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## Study of the Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding Online Student Services

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## Study of the Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding Online Student Services

David R. Nichols

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education  
Doctorate of Education Program

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Study of the Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding Online Student Services

David R. Nichols

Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in

Higher Education

Bill Boozang, Ed.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University–Portland

2020

## **Abstract**

Online education continues to grow as a delivery method for higher education. Institutions of higher learning have implemented effective support services for on campus students. The problem is whether institutions have implemented equally effective support services for online students. Although the number of online students continues to grow, institutions of higher learning struggle with the delivery of online education and support services offered to online students. For online students to persist and succeed, online support services must be equivalent to those offered to on campus students. This qualitative research study was conducted to determine the perceptions of online students regarding the support services provided. In this study, online students in the Organizational Leadership Program (ORGL) at a large public university in South Central United States responded to a confidential Qualtrics survey and participated in a telephone interview. The students answered questions about their real-life experiences with online support services. The majority of the online students were challenged in establishing a connection with the institution necessary for student success. Online students require distinct services from brick and mortar students. The online student faces challenges not encountered by brick and mortar students. Online students not receiving adequate online services may experience persistence issues and a lack of student success.

*Keywords:* support services, online education, persistence, brick and mortar

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Mary Anne, whose encouragement was probably more responsible for the completion of this degree than any other single factor. Your sacrifice of time, patience, and your support during my educational pursuits have meant so much to me. To my sons, Robert, and David I offer my sincere appreciation for your support throughout this educational journey.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The growth of online education has prompted the debate on the quality of education provided by institutions of higher learning and the degree of satisfaction of students with the services offered. The ability of the institutions of higher learning to successfully implement and maintain online education programs is key to the success of the online student.

Online education offers more flexibility for students enabling more students to participate in higher education. As of fall 2014, approximately six million students were enrolled in online education classes, with total enrollment in post-secondary institutions expected to rise 15% by the year 2025 (NCES, 2014). Student support services are essential to the online student for success and persistence to graduation. Online students require services that create a sense of inclusion and belonging; without these services, an online student is more likely to fade away from higher education (Bailey & Brown, 2016). As the number of online learners continue to grow, it is essential to understand how to support online learners so that they may achieve their goals (Stavredes & Herder, 2013).

Institutions of higher learning should ensure that the services and products delivered to online students promote success and persistence to graduation. The education that the student is expecting is an education that will not only prepare them for success in the classroom but prepare them for success in their careers and their communities outside of the classroom. Institutions of higher learning have been challenged to provide services that promote success and retain students in programs to graduation (Fullan & Scott, 2009).

Stavredes and Herder (2013) have identified five skill areas that online students must master to be persistent and successful. The skill areas identified are as follows; “computer literacy, information literacy, time management, reading, and writing, and computer-based

interaction” (Stavredes & Herder, 2013, p. 26). Online students will vary in their abilities within the five skill areas requiring institutions of higher learning to provide specialized services to online students in order to promote persistence and success. The challenges for institutions of higher learning, is in designing and implementing services that will encourage the participation of online students to successfully graduate.

As businesses have adapted to changes in consumer trends, institutions of higher learning will need to respond to student demands. “History is littered with examples of industries that, at their peril, failed to respond-or even to notice-changes in the world around them, from railroads to steel manufacturers” (Christensen, 2011, p. 3). Institutions of higher learning that have made the choice not to implement online education programs designed to assist online students in their success. Institutions of higher learning need to embrace the challenges of the digital age to raise the overall standards of online education to ensure that the programs and services that offered are equal to traditional instruction (Christensen, 2011). Online students should expect services that create an environment of inclusion that promote success and persistence to graduation.

### **Background, Context, History, and Theoretical Framework of the Problem**

The growth of online education has prompted the debate on the quality of education provided by institutions of higher learning and the degree of satisfaction of students with the services provided. The ability of the institutions of higher learning to successfully implement and maintain online education programs is key to the success of the online student. Through implementation and maintaining online programs, the services offered to the online students must be explicitly designed for the online student to ensure success and retention to graduation.

College and universitie leaders will be challenged to provide students with engaging, interactive online courses while maintaining the core values of the institution. Online education

provides institutions of higher learning with an opportunity to reach more students supplementing declining enrollment. Implementing new programs and delivery methods should not negatively impact the values and ideals of the institution (Bowen, 2013). Institutions of higher learning must provide services designed for online students that foster success and persistence. Student services that are provided to on campus students may not be sufficient to meet the needs of the online student. Colleges and universities must adapt to the changing demands of technology to provide the services that online students will demand. Online students rely on technology to connect with the institution, faculty, and peers. Online students rely on technology for their education as well as, a tool to communicate with the institution. As the world continues to become a global environment, students will have the option of attending online universities across the globe. Online students will have the ability to attend universities that offer student services specifically designed for online students. Services that encourage engagement with the institution, faculty, and peers.

Universities need to upgrade its technology to prepare students for careers that utilize technology or face being left behind other countries, which could draw students into a global environment. “Private sector respondents are particularly concerned, with 46% expressing worry that the U.S. is lagging behind other countries in its ability to produce high quality professional” (Glenn, 2008, p. 10). Universities have the opportunity to partner with the business to innovate and develop. Institutions that cannot overcome barriers to innovation may encounter a decreased in enrollment resulting in economic hardships. Institutions that invest in technology will open lines of communication with online students encouraging engagement and creating a co-operative environment resulting in greater inclusion. Online students will search for institutions that offer services contribute to their success.



Online students are physically removed from the campus environment; therefore, support services are critical to their success. Online courses should engage and connect the student with the institution (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Employers value the team aspect of work. Institutions offering online courses and programs will need to develop courses that provide online students the opportunity to interactive academically and socially. Siebold (2007) concluded that employers did not believe that online education was equivalent to face to face instruction and that online education did not provide the essential social skills necessary to be a productive team member. In order to compete in the marketplace, online students must be afforded similar services to compete with their on-campus counterparts and to satisfy employer demands.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The literature search was conducted to generate background information on whether services delivered in an online format promoted success and retention. Numerous studies exist regarding the quality of online services provided to students enrolled in these formats. The literature that is of most interest for this study is the negative perception that the online student formed regarding their relationship with the college or university. The literature revealed that online students need to connect with the faculty, peers, and the institution to be successful.

The literature will be examined from a social constructionist perspective. Social constructionism maintains that knowledge is not derived from nature but rather from social interactions (Burr, 2015). Social interactions provide an opportunity for individuals to construct knowledge (Burr, 2015). The quality of online education is related to the interaction between peers and the professor. On-campus delivery offers the opportunity for interaction between students and faculty; online delivery must be designed with communication as a primary goal.

Shackleford and Maxwell (2012) focused on how the course design has engaged students. Online students should feel a connection with the course through interaction, which develops a sense of community and belonging (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Saul (2013) advocated that faculty may need professional assistance in creating online courses to ensure strong student interaction. Interaction increases student persistence and the probability of student success (Saul, 2013). Interaction is a concern for employers of online students. Siebold (2007) identified that employers value a team approach to problem-solving. The concern of employers is that online delivery does not provide for the development of face to face communication skills, which are necessary to be successful beyond the classroom (Siebold, 2007).

Student support services are essential in establishing a sense of community for the online student. The connection to the institution provides stability to the student increasing the persistence and success of the student (Nolan, 2013). The literature provided information that students deemed critical for success, as researched by Linardopoulos (2010). The services which are valued by students help establish the bond between the online student and the university.

The literature has illustrated the concerns surrounding the quality of online education focus on relationships and interaction. The social constructionist would draw attention to the fact that interaction is essential for the success of the online student. “The goings-on between people in the course of their everyday lives are seen as the practices during which our shared versions of knowledge are constructed” (Burr, 2015, p. 5).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The main issue is whether institutions of higher learning are providing services to online students that ensure student success and persistence. Institutions of higher learning have been challenged to provide services that meet the needs of the online students that will result in the

success of the student and the institution. Persistence matters as the opportunities that become available in life increase noticeably with the completion of a degree (Fullan & Scott, 2009).

Colleges and universities have been tasked with providing online students with services that promote success and persistence and to continually adapt to advancing technologies. Online students expect to receive equivalent services to ensure success in the classroom and beyond. Traditional student services may not fulfill the unique requirements of the online student. The success of colleges and universities to remain sustainable will mirror the success of the online student. Online students will be attracted to those institutions that offer services that the online student deems effective in encouraging student success.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of online students about the services which were provided by institutions of higher learning. The study focused on; whether the students perceived that the services were effective, valuable, and sufficient for success and persistence in their studies. This study expanded on previous research studies on the perception of students towards online learning. Absent from previous literature and research regarding on-line education was the determination of which services were most beneficial for success and retention to the on-line students. This researcher investigated the services offered to an online student by institutions of higher learning to identify those services the students perceived were effective to their success. The findings from this research offered insight to institutions of higher learning as to the perceived effectiveness of online services.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study in relationship to the perception of online students regarding services provided by the institutions.

The research questions are:

1. What remote services are the most effective in promoting success and persistence from the perspective of the online student?
2. What are the perceptions of online students regarding the quality, value, and accessibility of the services provided?
3. From a student perspective, how can institutions of higher learning improve remote services to online students?

### **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

The researcher was personally interested in the quality of online education as the researcher obtained a master's degree completely online and pursued a doctorate online. In addition to my interest, there is concern that some institutions may view online education as solely a revenue-generating proposition their core purpose in providing quality education to students regardless of the mode of instruction. Attracting new students has become less important than retaining students through graduation (Fullan & Scott, 2009). Institutions of higher learning have a moral obligation to the students to offer services that will assist students to persist and succeed.

The literature available on the experience of online students suggests that institutions of higher learning have experienced a growth in online education, which has presented the institutions with unique challenges. Institution administrators have struggled to provide equivalent services and to keep pace with technological advances. Substitutes for synchronous instruction have challenged the faculty to provide more immediate feedback and to design more robust lessons that will engage the students providing the opportunity for interaction. The challenge centers around the cost of providing these services to the students.

Institutions have faced challenges that will implement online services that are affordable. Student debt has risen, and many students are faced with borrowing as the only option to pay for higher education (Bowen, 2013). When viewed as consumers, students expect value for their educational dollars and will search for institutions that offer services promoting success for the online student.

Information from the research has identified the importance of services to online students require to be successful in and beyond the classroom. College and university administrators have been able to concentrate on those services, ensuring student persistence leading to student success, and the success of the institution.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Online education.** “A virtual campus environment composed solely of technology where presence is elusive, communication is electronic, and interactions take place in cyberspace.” (Lehman, Conceição, & Conceio, 2013, p. 22).

**Brick and mortar.** A traditional college campus where students live on campus, attend classes in person, and interact with peers and instructors (Lehman et al., 2013).

**Face to face instruction.** Students attend classes in person, and interact with peers and instructors (Lehman et al., 2013).

**Retention.** The continued participation in an online beginning at enrollment and lasting through completion (Gazza & Hunker, 2014).

**Social constructionism.** A singular definition for social constructionism is difficult to ascertain; however, key elements include; gaining knowledge through social interaction, and social interaction is a significant component in gaining knowledge (Burr, 2015).

## **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

**Assumptions.** There is an assumption that online students are interested in examining the effectiveness of student services on success and persistence. It is also assumed that the participants in the study provided honest answers based on their personal experiences with online education. It is assumed that online students understand the changing nature of education and, as such, the changing nature of services provided to students.

**Delimitations and limitations.** The limitation of this study was the availability and size of the target population. The study used sample participants from online university programs. The study was a qualitative study dependent on the honest responses of the participants. Researcher bias is a potential limitation in the study. Personal experiences, as a student, in online education, have shaped my opinions and beliefs regarding online education. The researcher acknowledged this limitation and will endeavor to remain open-minded throughout the research study.

## **Chapter Summary**

The growth of online education focused on debates on the quality of education and services provided to online students. Concern over the success and retention of online students prompted deliberation as to whether colleges and universities are providing adequate services to online students.

This research study was limited to students who have completed or participated in an online course or online program. The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore whether institutions of higher learning are providing services to online students that promote success and persistence. Chapter 2 is a review of previous studies and literature concerning services provided to online students.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

There has been growing concern regarding the success and persistence of online students in institutions of higher learning. “In 2-year, institutions 47% of students age 26 and older are enrolled in online courses, with 52% of the 18 to 25-year old students enrolled in online courses” (Hoskins, 2011, para. 2). The purpose of this research study was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of online students about the support services which were provided by institutions of higher learning. The study focused on whether the services provided were effective in promoting student success and persistence. Several studies have been conducted to track the services that colleges and universities provide to online students (Kinkle, 2010; LaPadula, 2003; Nolan, 2013; Saul, 2013; Shackelford & Mawell, 2012; Woods, 2008). Some limitations of the research were free to form responses from online students regarding which services would be most valuable, considering success and persistence in online education.

Online students are usually physically remote from the campus, which necessitates a separate range of services required for success. Colleges and universities administrations have generally been slow to implement change. Numerous colleges and universities administrations are change-resistant (Fullan & Scott, 2009). College students have evolved at a quicker pace than college faculty in using technology. Online education has changed the demographics of the college offering and the expectations of the college student. Faculty members tend to respond at a slower pace, creating a disparity of expectations between students and faculty (Borden & Evenback, 2007). To meet the demands of the online student, universities and colleges will need to implement a 21st-century solution. The traditional model of institutions may not be capable of addressing the needs of tomorrow’s students and needs Marx (2006). Institutions of higher

learning will be challenged to implement programs that foster the success and retention of online students. Services designed for traditional education may not transfer to the online environment. Colleges and universities will need to focus on services specifically designed for the various educational delivery methods that exist.

This chapter focused on previous literature that incorporated the services and support that is provided to online students and the value of those services. Literature was gathered from various sources such as; ProQuest, ERIC, Taylor and Francis Online, and the library at Concordia University Online. Previous research did not allow for free form responses from students and did not attempt to generate an inventory of support services institutions of the higher learner should provide to online students. This study has incorporated free form responses from students to investigate services that institutions may implanted to ensure student success and the success of an online program.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The failure of business to respond to the ever-changing conditions in society can be seen throughout the history of the United States (Christensen, 2011). Institutions of higher learning that have decided to implement online education programs and services may find that they will join those industries that litter the business history of the United States. Institutions of higher learning should embrace the challenges of the digital age to raise the standards of online education to ensure that the programs offered are equal to face to face instruction meeting the needs of the student and the institution (Christensen, 2011).

This researcher has not only completed many online courses and completed an entire master's program online without any residency requirements. Some skepticism exists as to whether online programs are offering equivalent educational products and services compared to



traditional on-campus offerings. Students have become more consumer-oriented, demanding services that meet their expectations. Students will demand an education that meets their schedules and meets their expectations. Students are more consumer-oriented, requiring institutions to provide the services and products promised in their prospectus or suffer the consequences of a transfer or withdrawal from their institution (Fullan & Scott, 2009).

Institutions of higher learning must offer services to online students that are specific to the online student needs or suffer economic consequences, which could jeopardize the existence of the institution.

Online education continues to grow, that is attributed to the needs of students and how supports are used to support their success. An advisor is essential for college students but more so for the online student. An advisor is a connection between the student and the institution. Students prefer an advisor who is consistent and remains a support throughout the life of the program as their role is the connection to both the institution and the program (Nolan, 2013). Students who were afforded the services of an advisory were more likely to continue in the program, increasing the retention rate for the college (Nolan, 2013).

Online education offers more flexibility for students enabling more students to participate in higher education. As of the fall of 2014, approximately six million students were enrolled in online education classes, with total enrollment in post-secondary institutions expected to rise to 15% by the year 2025 (NCES, 2014). Notwithstanding the growth of online education, the extent of student satisfaction varies. The extent of satisfaction or dissatisfaction depends on a number of factors, as concluded in a study by Chyung and Vachon (2013). The factors that determine student satisfaction or dissatisfaction are variables that can reside with the student or are external variables that reside with the institution of higher learning (Chyung & Vachon, 2013).

Developing a sense of community in an online course is critical for student satisfaction (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Students need to feel a sense of inclusion in the course or the program and that they are not alone in their studies (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Students will model their behavior in correlation to the faculty member to create a sense of community in an online environment community (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Students in a traditional on-campus setting interact with the instructor to create a sense of community; therefore, the need to capture the same in an online setting is equally important. Online students, normally, do not have the same opportunity to see their instructor through recorded lectures or synchronous interaction. The instructor must create opportunities for interaction, which compensates for the loss of visual interaction. The interaction between student and faculty connects the student to the institution allowing for an exchange of knowledge as expressed by the social constructionist theory (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). A high level of interaction between the student and the instructor will lead to a positive experience for the student. Students with a positive experience in online education are more likely to persist with their program to graduation.

