleman in his late fifties. He described a nagging feeling of regret at not having completed his undergraduate degree. Upon completion of his undergraduate degree via e-learning, Participant 4 described an "infusion of confidence" that was then transferred to his work environment resulting in further success and increased confidence in the workplace. This participant provided a description of the online atmosphere as "contagious" and inclusive of support and interaction with classmates, faculty, and administration, flexible and accommodating course schedule, a collaborative learning environment, online access to academic resources, and a strong networking community, all of which enables continuation and degree attainment. Participant 4 is hoping to continue all the way through to a doctorate.

In terms of ethical issues and academic integrity, Participant 4 believed unethical behaviors will exist in all circumstances regardless of mode of delivery (i.e., traditional versus e-

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learning). This participant perceived no increase in plagiarism or other ethical or academic integrity issues, but noted the importance of monitoring and regulation. For the most part, this participant believed what was expected is what was received and mentioned that in some ways the expectations were met and surpasses.

Structural Composite Descriptions

This section features the composite structural descriptions generated from the individual structural descriptions and the thematic categories of the previous sections (Moustakas, 1994). These descriptions describe how the participants perceived the essence of their experiences as e-Learning students, the factors associated with their personal failure in a traditional setting, their choice to return to school in an online format, their perceptions of ethical issues within the e-Learning environment, and the psychological needs and satisfaction resulting from participation in the e-Learning format for educational advancement. The themes and corresponding experiences provide the overall conclusions of the data analysis and are used to attempt to answer the research questions of the study.

Theme 1: Flexibility perceived as a primary factor in the decision to enroll in e-Learning

The most influential factor perceived to affect the decision to return to school via e-Learning is the flexibility and convenience of the program. This flexibility provides for the ability to complete the educational process through to degree completion without compromising work or personal/family life, an opportunity that, for some participants, did not exist without online educational opportunities and one that was perceived to enable professional advancement. Several participants noted that the degrees would not have been attained without an e-Learning format for study.

Theme 2: No perceived increases in ethical problems or academic integrity within e-Learning

Ethical dilemmas and issues with academic integrity were perceived to be generalized across populations regardless of educational mode of delivery. Most of the participants (75%) noted no differences between e-Learning versus traditional settings in terms of ethical issues. However, a single participant perceived the e-Learning environment to more easily accommodate behaviors such as cheating.

Theme 3: Participants were generally satisfied with the quality of the e-Learning experience, particularly in terms of providing the satisfaction and ability to accomplish a degree that was otherwise non-attainable

Through a collaborative learning environment, e-Learning is perceived to provide students' satisfaction in terms of basic intellectual curiosity and the satisfaction of pursuing a college degree, which had previously been deemed unattainable, if their only option was within a traditional college setting. e-Learning afforded them an opportunity to satisfy their personal goals, academic advancement, and degree attainment. Further, several factors associated with e-Learning were perceived by participants as advantageous as well as disadvantageous. Despite occasional difficulties with communication, in general, the participants described a flexible supportive environment that supports the students in their quest to obtain the desired degree, by providing them with a quality education, and the ability to pursue and complete the degree process; thereby, fulfilling the psychological needs associated with returning to complete their degrees. All the participants expressed an overall satisfaction with the quality of the e-learning experience with many providing demonstrative evidence by his/her continuation in this learning format on to the pursuit of an advanced degree.

Theme 4: Teachers perceived as serving a critical role in student success online

Perceived as essential to student success in e-Learning is the guidance and continuous communication of teachers and advisors. Participants stressed the positive role of teachers as a contributing factor in the quality of their e-Learning educational experiences.

Theme 5: As the individual proceeds in the e-Learning process, less and less support is required for that individual.

Although the schools were perceived to provide student support services, which were perceived as crucial to student success and continuation to degree attainment, participants noted the reduction of needed support as progression was made through the e-Learning program. As student were able to navigate the e-Learning environment, the students expressed the ability to manage their own education as well as time and curriculum needs, necessitating less support from the school.

Summary

Chapter 4 has presented the results from the interviews of a sample of four adult e-Learners from online colleges in Connecticut, who dropped out of college in a traditional setting, and sought to obtain a four-year degree via e-Learning. The interviews explored the experiences and perceptions of these adult learners in terms of influential factors for choosing an e-Learning format for education, perceived advantages and disadvantages of the e-Learning environment and the quality of the education received, perceived personal gains resulting from e-Learning, perceptions of ethics and academic integrity related to e-Learning, and the psychological needs and satisfactions gained through participation in e-Learning. Chapter 4 presented the research questions, the data collection, and the analysis process used for this study.

