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Surviving Higher Education: Retention & Persistence Through The Lens Of Psychological Survivorship

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SURVIVING HIGHER EDUCATION: RETENTION & PERSISTENCE THROUGH THE

LENS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL SURVIVORSHIP

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of students categorized as at-risk, non-traditional adult learners who persisted in pursuit of their higher education degree. These students demonstrated perseverance and grit when faced with challenges that might have caused them to drop out of school. The lived experiences of the participants are strongly linked to their identities as working professionals and adult-learners. Recent literature indicates that several theories and models have emerged on the concept of motivation as it relates to success in higher education. Research suggests that achievement is not solely based on cognitive abilities of the learner, but rather on the combination of cognitive ability and personality traits, such as grit and deliberate practice. In the past two decades, one of the most important innovations in the US higher education system has been the steady increase in distance education through online courses. The institution in this study is experiencing a similar trend in online learning enrollment growth coupled with student retention and persistence challenges. The students in this study have demonstrated the requisite grit and perseverance to succeed even in the face of adversity. Students in this study also exhibited a strong internal locus of control and all had strong support structures outside of their educational orbit.

Keywords: higher education, adult learners, retention, grit

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INTRODUCTION

More than 70% of U.S. higher education institutions incorporate online learning into their

long-term strategic plans (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Online class registrations are on the rise, yet

studies show that 30% to 40% of online students drop out. A study published by the National

Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) reports that "among all students who enrolled in

college in fall 2017, 73.8 percent persisted at any U.S. institution in fall 2018, while 61.7 percent

were retained at their starting institution" (p. 1). This same study defines persistence and

retention as the following: "The persistence rate is measured by the percentage of students who

return to college at any institution for their second year" (p. 11), while the retention rate is

defined as "the percentage of students who return to the same institution" (p. 11).

Many students who opt for online learning as opposed to traditional classroom learning

do so for numerous reasons. A recent study from *Inside Higher Ed* (2018) shows that "the

proportion of all students who were enrolled exclusively online grew to 15.4 percent, totaling

3,104,8799 students" (p. 1). Some students feel that enrolling in online classes may be less

burdensome on their lives, more economical, less time consuming, and offer more flexibility in

terms of course completion. Park & Choi (2009) maintain that "distance learning allows adult

learners who have employment, family, and/or other responsibilities to update knowledge and

skills related to their job by saving travel costs and allowing a flexible schedule" (p. 1). While

online learning allows flexibility, students who bear additional responsibilities such as work and

family, must find a way to balance their schedules to successfully complete an online degree.

Thus, this qualitative study explored how certain characteristics of online students at a

non-profit, private institution of higher education in the northeastern United States contributed to

their academic persistence. The types of students who typically enroll at this institution are similar to those enrolled in other institutions of higher education and include single parents who work full-time while raising their children; individuals who experienced problematic academic experiences in the past; individuals who aspire to receive a college degree but cannot afford to do so through traditional means.

A traditional college student enrolls full-time in college directly following high school graduation (Horn & Premo, 1995). The students described above are considered non-traditional, in that they didn't go to college directly after completing their secondary education. Further, Ely (1997) defines the non-traditional student, or adult learner, as making up the new majority in post-secondary education, creating several implications for community colleges. There are several studies that support the changing makeup of the college population including a recent study by NCES (2017), where it is noted that "from 2000 to 2012, the enrollment of students over the age of 25 increased by 35%" (p. 1). Further, "by 2019, the share of students over age 25 is projected to increase by another 23%" (Hess, 2011, p. 1). Also, Miller, Gault, & Thorman (2011), find that "3.9 million postsecondary students in the United States are parents" (p. 13). With the increase in non-traditional, adult students and the prevalence of parents pursuing their postsecondary degree, there will be demands borne inconsistent with that of the traditional student.

Rovai (2003) discussed additional demands on the time of non-traditional students, such as life crises (e.g., sickness, divorce, loss of a job) and how such demands can adversely affect persistence. Furthermore, on college and university campuses, non-traditional students represent an increasing share of the total student population (Ely, 1997; Kerka, 2001). Moreover, non-traditional students bear additional external factors contributing to their decision to stay enrolled

or drop out, including familial support and organizational support. Organizational support would be specific to those who are attending school at the pleasure of their employer. These students have an incentive to stay in and a disincentive to drop out. Further, most adult learners have many responsibilities for their family as well as for their job, and these two are key factors affecting adult learners' decision to drop out of online courses (Park, 2007). In addition to the broader categories of family and job as noted above, adult learners can be faced with other external factors such as scheduling conflicts, financial problems, and health constraints to name a few. Given the higher likelihood that non-traditional students will fail to persist (Ross-Gordon, 2011), it is important to understand the characteristics of the non-traditional adult learner who faces substantial internal and/or external pressure and yet persists in their online degree.

According to the 2006-2012 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and an independent study through Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce, Carnevale and Van Der Warf (2017) estimate that roughly one third to 40% of undergraduate students receive a Pell Grant. Pell Grants are typically awarded to students with exceptional financial need. Often, students who receive Pell have a socio-economic status well-below the poverty line. This means that approximately one in every three college students struggle financially. While programs such as Pell provide access to students who would not be able to afford higher education tuition, these same students are more likely to be at risk to stop out or not complete their education. This is partially due to their socioeconomic status, but also due to the fact that they are likely working or balancing other responsibilities in addition to their educational pursuits.

It is known that many of those who are considered at-risk will not complete their higher education degree. Further the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2018) postulates that those who

earn a bachelor's degree make substantially higher incomes than those who only graduated high school. Thankfully, programs like Pell provide options for this student to pursue a higher education degree. Further, not all at-risk students will stop out or drop out. Some will persevere and find a way to make it through their education. Shapiro et al. (2011) published findings in the National Student Clearinghouse demonstrating non-traditional adult learners have a substantial gap in graduation attainment when compared to their traditional counterparts. However, the study showed a six-year graduation rate for a population of 327,487 non-traditional, adult learners of 42.1% (p. 7).

     Ishitani (2006) used NCES data to analyze the academic progression in a sample size of over 4,000 students from various types of institutions. The data showed that students in the lowest income group were 2.3 times more likely to drop out of school in the first year than those in the highest income group. Further, students with a low socioeconomic status were 18% less likely to graduate from their program of study when compared to classmates from a higher socioeconomic stratum. In addition, Bawa (2016) asserts that "despite increasing enrollment percentages from earlier years, online courses continue to show receding student retention rates" (p. 1). While the research shows that students with internal and external pressures, coupled with lower socioeconomic statuses are less likely to succeed, why do certain students still persist? Are there similar characteristics and traits among these students/adult learners? This study examined the characteristics of such adult learners.

     The emergence of self-efficacy and grit as a core personal characteristic is one reason that some students may succeed where others do not. While motivation and other internal and external factors influence persistence, intellectual acumen is a core component of success in higher education. Busato et al. (2000) link intellectual ability as being associated positively with

academic success. More recently, Tatarinceva et al. (2018) argued that there are many definitions of intellect and that many factors that make up intellect. "The ability to learn and the ability to adapt efficiently to environmental changes are the most important and significant factors of human intellect determining an individual's successfulness in the process of lifelong learning" (p. 6). While intelligence is a fundamental trait for success, other factors influence student persistence through a program of higher education. Key components of success include perseverance or "grit".

What is "grit"? Duckworth (2007) defined grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087-1088). This suggests that two individuals with similar intelligence levels would be differentiated in their prospective success by the level of grit they exhibit.

Tinto (1987) leveraged a theory first introduced by sociological theorists, Emile Durkheim and Arnold Van Gennep, through their studies of cultures and societies. Tinto takes their research and expands their theory of participation and the correlation of not committing suicide. Suicide in this context means leaving the institution. Students who retain or persist are considered to have survived. This study sought to interpret the phenomena that emerged from the experiences of several successful online graduate and undergraduate students who have faced adversity during their matriculation at a private non-profit university in the northeastern United States. More specifically, this study explored the stories of the non-traditional, online students. Non-traditional, adult learners are more likely to face adversity; and this study revealed their grit and perseverance.