Colleges and universities' administrators have created a new generation of students, online learners. The creation of the new generation of students challenges the faculty to design successful online courses (Saul, 2013). Faculty members may be challenged by converting traditional format courses into online courses (Saul, 2013). The methods utilized in a traditional classroom setting might not be as effective when delivered online. Faculty members may not have the training to develop online courses that are both engaging and interactive. The interactivity between students and faculty is important to the construction of knowledge. Without adequate training, the course will not meet the expectations of the student and the institution. The design of the online course can impact the retention rate and the persistence rate of the online

student (Saul, 2013). Faculty members may require the assistance of external experts to design courses to deliver their course content to the student. The online environment is subject to more rapid change than the traditional on-campus delivery method. Technologies change rapidly, and the faculty may want to evaluate the effectiveness of the course to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of the student and the institution (Saul, 2013).

Cell phones have more computing power than ever before, allowing users to accomplish a multitude of functions. Technology is a part of everyday life and will continue creative minds develop more functionality, which the public demands. Online education provided institutions of higher learning with an opportunity to reach more students supplementing declining enrollment. In creating the opportunity for the growth of the institution, the administration must maintain its core values and provide services to all students (Bowen, 2013). Institutions of higher learning must provide services to online students that encourage exchanges between students and faculty. Institutions of higher learning must adapt to the changing demands of technology in order to provide the services that online students will demand.

The literature available on the experience of online students suggested that institutions of higher learning have experienced a growth in online education, which has presented the institution's administrators with unique challenges. Administrators have struggled to provide equivalent services and to keep pace with technological advances. One result of Kinkle's (2010) research asserts that the administrators and faculty had limited knowledge of online education. Substitutes for synchronous instruction have challenged the faculty to provide more immediate feedback and to design more robust lessons that will engage the students providing the opportunity for interaction. The challenge also centers around the cost of providing these services to the students. Linardopoulos (2010) studied the perspectives of faculty and students

regarding online education. Faculty who did not have a positive view of online education believed that the university was focusing on profit rather than the quality of academic delivery (Linardopoulos, 2010).

Institution administrators are challenged to implement and provide affordable online services. Student debt has risen, and many students are faced with borrowing as the only option to pay for higher education (Bowen, 2013). When viewed as consumers, students will expect value for their money and will search for institutions that offer value for their money.

The social constructionist theory is concerned with learning as the main goal of human activities (Loseke, 2011). Learning has its basis in social interactivity, and that understandings must be shared to fully develop (Loseke, 2011). The research that I conducted drew on the social constructionist theory as a key concern of online education is the lack of interactivity. The course design, presentation, and student experience must include social interactions for the online student to be fully successful. The administration must be aware of this requirement for student success, and the faculty needs training to present interactive lessons.

Through this research study this researcher investigated the satisfaction, and perception, of online students with the product and services received from institutions of higher learning. The data from the research was intended to assist institutions of higher learning in providing the services students demand. The data has contributed to assisting institutions in the design and delivery of lessons to the students to maximize production and student achievement.

The implementation of online education is the beginning of an institution's challenge to offer services to a broader pool of students. The ability to remain current with technology and student demands is the ongoing challenge that the institutions will encounter.

## **Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature**

There is considerable literature regarding online education. The literature focused on the services offered to online students and the perception that online students provided about their experiences. The literature search was conducted to yield information on whether the services, and product, delivered to online students was equivalent to those services offered to on-campus students. For the online student to be successful, the quality of online instruction must be equal to the services and product of on-campus instruction.

The growth of online education has prompted the debate on the quality of education provided by institutions of higher learning and the degree of satisfaction of students with the services provided. The ability of the institutions of higher learning to successfully implement and maintain online education programs is key to the success of the online student. The study of services provided by institutions of higher learning will aid in identifying those services that are critical for institutions to employ to ensure student success in online education.

**Course design.** Online students, generally, are not physically present on campus, which creates a challenge in building a sense of community and belonging to other students, faculty, and the institution. Most students tend to learn at a higher rate when actively engaged with peers and the faculty of the institution. Active engagement in course work in collaboration with peers, and faculty, create a positive environment for learning and a sense of community (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012; Wildavsky, Kelly, & Carey, 2015). Creating an atmosphere of engagement and community is an element of course design and function of the online instructor (Kegelman, 2011; Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012, Smith, 2013).

Research conducted by Kegelman (2011) indicates that the asynchronous design of most online courses adds to the obligations of online students. The flexibility of online education provides an ideal format for students working full-time that may find it difficult to attend college

or university. However, while convenient, there are additional responsibilities for online students. Online students must find the time to; study, seek academic assistance and interact with peers and instructors through written communication (Kegelman, 2011). On campus, students have one advantage of being able to interact with their peers. The ability to verbally interact on a regular basis provides an opportunity for on-campus students to discuss concerns, provide support to one another, and the ability to interact with faculty. These opportunities may not be readily available to the online student. These types of interactions between peers may act as a form of advisory, which, as Nolan (2013) identified, was critical for the success and persistence of online students. Online programs will need to develop delivery methods that allow for synchronous communication to assist the online student in engagement and to establish a sense of community.

Online instructors need to create an atmosphere of interaction to develop a sense of community, promote learning, and increase persistence in online learning. The online instructor must remain present in online discussions, encouraging peer discussion through questioning and comments. Regardless of the format, synchronous or asynchronous instructor engagement is critical in creating a positive learning environment (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012).

Administrators will need to make certain that the faculty has the training and resources to create lessons that engage students. Online students engaged in course work will create an atmosphere of inclusion leading to success and persistence. A shift in from full-time faculty to adjunct faculty is a concern when considering training in online course design (Kinkle, 2010; Saul, 2013; Smith, 2013). Adjunct faculty may not have the training to design lessons for online students that encourage interaction. Adjunct faculty are part-time employees; many have full time positions elsewhere with insufficient time to devote to assisting online students (Smith,

2013). Adjunct and full-time faculty members may not have the training to develop online courses that are engaging and interactive.

While a student needs the discipline to complete an online course successfully, faculty have the responsibility of designing lessons that promote the interaction of students. Smith (2013), in a series of interviews with faculty, found that faculty possessed positive attitudes towards online education but were concerned with the amount of student interaction. One concern is a shift from full time faculty to adjunct faculty. To meet the demands of students and ensure student success, institutions of higher education administrators will find it necessary to provide training or employ outside agencies to develop courses that create student interaction. Faculty members may be challenged by converting traditional format courses into online courses (Saul, 2013). The methods utilized in a traditional classroom setting might not be as effective when delivered in an online setting. The development of online courses has become an industry of its own existing to assist online faculty in designing courses that are engaging (Saul, 2013). Without adequate training, the course will not engage the student resulting in poor academic achievement that may result in the withdrawal of the student from the institution. The design of the online course may have a direct impact on retention rates and the persistence rate of the online student (Saul, 2013). Faculty members may require the assistance of external experts to design courses to deliver their product to the student. The online environment is subject to more rapid change than the traditional on-campus delivery method. Technologies change rapidly, and the faculty may want to evaluate the effectiveness of the course to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of the student and the institution (Saul, 2013).

Kinkle (2010) recommended training for faculty to implement online education and to take advantage of the benefits of online education. Online students value peer and faculty

interaction in creating an inclusive environment in an online course (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). A high level of interaction between the student and the instructor will lead to a positive experience for the student. Students with a positive experience in online setting are more likely to persist, leading to graduation. This interaction is present in an on-campus experience; however, it might not be as prevalent in an online setting leaving the student at a disadvantage as compared to the traditional on campus student. Existing faculty may or may not have the expertise to design courses to incorporate the interaction that most students require to learn at an optimal level. Interaction becomes a key to student success and student achievement in online courses and in on campus courses. Kinkle (2010) recommended that the university administrators implement faculty training, concentrate on the benefits of online education, and employ quality assurance to meet the needs of online students. Institutions that chose to participate in online education must invest in the resources to enable the online students to be successful. Administrators and faculty will need to recognize the value of online education and respond to the demands placed on the institution by online students.

**Online equivalent to in person instruction.** The perception that online education may not be equivalent to the education delivered in a traditional setting has been a concern to students, faculty, and employers (Kinkle, 2010; Linardopoulos, 2010; Siebold, 2007;). One result of Kinkle's (2010) research asserts that the administrators and faculty had limited knowledge of online education. Additionally, administrators and faculty had a negative view of online education, believing it was inferior to face to face instruction at a brick and mortar institution. The university administration implemented an online program but failed to recognize the importance of online education or offer the services that the students required to be successful.



Employers are aware of the interaction of staff members in daily team settings. While employers generally had positive opinions of online education, employers are concerned about the lack of interactivity in online courses. Institutions of higher learning need to ascertain the qualities that employers are seeking and design courses that will develop those qualities in online students (Siebold, 2007). “When viewed from a sociological standpoint, online education may not be on the same echelon as traditional forms of educational delivery” (Siebold, 2007, p. 2). Online education provides students with the flexibility that students are seeking; however, it might lack some elements that employers deem valuable in an employee. A traditional delivery method of education allows for student and faculty interaction. Providing for the development of skills that are necessary for a team approach to problem-solving (Siebold, 2007). Employers value the team aspect of work. Institutions offering online courses and programs must develop courses that provide online students the opportunity to interactively academically and socially. Siebold (2007) concluded that employers were in disbelief that online education was equivalent to traditional class face-to-face instruction and that online education lacked the essential social skills that are necessary to be successful in a team-oriented environment. The employers that were surveyed did not believe that online education provided equivalent levels of interactivity and did not provide for the development of team-building or networking skills (Siebold, 2007).

Linardopoulos (2010) studied the perspectives of faculty and students regarding online education. Faculty who did not have a positive view of online education believed that the university was focusing on profit rather than the quality of academic delivery (Linardopoulos, 2010). The majority of the students surveyed indicated their interest in taking another online course. The study identified the top 28 factors that students considered important in deciding whether to enroll in an online course. Included in the top five reasons were as follows: timely

feedback and presentation of coursework (Linardopoulos, 2010). The negative attitude of the faculty towards online education may contribute to the student's decision not to consider enrolling in an online course. The effect could result in a decrease in retention and possible loss of faculty positions. Online students value the timely feedback from faculty. The faculty must have a positive opinion of online education to ensure that student needs are being met as the institutions embrace changing attitudes and technology while providing value to the student.

**Economic value to the student.** Students are seeking value for the dollars spent on education (Bowen, 2013; Fullan & Scott, 2009). Retention is an important consideration as institutions of higher learning implement and maintain online programs. Fullan and Scott (2009) noted that the student had become more of a consumer seeking quality education just as a customer would expect quality when shopping for any product. Students are increasingly more likely to leave an institution if the student feels that the institution is not providing full value for the dollars expended on education (Fullan & Scott, 2009). Students will demand an education that meets their specific schedules and expectations; otherwise, they will explore the resources offered through other higher educational institutions. "The student-as-consumer trend is also now resulting in a growth in truth in advertising litigation against universities, as students sue postsecondary institutions under provisions of statutes like contract law for not delivering what was promised in their prospectus" (Fullan & Scott, 2009, p 16). Students will seek out those institutions that provide the services they demand. Administrators who choose not to embrace online education will find that their programs will not be successful in the long run.

The literature available on the experience of online students suggests that institutions of higher learning have experienced a growth in online education, which has presented the institutions with unique challenges. College administrators have experienced some barriers in

providing technical support to meet the current needs of students and face some difficulty keeping up with the constant technological advances. Substitutes for synchronous instruction have challenged faculty in providing more immediate feedback to the student by designing robust lessons that will engage the students effectively.

Online education has the potential to provide quality education with reduced costs without negatively impacting the educational results (Bowen, 2013). One challenge for institutions is the activity of implementing and delivering quality education that potential students find equitable. Students confronted with student debt, as a result of limited options to finance education, will be expecting value for dollars borrowed (Bowen, 2013). The fundamental beliefs of social constructionism are that “People are sense-making creatures, the meaning is socially constructed through language, and meaning construction is contextualized and embedded” (Loseke, 2011, p. 379). According to Loseke (2011), learning is realized through interaction. The researcher relied on the social constructionist theory as a lens to view the interactivity between students and instructors. Interactivity among students and professors is a concern that intuitions of higher learning will need to address.

**Peer and faculty interaction.** The literature indicated that there is a concern over the interactivity of students in online education programs. The studies revealed that some form of the social contract is valued by the students and employers. This social contact seemed to be essential to the success of the students in online education. Administrators and faculty of institutions of higher learning have to consider the course design and presentation to ensure that online interactivity. Employers and students are concerned with the lack of interactivity and its negative effect on the quality of online education at the post-secondary level. Interaction between students and faculty is considered an integral component of education by social constructionists.

Online learning, when viewed through the lens of a social constructionist, is dependent on interaction. The social constructionist does not believe that knowledge is derived from nature but from the interactions of others (Burr, 2015). “It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated” (Burr, 2015, p. 4). Communication then becomes an important element of learning as humans have created knowledge through interactions with others. The social constructionism theory validated the findings of Wildavsky et al. (2015) that students learn best when they are actively engaged with other students and with the faculty. Faculty and administrators designing online classes or programs must incorporate interactivity into the curriculum.

According to Burr (2015), the thoughts and the types of concepts humans develop are dependent on language. The way a person thinks and formulates ideas and concepts is provided by the language. The language provides the foundation for human thought (Burr, 2015). Since language is an important element of the development of thought, the pursuit of higher education should include the opportunity to interact with others to develop more advanced concepts. The ability to interact with peers and faculty should not be confined to the on-campus experience. Online students should have the opportunity to actively participate in discussions. The feeling of isolation through a lack of interaction with fellow students and with faculty may add to the responsibilities of the online student. While online education programs have increased the opportunities for participating in higher education, online education may have added to the responsibilities of those students choosing online education.

**Online orientation.** Student services are an integral component of amenities offered by the institution to students (LaPadula, 2003; Valle, 2016). Valle (2016) proposed that an online orientation program could increase the probability of success for the online student. It is

important for administrators and faculty to recognize that not all students will be familiar with the institution's online format. Students who are enrolling in their first online course would benefit from some form of orientation, whether they are freshmen or graduate students (Valle, 2016). As online education becomes more commonplace, the need for orientation will not subside. Changes in technology, along with changes in curriculum, will necessitate that student orientations continue as online education continues to evolve. The orientation process should be regarded as a required service offered by the college or university.

Student support services are considered an essential part of the educational process and are assumed to be available to all students attending college or university. LaPadula (2003) noted that these services have not necessarily been part of the implementation of online programs. "A student's distance learning experience is often shaped by the quality of the services that support the educational process" (LaPadula, 2003, p. 120). The services that online students receive should be designed to fulfill the needs of the online student, and these resources can be separated from those services that are offered to on-campus students (LaPadula, 2003). The needs of online students are unique, and the services offered to the students should be unique to facilitate student success. Online students do not travel to the campus to receive an education; therefore, the likeliness of these students traveling to the campus to attain support services (LaPaudula, 2003). The services provided by the institution must be as flexible as the programs offered and required services for online students.

**College readiness.** The literature review substantiated that there is a genuine concern regarding the college readiness of students. The main concern in online programs where services may not be readily available or adapted to the needs of the online student. Tutoring is easily available to those students who attend the brick and mortar institution; therefore, these services

are equally essential for the online student. The majority of college students lack the academic skills necessary to be successful at the college level (Bantum, 2013). Online students must have access to tutoring services that are flexible and constructed to meet their schedules.

Administrators and faculty will need to be mindful of the relationship between the services offered to the students and student success (Bantum, 2013). Student success leads to student retention, which benefits the student and sustains the institution.

Milman, Posey, Pintz, Wright, and Zhou (2015) identified services that were important to online graduate students. These findings indicated that online graduate students valued; interactions with the faculty, support from individual faculty, library services, and support that was implanted in the course (Milman, Posey, Pintz, Wright, & Zhou, 2015). These support services were utilized daily and were essential to the successful completion of coursework. Services that were not utilized as frequently were of lesser importance to the students. The services identified as important are readily available to on-campus students institutions need to implement procedures to make these services available to all students regardless of delivery method.

The research investigated the overall satisfaction of online students with the product and services received from institutions of higher learning. The research focused on the services provided by institutions of higher learning to online students. The research explored how the services offered to online students promote success and persistence. The concern is student success and retention to graduation. Kegelman (2011) noted, “There is no consistent reporting format, but there is consistency in reports that online students are generally less successful than their face-to-face counterparts” (p. 4). The goal of the research was to identify those services

that, if provided, will ensure that the online student will be as successful and persist to graduation.

The data from the research was intended to assist institutions of higher learning in implementing and maintain the services students demand and to provide equivalent services to online students. The data can assist institutions in the design and delivery of lessons to the students to maximize production and student achievement. “It is no longer possible for university administrators to continue to operate in a vacuum and ignore the basic tenets of market competition” (Robinson, 2017, para. 3). Competition for online students should contribute to the growth of services for online students. Universities will need to be competitive, offering quality programs and services to all students.