Through the analysis of the data, thematic categories were developed and categorized under the three research questions to represent the lived experiences and perceptions of the participants. The transcribed interview data were analyzed to generate individual textural and structural descriptions of participants describing how participants viewed their experiences. The textural-structural synthesis provided an overall analysis of the meaning and essence of the data for the participants as a whole. Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the research questions related to the findings of the analysis of the data presented in chapter 4. In addition, chapter 5 provides recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the phenomenon of returning to college utilizing an e-Learning modality after previously dropping out of a traditional college. Through a phenomenological research methodology, four individuals of various levels of educational attainment gained primarily from participation in e-Learning, were interviewed. Open-ended questions ascertained the views of these participants with regard to why they chose e-Learning; the perceived advantages and disadvantages of e-Learning; personal gains, including psychological gains, and struggles and perception of ethics and academic integrity in an e-Learning environment. The study provided a direct account of the experiences and factors perceived as related to the value of e-Learning, and revealed the perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and understandings of the participants, in regard to the phenomenon under investigation. The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using the modified van Kaam method as proposed by Moustakas (1994), and assisted by use of NVivo 8® qualitative analysis software.

The seven step modified van Kaam process of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994) was used to determine the invariant constituents and subsequent thematic categories, which were representative of the experiences and perceptions of the participants. The analysis was aided by the use of the NVivo 8® qualitative software program to code the text of the interviews, note the location and frequency of each relevant occurrence (invariant constituents) within the transcribed texts, group the invariant constituents into categories, and generate frequency percentages for the invariant constituents, as represented by the participants. This process generated key invariant constituents, which were separated into the five thematic categories of (a) reasons for returning to school via e-Learning, (b) perceived advantages and

disadvantages, (c) perceived personal gains, (d) perceptions of ethics and academic integrity, and (e) psychological needs and gains. These thematic categories represented the perceptions of the participants with regard to their lived experiences of e-Learning. From the thematic categories and the individual textural structural descriptions, the phenomenological analysis revealed five overarching themes, which are described in the next section.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings as described in Chapter 4 and the relationship of these findings to previous literature, providing a broader meaning and understanding of the phenomenon. In addition, Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the results, including the significance of the study, and conclusions of the research. Lastly, the limitations of this study are provided along with recommendations for future research.

Findings of the Study

This section discusses the results with regard to the objectives of the study. The analysis was based on the conceptual framework presented in the literature review and research questions centered on the participants' experiences and perceptions of e-Learning, the factors, both intrinsic and extrinsic that influenced their personal decision to utilized e-Learning to complete their education and obtain their degree. Also, the perceived advantages, disadvantages, and personal gains resulting from this decision were analyzed. This section provides a review of the research questions of the study and the resulting thematic categories and ultimately the five overarching themes that were derived from the participants' interview responses. These themes reveal the overall perceptions of the participants as a whole and serve as the conclusions for the study.

Five thematic categories emerged based on the responses gathered from the research questions and subsequent data analysis. The participants presented their perceptions and lived experiences on each of the following factors as they relate to the experiences and perceptions of non-traditional learners with regard to the use and efficacy of the e-Learning modality. These factors, or themes, emerged as a result of the research questions, which provided the foundation for the interview questions presented.

Research Question 1: What perceived factors do students, who have previously dropped out of a traditional college and have returned to complete their degree via e-Learning, see as influential to selecting e-Learning to complete their college degree?

The first research question guiding this study was presented to allow the participants to provide their insights into the influential factors affecting the choice to utilize the e-Learning format to complete their college degree. The relevant constituents relating to the first research question were clustered and thematized according to the modified van Kaam process (Moustakas, 1994) resulting in the three thematic categories of (a) reasons for returning to school via e-Learning, (b) perceived advantages and disadvantages of the e-Learning environment, and (c) perceived personal gains. These thematic categories shed light on the internal and external factors that affected the personal decision to return to school for degree attainment via the e-Learning modality.

From these three categories, two themes were revealed based on the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants relating to factors that served to affect their decision to select e-Learning to complete their degree. The themes identified included (a) flexibility of the program and mode of delivery in terms of anytime, anywhere access was perceived as the primary factor in the decision to enroll in e-Learning, (b) e-Learning was perceived to provide a satisfaction in terms of accomplishing degree attainment that was otherwise considered unattainable. These factors have an effect on non-traditional students' ability to pursue continued education by demonstrating the effect of providing flexible opportunities for education for adults with work, family, and other commitments. Additionally, these factors also highlight the participants' overall satisfaction with the quality of their e-learning experience. The second of these themes is also used in answering research question three.