Problem Statement

It is critically important to understand the factors that contribute to the adult learner's decision to stay enrolled in an online program. This is especially true for an institution experiencing enrollment declines and retention and persistence challenges. James, Swan, & Daston (2016) state that "online learning continues to grow across post-secondary institutions across the United States, but many question its efficacy, especially for students most at-risk for failure" (p. 76). Dropouts among adult online learners enrolled in online programs are six to seven times higher than traditional students (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Despite this reality, there are those who persist through graduation. Recent literature indicates that in past decades, there have been several theories and models on the issues of motivation as it relates to success in higher education (Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013). Further, Bazelais, Lemay, & Dolek (2016) share that "research suggests that achievement is not solely based on cognitive abilities of the learner, but rather on the combination of cognitive ability and personality traits, such as grit and deliberate practice" (p. 35). Hogan & Wong (2013) argued that grittier individuals tend to work harder and longer and are more inclined to engage in deliberate practice to enhance performance or success. The institution that this study is focused on is experiencing a similar trend in online learning enrollment growth coupled with retention and persistence challenges.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of students categorized as at-risk, non-traditional adult learners who persisted in pursuit of their higher education degree. These students have demonstrated perseverance and grit when faced with challenges that might have caused them to drop out of school. The findings from this study will help the administration and faculty understand the types of challenges that

non-traditional, adult learners face while they pursue their degree. Furthermore, recognizing the types of qualities and characteristics of gritty students will help frame the dialogue with future students in similar situations. Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" and state that grit "entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (p. 1087). Finally, if there is a way to replicate the characteristics found in the participants, the university will be able to improve their persistence, retention and graduation rates.

Research Questions

This qualitative study involved an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA focuses on understanding the meaning of the participants' reported experiences as a result of the researcher engaging in an interpretative relationship with the data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This interpretative phenomenological study addressed one primary research question and several related sub-questions:

- How do adult learners describe their experience of survivorship in an online course of study?
    - What factors, internal and external, have adult learners encountered during their online academic career that have caused consideration as whether or not to persist and remain enrolled in an online program of study?
    - What personal characteristics, traits, decisions or other factors do online, adult learner describe as vital to their academic success?

Conceptual Framework

This interpretative phenomenological study sought to understand why some students, when faced with tremendous adversity, are able to persevere and persist. The conceptual

framework of this study stemmed from Vincent Tinto's theory of psychological survivorship and is derived from the worldview of social constructivism. Creswell (2012) shared that "social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences — meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (p. 37). Since the interpretation of the participants' experiences was derived solely from the interviews, it is important to understand that the experiences shared are the reality from the perspective of the participant. Furthermore, the study is anchored in the phenomenon that perseverance and grit are core characteristics of students who have achieved psychological survivorship in their pursuit of a higher education degree. This framework suggests that certain, at-risk, non-traditional students, when faced with external and/or internal pressures, will persevere and ultimately, complete their academic pursuits.

Assumptions, Limitations & Scope

Assumptions are unsubstantiated beliefs that the researcher has about their study. The following assumptions were made for the purpose of this study: Interview participants fully understood the questions and were honest in their responses. In addition, participants were willing and available to take part in the interview. The researcher assumed that, when faced with extreme adversity, extenuating life circumstances, and/or life-altering crises, most students would not continue with their education. Further, it is assumed that the experiences shared by adult learners are representative of the population of students at the institution and not unique to participants. The researcher assumed that he properly interpreted responses to interview questions. Finally, it was assumed that there were common themes that arose from the participants' responses.

This study was conducted at a regionally accredited, non-profit, private university in the northeastern United States. The researcher worked in an academic leadership position at this university at the time of this study. The participants were adult learners who are currently enrolled or who have recently graduated from this university.

Limitations

Limitations of this study included concerns common to qualitative research. Researcher bias is inherent to academic research and can potentially jeopardize the authenticity and independence of the research results (Creswell, 2012). In addition, the researcher's personal experience as a doctoral student who participated in asynchronous online graduate courses while also balancing internal and external responsibilities generates the potential for bias. Based on the literature included in this study, the researcher is considered an at-risk, adult learner, which is the targeted population for this study. Thus, during the interview process, the researcher refrained from leading the participants by limiting inquiry to open-ended questions. Another limitation is that the data were restricted to this single institution, which may have minimized the applicability that a more expansive study may have provided. Additional limitations included obtaining an adequate number of participants and the honesty their responses.

<div align="center">Significance</div>

Technology and the advent of online learning has created convenience and flexibility in accessing higher education (Bolliger & Holupa, 2012). This transformation of educational access benefits many adult learners who may not have previously had availability to other education options. While this access is a benefit to adult learners, many are still unable to complete their degree. Each year, a significant number of students who enroll in universities do not graduate and the factors that distinguish those who will and will not successfully complete their degree are

complex (Davidson, Beck, & Milligan, 2009). This study contributes to the existing literature that seeks to understand the attributes and experiences of students who have exceptional self-efficacy and unparalleled grit. Grit is linked to college students' success (Duckworth, 2016). The results of this study may also fill a gap in the literature about student grit, a variable that is linked to college students' success.

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

At-risk student: Narrz'ello (2014) notes that "at-risk student is the identifying term applied to those students who have a greater than average chance of not succeeding in school and graduating" (p. 49).

Grit: Duckworth (2007) defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress." This suggests that two individuals with similar intelligence levels would be differentiated in their prospective success by the level of grit they exhibit.

Non-traditional student: Ely (1997) helps to define the non-traditional student, or adult learner, as making up the new majority in secondary education, and creating several implications for community colleges. The average non-traditional student is an adult, age 25 or older, who has returned to school either full-time or part-time. The student must balance school with employment, family, and financial commitments, placing them at risk.

Persistence: A study published by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) defines persistence as "the percentage of students who return to college at any institution for their second year" (p. 11).

Retention Rates: A study published by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) defines retention rates as "the percentage of students who return to the same institution" (p. 11).

Self-efficacy: Self-efficacy is defined as "People's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (Bandura, 1986, p. 391). Since Bandura's (1977) seminal article on self-efficacy, much research has clarified and extended the role of self-efficacy as a mechanism underlying behavioral change, maintenance, and generalization. Recent scholars still rely on Bandura's definition and offer a slightly modified definition: "Self-efficacy refers to student's beliefs in their ability to master new skills and tasks, often in a specific academic domain" (Honicke & Broadbent, 2016, p. 2.).

Conclusion

Retention is a topic that is highly visible at the university and across the national higher education landscape. "As a key performance indicator in university quality assurance processes, the retention of students in their studies is an issue of concern world-wide" (Thomas, 2009, p. 1). Thus, this study dissected the retention patterns of the distinct groups of students who matriculated into the university's online campus. With a better understanding of what the retention patterns were and a consideration of why some students persisted could help the institution consider how to improve retention rates. The literature considered for this study included data specific to the university, regional and national retention datasets, as well as authors contributing to existing and emerging theories around retention psychology.

Despite the many challenges that students face, there are those who persist through graduation. Recent literature indicates that in past decades, there have been several theories and models on the issues of motivation as it relates to success in higher education (Mellard,

Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013). Further, students who have high personal expectations and self-efficacy as well as those who enjoy the challenge of online learning will also tend to be more persistent (Bunn, 2004, Holder, 2007, Ivankova & Stick, 2005, Kemp, 2002, Müller, 2008, Park & Choi, 2009, Parker, 2003). Thus, the literature largely supports the mindset that self-efficacy is the best indicator for student retention.

 The forthcoming chapters are composed to further illustrate the study of psychological survivorship and adult learner retention and persistence. Chapter 2 establishes a review of the relevant literature, including a background of the evolution of online education, the relevance of the prevalence of non-traditional students pursuing higher education degrees and the psychological underpinnings of grit, determination and perseverance for students facing adversity. The methodology is presented in Chapter 3 and includes a thorough explanation of the study's development. Chapter 4 provides a summary of the findings, while lastly, Chapter 5 provides recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

A systematic literature review was conducted of studies that evaluate the evolution of online education, the relevance of the prevalence of non-traditional students pursuing higher education degrees and the psychological underpinnings of grit, determination and perseverance for students facing adversity. This literature review supports a qualitative study of how undergraduate and graduate students experience survivorship in an online program. The study takes place at a non-profit, private institution in the northeastern United States. This institution has a distinct online campus, where students can attend programs in a fully asynchronous environment. Students who attend this institution range in age from 19 to 70. However, the average age of graduate students was 31, while undergraduates have an average age of 30 (Institution, 2018). This is consistent with the online higher education landscape in the United States. U.S. News (2017) found that "among the 227 online bachelor's programs that provided student age data to U.S. News, the average was 32 years old" (p. 1). In an effort to consolidate the literature, this review categorizes the works into three main sections: the evolution of online education, the prevalence of the non-traditional learner in today's higher education environment, and characteristics of survivorship, grit and perseverance in higher education. The following section illustrates the growth and prevalence of online education.