The implementation of online education is the beginning of an institution’s challenge to offer services to a broader pool of students. The ability to remain current with technology and student demands is the ongoing challenge that the institutions will face. The research will assist the institutions in remaining current with student demands. To be successful, institutions of higher learning will need to provide quality services and products to online students. Student success and retention are equally important to institutions and students.

## **Review of Methodological Issues**

The purpose of this study was to examine whether institutions of higher learning are providing services to students that promote success and persistence regardless of the delivery format. There was considerable literature available that examined services provided to online students and assessed student satisfaction with the services provided. This study explored what services are deemed critical to student success in the online delivery format with the intent of providing institutions statistical data to assist in the implementation of services to support online students.

A review of previous methodologies revealed that the researchers employed a variety of research methods to obtain data from the participants. “Research approaches are the plans and the procedures for research that span the steps from broad assumptions to detailed methods of data collecting, analysis, and interpretation” (Creswell, 2014, p. 3). Creswell (2014) illustrated three predominant approaches to research; qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. A review of the prior research indicates that researchers relied on the three approaches as outlined by Creswell (2014).

The principal method of obtaining data from the participants, in previous studies, was through the application of surveys. The purpose of the survey, from the researcher’s point of view, was to acquire data from the participants regarding their experiences and perceptions of online education. The purpose of the research was to gain generalized information from the target population and draw inferences from that sample regarding their opinions and perceptions of online education (Creswell, 2014). The interview design is such as to illicit qualitative data, which the researcher will use to develop beliefs regarding the research topic. The design of educational research explored a particular research topic (McKenny & Reeves, 2012). Prior



research sought to identify trends rather than to verify or refute a known theory. Woods (2008) employed an online survey to determine student satisfaction between traditional delivery format and online format. Woods (2008) was not attempting to establish student satisfaction, not validating or refuting a known theory.

Surveys provided a convenient method of obtaining data from a population. Creswell (2014) noted that a survey provides a relatively inexpensive and quick method of collecting data. Qualitative research often relies on interviews in the field by the researcher, which provides an opportunity to observe people as data is collected by the researcher. The researcher uses an instrument of data collection rather than a survey or questionnaire (Creswell, 2014) Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) sampled approximately 1600 online students rendering interviews impractical. The advantage of such a large sample is that it would provide for a diverse sample of the population.

Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) sample represented approximately 1,600 students from 110 different professors. Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) employed a single sample technique to obtain research data. A single sample process is a researcher who has direct access to people in a target population, enabling the research to contact people directly (Creswell, 2014). The size of the sample also impacts the ability of the researcher to collect the necessary permission from the participants.

The participants were voluntary, and the purpose of the research was communicated to the participants (Creswell, 2014). Several of the researchers studied employed the internet to deliver the surveys to the participants. In order to utilize internet responses, permission was required from the participants (Creswell, 2014). The internet provides a convenient and fast method to sample a population while providing the means to gain permission before the study. A

smaller sampling, such as conducted by Kinkle (2010), does not present such an issue. Kinkle (2010) interviewed a total of 10 participants. The interview presented Kinkle (2010) with the opportunity to explain the study in person and obtain written permission. Obtaining informed consent was an important element of the data collection process.

The participants must be aware of a number of components related to the research study. The participants were provided with the following the purpose of the study, the commitment of the participant, the nature of the study, the fact that the participant can withdraw at any time, the benefit to the participant, the researcher's information, and the assurance of confidentiality of the research (Creswell, 2014). These elements were communicated to the participants prior to data collection, regardless of the form of data collection.

The majority of the prior research was conducted using a qualitative research approach. The researchers made an attempt to determine the significance of online education to the student and the institution. The researchers were not attempting to prove a particular theory related to online education. "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2014, p. 4). Previous research studies were endeavoring to establish the thoughts, impressions, and value of online education as held by various individuals. The problem researched was the notion that online education was an inferior form of delivery than face to face instruction, which negatively impacted the online student. Valle (2016) employed a quantitative approach to evaluate the services offered by institutions of higher learning to online students. Valle (2016) was mainly concerned with ranking the services according to usefulness, and a quantitative approach allowed for the comparison of the variables (services) provided. "A theory in quantitative research is an interrelated set of constructs (or variables) formed into propositions, or hypotheses, that specify

the relationship among variables (typically in terms of magnitude or direction)” (Creswell, 2014, p. 54). Valle (2016) made the inquiry to determine the importance of individual services (variables) to one another as they related to the success of the online student.

Orosz (2016) used a mixed-method approach to researching student outcomes from online courses versus face to face instruction. Creswell (2014) described a mixed-method approach as an approach that necessitates collecting both quantitative and qualitative data from participants and merging the data. The mixed-method approach allows for a more in-depth view of the research problem (Creswell, 2014). The qualitative piece would explore the factors that lead to success for the online student (Creswell, 2014). The purpose of this study was to explore the services that promote success and persistence at the college level. A qualitative study would provide the greatest range of data to determine the effectiveness of services offered from a student’s perspective. Regardless of the method employed, the use of theory is incorporated into the research at some point.

The data gathered was utilized for several purposes. The data was used to explore experiences or can be used to implement change (McKenny & Reeves, 2012). This research study into the satisfaction and success of online students was not testing a known theory. The research was more likely to yield evidence as to which services are most effective, for success and persistence, from a student’s perspective. In attempting to determine if institutions of higher learning are offering services that promote success and persistence, a theoretical view of the data was implemented (Creswell, 2014). This theoretical view was used in molding the questions asked of the participants and was used to influence the data analysis (Creswell, 2014). The research study would not validate any known theory but rather identify services that online students deemed effective in promoting success and persistence. These services could then be

implemented, or refined, by institutions of higher learning to empower online students to succeed.

Most of the prior research was from a qualitative approach, which is understandable since the researchers were attempting to identify generalizations and form a grounded theory from the data provided by the participants (Creswell, 2014). The researchers employed qualitative approaches to provide data on the experiences of students to come to an understanding of the perceptions of students regarding online education. The prior research would indicate that a qualitative approach with a theoretical lens would be the preferred research method. Qualitative research usually is conducted in person in the participants setting (Creswell, 2014). This study was limited in obtaining information from the participants through a survey instrument. Quantitative research normally is conducted via a survey; however, the addition of free response questions will allow the researcher to obtain data understanding how the participants interpreted their online experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Synthesis of Research Findings**

The prior research reviewed consisted of a variety of topics concerning online education as opposed to traditional face-to-face instruction. The research focused on services provided to students of online education by institutions of higher learning. Taken as a whole, the prior research provided information and concerns regarding the state of online education as provided by institutions of higher learning.

The previous research, reviewed, does not address the question as to whether online students are receiving services that lead to success and persistence in education. The research has broadened the knowledge of online instruction as related to the success of the online student.

This new research has increased knowledge as to how students perceive online education (Creswell, 2014).

The overarching issue revealed in previous research was the concern over interaction or a sense of belonging in online education. This issue was found in previous research of; faculty, students, and potential employers. The lack of interaction between peers and instructors presents a challenge to institutions to engage online students through instruction or services offered.

Students need to feel a sense of community, as evidenced in Shackleford and Maxwell's (2012) research study. Shackleford and Maxwell (2012) concluded that this could be accomplished through course design. To effectively design engaging online courses, faculty may need additional training or work in conjunction with other professionals in course design. Engaging online courses create a connection with the professor and the institution.

Nolan (2013) determined that a connection to the institution was an essential factor in the success of the online student. Research conducted by Nolan (2013) established that students who were afforded the services of a single advisory during their studies were more likely to persist and complete their course of studies. An advisor is an important, if not essential, connection for the student. An online student often relies on this advisor as their connection to the institution (Nolan, 2013). The connection to the institution was made through the services of an advisory. A connection to the institution can be made through peer to peer contact or through contact with the faculty.

Burney (2002) resolved that timely feedback from faculty was an important element of instruction that online students valued. Burney's 2002 study validates the position of Wildavsky et al. (2015) that students learn best when they are actively engaged with other students and with the faculty. Faculty can aid in making the connection between the institution and the online

student by providing timely feedback and through active engagement in online discussions. The importance of the dialogue between faculty and online students was also documented by Eom and Ashill (2016).

The perception of faculty, and others, has an effect on creating the connection between online students and the institution. Kinkle (2010) determined that the negative opinion of online education by faculty and administration hindered the development of a relationship between online students and faculty. The university implemented an online program; however, the faculty did not realize or understand services that online students required for success. Linardopoulos (2010) documented that the negative opinion of online education by faculty prevented the establishment of a connection with the institution resulting in a decrease in online student enrollment. The connection to the institution, interactivity with students and faculty will enhance the perception of online education with prospective employers.

The success of the online student extends beyond the classroom. Online students will need to compete with traditionally instructed students for employment. Siebold (2007) found that employers generally maintained a positive attitude regarding online education but were concerned with the lack of peer to peer interaction. The concern of the employers centered on the lack of development of social skills necessary for problem-solving in the corporate environment. The employers surveyed believed that online education did not provide the opportunity for skills that would be required in the workplace (Siebold, 2007). The skills that are necessary for success in the workplace are normally developed through peer interaction.

Student support services are assumed to be available to all students regardless of the content delivery method. In the case of the online student, services assist in the development of a connection to the institution and in creating a sense of belonging. LaPadula (2003) noted that

these services have not necessarily been part of the implementation of online programs. “A student’s distance learning experience is often shaped by the quality of the services that support the educational process” (LaPadula, 2003, p. 120). The persistence and success of the online student are dependent on the services that are offered by the college or university.

The previous research indicated that the online student requires a connection with the institution, faculty, and peers to succeed. The research determined if online students are receiving equivalent services required for success. In determining if the services provided to online and face to face students are equivalent, a register of services as is necessary for the online student’s success was developed.

### **Critique of Previous Research**

The prior research reviewed was concerned with various aspects of online education compared to traditional face-to-face instruction. The research studied did not necessarily attempt to make recommendations that would increase the overall experience and success of the online student. The research will attempt to identify the services that, when implemented by an institution, would increase the persistence and success of the online student.

Creswell (2014) suggested that deficiencies in past research may have occurred for various reasons, including; topics not investigated with a particular population, evolution of the issues, or a segment of the population being excluded from the study.

While the majority of the prior research is, recent there have been advances in online education, which may render some of the previous research obsolete. The study of online support services by LaPadula (2003) may not represent the current demands of the online study. The services deemed important in 2003 may not be the services that online students are requesting today to be successful in their studies. The research that LaPadula (2003) conducted was

completed in 2001, and the results indicated that students were interested in social services over academic counseling, this may not be reflected in the current online environment.

Valle (2016) conducted a study evaluating the satisfaction level of online students with services provided. The study was conducted at a small private university resulting in a narrow interpretation of the services provided. Due to the limited sampling Valle (2016) was unable to make wide-scale generalizations. Valle (2016) did not provide the students surveyed an opportunity to comment on the importance of specific services provided. The data collected represented the students' satisfaction according to a Likert scale. The study does not contain free form comments from the students regarding the level of satisfaction or the importance of the services offered (Valle, 2016). The views of the students would be critical in determining which services are important to student success and persistence.

The majority of the literature on online education centers on the academic qualities of education and that more studies are required to determine which online services have been effectively implemented (Valle, 2016). The research has determined which services that institutions have implemented, and which services are valued by the online students.

Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) conducted research into the interaction between instructors and students to determine factors that led to establishing a sense of community. The study surveyed 1,589 students at one university located in the South-Central United States. The return rate was 24% resulting in 381 surveys that contributed to the data (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). While the sampling was limited to one institution, the use of open-ended qualitative questions resulted in identifying what interactions the students considered important (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). The inclusion of student comments on a survey allows for a more detailed analysis of the data providing a basis to understand what services an institution of



higher learning should be offering or implementing to assist online students. Student perceptions of online education will enable institutions to respond to the growth in online education adequately.

The response to online education was researched by Kinkle (2010). Kinkle (2010) researched a specific university's response to the growth of online education by interviewing two administrators and eight faculty at the University of Mississippi. The interview consisted of twelve questions concerning the university's response to the growth of online education and the response of the university. The results may reflect the position of the university; however, it is difficult to ascertain the results are typical of most institutions or represent only the perception of the University of Mississippi. The study provided insight into how a traditional university responded to online education, although the results may represent only the University of Mississippi and not the community of higher educational institutions. The response of institutions of higher learning to online education will need to consider course design to engage online students and faculty.

Research into course design was studied by Saul (2013). Saul (2013) concluded that the faculty, and course designers, favored the implementation of progressive online courses for beginning online students; however, Saul (2013) noted that "further research might better define the content of the courses and their application to online higher education institutions" (Saul, 2013, p. 105). Saul (2013) identified that consistency in online course design would increase performance for online learners. "The findings have indicated a desire among participants to create consistency among online course designs relating to online learner performance. This tactic might improve learner performance, but further research might further define the details of a consistent, effective online course design" (Saul, 2013, p. 104). Saul (2013) identified areas

where changes to online course design would benefit the online learner, but the specific details of the design remain to be researched. Course design is a service that is provided and, as such, will have an impact on the perception of students regarding online education. Institutions need to view course design as a service provided to online students that has an impact on student success.

Student satisfaction with the services provided is essential to understanding what services are required regardless of the delivery method. Woods (2008) surveyed online students and traditional face-to-face students regarding satisfaction with services provided, concluding that students were partially satisfied with the delivery of student services. The research was limited by several factors, according to Woods (2008). The data was gathered from an urban community college and may not represent the views of rural students or those students from a four-year university. Woods (2008) employed a quantitative survey to gather the data, which did not provide the students with an opportunity to express their opinions. Woods (2008) acknowledged that a qualitative component to the survey “would provide in-depth information on how student services are perceived at the community college level” (p. 79). The research did not correlate the relationship between services offered and student persistence or student achievement (Woods, 2008). The relationship between services provided and the success of online students is the major focus of the research. To determine student perception of the services provided, a qualitative component to the survey is critical.

The literature review indicated that a qualitative component of data collection is necessary to garner a deeper understanding of the services offered and the success of online students. While sample size might be an important consideration allowing the students the opportunity to express their opinions presents the best opportunity to discover what services

online students need to be a success and the services that institutions of higher learning need to implement. Based on the review of literature, an investigation of the services provided by institutions of higher learning may yield significant findings regarding the success of online students. The literature review provided strong support for research into services offered by institutions to online students to answer the following multi-part question: Do institutions of higher learning provide equivalent services to online students as to traditionally instructed students, and what is the impact on online students?

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Online education has become a fundamental way students receive instruction from institutions of higher learning. Online students are entitled to equivalent services as students who are instructed face-to-face. The services provided to online students should enable the online student to persist and succeed in graduation, and institutions of higher learning have a moral obligation to provide such services.

The review of literature has provided evidence that an online student must develop a bond with the institution to be successful. The faculty and administration of the institution must develop programs and courses with foster the development of the bond between student and institution.

Online education cannot be viewed as merely a revenue-generating program for the institutions. The institutions have a moral obligation to online students to provide equal services to retain students to graduation. It is no longer acceptable to enroll students without providing adequate services to ensure their graduation (Fullan & Scott, 2009). As consumers' students will seek institutions that meet their needs, and the institution which does not offer sufficient services to online students may not be successful. Online students expect courses and programs that will

equip them for life beyond the classroom, and employers will be expecting students who have the skills to contribute to the corporate world after graduation.

The growth and popularity of online education will require colleges and universities to implement courses that are interactive and challenging to the student. Faculty members may require additional training or assistance in developing courses; however, the quality of online education must be equivalent to that of face-to-face instruction.

A review of the literature raises sufficient questions regarding the services provided to online students as opposed to those offered to on-campus students. Online students require an interactive and engaging course to develop a relationship with the institution, which will promote retention and success. The literature provides sufficient reason for a research project which addresses the question: Are institutions of higher learning providing services to online students that foster success and persistence?

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the research methods utilized in this qualitative exploratory research study. The investigative quality of this research study affords the researcher the option of employing qualitative methods to explore the attitudes and perceptions of online students towards online education.

As of the fall of 2014, approximately six million students were enrolled in online education classes, with total enrollment in post-secondary institutions expected to rise 15% by the year 2025 (NCES, 2014). Notwithstanding the growth of online education, the extent of student satisfaction varies. The extent of satisfaction or dissatisfaction depends on several factors, as concluded in a study by Chyung and Vachon, 2005. The factors that determined student satisfaction or dissatisfaction are variables which can reside with the student or are external variables that reside with the institution of higher learning (Chyung & Vachon, 2005). Previous student experiences and demographics contribute to student retention and success. “These are the characteristics of the student (previous education, socioeconomic status, previous GPA, previous experience, age, gender, etc.) and the skills that they already have developed” (Jorissen, Keen, & Riedel, 2015, p. 233). These characteristics impacted student success and persistence; however, this study focused on student success through the services provided to the online student by the institution.