Research Question 2: What perceived moral issues in terms of academic integrity do students returning to school via e-Learning to complete their degree perceive as relevant to e-Learning students' behavior and conduct, as well as to faculty and administration?

The second research question that guided this study was presented to explore the perceptions of ethical issues and academic integrity within the e-Learning setting. A single thematic category of perceptions of ethics and academic integrity was developed in relation to this second research question. Based on this category, a single theme was revealed from the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants relating to the perceptions of participants with regard to ethics and academic integrity. The theme of no perceived increases in ethical problems or academic integrity within the e-Learning setting demonstrated the participants' assertions that ethical misconduct results from personal deficiencies in ethical conduct rather than a result of the mode of delivery of education. That is, participants felt that if someone is going to cheat, they will cheat whether they are participating in a traditional educational setting or in an e-Learning setting and those who do not cheat will likely not cheat, regardless of mode of educational delivery.

Research Question 3: What psychological needs are perceived to be satisfied from participation in the e-Learning model by students returning to college via e-Learning to complete their degree?

The third guiding research question served to understand the psychological aspects in terms of perceived rewards and satisfaction, involved in the decision to return to college via the e-Learning mode of instruction. This research question was closely tied to the first research question of the study, seeking to define the factors influential to the decision to pursue continuing education via e-Learning. Through an examination of the literature, this research question is also closely related to the persistence and success of e-Learning students, and their level of satisfaction with the quality of their e-Learning experience.

A single thematic category was developed in relation to this research question, which related to the psychological needs and gains of participants. Based on this category, three overarching themes were revealed from the perceptions and lived experiences of the participants, which included (a) e-Learning was perceived to provide student satisfaction in terms of accomplishing a degree that was otherwise seen as unattainable (this theme was previously discussed under research question 1), (b) teachers were perceived to serve a critical role in student e-Learning success, and (c) as the individual proceeds through the e-Learning process, less support is required for that individual to succeed in terms of course completion and ultimately, degree attainment. Although participants acknowledged the importance of student support services and particularly, support from the teachers, the need for this support was felt to decrease as the student became more familiar with the requirements, technology, and functional elements of the e-Learning setting.

Implications

This phenomenological study served to provide insight into the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of non-traditional students who have returned to complete their degree via e-Learning, after dropping out of a traditional college setting, as well as, elements that serve to assist the student to persist to graduation. In addition, the interview data provided understanding of the perceptions of these students with regard to possible societal ethical concerns surrounding the e-Learning mode of academic delivery. The in-depth data obtained and findings revealed through the phenomenological analysis of transcribed interviews for this study has provided a depth of understanding that can be applied to this non-traditional student sample. Given the extensive growth in this non-traditional student population as well as the growth of e-Learning education, understanding the motivations, perceived gains, factors affecting the decision to enroll, and perceptions and experiences with regard to ethical conduct of these students is critical to providing appropriate resources, guidelines, and opportunities to this student population.

Theme 1: Flexibility perceived as a primary factor in the decision to enroll in e-Learning

During the interview process, participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of the factors that influenced their decision to return to school via e-Learning in order to provide information that may be used to answer the first research question of the study. The discussions focused on the flexibility offered by the e-Learning environment. The anytime, anywhere capability of the e-Learning environment seemed to attract this non-traditional student sample in terms of the availability to "fit" classes into existing work, family, and social obligations.

For participants in this study, the importance of flexibility and convenience could not be underscored. Some participants felt degree attainment would not have been possible without the e-Learning format of study, which enabled them to complete the educational process to degree completion without compromising work or personal commitments. The flexible design of the e-Learning format was described by all the participants (100%) as the primary reason for choosing e-Learning to complete their degree.

Although the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations for utilizing e-Learning can be numerous, as demonstrated in the student motivation frameworks of Gibbs et al. (1984) and Boshier and Collins (1985), the results from this study suggest that the major factor affecting the decision to use e-Learning for these non-traditional students is the flexibility and convenience of the e-Learning environment. Research has demonstrated that e-Learning tends to appeal to nontraditional students, who are limited by work obligations, location, disability, or family commitments (Dalziel, 2007), by providing opportunities for students that are not bound to a specific time or their local area (Halfond, 2008). The perceptions of the adult learners in this study suggest that without this level of flexibility and anytime, anywhere convenience of e-Learning, it would be very likely be that these students would not have attained their degrees, given the demands of work and family. This finding of the present study provides insight into this very personal perspective on adult e-learners and the perceived value of this opportunity.