The evolution of online higher education

"In the past two decades, one of the most important innovations in the US higher education system has been the steady increase in distance education through online courses" (Xu, 2019, p. 2). In addition, this trajectory is expected to continue and should be part of strategic

planning for long-term higher education sustainability and success. NCES (2016) supports this growth, noting that "in 2016–17, approximately 3,500, or 76 percent, of all degree-granting institutions reported offering online courses" (p. 2). Convenience, cost and access are key attributes for the continuing demand and expansion of higher education. However, more students and employers are recognizing the quality and benefits of distance education.

>Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, (2013) share that,

>65% of the 55 million job openings through 2020 will require some postsecondary education. Additionally, the nation has recovered approximately 6.1 million of the 8.7 million jobs that were lost in the recession, but, the jobs that were lost look nothing like the ones that are coming back. (p. 15)

However, many organizations have an inherent reluctance to embrace change. Diamond (2006, p. 2) determined that "significant change will never occur in any institution until the forces for change are greater in combination than the forces preserving the status quo". Given the economic downturn, subsequent recovery, and the expected impending evolution of the adult learning and higher education landscape, universities are going to have to be nimble with respect to future students' needs and demands.

"Higher education systems and institutions across the globe increasingly require more and better information, on which to base sound decisions and meaningful strategic planning" (Rumbley, 2015, p. 8). Higher education institutions with the longest standing and strongest reputations may have less of a concern with reacting to the shift in demand when compared to most schools. However, given the evolution of the job market, even the top universities cannot continue to sit idly by and expect to remain on the forefront of the market. Universities must anticipate and adapt to the demands of their consumers and recognize the need to branch out in

areas of education that were previously unchartered. Additionally, structurally flexible alternative measures of academic delivery are being employed to non-traditional audiences. According to the Online Learning Consortium (2014), "Online learning accounts for nearly three quarters of all US higher education's enrollment increases last year" (p. 1). Even though the shift in delivery modality seems obvious, universities that are open to change are being strategic with their approach to online and hybrid delivery mechanisms.

Combatting this operational necessity for growth and change is the stigma associated with alternative higher education delivery models. The Online Learning Consortium (2014) further indicates that "only 28 percent of academic leaders say that their faculty accepts the "value and legitimacy of online education" (p. 1). Thus, the pedagogy and practice, curriculum, assessment and instruction must be flexible enough to fit the alternate delivery vehicles. The world is changing, and the workforce is following. Universities cannot rely on the same legacy driven approach if they hope to adapt to the educational and industry evolution. Nevertheless, holistic changes to pedagogy and practice, delivery and functionality could further disrupt a university's ability to thrive. Therefore, a strategic marriage of traditional and modern approaches is essential.

Regardless of the anecdotal and documented resistance to distance learning and online education, much of a student's academic experience today is electronic (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011). As of 2015, the number of students taking at least one online course was approximately 7.1 million (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Online learning is a new social process that is beginning to act as a complete substitution for both distance learning and the traditional face-to-face class (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Furthermore, online learning environments allow undergraduate students accessibility to higher education courses (Allen &

Seaman, 2015). As such, this has resulted in higher education enrollments increasing because individuals are no longer required to physically visit campus. In fact, the 2013 Educause Center for Analysis and Research study indicated that about 98% of institutions of higher learning have departments, units and programs with interest in online learning (Bischel, 2013).

Non-traditional students in higher education

It is important to examine the characteristics that contribute to successful retention, particularly among non-traditional students. Rovai (2003) discusses additional demands on the time of non-traditional students, such as life crises (e.g., sickness, divorce, loss of a job, etc.) and how such demands can adversely affect persistence. Furthermore, on college and university campuses, non-traditional students represent an increasing share of the total student population (Ely, 1997; Kerka, 2001). More specifically, the focus of this phenomenological study is on persistence at an online campus for a university in the northeastern United States, where 100% of the population is considered non-traditional. These students returned to school for a number of reasons, including the pursuit of an advanced degree, to finish a degree started earlier in life, or to stay current and competitive in the business world (Luzzo, 1999).

The term non-traditional student is not consistently defined, although age (usually 25+ years) and part-time status are common defining characteristics (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Distance education courses allow non-traditional students to adapt their schedules more easily to balance commitments of work, family, and community compared to traditional, lecture-based courses. Given that the majority of U.S. students are returning to education after work or are working now and often have families, these non-traditional students have become the new normal in higher education (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Park & Choi (2009) maintain that, "distance learning allows adult learners who have employment, family, and/or other responsibilities to

update knowledge and skills related to their job by saving travel costs and allowing a flexible schedule" (p. 1). However, despite the increased access and flexibility, student persistence in online programs struggles. Shapiro et al. (2011) published findings in the National Student Clearinghouse demonstrating non-traditional adult learners have a substantial gap in graduation attainment when compared to their traditional counterparts. The study showed a six-year graduation rate for a population of 327,487 non-traditional, adult learners of 42.1% (p. 7). Given the growth of the online non-traditional student demographic, it is important to understand the success factors of those students who persist in their pursuit of a higher education degree.

Adult learners possess unique learning characteristics when compared to children and adolescents. Institutions serving adult learners should pay close attention to the external need for professional growth and success as this will help promote meaningful learning and help with retention. Alternatively, the lack of understanding of these needs could have a negative impact on motivation and engagement issues in the online environment, leading to a lack of completion of programs and increase of dropouts (Fischman, 2011). Further, novice online adult learners may become overwhelmed with the unique demands of distance education; therefore, institutions must provide augmented services to aid in the adult learners' academic experience (Yoo & Huang, 2013). While demands of distance education can cause some to pause their persistence in obtaining their degrees, adult learners are more self-motivated which may be due to external factors such as job enhancement and higher salaries, social status, quality of life and other positive reinforcements (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012). Self-motivation is critical, but what are the additional or deeper characteristics that further drive a student to persist or survive in higher education?

The at-risk student and surviving in higher education

While there are several theories about online persistence, motivation is one of the most frequently studied variables in relation to dropout (Chyung, 2001; Chyung, Winiecki, & Fenner, 1998; Doo & Kim, 2000; Jun, 2005; Levy, 2007; Menager-Beeley, 2004). However, motivation alone is not enough to keep a student enrolled. Park (2007) describes other individual characteristics, such as age and employment status, external factors, including family and organizational support, as well as internal factors, such as family and work obligations and their relation to student persistence.

Quinnan (1997) stresses that adult students are at risk and they "have been and remain marginalized in academic institutions because of the persistence of a deeply rooted culture bias" (p. 31). Adult students in this regard are non-traditional and face multiple organizational, instructional and interpersonal barriers to achieving their educational goals. This is largely due to educational institution structures around traditional students and student services. Adult student status is not the only way to categorize risk. In fact, there are multiple definitions of at-risk as demonstrated by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2006-2012), The Glossary of Education Reform, Bulger & Watson (2006), Hammond, Linton, Smink & Drew (2007), and Horn (1997) include some of those who have sought to define at-risk. The definitions have consistencies, but also have slight variation. However, the consensus of a student who is at risk are those considered to have a higher probability of failing academically or dropping out of school. However, what factors play into this categorization? Horton (2015) compiled a comprehensive table of risk factors that influence college persistence and success (p. 86).