Institutions of higher learning should embrace the challenges of the digital age to raise the standards of online education to ensure that the programs offered are equal to face to face instruction meeting the needs of the student and the institution (Christensen, 2011). Skepticism exists as to whether online programs are offering equivalent educational products and services

compared to traditional on campus offerings. “Private sector respondents are particularly concerned, with 46% expressing worry that the U.S. is lagging behind other countries in its ability to produce high quality professional” (Glenn, 2008, p. 10). Students have become more consumer oriented, demanding services that meet their expectations. Students will demand an education that meets their schedules and meets their expectations; otherwise they will explore other alternatives for education. Students have become more consumer oriented as such students are holding postsecondary institutions liable, through legal options, for claims made in advertising and their prospectus (Fullan & Scott, 2009).

This researcher examined the online student’s experience through a social constructionist lens. Social constructionism maintains that knowledge is not derived from nature but rather from our social interactions (Burr, 2015). According to Burr (2015), daily social interactions result in the construction of knowledge. The quality of online education is related to the interaction between peers and the professor. On campus delivery offers the opportunity for interaction between students and faculty; online delivery must be designed with interaction as a primary goal.

Through this research study the researcher explored whether institutions of higher learning provided online students with the services necessary for retention and success. The study was aimed at determining the level of adequate services that are provided to online students by assessing the data provided by this population. Research designs are the methods employed that include making assumptions for collecting data, analyzing, and interpreting the data (Creswell, 2014). The research design chosen for the research project was a qualitative research method.

The process or event, being evaluated in this research project, was online education and the participant's experiences. "The key idea behind qualitative research is to learn about the problem or issue from participants and to address the research to obtain that information" (Creswell, p.186, 2014).

The goal of the research was to obtain information from a sample population of online students regarding their attitudes and beliefs concerning online education (Creswell, 2014). The data was analyzed to determine whether the institutions offered online services, which resulted in student success and persistence. Data provided through student interviews and surveys was utilized to identify services which institutions of higher learning must provide to online students to ensure student success.

### **Research Questions**

This basic qualitative study included participants enrolled in an undergraduate organization leadership program at a state university. The researcher focused on the perception of the participants with regard to the benefit of online support services offered. In particular, the researcher was interested in which online support services were essential to the success of the online student. Without adequate online support services, the online student is less likely to persist to graduation (Bailey & Brown, 2016).

The following research questions guided this study in relationship to the perception of online students regarding services provided by the institutions.

The research questions are:

1. What remote services are the most effective in promoting success and persistence from the perspective of the online student?

2. What are the perceptions of online students regarding the quality, value, and accessibility of the services provided?
3. From a student perspective, how can institutions of higher learning improve remote services to online students?

### **Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of the study was to gain an understand of the perceptions of online students towards online support services to identify essential support services. The ability of the administrators of institutions of higher learning to successfully implement and maintain online education programs is key to the success of the online student. As the number of online learners continue to grow, it is essential to understand how to support online learners so that they may achieve their goals (Stavredes & Herder, 2013).

Identifying the perceptions of online students towards support services identified those services that students deemed essential to success and persistence. The findings of this study can provide universities with elements of an online support system that online students consider essential.

This researcher employed a basic qualitative study to identify the perceptions and attitudes of online students regarding online support services. “A basic qualitative study is the most common form and has as its goal understanding how people make sense of their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 42). In the study ten online undergraduate students participated in a Qualtrics questionnaire and telephone interview. The researcher sought to determine the online support services that are essential to online students. Current online students are in a unique position to provide meaningful data regarding online support services to administrators of high education.



This research utilized a qualitative research methodology. The qualitative research methodology is commonplace, where a researcher does not pronounce it as any particular type of qualitative research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A basic qualitative research design was used to identify the perceptions of students regarding online education. In a qualitative study, the researcher was concerned with the worth of the experiences the participants encountered in the real world and their attitudes towards those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The experiences of the online student were essential in determining the effectiveness of the online services provided by the college or university. Throughout the qualitative research process, the researcher focused on interpreting the data from the participants regarding a problem rather than on the meaning the researcher holds regarding the problem (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative data was utilized to analyze the participants' attitudes regarding the online services provided. The qualitative data provided diverse views from the targeted population. Qualitative data provides a deeper understanding of the student's perception of the services provided, while the quantitative data will provide a more generalized view (Creswell, 2014).

A review of previous literature revealed that students were not afforded the opportunity to express their thoughts in a free response format. Therefore, it was determined that this study would employ student interviews, and a questionnaire to determine the attitude and beliefs the students embrace regarding the services offered by the college or university. The interviews provided qualitative data and provided by the students with an opportunity to expand in understanding what aspects of support services contributed to their success in online education (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). The feelings and attitudes of the participants were an important component of the research and this information was used as part of the data analysis (Hesse-Biber, 2014). The attitudes formed by the online students were a result of lived experiences and

provided a unique insight which was considered during data analysis. Providing online students, the opportunity to express their thoughts, attitudes, and experiences regarding online education offered a deeper representation of their perceptions.

Data from the total number of participants was examined to discover which services offered by the college or university promoted success and persistence for online students. The data was gathered from interviewing students who have completed courses or pursued degree programs that were offered online, as well as, from an online survey instrument. The student interviews provided both the student and the researcher the opportunity to explore areas of concern that was discovered through the course of the interview, an opportunity which cannot be developed through a survey instrument.

Qualitative data provided for unrestricted responses to questions and allowed the participants to share their opinion. The ability to provide open-ended responses was a significant factor missing from the research and literature reviewed. Quantitative data normally is comprised of closed-ended questions (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative data will provide an aspect that quantitative data cannot provide. Qualitative data provided some insight into the attitudes of the research participants regarding online education. One of the attributes of qualitative data is that the data provides a better understanding of an issue and the experiences of the participants, which is not available from quantitative data (Watkins & Gioia, 2015).

The qualitative data was collected by interviewing students through telephone interviews and from an online questionnaire. The decision to incorporate telephone interviews for this study was based on the writings of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), who advocate that the “researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis” (p.15). The ability to interact with the study participants provided a greater opportunity to gather data that led to a richer final analysis

of the data. Interviewing study participants allows for a richer understanding of the attitudes and opinions shared by the participants. The researcher was able to immediately clarify or further explore a participant's statement, which a survey does not permit.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

Invitations to participate in the research study were distributed to the undergraduate students enrolled in the Organizational Leadership Program (ORGL) at Regional State University (a pseudonym) in South Central United States. A pseudonym was utilized for confidentiality. The study was limited to undergraduate students enrolled in the ORGL program of the university. The target population for this research study was approximately 119 online undergraduate ORGL students. The target population mirrored the overall demographics of the university representing a demographic as follows: 2% Asian, 4% African American/Black, .1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 6% Hispanic/Latino, 50.6% White/Caucasian, and 17% American Indian/Alaskan Native. The target population reflected a 2:1 ratio of females to males. The researcher anticipated that 15%–30% of the undergraduate population would participate in this basic qualitative study resulting in approximately 16 to 33 participants.

The anticipated participation rate of 15%–30% was not realized; a total of 10 students participated in the research study resulting in a participation rate of approximately 8%. The participant sample represented a demographic as follows: 70% White/Caucasian, 1% American Indian/Alaskan Native, 1% Other, and 1% who preferred not to answer. Seventy percent of the participants were female and 30% of the participants were male.

Creswell (2014) suggested that a return of 10% from the potential participants would represent a typical return. However, the response rate is dependent on the participants' ability to participate in an interview. The schedules of students and employees were a challenge; therefore,

participation in a study to this magnitude promoted some barriers in terms of their availability to contribute to volunteer to be a part of the study. The researcher used email reminders through Qualtrics as a method to prompt the students to respond to the invitation to participate.

The target population for the study were students who have participated in online courses. The target population was limited to those students who have completed an online course or program. The attitudes and opinions of those students who completed a course or program were important in identifying the services that online students require to be successful. The actual number of respondents was dependent on several variables, with the participation rate promoted using reminders and the ease of completing the questionnaire. The sample was a convenience sample; participants were chosen based on their availability (Creswell, 2014). The sample was dependent on the participants responding to an email invitation to participate in the questionnaire and telephone interview.

### **Instrumentation**

Qualitative interviews and surveys were the main source of data collection for this research study. Data was collected through a remote interview by telephone. Qualitative interviewing is necessary when it is not possible to observe behavior or peoples' reactions to the issues being studied (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Flick (2018), qualitative research is the act of connecting with the real world rather than conducting research experiments at a test center. An email survey would allow the participants time to reflect on the questions that are not available during a face-to-face interview (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). However, an interview allows the researcher to gather information, clarify statements, and pursue topics not considered in the original study. Some participants will speak fluently with little prompting; however, asking open-ended questions will encourage the participants to respond freely. The original

design cannot be so rigid that the design prevents a shift or change in direction once the research begins (Creswell, 2014). The key element is to learn the participant's perception of the issue and to adapt the research as necessary to gain this type of information (Creswell, 2014). For this study, a semi structured interview was employed. The semi structured interview allowed for more flexibility than a structured interview allowing the participant to respond uniquely to the open-ended questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The objective of the research was to explore attitudes towards online education based on online students' experiences. Appendix A details the interview protocol which was completed by the participants.

### **Data Collection**

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested three methods to record the data obtained during the interview. The two preferred methods were audio recording and note taking, for this study, audio recording and note taking were utilized. Audio recording ensured that all of the participants' thoughts are captured for analysis, note-taking allowed for researcher reaction to what was shared by the participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participants were emailed an interview protocol and survey prior to the telephone interview (see Appendix A). This approach allowed participants time to consider a response to the initial question. The interview began with, "Please tell me about your experiences with online education." Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested that open-ended questions will allow the participant more flexibility in their responses. The interview protocol incorporated a statement that informed the participant the interview would be recorded, including that the recording would be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

The researcher sent a total of three emails to the prospective participants. An initial invitation email was distributed to the target group introducing the study with a request to

participate and a click to consent feature (see Appendix B). The incorporation of the consent option allowed the participant to participate in a brief demographic survey. The second email was used as a reminder email that noted the agreement made by the participant to engage in the research study (see Appendix C). The reminder email was sent approximately one week from the initial invitation. The third email contained the interview protocol. Upon completion of the study, the researcher emailed a thank you card in recognition of their voluntary participation in the study.

The qualitative data was evaluated using the constant comparative method to determine the participant's life experiences with online education and whether institutions of higher learning are providing services adequate for the success of online students. The qualitative data was utilized to explore the attitudes of the participants with online education.

### **Identification of Attributes**

This qualitative study investigated the attitudes and experiences of the participants regarding online education. The overarching purpose of a qualitative study was to define how people understand encountered experiences in life (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The objective of the qualitative research study was to understand the experiences of the participants with online education rather than to determine the causality of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A qualitative study uses words as the data compared with a quantitative study that is concerned with numerical data to prove or disprove a theory (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The qualitative method of research design was chosen to determine the attitudes of the participants towards online education and to explore which factors of online education contributed to the attitudes shared by the participants.

The social constructionist contends that knowledge is constructed through shared daily social interactions with other people (Burr, 2015). Interaction between people is of importance to the social constructionist (Burr, 2015). Social constructionism maintains that we come to understand the world around us through our interactions with other people (Burr, 2015). Learning and acquiring knowledge in an online setting is dependent upon interaction with peers and with faculty. The study explored the online student's learning experiences with online education.

### **Data Analysis and Procedures**

The research study provided qualitative data, which was evaluated through a process of data analysis to interpret the data. Participant interviews offered a narrative of the attitude and opinion of the participants toward online education. Previous literature did not provide in-depth responses from the participants. The data did not provide a deep examination of the attitudes of online students. This research study explored the perceptions and attitudes of online students through a variety of questions designed to incite responses from the participants.

Creswell (2014) recommended a seven-step process for reviewing and analyzing the data. The recommended steps are as follows: organizing the data, reading the data, data analysis with some form of the coding process, creating categories and themes, develop how themes and categories will be characterized in the analysis, and the final step, which is the interpretation of the data.

The purpose of data analysis was to determine the answers to the research questions (Merriman & Tisdell, 2016). The analysis began with a review of the notes and recorded responses from the study participants to order categories and themes regarding the participants' attitudes towards online education and the services provided. The analysis of the data searched

for reoccurring patterns in the perceptions of online students. The global analysis was used to serve as an interpretation of the researcher's discernment of the online student's insight into the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

To analyze the data, the researcher used a procedure termed constant comparison. The constant comparison method is a coding process to categorize and then compare data for further analysis (Freeman, 2005). Constant comparison, created by Blaser and Strauss, is most often linked to the grounded theory methodology but is commonly utilized in other methodologies as well (Freeman, 2005). At one time, the constant comparative method of data analysis was utilized primarily with a grounded theory research study. However, the constant comparative method is now widely used in many types of qualitative studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Glasser (2008) described the basic rule of constant comparative method as identifying an incident coding it to a particular category and comparing the incident to others in the same category looking for commonality.

Analyzing the participant responses yielded codes in the form of word patterns. The data was evaluated using the constant comparative method to determine codes and themes in the data. The beginning analysis was quite broad, reviewing the data for any pieces of data that seemed relevant to the research study. In the beginning stages of analysis, the scope was fairly broad, being referred to as open coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Open coding is defined as the labelling of any piece of information that may be applicable to the study. Saturation of data can occur when there are no new responses to the open ended inquiries asked during the participant interviews. Once the transcripts were reviewed with codes assigned to pieces of data, the open codes were then reviewed, sorting the open codes into categories. Axial coding is the grouping of codes into categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The process of open and axial coding provided



descriptive codes that were obtained through the participant interviews. The descriptive codes were then reviewed to determine meaning through analytical coding, which moves beyond descriptive coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Each interview transcript was reviewed to identify incidents and group them into categories. The codes were then compared to identify themes regarding the participant's experiences with online education. The data was broken down into incidents which were then grouped by category. If a student responded that technical support was the most important service offered, that incident was logged under the essential services category. Constantly comparing the data lead to categories that will clarify the students' perception of online education and to those services which are essential for the success and persistence of online education students. This method provided the researcher with a greater understanding of the issue being studied through the lives of the participants (Freeman, 2005).

### **Limitations of Research Design**

The limitations of this study were the access to the target population and the sample size. To conduct the research study, permission must be obtained from those in a position of authority to acquire access to the participants (Creswell, 2014). The researcher obtained permission to use email addresses from the participants to engage in the online survey. The importance of obtaining permission from the participants as part of the required initial questions so that they understood that a survey instrument would be utilized (Creswell, 2014).

Invitations to participate in the research study were distributed to the undergraduate students enrolled in the Organizational Leadership Program (ORGL) at Regional State University. The study was limited to undergraduate students enrolled in the ORGL program of the university. The demographics of the target population mirrored the overall demographics of the online enrollment at the university. The target population for this research study was

approximately 119 online ORGL students whose demographics mirrored those of the research institution. Representing a demographic of; 2% Asian, 4% African American/Black, .1% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 6% Hispanic/Latino, 50.6% White/Caucasian, and 17% American Indian/Alaskan Native. The target population reflected a 2:1 ratio of females to males. I expected that 15%–30% of the undergraduate population to participate in this qualitative study.

The convenience of conducting an interview at the participant's convenience makes the choice appealing. The researcher is familiar with the demands placed on online students creating, therefore, provided a relaxed atmosphere for the participant. The convenience of the interview and the familiarity of the researcher in online education will result in an increase in the number of participants and greater quality data for analysis.

The study focused on the establishment of a relationship between the online student, the faculty, and the institution. Developing a sense of community in an online course is critical for student satisfaction (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Students need to feel a sense of inclusion in the course or the program and that they are not alone in their studies (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Students will model their behavior after the instructor's behavior in an online setting allowing the instructor an opportunity to create a sense of community (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Social constructionism maintains that people learn from interaction with each other. The emphasis on the study is to determine the extent of interaction on student success and persistence in online education.

### **Validation**

Internal validity was established through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) following their policies and completing the necessary forms for conducting research. Federal regulations require IRBs to operate to protect participants from human rights violations (Creswell, 2014).

The main concern for IRBs is the protection and well-being of the participants in the research study (Cannon & Buttell, 2015). Completing the IRB process ensured that the research study protected the participants and the integrity of the project. Research for the study did not commence until Concordia, and Regional State University IRB committees had examined and approved the research study.

The Participants were in control of their participation in the research study, and the researcher explained that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The study eliminated any identifiable data in the research to protect the confidentiality of the participants. A portion of the ethical code for researchers includes the privacy protection for the subjects and communicating the protection to the participants (Creswell, 2015). Information regarding the study was communicated to the participants through the introduction email transmitted to the participants prior to undertaking the survey. The participants signed an informed consent form, which will outline the protections provided by the study.

**Credibility.** The researcher recognized any potential biases as a recipient of completing the majority of my education in an online setting. The researcher was able to remove my own biases and focus on the data that was provided by the participants in the study and maintain the integrity of the information shared throughout the research study.