Acknowledging the critical importance of flexibility of time and place to the nontraditional student, it can be suggested that e-Learning is not actually competing with traditional settings for these available students who are electing to return to college to complete their college degrees. Rather, this non-traditional population of former college dropouts returning to school via the e-Learning modality exists because of the flexibility and convenience offered through the e-Learning environment, enabling continued educational opportunities to students who would otherwise be unable to attend a traditional postsecondary educational setting due to work and family responsibilities. This aligns with Kortesoja (2009), who asserted that adult learners returning to complete a postsecondary degree must have both opportunity and motivation to enroll. Without the opportunity to learn in a manner that fits into the present life demands of these adult learners, despite the many other motivational factors, the adult learner may never achieve the desired post-secondary degree attainment; as such, e-Learning was perceived to successfully meet the needs of these adult learners, providing a perception of satisfaction in the quality and fit of this educational modality, to their circumstances. Therefore, the practical implication of this finding is the need for stakeholders to support the continuous development of e-learning courses so that colleges and universities can continue to offer the option for e-learning, providing a means for this nontraditional student population to advance their education and careers.

Theme 2: No perceived increases in ethical problems or academic integrity within e-Learning

To answer the second research question regarding moral issues of academic integrity within the e-Learning environment, the participants were asked to describe their experiences and perceptions related to academic integrity and moral issues. The second theme revealed in the analysis of the data related to the second research question. This theme focused on the lack of perceived differences between the e-Learning environment and the traditional environment in terms of moral issues and academic integrity.

The participants in the study noted the importance of the individual student with regard to this issue, rather than the mode of delivery. Participants perceived ethical issues, particularly in terms of academic integrity, to be a generalized problem, neither more nor less abundant within the e-Learning mode of delivery, and generally noting no difference in ethical issues or problems with academic integrity between an e-Learning versus traditional setting (75%). However, one

participant perceived that the e-Learning environment affords more and easier opportunities for such behaviors.

As noted by Banthamai (2009), the nature of the e-Learning environment is associated with an asynchronous "freedom" that is provided to e-learners, which may affect the ethical behaviors of e-Learning students, as suggested by the single participant in the present study. The perceptions of e-learners in the present study suggest that breaches in ethical conduct can be primarily accountable to the individual learner, regardless of learning environment. E-learners, as with traditional students, require ethical characteristics of responsibility, class participation, team work, regular class attendance, honesty, and respect for intellectual property (Banthamai). The study suggests the use of clear institutional policies and guidelines with regard to issues of academic integrity and ethical behavior to be set for e-Learning programs just as they would be for traditional programs. This aligns with suggestions of Tropek et al. (2007), who suggested such policies in order to prevent privacy infringement, plagiarism, and copyright issues.

Colleges and universities could provide a student handbook specific to e-Learning courses in which expectations and guidelines are outlined. Faculty development programs could be developed that foster the importance of establishing clear guidelines to students regarding handing in one's own work.

Theme 3: Participants were generally satisfied with the quality of the e-Learning experience, particularly in terms of providing the satisfaction of accomplishment in obtaining a degree that was otherwise non-attainable.

Research question three served to provide insight into the personal gains obtained by e-Learning students, particularly in terms of psychological gains of personal satisfaction, as well as, the overall level of satisfaction of participants with the quality of their e-Learning experience. Three themes developed from the interview data related to this question. These themes focused on personal satisfaction, growth, and autonomy in a collaborative e-Learning environment.

In terms of personal satisfaction with, and perceived quality of the e-Learning experience, all four of the participants noted some element of personal psychological satisfaction, such as, intellectual curiosity and "love of learning," the basic satisfaction of pursuing a degree, the ability to quench the "unfulfilled desire" to return to college, the increased confidence, and the contagious atmosphere of support and collaboration enabling the continuation to degree completion. In addition, all the participants noted that degree attainment may not have been possible without the use of an e-Learning environment. In order to maintain the personal commitment to reach these goals, participants cited the importance of support, interaction, collaboration, communication, and a strong sense of community within the e-Learning environment. These notions support previous research by Gilbert et al. (2007), who suggested student expressions of satisfaction were related to increased levels of communication and interaction with other students and other learning support.

Building on this, student perception and satisfaction with the e-Learning environment have been shown to affect both attrition and intent to use an e-Learning format (Lee et al., 2005; Levy, 2004). The participants in this study all described personal motivational elements that served to provide the intent to use the e-Learning format for educational advancement, while also highlighting the need for communication and interaction among peers and educators, aligning with previous research. The e-Learning environment provided for the participants in this study satisfaction and accomplishment of their personal goals, eliciting the desire to continue to use e-Learning to further the educational goals of all participants. Practical implications of this finding include implementation and design of course work that promotes or even requires a greater level of communication and interaction between peers, which would serve to increase the students' sense of belonging motivation, and engagement. Projects such as group projects, planned use of the discussion board in terms of a planned discussion meeting via electronic modes of delivery.