Table 1.1

Characteristics and factors contributing to college persistence and success

Background Characteristics	
Older student	First generation college student
History of academic failure	Minority group
Academic unpreparedness	Family issues; parenting deficiencies
Socio-economic status	Sibling dropped out of high school
Physically challenged	Financial constraints; poverty
Emotionally impaired; domestic violence	Non-supportive home environment
Cultural/language barriers	Homelessness/Transiency (migrant-worker families)
Technology skill limitation	Incarceration
Study behaviors	Lack knowledge of college admissions/matriculation
Individual Characteristics	
Task values (interest, importance, utility)	Serious health or substance abuse issues
Unrealistic goals; Lack of goal clarity	Lack of school engagement
Personal autonomy or independence	Limited communication skills
Self-confidence (insecure public speaker)	Emotional, psychological, or behavioral problems
Low level of self-respect or self-esteem	Passive aggressive attitude
Weak self-concept (judgmental; afraid of failure)	Lack of strong role models/mentors
Social competence; Limited key social skills	Lack self-discipline

Self-efficacy	Low academic demand expectation (fixed mindset;
Lack of motivation for performing well	unchallenged)
Lack of strong support group	Teacher pleaser
Learning or Physical Disabilities (diagnosed or undiagnosed)	Childcare responsibility
	Negative social network (friends) or cultural norms
Underprepared for current academic challenges	Lack understanding of available financial resources
(memorization; knowledge transfer; metacognition)	Procrastination
Environmental Factors	
Transportation time and costs	Internships & field placements
College financial cost	Negative peer culture (ostracizes successful students)
Study environment	Racism or Sexism
Student services (access & under-utilization)	College evaluation culture bias; poor academic fit
Advisor advice & support	No individual guidance or mentoring
Course offerings (remedial; flexible)	Broken college relationships
Adequate facilities	Workforce issues (short or long term)

Note: Reprinted from Horton, J. (2015). Identifying at-risk factors that affect college student success. *International Journal of Process Education*, *7*(1), 83-101.

While Horton's (2015) list is comprehensive, it is not exhaustive of the reasons why a college student could be considered at-risk. Therefore, it should be assumed that an individual's own distinct internal and external factors are situational insofar as it may or may not cause a student to be considered at-risk. Given the individualized nature of risk factors for students and, in particular, online adult learners, the next section will focus on general characteristics of students who persevere despite of having risk factors.

Fishbein & Ajzen (1975) theorized that a student's decision to persist is largely based on previous behavior, attitudes, and norms that drive behavior through the formation of an intent to learn. Although grit is widely seen as a personality trait, it has also been shown to be something that people can be taught; that is, interventions can be enacted to increase a person's grit (Lerner, 2013). Tinto (1975) argues that,

> The process of dropout from college can be viewed as a longitudinal process of interactions between the individual and the academic and social systems of the college, during which a person's experiences in those systems (as measured by his normative and structural integration) continually modify his goal and institutional commitments in ways which lead to persistence and/or to varying forms of dropout. (p. 94)

Figure 1 below is an adaptation of Tinto's longitudinal continuum of students' decision to stay enrolled or drop out.
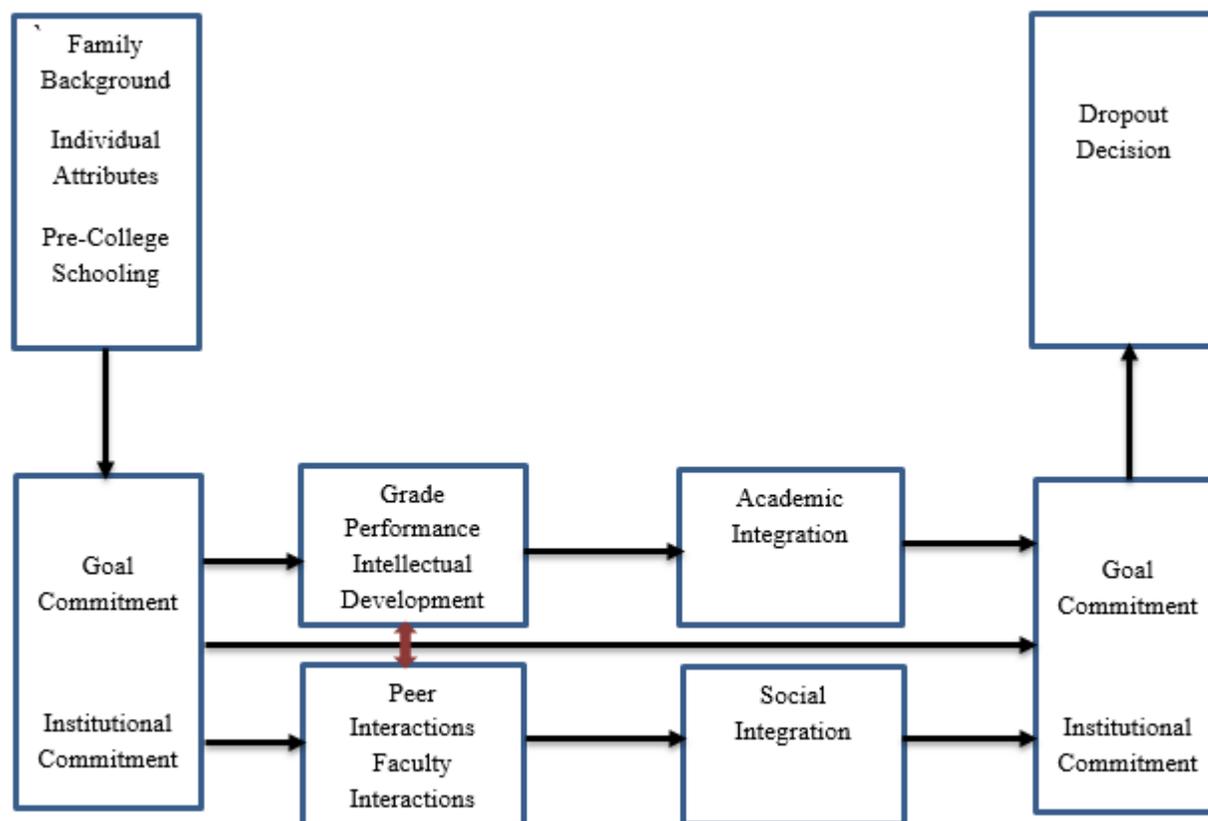
Figure 1. A conceptualization of Tinto's (1993) student integration model. Reprinted from Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition.* University of Chicago Press, 5801 S. Ellis Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637.

Given the various internal and external inputs that go into a student's decision to stay enrolled, there are many researchers who have focused on retention and persistence in higher education institutions (Alqurashi, 2016; Baeten, Dochy, & Struyven, 2013; Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011; Kauffman, 2015; Rovai, 2001). Emerging topics related to retention continue to become more and more entwined with retention specific to online learning. Therefore, much of the research performed for this study will revolve around online success through institutional involvement and student self-efficacy. Rotgans and Schmidt (2012) analyzed motivation and student achievement to determine why the motivation factor is so critical to success in an online environment. Their findings show that motivation, in of itself, is not something with predictive

reliability with respect to retention. Sogunro (2014) also included motivation as a key attribute

for adult learner success in higher education in several of his publications, in particular the

concept of motivation coupled with pragmatism into online success. He further suggests that it is

more likely for students to succeed when they can apply their academic pursuits to existing or

prior practical experiences.

Astin (1984) shares a theory of student involvement and its correlation with success in

higher education,

> Student involvement refers to the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological
>
> energy that students invest in the college experience. Such involvement takes many
>
> forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities,
>
> and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel. (p. 528)

Astin's research and literature indicated frequent interaction with faculty is linked to higher

student satisfaction than any other type of involvement or any other student or institutional

characteristic. Students who interact frequently with faculty members are more likely than other

students to express satisfaction with all aspects of their institutional experience, including student

friendships, variety of courses, intellectual environment, and even the administration of the

institution. Astin (1984) also found that student involvement with faculty was predictor of

student academic motivation. This literature review has shown that grittier students outperformed

their peers, with researchers measuring this performance through grit scores (Duckworth et al.,

2007). Grit has been deemed a college student success variable; however, there is a lack of

research about what causes college students to have grit. However, Astin's research argues that

interaction can lead to satisfaction and subsequently predict motivation. Grit, by definition, is

perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward

challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. Therefore, interaction could ultimately contribute to student grit and perhaps, retention.

There are many theories as to why students leave college; however, one of the most cited theories comes from Tinto (1988). Tinto's (1988) student departure theory states that a student decides to leave the college setting for a number of reasons. Tinto organized these reasons into two large categories, academic and social. Academic reasons include academic ability, preparedness, school setting, and being able to pay; whereas, social factors include fitting into the environment and feeling part of the school setting (Tinto, 1988). Tinto (1987) leveraged a theory first introduced by sociological theorists, Emile Durkheim and Arnold Van Gennep, through their studies of cultures and societies. Tinto takes their research and expands their theory of participation and the correlation of not committing suicide. More specifically, the more a subject participates, the less likely they are to commit suicide. Suicide, here, equates with leaving the institution. Using suicide as a descriptor of a theory is direct and can be considered provocative. However, it seems evident that the more a subject is invested with whatever phase of life they are pursuing, the less likely they would be to steadfastly exit that pursuit. This particular theory also aligns with the research on self-efficacy and motivation as driving factors for online retention and persistence.