The lack of free from responses in previous studies provided an external validity threat. The addition of free form response provided more detailed data from which generalizations can be applied to other groups not surveyed. Creswell (2014) noted, “External validity threats arise when experimenters draw incorrect inferences from the sample data to other persons, settings, and past or future situations” (p. 176). The target population for the study represented a typical undergraduate population at a large university. The sample size represented a variety of

experiences with online education settings providing the basis to generalize that the results were typical of other online students. The addition of free form responses and telephone interviews added to the credibility of the study. Triangulation was achieved through the collection of data through more than one data collection method. This researcher compared data collected through questionnaires to the data collected through telephone interviews. Triangulation “is a powerful strategy for increasing the credibility or internal validity of research” (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016, p.245).

**Dependability.** In qualitative research the researcher is exploring the real life experiences and explaining those real life experiences through the lens of the participants. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The participants were provided the opportunity to review their questionnaires during the telephone interview. This allowed the researcher, and participants, to accurately describe their experiences. Providing rich, thick descriptions of the participant’s experiences. Rich, thick description “has come to be used to refer to a highly descriptive, detail presentation of the setting and in particular, the findings of a study” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257).

The research study was not time-bound in terms of when the participants were enrolled in online classes. The participants completed online courses at various times. The data provided information on past and present attitudes regarding online education. The results provided information on the future state of online education; it allowed for drawing generalizations about the past and present issues in online education. In order to incorporate future situations in online education, the study would need to be replicated at a later date to determine if past and present issues have been resolved.

## **Expected Findings**

The researcher anticipated that between 10%–15% of the prospective participants would participate in the qualitative study regarding online education. The participation rate for the study did fall within this expected range. The researcher understood that the participants' responses are confidential and that these participants would be truthful in sharing how they viewed support services based on this level of confidentiality. The researcher expected the findings from the participant's responses to the confidential interview would indicate that institutions of higher learning have struggled to provide services specifically designed for online students.

Previous literature did not allow for open-ended responses from the participants. It was expected that a participant interview would provide more detailed data on services that online students require for persistence and success.

A study using prior research indicated that there were several reasons for student dissatisfaction with online education. Lehman et al. (2013) explained how there are several factors that influenced the attitudes of students towards online education as follows: frustration, a lack of connection between the institution and the students, untimely feedback, a lack of student interaction, and inadequate guidance in instruction (Lehman et al., 2013). The researcher suspected that there would be similar concerns from the participants to include some of the previous factors addressed in the literature. The literature indicated that one source of frustration was with technical support. I expected that with the advances in technical capabilities and support that this will no longer be a significant source of frustration. I expected that negative attitudes and experiences with online education would result from the lack of connection with fellow students, the faculty, and the institution resulting in online student failure.

Services and interactivity will vary by institution and instructors. A review of previous literature reveals that services and interactivity vary by the approach to online learning, the training, and the commitment of the faculty.

### **Ethical Issues**

**Conflict of interest assessment.** The researcher is a current doctoral student enrolled in an online format; therefore, understands issues evolving any potential conflicts of interests in the development of the research study. Consequently, the researcher has no direct connection with the target population enrolled at the university as the researcher is not employed nor enrolled in a program at the institution where the research study was conducted.

**Researcher's position.** I, as a student, was the principal investigator in the research study. I was responsible for ensuring all IRB policies and procedures were followed during the research project. There were no other personnel involved in the examination and analysis of the research data.

**Ethical issues in the study.** The research study followed all the policies and procedures of the Concordia Institutional Review Board and those of Regional State University's Institutional Review Board. There was no deception employed in the research study. Participants received a copy of the Informed Consent Letter prior to participating in the study. Participants were free to refrain from answering any questions which are uncomfortable and were free to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

### **Summary**

The chapter outlined the descriptive participant interview design, which was utilized in the research study to determine whether institutions of higher learning are providing online students with sufficient services for student success and persistence. Qualitative data, gathered

from participant telephone interviews, was used to gain a greater understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of students towards online education.

Online students require distinct services from brick and mortar students. The online student faces a different set of challenges, and these experiences cannot be identified with those traditional students who are not enrolled in this format. Online students not receiving adequate online services may experience persistence issues and a lack of student success. The results of this research may assist other institutions of higher learning to identify services which online students deem important to their persistence and success in online courses. The research may make online administrators and faculty aware of the challenges encountered by online students and facilitate the creation of techniques or approaches to increase online student retention and success.

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results**

### **Introduction**

This basic qualitative research study was conducted to determine the perceptions of online students regarding online student support services. For online students to succeed in an online format, support services will be required for graduation completion. The goal of the research study was to gather data from a sample population of online students to understand their perceptions of the value of online education. The importance of understanding how this population perceives the flexibility that motivated them to enroll in an online format over a traditional classroom setting. By the year 2025, NCES (2014) reported that online education enrollment would increase by 15%.

This chapter entails a description of the sample population, an explanation of the data collection methods that were used to analyze this information attained in this qualitative research study. This chapter concludes with a summary of the findings and a presentation of the data.

### **Description of the Sample**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perceptions and attitudes of online students in regard to support services offered. Student support services are essential to online students to succeed in their educational pursuit leading to graduation. Online students require services that create a sense of inclusion and belonging. Without these services, an online student is more than likely to withdraw (Bailey & Brown, 2016). As the number of online learners continues to increase, higher educational institutions will need to understand how to support online learners for the student to be able to achieve their goals (Stavredes & Herder, 2013).

The target population selected for this research study was comprised of online students enrolled for the fall 2019 semester, who declared a major of Organizational Leadership (ORGL)



at Regional State University. The target population consisted of 119 undergraduate students that were enrolled in the online baccalaureate degree program. The demographics of the target population reflected the current enrollment at the university consisted of the following demographic: Asian 2, African American 5, Hispanic Latino 7, Other 24, American Indian/Alaskan Native 21, and White/Caucasian 58. Also, the target population reflected a 2:1 ratio of females to males to represent the gender composition of online enrollment at the university. Figure 1 indicates the data as described above.

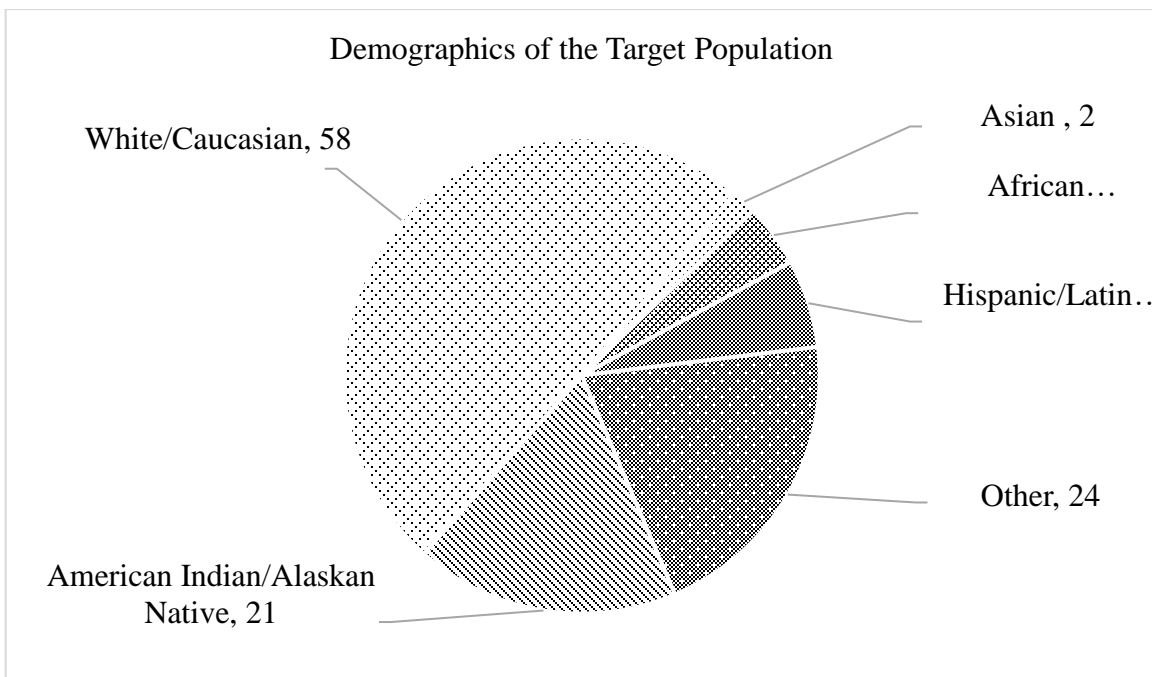


Figure 1. Demographics of the target population.

The participant sample was obtained using an open invitation with a demographic questionnaire. The demographic questionnaire gathered information including, age, gender, ethnicity, highest degree earned. A total of 10 students agreed to participate in the research study. The participants represented the following demographics; White/Caucasian 7, American Indian/Alaskan Native 1, Other 1, and Prefer Not to Answer 1. Six of the participants were enrolled full-time with the remaining students enrolled on a part-time basis. Nine of the 10

participants were enrolled solely online, one participant was receiving online instruction in addition to attending class in person. All participants had completed more than six online courses. Figure 2 represents the demographics of the participant sample.

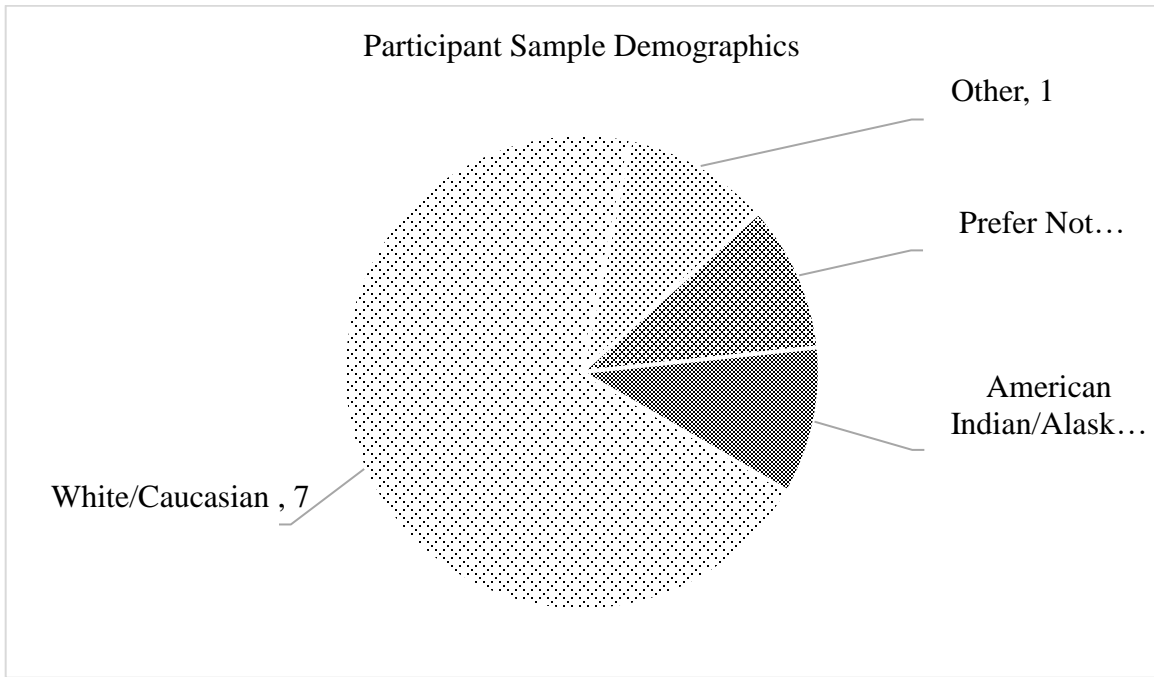


Figure 2. Demographics of the participant sample.

### Research Methodology and Analysis

The data collection process began after receiving approval from Concordia's IRB and Regional State's IRB committees. The initial email sent to the target population, from Qualtrics, included an invitation to participate, a description of the study including the confidential nature of the survey, an online consent form feature, and a demographic survey. This email was sent to all 119 students who met the criteria for this study. By incorporating an online consent option, the participants were able to access the interview protocol. After completion of the interview protocol, a follow-up interview was scheduled for each participant. This design provided a clear method of steps that would ensure that the participants provided both consent and the ease of scheduling was accomplished by providing the information in one central location.

The researcher set a goal to achieve a participant pool in which 10 participants had completed the confidential survey distributed by Qualtrics. Nine of the 10 participants completed a telephone interview, and one participant did not respond to the request for a telephone interview.

The participant's confidential information was collected in Qualtrics that allowed for data analysis using the constant comparison method. The data was analyzed by using open, axial, and selective coding. The descriptive codes were reviewed to determine the full meaning of the data collected. Codes were compared to identify themes and similarities regarding the participant's experiences with online education.

Once all of the data had been collected from the Qualtrics surveys and the telephone interviews, the researcher was able to examine the data. During the open coding process, the researcher divided the data into broad categories, which were labeled according to the participants' responses to the online Qualtrics survey and telephone interviews. The data was cataloged into broader categories using the three research questions;

1. What remote services are the most effective in promoting success and persistence from the perspective of the online student?
2. What are the perceptions of online students regarding the quality, value, and accessibility of the services provided?
3. From a student perspective, how can institutions of higher learning improve remote services to online students?

The researcher included a figure of word frequencies to illustrate the common word patterns among the participants.

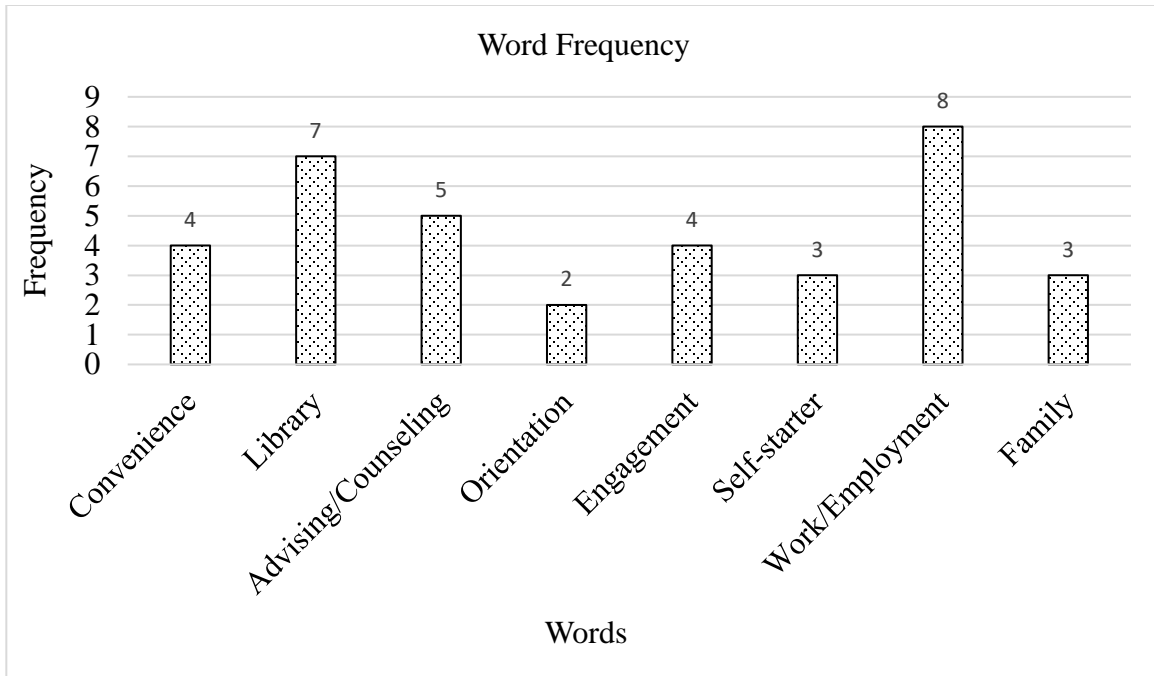


Figure 3. Word frequency of common word patterns among participants.

The second step in analyzing the data was axial coding. “Axial coding is the process of relating categories and properties to each other” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 229). Axial coding was employed to discover the relationships between the open codes and to verify the participant’s perceptions of the online services provided.

The first axial code was part of the result of the participant response(s) that explored how they perceive success and persistence in an online education environment and what the university provided for online services. The axial code relates to the participants’ perception that they are receiving similar services as students who receive instruction in a face to face environment. The second axial code that emerged was the availability of services the participants needed to continue their education. This axial code relates to the open code of flexibility, services that are available when the participants required the services. The third axial code connects student success to required interaction with faculty and peers. Online students are

removed from the physical classroom and require alternative methods of connection with peers and faculty.