Theme 4: Teachers perceived as serving a critical role in student success in e-Learning

The guidance and high level of communication received from teachers and advisors was perceived by three of the four participants in this study as a critical part of the necessary support to maintain the students' personal commitment to continuing education and degree attainment within an e-Learning modality. Above other factors, participants stressed the role of teachers in their personal e-Learning educational experiences. In addition to teacher support, support services provided by the schools were also noted, particularly in the early stages of involvement for the student. Specifically, professional development for the teachers related to common technical difficulties and full functionality of discussion/communication features within the e-Learning format may be helpful to promote a higher level of comfort of teachers with using the system as well as greater communication within the e-Learning learning community.

E-Learning encompasses more than course content in an e-Learning format; rather, e-Learning relates to interaction between educational content, and between students and teachers (Ally, 2008). Ally asserted that growth and knowledge is acquired through this interactive e-Learning process. As such, e-Learning is the use of technology to facilitate learning through human interaction (NCEL, 2002). An essential element to this exploration was the social factors involved in the learning process, which were examined using a framework of social constructivism and connectivism. Findings revealed the relative perceived importance of the teacher-student relationship, even above peer relationships, to the success of the adult e-learner.

Theme 5: As the individual proceeds in the e-Learning process, less support is required for that individual.

Despite the perceived importance of support services, teacher support and communication in the success of the student, all participants noted the reduction of needed support as progression was made through the e-Learning program. Given greater familiarity with the processes and expectations involved in the e-Learning environment, these adult elearners felt they were able to manage their education, in terms of time and curriculum needs, resulting in reduced need for support from the school and teachers. Although previous research highlights the need for continued support for students in the e-Learning environment, the gradual decrease in support services needed as the e-learner proceeds through the process seems to be a novel notion. This described experience revealed by all of the study participants suggests a needed focus of support services for students new to the e-Learning environment with less focus on continuation of services throughout a student's e-Learning career.

Therefore, it can be suggested that implementation of student tutorials on the user system provided for the e-Learning course would be helpful. The one time nature of the tutorial would seem to fit the initial need that tapers off with more experiences and time spent in the e-learning environment. Providing continuous access to the tutorial would allow students to learn when needed and/or requested. Curriculum development for e-Learning courses can incorporate team/group projects and required e-community discussions more frequently in the early level courses, whereas allow the more experienced upper level course students to more freely utilize the available modes of communication (e.g., discussion boards, email, videochat) without requirements and quotas.

Significance of the Study

With the advent of the Internet and the availability of e-Learning to provide access to educational advancement in circumstances where it may not have previously been a reality, many adults have chosen to return to college to complete their degrees via e-Learning. Despite numerous studies investigating e-Learning postsecondary education, these studies have tended to focus on curriculum and pedagogy, efficacy, and attrition and retention. There is a lack of literature focusing on the psychological and motivational aspects influencing a learner's decision to attend college via e-Learning, after previously dropping out of a traditional college program. More importantly, the studies have not addressed the motivation to continue, and the elements that are perceived by these students to preclude success.

This information serves as critical to understanding how best to serve this growing population of students. As noted previously, the study findings suggest that the e-Learning modality does not serve to compete with the traditional setting for these non-traditional students, as the participants reflect the inability of this population of adult learners to pursue advanced degrees without the flexibility and convenient nature of the e-Learning format. The e-Learning environment, therefore, enables a college or university the ability to add opportunities to reach a class of students who otherwise would be unable to seek such educational advancement.

Postsecondary educators and leadership can use the insights gained from this study to advance the direction of the e-Learning programs offered; positioning it to more adequately address the needs of the adult e-learner. By understanding the importance of the human interaction within the teacher-student relationship, in the perceived quality and satisfaction, as well as, the overall success of students (through connectivist and social constructivist models), programs can be assessed and restructured, responsively. Courses may benefit from inclusion of virtual meetings/discussion sessions in which students and faculty can engage in live, real-time discussion and interaction. Faculty should actively promote communication and use of available technology to facilitate interaction with both students and faculty. Faculty and educational leadership need to provide adequate student support services focused on assisting the new e-Learning student maneuver through the e-Learning course successfully and develop a sense of community, collaboration, and social interaction.

Specifically, results of this study emphasize the need for incorporation of technical support services, e-Learning tutorials on the systems needed for class participation, and perhaps a minimum communication requirement in terms of contact/communication with the instructor (i.e., faculty may require a minimum of two communications per week, utilizing the student's choice of discussion board, email, videochat, etc.). These elements would seem to be most beneficial to those students new to embarking on an e-Learning learning course. As students become more familiar with these structures and requirements, these support services should become less important to the successful completion of the course for the student. Therefore, this requirement may be most beneficial at the introductory level (i.e., initial level/Introductory courses).