Recent studies have identified grit, defined as passion and perseverance for long term-goals, as a college student success variable (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Studies have demonstrated that "grit predicted achievement in challenging domains over and beyond measures of talent" (p. 166). This research demonstrated that grittier students outperformed their peers, with researchers measuring this performance through grit scores (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit has been deemed a college student success

variable; however, there is a lack of research about what causes college students to have grit. Grit is more than persistence due to its focus on stamina, as it requires a student to sustain both effort and interest in activities over long periods of time (Duckworth et al., 2007). Duckworth et al. (2007) state,

> Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress. The gritty individual approaches achievement as a marathon; his or her advantage is stamina. Whereas disappointment or boredom signals to others that it is time to change trajectory and cut losses, the gritty individual stays the course. (pp. 1087-1088)

Duckworth et al. (2007) reference Galton (1892), Cattell (1903), and Cox (1926) as pioneers in the concept of grit. These researchers identified hard work, zeal, and persistence as the traits that predicted lifetime achievement, not strictly IQ or other cognitive abilities. Further, Duckworth et al. (2007) reviewed literature that attributed achievement of success beyond cognitive ability (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Hough, 1992).

Grit by itself will not guarantee success in the student's pursuit of a higher education degree. Credé et al. (2017) found "the higher order structure of grit is not confirmed, that grit is only moderately correlated with performance and retention, and that grit is very strongly correlated with conscientiousness" (p. 492). Their review of studies related to grit indicated the grit scale may be better served in a model with passion and perseverance as separate constructs since the majority of the findings they reviewed only indicated small to moderate effect sizes (Credé et al., 2017). Credé et al. (2017) also suggest grit is not different enough to stand alone as a separate construct from conscientiousness stating grit-performance may be affected by other

differences such as ability. While grit can be a factor that takes an at-risk student through external and internal obstacles they are facing, it is not a causal guarantee.

<p style="text-align:center">Conceptual Framework</p>

A conceptual framework discovers and investigates the links existing between constructs and notions derived from individual experience, observations, recognized theories, and prior research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The data collected through the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis should "provide the researcher with the raw material needed to explore the research questions" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 7). The exploration intends to uncover phenomena that exist among the participants who are the target of the study. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) suggest that "conceptual frameworks are comprised of three primary elements: personal interests, topical research, and theoretical frameworks" (p. 10). Tamene (2016) argues that the "conceptual framework is a network/interlinked system, or relationship of assumptions, expectations, beliefs. It is a tentative theory that guides the research" (p. 51). Based on the definitions above, one can argue that the conceptual framework is a tool to influence the organization of the research and a lens from which to view the research. The framework for this study reflects the idea that the phenomenon of student persistence in online academic careers are driven by both internal and external factors.

Personal interests

The researcher currently works in a leadership role at a university that offers a substantial online program portfolio for adult learners. In his capacity, the researcher oversees academics; which directly includes curriculum and faculty and indirectly includes student services. In this role, the researcher has first-hand knowledge of student success and failure as they pursue their online academic degree. Further, the researcher is a father of two young children and is currently

attending an asynchronous online program while balancing a full-time job. Therefore, the researcher has amassed significant direct exposure with internal and external factors consistent to what the participants of this study have experienced. The conceptual framework of this study derives from the worldview of social constructivism. Similarly, Creswell (2012) shares that "social constructivists believe that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences — meanings directed toward certain objects or things" (p. 37). The social constructivism theory supports the idea that the researcher's conclusions may be subjectively influenced by his personal experience.

Topical Research

Ravitch & Riggan (2012) define topical research as the existing work that is focused on the subject being studied. Therefore, the conclusions and findings that are included in relevant and contemporary literature will already frame what will be concluded by the researcher's study. This particular component of the conceptual framework will be critical in identifying gaps in existing literature and opportunities for future research. Motivation, grit and cognitive ability have emerged as traits that lead toward persistence in pursuit of higher education. However, these traits do not guaranteepersistence. Recent literature indicates that in past decades, there have been several theories and models on the issues of motivation as it relates to success in higher education (Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013). Further, Bazelais, Lemay, & Dolek (2016) share that "research suggests that achievement is not solely based on cognitive abilities of the learner, but rather on the combination of cognitive ability and personality traits, such as grit and deliberate practice" (p. 35). Hogan & Wong (2013) argue that grittier individuals tend to work harder and longer and are more inclined to engage in deliberate practice to enhance performance or success. This study explored characteristics of a population of students at a

university in the northeastern United States who have persisted when faced with internal and external adversity and obstacles that would typically cause a student to suspend their education. This study documents similarities or phenomena that exist among these participants.

Theoretical Framework

Depending on the way the research is framed, and the way the data are collected and interpreted, the findings could be widely varied. Anfara & Mertz (2014) describe "the purpose of a theoretical framework is to make sense of the data, to provide some coherent explanation for why people are doing or saying what they are doing or saying" (p. 111). The authors further expand this discussion to explain that theoretical frameworks are "meant to move the research project beyond the realm of the descriptive and into the realm of the explanatory" (p. 111). Therefore, a theoretical framework consists of carefully chosen theories that and frames them as a lens from which the topic is researched (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The lens through which this study focuses is that of psychological survivorship. Tinto (1987) leverages a theory first introduced by sociological theorists, Emile Durkheim and Arnold Van Gennep through their studies of cultures and societies. Tinto adapted their research and expanded their theory of participation and the correlation of not "committing suicide". More specifically, the more a subject "participates", the less likely they are to commit "suicide". Suicide in this regard, equates with leaving the institution. Surviving in this regard, equates with continual enrollment.

Social constructivism

The conceptual framework for this phenomenological interpretative study is rooted in social constructivism, which argues that meaning is derived from the interaction of experiences and inspiration within an individual's reality (Creswell, 2012, p. 24). Social constructivism is derived from Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) theory that learning is a result of social interaction. Social

constructivism "is perhaps the most common version currently in favor and…normally evoked by the term 'constructivism'" (Swan, 2005, p. 4). Researchers use social constructivism to determine "social phenomena from a context-specific perspective….as value-bound rather than value-free, meaning the process of inquiry is influenced by the researcher" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 28). This study includes the researcher's assumption that most adult learners will be faced with internal and/or external pressures that would cause them to consider stopping out and/or dropping out of their online program. While online education is theoretically available to all learners, more adult-learners take advantage of online or distance education. That said, the same, non-traditional, adult learners have responsibilities unlike that of traditional, face-to-face college students. The existence of additional professional and personal responsibilities lends additional opportunities for disruption in continued learning. With a higher likelihood to face internal and external pressures, non-traditional, adult-learners must possess the intellectual acumen and the self-efficacy or grit in order to persist in their online education.

While motivation and other internal and external factors influence persistence, intellectual acumen is a core component of success in higher education. Busato et al. (2000) found that intellectual ability is associated positively with academic success. More recently, Tatarinceva et al. (2018) argue that there are many definitions of intellect and that many factors that make up intellect. "The ability to learn and the ability to adapt efficiently to environmental changes are the most important and significant factors of human intellect determining an individual's successfulness in the process of lifelong learning" (p. 6). While intelligence is a fundamental trait for success, other factors influence student persistence through a program of higher education. Key components of success include perseverance or "grit". However, what is "grit"? Duckworth (2007) defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit

entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087-1088). This suggests that two individuals with similar intelligence levels would be differentiated in their prospective success by the level of grit they exhibit.

Conclusion

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study is to examine the experiences of students categorized as at-risk, non-traditional adult learners who persist in pursuit of their higher education degree. These students have demonstrated perseverance and grit when faced with challenges that might have caused them to drop out of school. It would be impractical to create retention policies that would apply to all students because the reason to leave is extremely personal. However, the findings from this study will help the administration and faculty understand the types of challenges that non-traditional, adult learners face while they pursue their degree. Furthermore, recognizing the types of qualities and characteristics of gritty students will help frame the dialogue with future students in similar situations. This chapter explored relevant literature, which examined the critical factors contributing to adult learners' determination to persist and overall perseverance in pursuing and completing their online degree. Multiple researchers (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2013; Jacobsen & Forste, 2011; and Allen & Seaman, 2015) provided the foundation for the evolution of online higher education which demonstrated the rapid growth and normalizing of online and distance education.