The last step in the process was selective coding; during selective coding, a core category emerges from the collected data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Selective coding was used to determine a single code that was common to all the participants in the basic qualitative research study. The research led to the selective code that all students valued the flexibility and convenience of online education and required convenient online services to be successful. The objective of the qualitative research study is to understand the experiences of the participants with online education rather than to determine the causality of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is the real-life experiences that the participants encountered, which was collected and analyzed by this qualitative research study. The researcher coded the participants from 1 through 10 to protect their identity and to ensure confidentiality.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The results of the surveys and telephone interviews revealed that 90% of the participants enrolled in online education because it supported their ability to work full-time. The participants were able to overcome external obstacles such as family commitments, employment commitments, and distance by enrolling in online education. Online education offers the flexibility and convenience to study fitting the participant's schedule. Participant 6 stated, "I have three kids and work full time. It was the only choice." Participant 2 listed "freedom, work, and the ability to travel" as factors that influenced their decision to enroll in online education. Participant 9 indicated that "time and work" made online education the only means by which they could complete their degree. The participants' responses were similar, which identified how they valued the flexibility of online education in meeting their educational needs. The

participants were able to overcome the outside obstacles which were preventing them from receiving education in a traditional setting. Each participant held that online education provided a viable opportunity to complete their education without online education degree completion would not be possible.

After a review of the data from the participants, two specific support services emerged as being useful in promoting the success and persistence in online education. The open codes which emerged from the data revealed that the following services contributed to their success: library services and advising or counseling services. Seven of the 10 participants cited library services as being essential to their success, and five participants referred to advising or counseling services as being vital to their success in online education.

From the data collected from the online Qualtrics surveys and telephone interviews, two open codes materialized. The open codes that emerged from perceptions of quality, value, and accessibility were; equal and convenient. The open code value encompassed concepts such as; the same as a brick and mortar education, and comparable to traditional education. The value represented the participants' perception of the worth of online learning. The open code convenience referenced the flexibility of online education, allowing the participants to continue their post-secondary education. Participant perceptions of convenience varied depending upon the participant's situation.

An analysis of the data collected revealed two open codes that focused on the improvement of services to online students. The open codes that surfaced were; flexibility and engagement. The open code of flexibility referred to the limitations surrounding the availability of support services. The open code engagement centered on the interaction between peers and professor-student interaction. Interaction for the online students is constrained by the lack of face

to face contact as in a brick and mortar setting. Online students interact through technology. Email communication, class discussions on Blackboard, and video conferencing characterize the interaction between online students and faculty.

**Presentation of the Data and Results**

From the data collected by the Qualtrics survey and the telephone interviews, four themes materialized from the research data. Table 1 illustrates participant responses regarding essential services.

Table 1

*Essential Online Services: Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding Online Student Services*

Participant	Library	Advising	Equivalent	Convenience	Interaction
Participant 1		X		X	X
Participant 2	X			X	X
Participant 3			X	X	
Participant 4		X		X	
Participant 5	X	X		X	X
Participant 6	X	X	X	X	
Participant 7		X		X	X
Participant 8	X	X	X	X	
Participant 9			X	X	
Participant 10	X	X	X	X	X

The responses are explained in detail in the following sections. The following major themes that were identified:

1. Advising and library services were essential services for student success.
2. Consideration of how online education is equivalent to a brick and mortar education.

3. More significant interaction would improve online education.
4. Students enrolled in online education for the convenience and flexibility.

The four themes were applied to answer the research questions produced in the research study. Themes 1 and 4 answer research question 1, *What remote services are the most effective in promoting success and persistence from the perspective of the online student?* Themes 2 and 4 satisfied research question 2, *What are the perceptions of online students regarding the quality, value, and accessibility of the services provided?* Theme 3 answered research question 3, *From a student perspective, how can institutions of higher learning improve remote services to online students?* The four themes are defined in greater detail in the following sections.

### **Services Essential for Success**

Two online services had emerged as the most essential to the success of the online student. Library services and advising services were recorded as these services necessary to promote success. In interviewing the participants, 8 of the 10 participants reported using either library or advising services to aid them in their educational success in an online format. In understanding what support service had impacted their success, the participants reported that half of them focused on library services, and the other remaining participants focused on advising services. Also, the participants noted the value of these services and how it was necessary for their pursuit of online education.

The seven participants who utilized advising services explained how essential these services were essential to their success. Participant 4 stated, “advising was awesome.” Participant 1 declared that “advising helped me stay on track with courses.” A similar sentiment was echoed by Participant 6, stating that “the advisor was good and assisted with enrollment.” The advisor was key personnel, according to Participant 8. Participant 8 also noted that it was essential that once assigned to a student, the advisor remained with the student throughout the



program. Participant 7 indicated that Native American Support services, along with student advising, were instrumental in offering encouragement during their online experience.

Participant 7 referred to advising as “student support,” indicating that advising played a more significant role in student success beyond assisting with enrollment. The function of robust advising services played a critical part in their education because of the support and encouragement that these services provided to the students.

Neither age or enrollment status was unique to the participants who utilized advising services. Three age groups were represented by the participants listing advising services as essential to their success. Six of the participants were full-time students, and four participants were part-time students.

Seven participants reported utilizing the online library system offered by the university. Five of the seven participants that used library services reported library services as essential to their success. Two of the seven participants utilized the library services but did not believe those services to be essential to their success.

Participant 10 noted that “the library was a hidden gem and was easy to use.” Participant 10 also stated they “relied” on the online library quite often, and the library was an essential part of their success in online education. Participant 8 stated, “the library had good access and was easy to use.” Participant 5 also stated that “the library was good and easy to use.” Participant 6 cited access to the library and JSTOR as essential to their success. Participant 2 noted the ease of use of the library as well. The majority of the participants identified the library as a critical service commented on the ease of use of the library. Online students are subject to many demands which diminish the time available to devote to education. The accessibility of support services is an important factor for online students. Participant 10 mentioned the significance of

having accessibility to library services that operate on a 24-hour basis was important to these students.

In interviewing the participants, some of the participants did not consider library services as the sole factor in their success; however, they did perceive the value of the service. Participant 4 stated, “the library was awesome” but did not indicate that library services were essential to their success. Participant 7 also listed the library as a service that was utilized but was not an essential service to their success. Some of the participants used other means of acquiring information for class assignments in lieu of library services and reported how they liked having other research options.

Three participants did not use library services opting to utilize internet services such as; Google and YouTube to research class assignments. Participant 9 indicated that the freedom on online education allowed “you to figure stuff out,” including research on the internet. Participant 3 reported awareness of access to the library but were more familiar and comfortable with using the internet for research purposes. Participant 1 did not utilize the library, preferring to utilize “outside resources” for research.

Seventy percent of the participants made use of the resources available through the library. The remaining 30% of the participants reported that they did not utilize library services in their online studies. Online students require services that create a sense of inclusion and belonging; without these services, an online student is more likely to fade away from higher education (Bailey & Brown, 2016). Online students rely on technology to connect with the institution, faculty, and peers. Students depend on email, video conferencing, and messenger to communicate with their peers and with the faculty given the absence of direct personal

interaction. The utilization of library services created a connection to the university, promoting a learning environment for online students.

### **Equivalent to Brick and Mortar Education**

The data collection provided compelling insight on how the participants perceived online education in comparison to online education. A majority of the participants recognized online education as equivalent to a traditional classroom environment.

Five of the 10 participants reported that they were able to work independently without any issues. For example, Participant 10 stated, “online education requires you to be a self-starter who can seek out the answers.” In addition, Participant 10 felt that this method of learning sharpened his independent study skills, as well as perceived online learning as more challenging than the traditional classroom setting. Participant 9 confirmed that online education required independent study skills, which led to increased learning. Participant 3 indicated that online study requires a “unique set of study skills,” which emphasized self-sufficiency. Participant 6 stated, “self-discipline and being a self-starter with technology” were requirements that made online education equivalent to, if not more challenging, than in a brick and mortar setting. Participant 1 indicated, “they learned more online as they had more freedom.” The ability to work independently provided the freedom necessary for the participants to succeed in online education.

Four participants observed the expectations of online professors and course work were equivalent to those at a brick and mortar institution. Participant 8 indicated that the professors’ expectations were comparable to those of professors in a brick and mortar setting. Participant 1 stated, “professors were very hands-on and the same as they are in person.” Participant 5 did not indicate that the professor’s expectations were equivalent to those in a brick and mortar setting;

however, this participant believed that the professors were equally accessible and supportive as those in a brick and mortar setting. Participant 9 did not specifically comment on the expectations of the professors; however, they commented on the overall expectations of online education. Participant 9 stated, “the course work is not easy” and that “people who don’t believe that should give it a try.” While acknowledging the perception that online education was not equivalent to a traditional classroom format, Participant 9 dispelled the perception. Online education may require different skillset compared to a brick and mortar education; the expectations are not diminished by the delivery method.

Several participants believed that online education was more difficult, requiring more considerable effort than being enrolled in a brick and mortar education. Online education involves determination and more of a time commitment because you have to read instructions, follow discussion posts, and perform reading and other tasks. Participant 7 stated, “online is more work requiring more organization with a greater time effort.” Participant 4 thought that online education was “harder and more time consuming.” Participant 8 revealed that online classes required, “more attention” than a brick and mortar class, emphasizing the fact an online student needs to be more self-reliant. “Participant 2 indicated that in-person study requires most of the work to be done online and that online education was “more difficult.” Participant 10 captured the difficulty created by family life. “My lifestyle is very busy with a full-time job, active church life, and grandkids, to name a few.” The daily life activities of online students contribute to their perception that online education is as difficult if not more complicated than a brick and mortar education.

One participant indicated that online education was not equivalent to a brick and mortar education. Participant 5 was the lone dissenting voice stating that “brick and mortar was a time

crunch, and it's easier to learn and read assignments in online education." Time was the only area where Participant 5 indicated that online education was not equivalent. Participant 5 believed lack of time crunch made online education easier, providing more time to absorb the course information. While participant 5 found that online learning was not equivalent, they "absolutely love" their online education experience.

In closing, the participants had mixed feelings on how they viewed both forms of educations as each participant was able to access the disadvantages and advantages of both brick and mortar and online educational formats. Many of the participants recognized that online learning required a different type of skillset and commitment that would need each student to be self-engaged.

### **Greater Interaction**

In response to questions that were designed to understand student and faculty engagement, the participants expressed overall concern about participation. Fifty percent of the students were critical of faculty or student participation in online courses. Participant criticism centered on a lack of response to discussion board posts, unanswered emails, and a need for greater faculty interaction. In defining engagement, the participants viewed 'their meaning differently and how they perceived the level of involvement is efficient in an online environment. Consequently, five of the participants believed that their on-line experience could have been improved through engagement.

The reliance on email communication was a prime concern for four of the participants of the study. Participants 5, 7, 2, and 1 reported the professors answered emails quickly and frequently communicated with students through email. Participant 5 stated that the professors were "readily" available but did understand why this is a concern to online students. Participant 7

detailed, “there was plenty of communication” with the professors responding to emails “on time.” Participant 2 stated, “all of my professors emailed frequently, so I never felt that I was missing interaction with any of them.” Participant 1 noted, “I’ve always had quick responses from professors in online classes and have never been left waiting, even on weekends. Email, in these cases, was the link to the institution that students require to be a success in online education.

Establishing a link through email communication was not evident for all participants. Two participants did not feel a connection to the professors through email communication. Lacking a direct personal connection to the faculty, online students rely on email to establish a link to the faculty. Reduced response times or a lack of response inhibits the establishment of a connection with the faculty member. Participant 4 stated, “faculty did not return messages.” Participant 4 also indicated that the professors did not care and did not “help with the process of learning.” Participant 10 expressed, “there were a few classes where emails were answered within 24 hours.” Indicating that emails were not typically answered promptly. Participant 3 made no mention of communication with professors or engagement with peers. Participant 6 (online and in-person student) connected with the professors during the traditional class setting, forcing email connection in online classes less of a necessity. Although Participant 6 was enrolled in both online and traditional classes, Participant 6 communicated strictly in the traditional class format.

The opportunity to connect with professors and establish a link to the university was disconnected, according to two participants. Participant 9 indicated, “there was little interaction,” even though the professor had a “weekly optional video chat meeting.” Inadequate participation in the video chat meetings resulted in a missed opportunity to connect with peers and to connect

with the professor. Participant 9 reflected, “I was the only student present at the two video chats attended.” Participant 8 stated, “one mandatory monthly meeting” would improve communication and establish a connection with the professor.

Four participants cited a lack of interaction with peers. The lack of engagement between students revealed a second missed opportunity for connections to the university and peers. Participant 3 indicated, “no interaction with other students.” Participant 9 indicated, “very little interaction only interaction posted on discussion boards.” Participant 6 indicated, “there was no interaction with other students.” Participant 10 felt that the online experience was improved with engagement. Participant 10 stated, “felt best when discussion boards were used, and emails were answered.” Participant 10 was not satisfied that discussion boards were not utilized in all classes.

Two students referred to group projects when answering on faculty and student interaction. Participant 5 mentioned group projects as a means of the student to student interaction. Participant 1 stated, “most classes had group projects,” which required students “email, chat, or even call other students.” Participant 5 noted that group projects promoted peer interaction by requiring to contact between students. Participant 2 mentioned how group projects were used as a means of increasing peer to peer interaction but noted that communication during group projects was difficult. None of the participants who mentioned a lack of student to student engagement mentioned group projects in their response to the question of interaction in online education. Participant 7 noted that “Student communication did lack because I never really had to talk to other classmates other than on discussion boards.”

The participants reflected on how group projects seem to force interaction among peers. In situations where the professor mandated chats, the students seemed to be more cooperative in this fashion compared to cases where the professor presented the chats as optional. Group

projects provided a venue for students to perceive the value of interaction and communication in an online setting, and this might be contributed to concern about how their peers would negatively perceive them for lack of participation.

**Convenience and Flexibility**

Table 2

*Demographics of Research Study: Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding Online Student Services*

Participant	Age	Enrollment Status	100% Online	Courses Completed
Participant 1	26–35	Full Time	Yes	More than 15
Participant 2	26–35	Full Time	Yes	11–15
Participant 3	46–55	Part Time	Yes	More than 15
Participant 4	46–55	Part Time	Yes	More than 15
Participant 5	26–35	Full Time	Yes	More than 15
Participant 6	20–25	Full Time	No	6–10
Participant 7	20–25	Full Time	Yes	6–10
Participant 8	26–35	Full Time	Yes	More than 15
Participant 9	36–45	Part Time	Yes	11–15
Participant 10	46–55	Part Time	Yes	11–15

The data from Table 2 indicated that nine of the 10 participants were studying 100% online. Eighty percent of the participants mentioned work as a factor in their decision to enroll in online education. Other factors that promoted both convenience and flexibility factors were as follows: schedule, distance, time, and family. Convenience and flexibility were factors in 100% of the participants’ reasons for choosing online education; however, comfort and flexibility held individual meanings.



Eight of the 10 participants mentioned employment as a factor in their decision to enroll in an online education program. Three of the eight participants reported that employment was the sole factor for enrolling in an online program as opposed to enrollment in a brick and mortar program. Participants 3, 4, and 7 cited work as the determining factor in choosing online education. Family commitments were reported as factors for Participant 10 and 5 in enrolling in online education in addition to employment. Participant 10 stated, “because of family commitments, “an educational opportunity that would work with my schedule” was required. Participant 5 mentioned the convenience of online education to accommodate their family and work schedule. Participant 5 felt less of a “commitment” while taking online classes. The ability to complete lectures and work from home made online education the optimum method of receiving education for Participant 5. Participant 8 reported time as a factor associated with their full-time work schedule eliminating traditional schools as a viable option for receiving education. Participant 6 commented that work and home life made online education as the only viable choice. Participant 6 noted that a “reduced commute” and that they could complete their “degree faster” made online education the ideal choice.

Two participants expressed the fact that online education was their only option to complete their degrees due to full-time employment commitments. Participant 2 and Participant 9 both mentioned that online was the only viable means by which they could complete their degree due to time constraints and full-time employment. Participant 2 enrolled in online education to complete a bachelor’s degree and believed that online education “was my only option.” Participant 9 stated, “It’s the only way I would be able to complete my degree,” citing both work and family responsibilities making attendance in a traditional classroom unviable.

One participant enrolled in online education to continue their studies at Regional State University. Participant 1 had previously studied at Regional State University but had moved from the area making attending in person impractical. Participant 1 desired to complete their degree at Regional State, making online studies the only option available to complete their degree at Regional State University.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the data from Qualtrics surveys combined with telephone conversations with the participants in the research study. The surveys and conversations were conducted with 10 online students from Regional State University, located in South Central United States. The students were online undergraduate students enrolled for the fall 2019 semester with a declared major in Organizational Leadership.

The findings from this qualitative research study presented by the themes that were discovered through the data collection process. This qualitative research study provided a better understanding of the perspective of online students towards online education. The four major themes were; services essential to success, equivalent to a brick and mortar education, higher engagement and convenience, and flexibility.

Overall, the participants were satisfied with the convenience and flexibility of online education, which allowed the participants to continue their education without sacrificing family or work commitments. In some cases, online education was the only viable option for degree completion. Participants were also generally satisfied with the quality of online education because they believed that online education is equivalent to a traditional brick and mortar education. The participants held that online education necessitated a different skill set than brick and mortar education but was nonetheless demanding. The participants were the most critical of

the engagement component of online education. The participants generally felt that greater engagement by peers and faculty would result in a greater learning environment.