Results of this study support that leadership needs to develop and maintain expectations and policies for ethical conduct and clearly state these policies to students (Tropek et al., 2007). Results suggest that increased student satisfaction and outcomes will likely result from increased levels of student-teacher interaction and communication, which will in turn provide enhanced student outcomes. Addressing ethical concerns early on will clearly denote what is expected of students and may enhance the credibility of e-Learning degrees in the workplace. Leadership and faculty should include not only handbooks for delineating ethical conduct expectations, but also clear explanations of ethical conduct (could be taken directly from handbook) handed out at the beginning of each course, such as through the initial introductory email contact from the faculty to students. Research has suggested that concerns for ethical deterioration in an e-Learning environment affect societal views of e-Learning degrees (Carnevale, 2007). As e-Learning continues to reach more potential adult learners and non-traditional students, offering a successful method for degree attainment, it is hoped that a greater level of social acceptance, particularly from employers, would also be achieved.

The nature of e-Learning lends itself to speculations of credibility (Banthamai, 2009), which is not only tied to the number of people who are utilizing this type of educational experience, but also to the societal perceptions with regard to the academic integrity within the e-Learning environment (Carnevale, 2007); therefore, leadership in e-Learning institutions should continue to seek ways to establish the credibility of the programs in order to benefit the students who have worked to achieve their degrees. Previous research has asserted that the asynchronous nature of e-Learning, which provides a degree of "freedom" not offered to students in a traditional setting, can affect the system of ethics incorporated by e-learners (Banthamai). However, results of this study found only a single participant that perceived this effect, noting the ease with which one can cheat in an e-Learning environment as compared to a traditional course, with most participants suggesting this to not be the case. Consequently, the policy and practice in place for traditional students can and should be applied to the e-Learner.

Despite whether it is or is not easier to commit unethical behaviors or academic fraud, the public perception of this element remains critical to credibility of the degree (Carnevale, 2007). Given the perceptions of the study participants that the e-Learning environment presents no greater ethical concern than a traditional setting, as greater numbers of the general population

gain experience with this mode of educational delivery, whether through personal experience or experience with those who have utilized e-Learning, the societal concerns may fade. If leadership involved with the development of e-Learning studies provides clear and relevant guidelines, expectations, and consequences, as are expected under any educational setting, this may serve to also contribute to a potential shift of public perception toward greater levels of credibility of the e-Learning degree.

Guidelines set specifically for e-learning course formats should include integrity statements that state the assumption of the ownership/originality of the work (academic integrity). Students could be required to submit a signed integrity statement with submittals of major projects/exams if not proctored. Efforts made by leadership to ensure academic integrity in the e-Learning environment will support greater acceptance of degrees within the larger public perception. Incorporation of techniques to ensure student originality, such as live video chat, could be used within the context of assessments to provide live question/answer sessions, either graded or non-graded.

Strengths and Limitations

The study was strengthened by the use of the qualitative, phenomenological approach because an objective of the study was to more fully understand the experiences and perceptions of the adult e-learners participating in the study. This in-depth understanding was used to generate knowledge with regard to the reasons for choosing e-learning for completion of a degree as well as issues of ethical behavior among students within an e-Learning environment. The strength in using the phenomenological design was in the exploration of undefined variables in which the search for knowledge focuses on in-depth understanding of the individual as a complex being (Creswell, 2007). Results (themes) were revealed from the analysis through an inductive process, rather than proving or explaining relationships with predefined variables through a deductive process. The phenomenological design was able to capture a vivid picture of each individual's experience and perceptions that was further used to help understand the topics of interest.

The phenomenological design also provided aspects used to limit bias and enhance validity and reliability of the study. Through the suspension of any preconceived conclusions (epoche) until the conclusions were based on exact information gathered through the research, and with respect for a subject's consciousness to both shape and define their reality according to their lived experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994), the phenomenological study provided a strong mechanism for achieving the goals of the study.

Despite these strengths, several elements served to limit the study. Participation in the study was limited to four adult e-learners who had successfully achieved postsecondary degrees, utilizing an e-Learning format, through a college or university program based in Connecticut. Due to time constraints with the participants, interviews were limited in length and as such, were not able to obtain a depth of understanding that would have shed more light on some aspects revealed in the study. A focus group format may have provided enhanced ability to delve more deeply into relevant aspects of interest by eliciting conversation and interactive discussion among the participants and researcher. Also, because the qualitative method does not seek to produce generalizable findings, but rather an in-depth understanding of a small group of participants, one of the limitations due to the use of the qualitative research method and sampling approach was that the analysis of the findings may not necessarily extend to wider populations.