The second area of focus of this study is the advent and prevalence of the non-traditional, online, adult learner in higher education. Rovai (2003) discussed additional demands on the time of non-traditional students, such as life crises (e.g., sickness, divorce, loss of a job, etc.) and how such demands can adversely affect persistence. Furthermore, on college and university

campuses, non-traditional students represent an increasing share of the total student population (Ely, 1997; Kerka, 2001). More recently, Xu (2019) finds that the prevalence of online courses has increased steadily over the past two decades and predicts that trend to continue. In addition, online and distance education has attracted working professionals and other non-traditional students who may not have had access to quality education in the past. These adult learners are motivated, but also balance work, family and other responsibilities. These responsibilities can manifest as obstacles – and adult-learners may have to prioritize their education below their other responsibilities. Therefore, it should be no surprise that research suggests that "students in online courses are between 3 percent and 15 percent more likely to withdraw, compared to similar students in face-to-face classes" (Xu, 2019, p. 2). However, some students face internal and external pressures and find the fortitude to persevere and persist as they pursue their degree.

The final area of focus of this study is the profile of the at-risk student and how they survive in higher education. There are several theories about online persistence, motivation is one of the most frequently studied variables in relation to dropout (Chyung, 2001; Chyung, Winiecki, & Fenner, 1998; Doo & Kim, 2000; Jun, 2005; Levy, 2007; Menager-Beeley, 2004). However, motivation alone is not enough to keep a student enrolled. Park (2007) describes other individual characteristics, such as age and employment status, external factors, including family and organizational support, as well as internal factors, such as family and work obligations and their relation to student persistence. Quinnan (1997) stressed that adult students are at risk and they "have been and remain marginalized in academic institutions because of the persistence of a deeply rooted culture bias" (p. 31). Adult students in this regard are non-traditional and face multiple organizational, instructional and interpersonal barriers to achieving their educational goals. Given the various internal and external inputs that go into a student's decision to stay

enrolled, there are many researchers who have focused on retention and persistence in higher education institutions (Alqurashi, 2016; Baeten, Dochy, & Struyven, 2013; Hartnett, St. George, & Dron, 2011; Kauffman, 2015; Rovai, 2001). Emerging topics related to retention are becoming more entwined with retention specific to online learning. Therefore, much of the literature reviewed for this study revolved around online success through institutional involvement and student self-efficacy. Tinto's (1987) research is the lens through which this study was approached and supports theories of self-efficacy and grit by framing the phenomenon of psychological survivorship and applying it to persisting in higher education. The next chapter describes the methodology and procedures applied to the study of non-traditional, adult-learners persisting in asynchronous online programs.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology, research questions, setting, participants, data collection, setting, participant rights used to conduct the research for the study and limitations associated with the study. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of students categorized as at-risk, non-traditional adult learners. These students have demonstrated perseverance and grit when faced with challenges that might have caused them to drop out of school. Qualitative research methodology is commonly incorporated into academic disciplines and in applied fields of practice, especially in education (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and popular among researchers across disciplines, including the field of education (Creswell, 2012; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Merriam, 2009; Thomas, 2011). The primary focus of a qualitative study is not to generalize the results of or understand other studies, but to maximize in-depth investigation of the specific study in question (Stake, 1995). More pointedly, Finlay (2009) states that applied to research, phenomenology is the study of phenomena: their nature and meanings. The focus is on the way things appear to us through experience or in our consciousness where the phenomenological researcher aims to provide a rich textured description of a lived experience (Kafle, 2011).

This interpretative phenomenological study sought to explore how adult learners experience the phenomenon of psychological survivorship. More pointedly, this study focused on the retention and persistence experiences of students who overcame adversity during their online academic career. Seaman et al. (2018) shared that in the United States, "distance education enrollments increased for the fourteenth straight year, growing faster than they have

for the past several years" (p. 6). Part of this growth is due to the accessibility and ability to pursue higher education for those that were once otherwise unable. There are myriad reasons why an adult learner may not have chosen to pursue a higher education degree. One common reason is the mere proximity of brick and mortar institutions with respect to the adult learner's home or job. Additionally, job and family commitments can prevent an adult learner from pursuing higher education in the traditional, face-to-face fashion. Although there have been notable increases in the education availability of non-traditional learners, online education has become a competing priority for students balancing their work-life-family. In the past decade, there have been increases in online learning delivery and a corresponding increase in enrollment with millions of students taking advantage of online learning (Liu, 2012). Despite the increase, large-scale implementation of online education, and increased demand for online education among adult learners, there are still barriers to successful completion of online courses and programs. Dropout rates have continued to increase in the online environments compared to traditional face-to-face environments (Lee & Choi, 2011; Lint, 2013). However, some students face hardship and misfortune and somehow still persevere. The intent of this study was to explore the similar characteristics among students who, when met with adversity, were able to persist.

Research Questions

This qualitative study involved an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA focuses on understanding the meaning of the participants' reported experiences as a result of the researcher engaging in an interpretative relationship with the data (Smith & Osborn, 2007). This interpretative phenomenological study addressed one primary research question and several related sub-questions:

- How do adult learners describe their experience of survivorship in an online course of study?

  o What factors, internal and external, have adult learners encountered during their online academic career that have caused consideration as whether or not to persist and remain enrolled in an online program of study?

  o What personal characteristics, traits, decisions or other factors do online, adult learner describe as vital to their academic success?

Setting

This study was conducted at a non-profit, private institution in the northeastern United States. More specifically, the participants of the study are enrolled as current students or are recent graduates from an online campus at this higher education institution in pursuit of their bachelor or master's degree. The institution has experienced a steady decline in overall undergraduate and graduate enrollment over the past few years, as well as a decrease in retention rates. Since the population of participants interviewed were non-traditional adult learners, this study sought to explore retention and persistence from their perspective. When faced with internal and/or external pressures such as family, work, finances and/or health that would typically lead to a period of a stop out and/or more permanent dropout, why do certain students continue to persist?

The researcher was a leader in online academics at the study site at the time of this study. The researcher performed a study at a private non-profit university in the northeastern United States. This institution was founded more than a century ago. Since its founding, one of the university's fundamental objectives was to support its students in fulfilling their professional aspirations. Through its unique approach to education, the institution grew from a small local

school to a multi-campus university. At the core of the institution's mission is the focus on industry-relevant curriculum. The faculty are nearly all working within the industry, relevant to the subjects to which they teach.

This institution has had a consistent decline in enrollment over the past decade, which is inconsistent with the nationwide higher education enrollment. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2020) notes that,

Between 2000 and 2018, total undergraduate enrollment in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 26 percent (from 13.2 million to 16.6 million). By 2029, total undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase to 17.0 million students. While total undergraduate enrollment increased by 37 percent between 2000 and 2010, enrollment decreased by 8 percent between 2010 and 2018. Undergraduate enrollment is projected to increase by 2 percent (from 16.6 million to 17.0 million students) between 2018 and 2029. (p. 1)

Given the disparity of enrollment trends between the institution and the enrollment data from NCES (2020), it is important to understand characteristics of those who have shown success, demonstrated through persistence, retention and graduation.

In addition to enrollment declines, this institution is experiencing retention and persistence challenges. According to the US Department of Education (2019), the retention rate "is the percentage of a school's first-time, first-year undergraduate students who continue at that school the next year" (p. 1). Since this study focused on online, non-traditional students, the traditional retention metric is not as meaningful as persistence. A study published by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) defines persistence as "the percentage

of students who return to college at any institution for their second year". This same study

published retention and persistence rates for similar institutions from 2009 to 2017 and notes,

> For students who started college in four-year private nonprofit institutions, the
>
> persistence rate was 85.1 percent, up 0.1 percentage point from the prior year, and down
>
> 2.4 percentage points in comparison to the fall 2009 cohort. Of all students who started
>
> college in this sector in fall 2017, 85.1 percent returned to college at any U.S. institution
>
> in fall 2018, and 74.1 percent returned to the same institution. (p. 4)

The institution under study is also a four-year, private nonprofit institution that is looking to

understand and improve retention and persistence rates. The institution would like to align with

the National Clearinghouse (2020) report's published retention and persistence rates for four-

year private, non-profit institutions. "Of all students who started college in this sector in fall

2017, 85.1 percent returned to college at any U.S. institution in fall 2018, and 74.1 percent

returned to the same institution" (p. 4). However, further analysis shows that this institution's

retention and persistence is consistent to that of students pursuing a degree part-time at private,

non-profit, four-year institutions. "Students in this sector whose entering status was part-time,

the persistence rate was 64.2 percent, down 0.2 percentage points from the prior year, and down

1.2 percentage points since 2009" (p. 4). While there is consistency compared to national trends,

losing nearly half of the population due to stop-out or dropout is unfavorable. If the research can

demonstrate consistent themes and characteristics among those who persisted, perhaps initiatives

could be enacted to duplicate the qualities of the successful student.