Chapter 5 will provide a discussion and overview of the findings that were described in this chapter, combined with literature that supports the results. Chapter 5 will provide information and recommendations for university administrators and faculty and recommendations for further research into the perceptions and attitudes of online students towards online education.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of online students pertaining to the online support services offered. The data collected from a confidential Qualtrics questionnaire and telephone interviews were analyzed using the constant comparison method. The advances, and availability, of technology has increased the demand for online education. As of fall 2014, approximately six million students were enrolled in online education classes, with total enrollment in post-secondary institutions expected to rise 15% by the year 2025 (NCES, 2014). As the number of online learners continue to grow, it is essential to understand how to support online learners so that they may achieve their goals (Starves & Herder, 2013). The students in this study have provided valuable information on the perspective of online student services. The perceptions share by the students are important in understanding, and establishing online support services for students.

As an online student this researcher is interested in the perception of online students towards online support services and which support services institutions of higher learning should offer online students. This researcher employed a basic qualitative study to examine the perceptions of online students regarding the online support services offered. In this study this researcher utilized telephone interviews and a Qualtrics questionnaire to explore the perceptions of online undergraduate concerning the online support services received. This chapter includes a summary of the results and a discussion of the results compared to the previous literature. The chapter concludes with recommendations for future research studies.

## **Summary of the Results**

This researcher began this study to investigate the experiences and perceptions of online students concerning the online support services offered. There is previous literature regarding online support services offered to online students, however the majority of the previous literature consisted mainly of data collected from surveys and did not provide an opportunity for free form responses. To augment previous research this researcher employed one-on-one telephone interviews, in addition to a Qualtrics questionnaire, allowing for free form responses from the participants. Through this basic qualitative research study this researcher strove to comprehend the perspectives of online students regarding the online support services offered.

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to determine the attitudes and perceptions of online students in relation to the services provided by the institution. Several studies have been conducted to track the support services that colleges and universities provide to online students (Kinkle, 2010; LaPadula, 2003; Nolan, 2013; Saul, 2013; Shackleford & Mawell, 2012; Woods, 2008). Developing a sense of community in an online course is critical for overall student satisfaction (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Students should feel a strong presence in the course or the program and that they are not alone in their studies (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Online students are usually detached from the physical campus requiring unique support services to establish a connection to the institution to promote success and persistence. During this basic qualitative study, the research tried to understand the perspective of the online students regarding the support services offered through the lens of a social constructionist. Social constructionism maintains that knowledge is not derived from nature but rather from social interactions (Burr, 2015).

Ten online undergraduate students from one university took part in this research study. Each of the participants had completed online courses and had utilized online support services offered by the university. The participants offered perspectives on the research questions regarding online support services offered to students. The results of this research study provides the perspective of online students with respect to the online support services that were offered. This researcher chose this study to expand upon the previous literature providing by exploring the perspectives of online students who have utilized online support services. The data from the participant questionnaires and telephone interviews from the ten participants led to the identification of four themes. The four themes relate to the research questions for this study.

### **Discussion of the Results**

This research study was undertaken to answer the research questions through the lens of the social constructionist. The social constructionist believes that knowledge is gained through social interaction and experiences within everyday life (Burr, 2015). This researcher relied on the experiences of the online students to guide the research through this basic qualitative study. The data in this basic qualitative research study uncovered the participants perceptions of online support services through lived experiences in online education. The primary research question for this study was, “What remote services are the most effective in promoting success and persistence from the perspective of the online student?” The primary question was answered by the first theme, services essential to success. The ten participants in this research study found benefit in several of the online support services offered. As the number of online learners continue to grow, it is essential to understand how to support online learners to achieve their goals (Stavredes & Herder, 2013). This researcher used the perception of the participants to identify support services that were deemed essential. The Qualtrics questionnaires and telephone

interviews led to the classification of four themes. The four themes that emerged were: services essential to success; equivalent to brick and mortar; greater interaction; and convenience and flexibility.

The participants in the study enrolled in online education as, for most of the participants, online education was the only viable option to complete a degree. The participants share the trait of being self-starters. The participants expressed that being a self-starter was an invaluable trait to succeed in online education. The participants noted that being a self-starter assisted in research necessary to succeed in online classes. The participants shared the obstacles they had to overcome to continue their education. Several participants were not aware of all support services which were available. Online students need to be educated regarding support services to be successful.

The second research question in this basic qualitative study was, “What are the perceptions of online students regarding the quality, value, and accessibility of the services provided?” The perception that online education may not be equivalent to the education delivered by a tradition is a concern to students, faculty, and employers (Kinkle, 2010; Linardopoulos, 2010; Siebold, 2007). Overall the participants were satisfied with online education and perceived that online education was equivalent to a brick and mortar education. The second theme, equivalent to brick and mortar and the fourth theme convenience and flexibility addressed the second research question.

The third research questions in the study was, “From a student perspective, how can institutions of higher learning improve remote services to online students?” The students held various positions on improving online education. The common observation of the participants concerned communication. The previous literature indicated a concern over online student

interactivity. Burney (2002) resolved that timely feedback from faculty was an important element of instruction that online students valued. Burney's 2002 study validates the position of Wildavsky et al. (2015) that students learn best when they are actively engaged with other students and with the faculty. The third theme, greater interaction would answer research question three. The four themes are discussed in greater detail throughout Chapter 5.

### **Services Essential to Success**

From the data collected two services were identified as essential to success in online education these services were, library services and advising/counseling. Seven of the participants utilized library services, and five participants utilized advising/counseling services. The participants were divided equally as to which service was essential for success; each service was considered essential by 50% of the participants.

The ease of use and availability of the library were considered important features to the online students. Participant 8 stated, "the library had good access and was easy to use." Participant 5 agreed about the value of library services stated, "the library was good and easy to use." Participant 10 noted that "the library was a hidden gem and was easy to use." The ease of use was a key element in the value of the library to the online students.

Eight of the 10 participants cited work or employment as a barrier that impacted their ability to focus on online education. Three of the participants emphasized the difficulty of balancing family obligations in pursuing online education. The participants acknowledged the time constraints that include work and family obligations impacted their ability to commit to the demands of an online educational program. The institution provided some level of satisfaction to the students by providing an external resource that allowed them to meet the requirements for



success in online education classes. Conversely, a library system that would be difficult to use would discourage online students and not promote success or persistence.

Access to the library is essential to the students as seven of the participants utilized the library services. Access was more than the ability to have use of the library; it was the ability to access the service on their schedule. Participant 6 explained how the library as an essential service along with “access to online databases such as JSTOR.” The availability of the library and the online databases fit the schedules of the online student. An online student, working full-time, cannot take advantage of online services during the regular workday. Participant 7 mentioned that online education allowed them to “work full-time and still go to school.” These services were available outside of the typical workday, allowing students to pursue their education. The availability of online services, specifically library database access, is essential for online student success.

Advising/counseling services were utilized by five of the 10 participants; all five participants considered advising/counseling as essential to their success in online education. When financial aid is considered as an advising/counseling service, nine of the 10 participants utilized advising/counseling services.

Nolan (2013) suggested that a connection between the institution and the online student was essential for success. The advising/counseling services were essential for 50% of the participants in making the connection to the institution. Participant 8 stated, “the advisor was key personnel and that it was important to have the same advisor.” Participant 9 returned to school after a 22-year absence. Participant 9 mentioned that having the same advisor was invaluable to their success. The consistency in having the same advisor was a key factor in the success of the students.

Participant 1 declared that “advising helped me stay on track with courses.” A similar sentiment was echoed by Participant 6, stating, “the advisor was good and assisted with enrollment.” Participant 1 had moved from the local area, making online education the only viable choice to complete a degree at the research university. The advisor was key in assisting with enrollment and making the connection to the university. Participant 6 decided to change majors because the program was offered 100% online. In addition, the participant required assistance with enrollment and was able to obtain assistance from the advisor to make this connection. The research supports Nolan’s (2013) belief that the advisor is an important link to the institution. The relationship between the advisor and the student cultivates a sense of community which Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) deemed essential to online student success. An advisor must be assigned to an online student to form a relationship that will support the online student and connect the student to the university. Nolan (2013) documented that online advising, or live chat, was acceptable for simple questions but did not establish a long-term relationship with the institution. Long term relationships are established through formalized online advising procedures, which are essential for student success (Nolan 2013).

While advising provided valuable services to the students, many of the students were unaware of the existence of these services offered by the institution. Seven of the 10 participants had little or no knowledge of the services offered. Table 3 illustrates the limited number of services that students utilize.

Table 3

*Services Utilized: Perceptions and Attitudes Regarding Online Student Services*

Participant	Library	Advising/ Counseling	Financial Aid	Writing Services	Technical Support
Participant 1	X	X	X		
Participant 2	X		X	X	
Participant 3			X		X
Participant 4		X	X		
Participant 5	X	X	X		
Participant 6	X	X	X	X	X
Participant 7	X	X	X		
Participant 8		X	X		
Participant 9	X				
Participant 10	X	X	X		X

Participant 9 indicated that they were “not sure if any” services were offered to online students. Participant 6 could only name Microsoft products as services offered to online services. Participants 4, 1, 10, 2, and 5 collectively identified in terms of knowing about one service that was offered for online students. Three of the participants listed library as one of the services that they knew was available to online student, and two other participants explained that they knew to advise was the other service known to online students. The participants were able to take full advantage of online services offered; however, the participants were not aware of all support services offered by Regional State University.

Advising was considered an essential resource by five of the 10 participants. This confirms the research by Nolan (2013), where 15 of 16 participants considered an advisor

essential. Participants were familiar with how to access and take online classes. However, most of the online students surveyed were not aware of all support services offered by the university. The university has designed support services for the online students who have not sufficiently communicated to the students the services available. Universities communicate information on taking courses but are not as effective in communicating how to obtain support services (Nolan 2013).

Three of the 10 participants mentioned the need for orientation. Orientation would provide an opportunity for the university to communicate expectations for online education and to share information about the services to support students. Participant 8 was aware of the services provided but thought that orientation would provide faculty and staff an opportunity to “find out what they are signing up for.” Participant 9 felt they would have benefitted from an orientation after an extended absence from school. Participant 10 believed that orientation would enable students to learn how to access and use the library, which was essential for success.

Thirty percent of the participants felt orientation would have benefited them in their online pursuit. An online orientation program should be implemented by the university to ensure student awareness of support services. Students need to be advised on the availability and procedures to access support services. Students who are enrolling in their first online course would benefit from some form of orientation, whether they are freshmen or graduate students (Valle, 2016). A mandatory online orientation course would ensure that all students are familiar with online format of the institution and support services offered. As online education continues to evolve orientation the orientation process will need to evolve and become a required component of any online curriculum.

## **Equivalent to Brick and Mortar**

The second theme that emerged from the data concerned the equivalency of online education compared to a brick and mortar education. The perception that online education may not be equivalent to the education delivered in a traditional setting has been a concern to students, faculty, and employers (Kinkle, 2010; Linardopoulos, 2010; Siebold, 2007). The participants in the research study did not share this perception rather believing that online education was equivalent to a brick and mortar education. Nine of the 10 participants felt that online education was equivalent to a brick and mortar education, one student did not believe that online education was equivalent. The participants cited several attributes of online education which resulted in skill development.

The ability to work independently and to be a self-starter were essential skills identified by three of the participants. Online students must find the time to; study, seek academic assistance, and interact with peers and instructors through written communication (Kegelman, 2011). Online students develop independent study skills developing independent study skills. Participant 6 indicated, “decent amount of self-discipline” is required to complete coursework. Participant 9 shared how online education required independent study skills, which led to increased learning. Participant 4 agreed that being a self-starter was a key skill for an online student. Participant 10 stated online education, “demands a self-starter that can seek out answers to questions when there isn’t an instructor that you can reach out and touch.” Participant 10 explained how online studying had “sharpened my independent study skill.” These participants believed that online education required certain skills that a brick and mortar education did not require.

Although working independently as a self-starter may be an attribute, it is may also be a disadvantage to the online student. Participant 8 indicated that it was necessary to consult Purdue Owl to become familiar with the APA writing style. Participant 9 shared how it was necessary to search the internet for APA formatting, “didn’t know APA that’s what you have Google for.” Neither of the two participants consulted the writing services resources offered by the university. The use of Purdue Owl and Google, by the participants, do not foster a connection with the university. These findings revealed that the students were working alone and struggled because they were unaware of all the services that could have aided in their success. Participant 10 found it necessary to search YouTube for videos on terminology for a statistics class. This participant was aware that tutor.com was an available service offered by the university; however, they decided not to take advantage of these services. Services were in place to assist the students. However, these students felt working independently was an expectation of online education.

The students equated the independence and time commitment to attending a brick and mortar class. Participant 4 indicated that online education was “harder and more time consuming.” Participant 10 said, “being an online student sharpened my independent study skills. I think it may be more challenging to be an online student.” Participant 7 stated that “online education is hard because you have to constantly be on top of your classes and have your priorities straight.” Participant 5 found that some online courses were “more challenging” than brick and mortar classes requiring an online student “to have strong reading and writing skills, computer proficiency, as well as a decent amount of self-discipline.”

The expectations for online courses were equivalent to the expectations held for a brick and mortar student. Participant 8 states that “professors had the same expectations” as an in-person class. Participant 1 stated that “I’ve had very hands on professors that helped me in the

same way I'd be helped in a classroom." Participant 6 cited in persons courses where professors "cancelled class half the semester or never assigned a single assignment but gave everyone participation grades." The participants viewed online education as equivalent to brick and mortar education based on a different set of skills required and the expectations placed on them in online education.

### **Greater Interaction**

Greater interaction was expressed as relations between faculty and students as well as peer to peer contact. The interaction between student and faculty connects the student to the institution allowing for an exchange of knowledge as expressed by the social constructionist theory (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Social constructionism maintains that knowledge is not derived from nature but rather from our social interactions (Burr, 2015). According to Burr (2015), daily social interactions result in the construction of knowledge.

Sixty percent of the participants shared negative experiences with faculty or peer interaction. "There has been little interaction. I'm currently taking a class where the professor has a weekly optional video chat meeting. I have visited with him twice and have enjoyed it," according to participant 9. The same participant mentioned that only one person was on the professor's optional video chat and that perhaps the video chats should not be optional. Participant 10 felt, "that an opportunity to video chat with the instructor would be an interesting option." Participant 8 thought that professors should hold a "mandatory monthly meeting." The participant felt that with available technology, a mandatory meeting would be relatively easy to organize and attend. Mandatory meetings would create an opportunity for faculty and students to connect, gaining knowledge from social interaction. The social constructionism theory validates the findings of Wildavsky et al. (2015) that students learn best when they are actively engaged

with other students and with the faculty. Faculty and administrators designing online classes or programs must incorporate interactivity into the curriculum. The technology exists to integrate video conferencing into online courses, which would establish links between students, faculty, and the institution. Communication would be improved, and an atmosphere for learning would be established.

Email communication is an essential component of online education. Students rely on email to communicate with faculty. Participant 4 mentioned that the faculty did not return email messages. Participant 10 indicated that they had been enrolled in “a few classes that emails were answered in 24 hrs.” The lack of interaction due to unanswered emails creates negative perceptions and does not foster a link between students and the institution. Participant 10 indicated that they “felt best when discussion boards were used, and emails were answered.” The discussion board and emails were the links to peers and faculty; without consistent communication, online students become isolated, and knowledge is not gained through social contact. The lack of consistency in returning email messages limits the interaction necessary to create a learning environment according to the social constructionist theory. Participant 6 mentioned consistency and “knowing what to expect” as important features of success to the online student. The social constructionist does not believe that knowledge is derived from natural but from the interactions of others (Burr, 2015). “It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated” (Burr, 2015, p. 4).

Peer to peer communication contributed to an overall lack of interaction. Participant 7 stated, “student communication did lack because I never really had to talk to other classmates other than on the discussion board.” Participant 6 indicated that faculty response was acceptable



on Blackboard other students did not contribute or participate in the discussion boards.

Participant 8 affirmed that “student to student participation did not go both ways.” Participant 10 stated that “discussion boards were not offered on all courses.” Discussion boards are essential components of online education. Discussion boards provide the vehicle for online students to exchange ideas and for the faculty to monitor progress. The absence of discussion boards inhibits student learning by limiting student interaction. Participant 10 “relied on Blackboard” for success in online education. The lack of student discussion limits the success of the student and impact student retention.

Interaction extends beyond email communication or a post on a class website. Course design is a factor in engagement. Online instructors need to create an atmosphere of interaction to develop a sense of community, promote learning, and increase persistence in online learning. The online instructor must remain present in online discussions, encouraging peer discussion through questioning and comments. Regardless of the format, synchronous or asynchronous instructor engagement is critical in creating a positive learning environment (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Training in course design may be a necessity for faculty to encourage online engagement.