In addition, the data from the study was contingent on the participant's willingness to answer honestly and openly during the interviewing process. Therefore, the validity of the study
was limited to the reliability of the information provided by the participants. In an effort to ensure openness and honesty during the interview process, attention was given to provide a comfortable and confidential atmosphere to promote open and honest answers from participants (Moustakas, 1994); hence, the researcher allowed participants to select the locations in which the interviews were conducted.

Conclusion

The current study provided information and insights into the views of successful adult elearners who obtained four-year degrees, using an e-Learning format, and their perceptions with regard to the experience of e-Learning, personal motivations for using the e-Learning modality, the advantages and disadvantages of the e-Learning environment, and the ethical concerns in e-Learning. The findings from this study contribute to the exploration of the factors related to adult e-learners, their associated motivations, and factors affecting success. Applying the concepts of the theoretical framework of the study, inclusive of general learning theory, the Student Integration Model (Tinto, 1994) and the Student Attrition Model (Bean, 1980), as well as the adult learner framework supported by Gibbs et al. (1984) and Boshier and Collins (1985), participant perceptions and experiences within the context of the institution reveal factors, both internal and external, that have affected the attitudes and decisions (intentional behaviors) of the participants. These factors include the flexibility and convenience of the e-Learning classroom, the desire to attain degree completion, the external influence of teacher interaction, personal gains of confidence, as well as, academic and career advancement.

The participants in this study demonstrated internal psychological motivational factors to pursue their degree completion within an e-Learning educational format. These internal motivations focused on the desire to complete their education for both personal educational achievement and for career advancement. The findings revealed, without the availability of e-Learning, the chances of participants returning to school to pursue their degrees were slim to non-existent; thus the myth that e-Learning was competing with traditional colleges and universities for students, is just that, a myth. In addition, the study participants asserted that the attainment of their goals to achieve their college degrees would have been impossible without the flexibility of e-Learning, which provided the opportunity to participate, while maintaining work, family, or other commitments and ultimately achieve their goals. The satisfaction reported by participants concerning the e-Learning modality was related to the achievement of their goals of degree attainment and the associated confidence and personal satisfaction obtained from that achievement.

The perceived importance of the interactive element in an e-Learning environment in order to facilitate a sense of community can be understood within the theoretical framework as well. The teacher, who was perceived by participants as critical to student success, as the classroom leaders, is responsible for facilitating communication and interaction within this virtual classroom environment. As such, the teacher enables the growth of the sense of community to which the participant feels he/she is a part of; thus, supporting student persistence, as suggested through Tinto's model.

The findings also provide insight into the continuing needs of e-learners. The findings suggest that as the individual learner proceeds through the e-Learning process, less support is required for that individual to succeed. This may be simply due to familiarity of the resources, modes of communication and interaction, and the protocols and procedures frequently used in an e-Learning environment or it may suggest that as the learner becomes more fully integrated into the virtual student life, the student's identification with the particular educational community, as

well as the student's level of satisfaction with the program, as he or she begins to see the goals become attainable, continue to propel the individual to persist.

With adult learners who are focused on the opportunity for achievement of their degree and career advancement, there seems to be arguments supporting the notions for both increased and decreased ethical problems in an e-Learning environment. The findings of the study reveal an overall perception of irrelevance as to the mode of educational delivery, so far as ethical issues were concerned, but rather an importance of the ethical nature of the individual. Further, it was observed, as within any educational community, opportunities for ethical misconduct exist; however, the findings of the perceptions of the study participants suggest no reason to question the credibility of e-Learning education in terms of academic integrity any more so than traditional learning environments. Thus, providing a clear delineation of the expectations and policies of a program of study should provide measures of prevention.

Recommendations for Future Research

The present study has provided useful information related to the perceptions of e-learners who have returned to school to complete their postsecondary degree. This is an area that is worthy of further empirical investigation. The findings of the study support current adult learner and student persistence models in the literature, while also suggesting specific motivational factors that may impact individual intentional behaviors among this population. Two important factors were perceived as critically important to the decision to participate in an e-Learning learning environment to pursue degree attainment, and persistence to achieve that goal. These include the flexibility of the e-Learning environment to fit into existing life demands of work and family providing opportunity for the personal satisfaction of degree attainment and the importance of the teacher interaction within the e-Learning program, particularly earlier in the e-Learning educational journey.