Participants/Sample

Permission to conduct the study, identify and interview participants and publish the

findings was formally sought by the institutional review board from the site's institution and the

university for which this publication was drafted. With permission, participants were chosen from a pool of existing and graduated online students. An email advertisement was drafted and made available to all current online students and alumni who were interested in participating in the study. The researcher used a non-random purposive sample. Ilker et al. (2016) defined purposive sampling as the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the participant possesses. It is a non-random technique that does not need underlying theories or a set number of participants. Simply put, the researcher decided what needed to be known and set out to find people who could and were willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience. Participation in this study was voluntary and minimized exposure by the participants to any undue hardships, such as anxiety and other stress from reliving the experiences that they overcame. As a result, the potential pool of participants for this study included all current online, non-traditional learners, as well as those who have graduated in the past two years.

This study used recorded interviews as its main source of data collection. The researcher distributed an offer to participate to the entire population of active students and recent graduates from the previous two years. The response was adequate so the researcher did not have to consider incentivizing participants. Providing the opportunity to all students should have provided for a homogeneous sample. According to Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012), it was suggested that the participants formed a "reasonably homogeneous sample" (p. 3) to get a better gauge and a 'better understanding' of the overall perceptions among the participants' 'lived experiences' Because IPA focuses on learning from the individual life experiences of each participant, this research emphasized "quality, not quantity, and given the complexity of most human phenomena, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases" (p. 51). Creswell (2012) and Robinson (2014) further suggest that small sample sizes

allow for collecting extensive data from participants. Therefore, the sample size was limited to 8 individuals. The researcher continued interviews until saturation was reached.

Prior to beginning the study, a pilot interview was conducted to validate and address interview questions and address the cadence and interview flow. A selected group of non-participants in the pilot also helped evaluate the effectiveness of the questions for ease of comprehension and content before disseminating the information to the participants. Pilot testing provides the opportunity to determine the length, time of completion, analysis and content, and also predict the likelihood of success (Brooks, Reed, & Savage, 2016). The small number of participants should also have an impact on data saturation. According to Mason (2010):

> There is a point of diminishing return to a qualitative sample—as the study goes on, more data does not necessarily lead to more information. This is because one occurrence of a piece of data, or a code, is all that is necessary to ensure that it becomes part of the analysis framework. Frequencies are rarely important in qualitative research, as one occurrence of the data is potentially as useful as many in understanding the process behind a topic. This is because qualitative research is concerned with meaning and not making generalized hypothesis statements. (p. 2)

The email invitation from the researcher to participants included the purpose of the study, the criteria for participants, and the potential contributions of the findings to research about psychological survivorship in higher education. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) advised that the study be based on selecting a small group of participants "on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned" (p. 96). The researcher followed the guidelines of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012):

Informed consent must be gained not only for participation in data collection (you will

need to think about how best to explain to your participants what to expect from an

interview or focus group) but also for the likely outcomes of data analysis (and

particularly, the inclusion of verbatim extracts in published reports). With regard to the

data collection, it is normal practice to let the participant know the type of topics to be

covered. (p. 53)

The Appendices include the invitation to participate, the consent form to participate, the

interview questions as well as the Interview Protocol. Participants received pseudonyms to

provide an extra layer of confidentiality. While the sample size was small, the researcher

continued the interview process until saturation was achieved.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a the 2018-2019 school year using semi-structured interviews

detailed in the Interview Protocol (Appendix 1). An interview protocol is an instrument of

inquiry—asking questions for specific information related to the aims of a study (Patton, 2015)

as well as an instrument for conversation about a particular topic, such as life experiences. This

structure allows for the standardization of pre-determined questions, in addition to having the

flexibility for real-time follow up questions tailored to each participant's responses. Moreover,

semi-structured/open-ended interviews are well suited for phenomenological studies since the

researcher can focus and refine the follow-up questions to the participant, thus discovering

patterns/phenomena.

Given the nature of online education and the proximity to home that learners prefer, the

researcher aimed to conduct in-person interviews. Dimeo (2017) published a recent study in

Inside Higher Ed that shows that online learners stay close to home: "54 percent of the

respondents live less than 50 miles from their college or university and 18 percent live 50 to 100 miles away" (p. 1). However, some of the participants could not agree upon a neutral, mutually agreed upon location or campus. Therefore, in these cases the researcher utilized Zoom audio and video technology to perform and record the synchronous interviews. The benefit of having a synchronous interview through a tool such as Zoom allowed for the researcher to (a) record the interview and (b) document nonverbal communication cues to augment the interview responses. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. For the interviews that took place in person, in addition to recording the interview, the researcher took notes, with observations on nonverbal communication cues, such as eye contact, pauses, hesitations and other body language and observable signals.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews between the researcher and participants represented the primary method from which data was collected for this study. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) assert that the primary focus of qualitative research is an exploration to discover findings and "is suited to promoting a deep understanding of a social setting or activity as viewed from the perspectives of the research participants" (p. 27). The study employed a semi-structured interview format, which provided the ability to consider other ideas not included in the scripted portion of the interview. Merriam (2009) argued that this format of interviewing lessens the potential for rigidity of structured interviews, which could limit more in-depth responses from interviewees. Furthermore, the flexibility of semi-structured interviews format provided the opportunity for the researcher to ask relevant, follow-up questions that naturally occur during the interview exchange. In addition, this less-formal conversational flow of interviewing allowed the interviewer an opportunity to foster a more natural relationship with the participant, which, in

turn, allowed for more openness and honesty in the provided responses. This format allowed for

the interviewees' responses to be summarized and restated by the researcher interviewer to verify

accuracy of the exchange.

Pilot Study

Kinchin, Ismail, & Edwards (2018) explained what a pilot study is and the importance

incorporating pilot studies in qualitative interviews:

> A Pilot Study is a small-scale research project conducted before the final full-scale study.
>
> A pilot study helps researchers to test in reality how likely the research process is to
>
> work, in order to help them decide how best to conduct the final research study. In
>
> piloting a study, a researcher can identify or refine a research question, discover what
>
> methods are best for pursuing it, and estimate how much time and what resources will be
>
> necessary to complete the larger final version of the study. (p. 2)

To ensure that the interview instrument measures what it intends to measure, the interview was

piloted. The first iteration of the pilot showed additional opportunities for improvement,

therefore additional iterations of pilots were initiated. Several of the academic team members

that work closely with the researcher have experienced online education as non-traditional, adult

learners. Therefore, these individuals provided a representative, small-scale population of the

students ultimately included in the study. These pilot participants were encouraged to provide

feedback for improvement on the interview format, cadence and content. The feedback was

incorporated into the official interviews.

Data Analysis

Smith & Osborn (2004) explained that "IPA recognizes that different people perceive the

world in very different ways, dependent on their personalities, prior life experiences and

motivations" (p. 229). The nature of online, non-traditional, adult-learners is such that most students enrolled in this institution's online program balance competing priorities. Rovai (2003) discusses additional demands on the time of non-traditional students, such as life crises (e.g., sickness, divorce, loss of a job) and how such demands can adversely affect persistence. Furthermore, on college and university campuses, non-traditional students represent an increasing share of the total student population (Ely, 1997; Kerka, 2001). Given the nature of the participants and the varying life stages and hardships they have faced, this particular method was well-suited for this study.

In qualitative inquiry, data collection can come from various sources, including interviews, observations, letters, surveys and any source that may answer the research questions to be studied (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). There is an emphasis on the use of tools such as codes and visualization for qualitative data analysis, which has created opportunities for researchers to rearrange data to ease research findings (Evers, 2016). Coding the interviews allowed for themes to emerge allowing the researcher to identify phenomena through the organized data (Sanchez-Algarra, & Anguera, 2013). To ensure trustworthy research findings and to bring order and understanding to the study, the data were categorized, analyzed, and interpreted to enable the identification of themes and codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

The coding process occurred in cycles. In the first cycle of coding, descriptions and short phrases were designated to relevant sections of the interview transcripts to seek a meaningful and direct summative topic of those sections. The second cycle of coding "worked with the resulting First Cycle codes themselves" (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 72) to create a repository of interview data for indexing and categorizing into common groups among ideas, referred to by Creswell (2012) as themes. A review of each interview transcript guided the researcher's

summarization and conceptualization of each artifact, and was submitted back to the student

participants to verify accuracy and to solicit feedback. Once reviewed, transcripts were

interpreted with the intent to identify a "larger meaning of the data" (Creswell, 2012, p. 187).