Kinkle (2010) recommended that the university administrators implement faculty training, concentrate on the benefits of online education, and employ quality assurance to meet the needs of online students. The asynchronous nature of many online classes does not provide for active student engagement. With the rapid advances in technology faculty may not have adequate experience or training in designing courses for an online platform. The design of the online course may have a direct impact on retention rates and the persistence rate of the online student (Saul, 2013).

Faculty members may be challenged by converting traditional format courses into online courses (Saul, 2013). For two participants, traditional group projects facilitated peer to peer interaction. Participant 1 mentioned that “most online classes assign at least one group project. This requires us to email, chat, or even call other students.” Participant 5 similarly interacted with peers through group projects. Participant 8 stated, “need to be involved through group projects.” Group projects establish a link between students, which allows for the exchange of ideas. Group projects encourage communication between students creating social interactions necessary for the construction of knowledge. The inclusion of group projects required the participants to interact at a level that created a positive learning environment.

### **Convenience and Flexibility**

Students will demand an education that meets their educational needs and personal schedule. Convenience and flexibility were mentioned by 100% of the participants as a determining factor in enrolling in online education. Convenience and flexibility were characterized by various aspects by the participants. Employment, schedules, family, and time were factors that influenced participants to choose online education as opposed to enrolling in a traditional delivery method. Online education provides an opportunity for degree completion for students who otherwise would be excluded from post-secondary education.

Employment and family responsibilities limit or eliminate the opportunity for students to attend a traditional brick and mortar institution. Online education provides an opportunity for students to complete a degree which otherwise inaccessible. Participant 10 noted that with a busy lifestyle, “an educational opportunity that would work” with a busy lifestyle was required. Participant 2 indicated that online education was the only means by which to complete a degree. Participant 9 explained the rationale for choosing online was largely contributed to working

which limited attending a traditional brick and mortar institution. Participant 2 indicated that the only way to obtain a degree was to enroll in an online program. Participant 5 identified work and family commitments as limiting factors in attending a brick and mortar institution. More mature students will likely encounter life circumstances that will necessitate online education to complete degrees. “In 2 years, institutions 47% of students age 26 and older are enrolled in online courses” (Hoskins, 2011, para. 2). Eighty percent of the participants in this basic qualitative research study were 26 years of age or older. Older students bring with them additional responsibilities with respect to family and employment. Family and employment commitments will continue to impact decisions to enroll in online education. Students are increasingly more likely to leave an institution if the student feels that the institution is not providing full value for the dollars expended on education (Fullan & Scott, 2009). Value is perceived in dollar amounts as well as in services provided. Students will demand an education that meets their specific schedules and expectations; otherwise, they will explore the resources offered through other higher educational institutions.

Marx (2006) noted, “Yesterday’s system may not be able to address tomorrow’s needs. That’s why we need to perceive renewal and change as less threatening and more a part of how the system and everyone in its functions” (p13). All of the participants mentioned convenience and flexibility as a factor in enrolling in online education. Eighty percent of the participants cited employment as a contributing factor in the decision to enter in online learning. As more mature students enroll in online education, the institution must meet the needs of the students to ensure persistence through graduation.

## **Discussions of the Results to the Literature**

Nolan (2013) noted that students' primary connection to the university was through an advisor. Seventy percent of the participants utilized the services of an advisor. Sixty percent of the participants in this research study agreed with Nolan (2013). The advisor was a key element in the student's interaction with the university and a key to the success of the students.

Participant 8 explained how it was essential that once assigned to a student; the advisor remained with the student throughout the program. Students prefer an advisor who stays with them over the life of the program as their connection to the institution and the program (Nolan, 2013). Students who were afforded the services of an advisory were more likely to continue in the program, increasing the retention rate for the college (Nolan, 2013). The services of an advisor connection to the university, encouraging the online student to persist to graduation. Developing a sense of community in an online course is critical for student satisfaction (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). The advisor is an essential link between the online student and the university.

The fundamental beliefs of social constructionism are that "People are sense-making creatures, the meaning is socially constructed through language, and meaning construction is contextualized and embedded" (Loseke, 2011, p. 379). According to Loseke (2011), learning is realized through interaction. Fifty percent of the participants in this research study was critical of the lack of interaction during online courses. The participants were critical of the lack of interaction through Blackboard posts, unanswered emails, and the lack of dialogue with faculty. Shackleford and Maxwell (2012) determined online students required a sense of community and a sense of inclusion to be successful. The interaction between student and faculty connects the student to the institution allowing for an exchange of knowledge as expressed by the social constructionist theory (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). The online instructor must remain a

presence in online discussions, encouraging peer discussion through questioning and comments. Regardless of the format, synchronous or asynchronous instructor engagement is critical in creating a positive learning environment (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). The research indicates that five of the participants experienced a diminished online experience due to a lack of peer and faculty interaction. Social constructionists maintain that learning is accomplished through social interaction (Burr, 2015). A reduction in social interaction, as through email correspondence, will result in reduced learning.

Wildavsky et al. (2015) wrote, “Most students learn best when they’re actively engaged in dialogue and collaboration with faculty and fellow students” (p. 229). Fifty percent of the participants in this qualitative study were dissatisfied with the level of interaction between peers and faculty.

Saul (2013) expressed that faculty may not have the training to develop an online course that is engaging and interactive. Thirty percent of the participants mentioned areas in which faculty did not create an atmosphere of engagement. Kinkle (2010) recommended training for faculty to implement online education and to take advantage of the benefits of online education. Technologies change rapidly, and the faculty may want to evaluate the effectiveness of the course to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of the student and the institution (Saul, 2013).

Valle (2016) recommend an online orientation program to increase the probability of student for the online student. Two of the participants indicated that an online orientation program would have been beneficial. As Valle (2016) reported, online students enrolling in their first online class would benefit from some form of online education, whether they were freshmen or graduate students.

## **Limitations**

Some limitations were apparent in this qualitative research study. The first limitation is that the researcher is an online student. The researcher has completed a Master's of Arts and Doctoral degree completely online. Rather than disregarding these biases Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest recognizing the biases examine the impact on results. The researcher endeavored to detach himself from the data previous experiences with online education could have impacted the researcher's perception of online education.

The second limitation of this study was the small sample size. The sample size was less than anticipated with 10 participants responding. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) there is no definitive number of people to interview, but rather was the sample adequate to answer the research question. This researcher believes that the sample was sufficient to answer the research question, however, a larger sample would result in a more diverse result.

Responses to the invitation to participate in the study were less than anticipated, and one of the respondents did not participate in a telephone interview, for reasons unknown, reducing the number of interviews to nine. The third limitation was that the participants were enrolled in the same program at the university, limiting online experiences to one institution and one program. However, these limitations did not interfere with the researcher's ability to assess the support services that were effective in the success of these participants.

## **Implication of the Result for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

The main purpose of this basic qualitative research study was to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of online students in regard to the support services offered. The Qualtrics questionnaire and the telephone interview allowed the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of the perceptions of online students. The results of this study were to provide

information to college administrator's as to the service deemed essential by online students for support.

**Practice.** The research data from this qualitative study confirms that student and faculty interaction essential for student success. Interaction is a requisite element in designing and implementing online courses. The inclusion of group projects, Blackboard class discussions with faculty must be considered in course design. As noted by Kinkle (2010), faculty may require training to design courses useful in student-faculty engagement.

The research also confirms the importance of an advisor to online students, as documented by Nolan (2013). The majority of participants in this research study created a connection with the university through an advisor, which aligns with the literature that supports the impact of an advisor in an online program. The research confirms that online students benefit from having the same advisor assigned throughout their course of study as it represents consistency and follow-up.

Valle (2016) documented the need for an online orientation. The research confirms that online students would benefit from an online orientation. An online orientation would provide students with clear expectations and would allow for interaction between students creating a sense of community and a learning environment. Orientation provides an opportunity for the student to connect with the university and to receive valuable information regarding support services.

**Policy.** The design and implementation of online courses must create a sense of community for online students. Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) noted that a feeling of inclusion was necessary for online student success. Students will model their behavior in correlation to the

faculty member to create a sense of community in an online environment community (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012).

University and college administrators must incorporate opportunities for creating inclusion in online programs offered. Online orientation for students entering an online program must be a required policy. Faculty must design lessons that create opportunities for peer to peer interaction as well as interaction with faculty. Administrators will be tasked to provide the necessary resources to faculty to create interactive lessons. Kinkle (2010) recommended training for faculty to aid in the creation of interactive lessons. The interaction between student and faculty connects the student to the institution allowing for an exchange of knowledge as expressed by the social constructionist theory (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). The policies of the administration must encourage the inclusion of online students.

**Theory.** The research data from this qualitative research study validates the beliefs of social constructionists that knowledge is gained through daily interactions, as noted by Burr (2013) and supported by Wildavsky et al. (2015). The Social constructionism maintains that knowledge is not derived from nature but rather from our social interactions (Burr, 2015). “It is through daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated” (Burr, 2015, p. 4). The quality of online education is related to the interaction between peers and faculty. Loseke (2011) documented that learning has its basis in social interactivity, and that understandings must be shared to fully develop.

The participants expressed concern regarding the lack of communication and interactivity. Administrators and faculty would provide a positive experience for online students by viewing online education through the lens of a social constructionist.



## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Relationships between peers and faculty are an important element of online education. This research study confirmed that online students benefit from regular interaction between peers and with faculty. Study participants were able to provide evidence that a positive interaction between students and faculty created an environment for success. Further studies are required to establish the importance of the relationships on the success of online students.

The first recommendation is to the number of participants including students from a variety of disciplines. Expanding the number of participants would allow for a greater representation of the perceptions of online students regarding online support services. The sample size in this research study made generalizations difficult. A larger sample size would provide the opportunity to create accurate generalizations.

The second recommendation is to include students who have participated in both online and in person programs. Comparing online support services to support services offered to in person students. Comparison of the support services offered in a traditional delivery method as opposed to an online delivery method would provide greater understanding into the value of support services. The comparison would assist in the identification of services that are necessary for student success.

A third recommendation is to include online students who were not successful in completion of an online course or program. This research study focused on students who successfully completed an online course or program. The perceptions of those students who failed to successfully complete an online course of study would be valuable in determining support services required for success.

Future studies could use this research study as a guide for research in determining the impact of peer to peer and faculty relationships. Online institutions need to provide faculty with the training to design and implement practical online courses that encourage engagement. Students need to connect to create opportunities for learning. Positive relationships must develop between students and faculty for success in online education. Future research is required to determine the impact of relationships between students and faculty on student success.

## **Conclusion**

This research provided greater understanding of the perceptions of online students regarding online support services. This research study explored the perceptions of 10 online university students regarding online support services. The data for this research study was obtained through a Qualtrics questionnaire and telephone interviews. The participants shared their experiences with online education and support services offered. The participants allowed this researcher to explore their real world experiences with online education.

As online students are not directly connected as their traditional colleagues, it is essential to have the same advantages as these students. The importance of interaction cannot be overemphasized, and this study explored the importance of faculty and student interaction as it will lead to student success. Knowledge is gained through student and faculty interaction; greater interaction was a concern of several participants in the research study. Support services are necessary to connect the online student with the institution and to develop relationships. Online services such as; library services, technical support, and writing services create connections with the institution. Online services such as; advising, orientation, peer to peer, and faculty discussions create interactive opportunities to develop relationships. Online services need to be designed specifically for online students. Online students required unique services equivalent to

services offered to brick and mortar students. Online support services must support the academic success of the students while creating a relationship with the institution.

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## **Appendix A: Interview Protocol**

**Welcome to the research study!**

### **Interview Protocol**

Dear Participant:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study of online student services. I realize that you are busy, and I appreciate you taking the time to speak with me regarding online education.

As I had stated in a previous letter, I am a doctoral student at Concordia University, in Portland, Oregon. The purpose of the interview is to collect information regarding your perceptions of online education through your experiences.

As previously communicated all information provided will remain confidential. Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue your participation at any time and there are no risks to you as a result of your participation.

I would like to record our conversation in order to facilitate note taking. The recording will remain confidential and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research study. The recording will not be shared with any outside persons.

Once you complete the interview protocol, I will call you to set up a time for a telephone interview. I will send the Starbucks card as soon as the interview is completed.

Thank you for your participation!

David

Question 1: Do I have your permission to record our conversation?

Yes

No

Question 2: What is your gender?

Male

Female

Question 3: What is your age group?

20 - 25

26 - 35

36 - 45

46 - 55

56 - 65

>65

Question 4: What is your ethnicity?

Asian

African/American

Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Hispanic/Latino

White/Caucasian

Other

Question 5: What is the highest degree you have earned?

Associates

Bachelors

Masters

PhD/Doctorate

No degree earned

Question 6: When did you complete your last online course?

Question 7: Please tell me about your experiences with online education.

Question 8: What services did the institution offer to online students?

Question 9: What services did you take advantage of as an online student?

Question 10: Which services were essential to your success?

Question 11: What factors influenced your decision to enroll in online education?

Question 12: There has been a perception that online education is not equivalent to a brick and mortar education. How do you feel about that perception?

Question 13: A lack of student interaction and faculty interaction is a concern with online education. Describe your level of interaction with fellow students and the faculty.

Question 14: Which services offered by the institution did not meet your expectations?

Question 15: Which services would you like to see which were not provided to you through online education?

Question 16: Which services were the least effective in supporting your success?

Question 17: What recommendations do you have for improving remote services for online students?

## **Appendix B: Invitation Email**

### **The purpose of this study is to study the perceptions and attitudes of online students regarding online support services.**

The first phase of this study is this online survey. We expect approximately 15 volunteers to take this online survey. The survey can be completed between October 8th and October 21st. This online survey will ask you questions about your online educational experiences. Completing the survey should take less than 30 minutes of your time. The survey will ask you how many online courses you have completed, the online support services utilized and other information. I will ask for your email contact information so that I can contact you and ask you to participate in an interview. If you choose to provide this information, I will contact you and provide you more information so you can decide if you want to participate in this second phase of participation.

### **Risks**

The interview will include a section requesting demographic information. The combined answers to these questions will not make an individual person identifiable. Every effort will be made to maintain and protect participant's confidentiality. However, if you are uncomfortable answering any of these questions leave them blank.

In the unlikely event that some of the interview questions make you uncomfortable or upset, you are free to decline to answer the question or to stop your participation at any time during the survey. In the event that you discontinue participation in the research study your data will be returned to you upon request.

### **Benefits**

There will be no direct benefit to you from your participation in this research study. However, the information that you provide may help institutions of higher learning develop and provide improved services and support to online students. The gift card is an incentive for your participation.

Your personal information will be protected. This survey is firewall and password protected so that only the researcher (me) can see your answers. I will keep this in strict confidence. The information/topic of the questions are not sensitive or risky. However, if you were to write something that might allow someone to possibly deduce your identity, we would remove this information and we would not include this information in any publication or report. And data you provide would be held privately. Recordings will be deleted immediately following transcription and member checking. All other study related documents will be kept securely for 3 years from close of study.

You can stop answering the questions in this online survey if you want to stop. Data is retractable until the point of data analysis, should you choose to withdraw.

Please print a copy of this for your records. If you have questions you can talk to or write the principal investigator, David Nichols at [redacted]. If you want to talk with a participant advocate other than the investigator, you can write or call the director of our institutional review board, Dr. OraLee Branch (email obranch@cu-portland.edu or call 503-493-6390). This project has been approved by the Research University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

**Click the button below to consent to take this survey.**

Consent

Do Not Consent

Enter valid email address and telephone number

**Questions 1:** What is your gender?

Male

Female

**Question 2:** What is your age group?

20–25

26–35

36–45

46–55

56–65

Over 65

**Question 3:** What is your ethnicity?

Asian

African American

Hawaiian/Pacific Islander

Hispanic/Latino

White/Caucasian

Prefer not to answer

**Question 4:** Highest degree earned?

Associates

Bachelors

Masters

PhD/Doctorate

**Question 5:** Current enrollment status

Full Time

Part Time

**Question 6:** How many online courses have you completed successfully?

- 1–5
- 6–10
- 11–15
- More than 15

**Question 7:** Are you completing your program 100% online?

- Yes
- No

**Question 8:** Which remote support services, offered by Regional State University, have you utilized?

- Financial Aid
- Career Advising
- Writing Services
- Library Services
- Academic Counselling Services
- Participation in an online orientation program
- Technical support/help desk
- Tutoring Services
- Other – Specify

### **Appendix C: Reminder to Participate**

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the research study! Please click on the link to complete a confidential online survey (it only takes a few minutes). Once I have the completed survey returned I will schedule a time for our telephone interview.

Thank you!

David Nichols



## **Appendix D: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### **What does “fraudulent” mean?**

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### **What is “unauthorized” assistance?**

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

**Statement of Original Work (Continued)**

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

DRN

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Digital Signature

David R. Nichols

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Name (Typed)

February 21, 2020

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Date