Results of this study suggest the need for an examination into the importance of the teacher role and teachers who are more or less communicative during the course of instruction. In addition, findings suggest more research on the changing support needs of students throughout the course of degree attainment, may provide leaders with more information in order to appropriately address the needs of the students; thereby, assisting in their success. In a difficult economy, it is imperative to identify places where student assistance programs are most beneficial and where programs are not necessary, to maximize the use of limited funds. The findings suggest that educational institutions may not need to devote as much attention to students progressing further in their e-Learning program, as to new students to the e-Learning format. This aspect should be further investigated, perhaps using a quantitative study to enable predictive properties of the variables of interest.

The current study was geographically homogenous in that it was comprised of adult e-learners participating in courses offered through universities based in Connecticut. Future research should focus on examining e-Learning students from more diverse geographic areas. This may lead to additional valuable insights regarding the educational experiences of this non-traditional student population.

The present study was limited to e-learners who have returned to school to obtain their postsecondary degree via e-Learning, after previously dropping out of a traditional setting. Further research could be focused on specific minority groups and compare factors associated with motivation and persistence across groups, identifying more universal factors that may affect the use of e-Learning environments. The participants in this study primarily used the e-Learning educational format due to time constraints rather than because access to a traditional university was unavailable. It would be interesting to understand the motivations and factors contributing to the use of e-Learning in students from rural areas, where there may not be immediate access to institutions of higher education.

Finally, although the participants in the present study did not perceive problems with ethical conduct, prior research suggests this can be an issue (Banthamai, 2009) and that society may continue to perceive ethical and academic integrity problems associated with the e-Learning environment (Carnevale, 2007), which may serve to restrict those who attain degrees in this modality, particularly in terms of their career advancement. Further research examining this social perception with regard to e-Learning, particularly in the workplace, and the best ways to achieve changes in these perceptions would be valuable. Both large scale quantitative studies and small scale qualitative studies on social perceptions of the credibility of e-Learning degrees are warranted.

Summary

The current qualitative study employed a phenomenological research design to explore the phenomena of the motivational aspects associated with enrollment of non-traditional adult elearners. Four individuals, who completed their degrees e-Learning after having previously dropped out of college in a traditional setting, participated in face-to-face and follow-up telephone interviews. The phenomenological analysis revealed five significant themes in terms of the perceptions of the participants, which included (a) flexibility perceived as a primary factor in the decision to enroll in e-Learning, (b) no perceived increases in ethical problems or academic integrity within e-Learning, (c) e-Learning is perceived to provide satisfaction in terms of accomplishing a degree that was otherwise non-attainable, (d) teachers perceived as serving a critical role in student success in e-Learning, and (e) as the individual proceeds in the e-Learning process, less support is required for that individual.

The findings of the study aligned with the review of the literature and the results provided answers to the designated research questions for the study. Themes one and three provided motivational influences on the decision of participants to enroll via e-Learning to answer research question 1. Theme two related to the ethical concerns surrounding e-Learning education to address research question two. In addition to addressing an element of research question one, the third theme also served to answer research question three and identified satisfaction with the e-Learning environment in terms of achievement of personal goals. Themes four and five were also used to answer research question three, providing insight into the factors and support mechanisms that may be critical to student persistence in an e-Learning program.

Connectivist and constructivist learning theories, student attrition and persistence theories, and adult learner theories provided a framework to analyze the results and demonstrate implications and significance of the study. The results of the study can be used to further provide opportunities to meet the needs of non-traditional learners, who tend to be limited by work, family, and other life commitments, to facilitate degree attainment and career advancement where traditional settings fail to provide adequate flexibility. The findings also provided a base to recommend further research to build upon.

Recommendations from the current study included information for e-Learning educational program leaders to support their non-traditional students. Changes in the scope and setting of the study were recommended to provide additional understanding of these issues on a more general level. Further investigation of the role of teachers in the e-Learning success of students, in terms of specific factors or characteristic behaviors that serve to motivate students to persist, was also recommended. In addition to the role of teachers in providing support to students; the findings of the study suggest the need to examine the benefits of specific support services designed to assist e-Learning students, and where and when these should be provided. Thus, suggesting the need to focus support services on the relatively newer students in the e-Learning environment. Although ethical issues within the e-Learning environment were found to not be perceived as a problem, societal views may exist, necessitating further examination of this element on a larger scale in the general population or workplace.

The benefits to providing accessible opportunities for non-traditional students through e-Learning can be great. The achievement of these individuals, the confidence attained, and the social and economic successes that can emanate from their educational success could be significant. Educational leaders should continue to see the value in providing these opportunities for non-traditional learners and focus on the elements contributing to their motivation and successful outcomes. Societal perceptions can be changed with an infusion of capable, welleducated and intelligent e-Learning degree recipients contributing to the workforce.

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