Additional notes were taken to triangulate the points of inflection, emotion, pauses, and eye-

contact. The combined notes were then organized into initial codes and themes for the next stage

of analysis.

Creswell (2012) recognized that "hand coding is a laborious and time-consuming process,

even for data from a few individuals. Thus, qualitative software programs have become quite

popular, and they help researchers organize, sort, and search for information" (p. 245). However,

"Data collection, analysis and resultant theory generation has a reciprocal relationship…it

requires a constant interplay between the researcher and the data" (Charmaz, 2008, p. 47).

Therefore, the researcher elected to not incorporate software and used a manual coding

methodology. Creswell (2012) describes that "beyond identifying the themes during the coding

process, qualitative researchers can do much with themes to build additional layers of complex

analysis…[such as] shap[ing] into a general description (as in phenomenology)" (p. 248).

Member Checking Procedures

The analysis process in this study included participant review of their individual

transcripts for accuracy. In addition to participant review, the researcher read each transcript

multiple times. The researcher also listened to and/or watched the recordings while referencing

notes taken during the initial interview. The transcribed interviews were provided to the

interviewees for their review; in particular, to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions by

notating errors and/or exceptions, a process known as member checking (Bloomberg & Volpe,

2012). Merriam (2009) defined member checks as a strategy to support the internal validity of a

study. Multiple member checks will be conducted throughout data collection and analysis to verify accuracy. As part of the member check process, participants were encouraged to suggest edits, make additions, and/or request exclusions from the findings as needed to better represent their lived experience. When the participants returned their reviewed transcripts, the researcher re-read them and made any requested corrections. The transcripts were finalized and summarized with identified codes and themes. These summaries were redistributed to the participants for validation. The researcher then mapped the codes to the interview questions.

Participant Rights

Participation in this interview was voluntary and did not expose the students to any undue hardships. The Appendices to this dissertation include the invitation to participate, as well as interview questions and protocol. Participants were given pseudonyms to provide a layer of confidentiality and each participant fully understood that they could opt out at any time. Furthermore, each participant signed a consent form that details the confidentiality and his or her rights. Initial findings and transcripts were provided to the participants, reviewed under their pseudonym, ensuring they remained confident that their identities have been kept confidential. The researcher is the only person to know the actual identities of the participants. Consent forms and other identifying material is maintained in encrypted format to prevent compromise.

Potential Limitations

Limitations in this study relate to researcher bias and scope of the study. The researcher's personal experience as a student who faced internal and external pressures while pursuing an online degree presents the potential for bias. Further, as this study examined characteristics of students who persisted, corresponding characteristics of students who did not persist will not be considered. Since only students who persisted are the target of the study, there may be a

limitation in data collected. The benefits will be in sharing the similarities in personality traits and grit to future students facing similar difficulties. However, the researcher was limited by the honesty of the responses provided. Further, the recall of the situations and reasons to persist may have been limited. Finally, the research in this study was conducted at a single institution of higher education.

Conclusion

This interpretative phenomenological study sought to understand the lived experiences of non-traditional, adult learners within an institution of higher education who have successfully demonstrated grit and perseverance in response to adversity and internal and external pressures while pursuing their degree. Through purposive, non-random sampling, participants were selected based on a self-identified characteristics of having survived in their pursuit of a higher education degree. Data were gathered through a semi-structured interview with each participant. IPA methodology was used to analyze interview transcripts to determine themes that are illustrative of the faculty perspective. Chapter 4 provides a summary of the findings, while lastly, Chapter 5 provides recommendations for future studies.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The purpose of this interpretative, phenomenological, qualitative study was to examine the experiences of students categorized as at-risk, non-traditional adult learners. These students have demonstrated perseverance and grit when faced with challenges that might have caused them to drop out of school. This study documented the perceived experiences of adult-learners who studied online courses at a non-profit, private institution of higher education in the northeastern United States. The experiences adult-learners encountered while participating in online instruction were explored using an interpretive, qualitative approach that employed semi-structured interviews to identify the lived experiences of the student participants in this study (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009). Retention is a topic that is highly visible at the university and across the national higher education landscape. "As a key performance indicator in university quality assurance processes, the retention of students in their studies is an issue of concern world-wide" (Thomas, 2009, p. 1). Thus, this researcher will dissect the retention patterns of the distinct groups of students who matriculate into the university's online campus. With a better understanding of what the retention patterns are and a consideration of why some students persist could help the institution consider how to improve retention rates. The data obtained during this study are used to answer the following research questions:

- How do adult learners describe their experience of survivorship in an online course of study?
  - What factors, internal and external, have adult learners encountered during their online academic career that have caused consideration as whether or not to persist and remain enrolled in an online program of study?

   o What personal characteristics, traits, decisions or other factors do online,

     adult learner describe as vital to their academic success?

This study was conducted by interviewing currently enrolled and recently graduated students from an online campus at a private, non-profit institution of higher education in the northeastern United States. The institution has experienced a steady decline in overall undergraduate and graduate enrollment over the past few years, as well as a decrease in retention rates. Since the population of participants interviewed were non-traditional adult learners, this study sought to explore retention and persistence from their lived experiences. When faced with internal and/or external pressures such as family, work, finances and/or health that would typically lead to a period of a stop out and/or more permanent dropout, why do certain students continue to persist?

Data were collected over a four-week period and documented through recorded interviews which were professionally transcribed. The transcribed interviews were provided to the interviewees for their review; in particular, to confirm the accuracy of the transcriptions by noting errors and/or exceptions, a process known as member checking (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). As part of the member check process, participants were encouraged to suggest edits, make additions, and/or request exclusions from the findings as needed to better represent their lived experience. The researcher re-read the reviewed transcripts and made the appropriate requested corrections. The researcher read and listened to each finalized transcript several times before the coding process was completed. Finally, the researcher employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the methodology for data analysis.

This chapter is organized in accordance with the model advocated by Larkin, Watts, and Clifton (2006). The first section presents a detailed narrative which gives voice to the

experiences of each participant. This is followed by a discussion of meaning-units extracted from the narratives, framed by the research questions used in the study. Finally, building upon the previous two sections, emergent themes are presented giving voice to the phenomenon of student persistence or "surviving higher education" during periods of hardship.

Surviving Higher Education

Names identifying each of the following participants' lived experiences represent the pseudonyms selected by participants at the time of each interview. The narratives in the following section were authored by the researcher from interview transcripts as well as notes taken during the interview and while listening to the interview recordings. Each narrative synopsis was subsequently reviewed by the corresponding study participant. All requested changes were incorporated before each account was finalized for inclusion in the study. The finalized narratives provide an in-depth account of the lived experiences of students who have faced internal and external pressures while pursuing their degree in higher education. The following table represents the participants' pseudonyms, academic degree programs, enrollment status, current GPA, and expected graduation date.

Table 4.1. *Student Academic Status*

Student	Degree	Program	Status	GPA	Graduation Date
Rayne	MBA	Project Management	Still enrolled	3.86	May, 2021
Scarlett	BS	Psychology	Still enrolled	2.68	May, 2021
Harper	MBA	Finance	Still enrolled	4.0	December, 2020
Alan-Scott	BS	Business Studies	Still enrolled	2.70	May, 2022
Audrey	BS	Food Service Management	Graduated	3.54	February, 2020
Caesar	MPA	Public Administration	Still enrolled	3.94	August, 2020
Carrie	MBA	Organizational Psychology	Still enrolled	3.97	December, 2020

As the table illustrates, the students represent a diverse population. The diversity is in programs spanning graduate and baccalaureate degrees in hospitality, psychology, public administration and business. The diversity is also in gender and age. While the students weren't required to disclose their age, the researcher deduced the relative age range based on other disclosed information such as years of professional experience, ages of children and years in school. Based on these disclosed data, the estimated ages range from mid-twenties to mid-fifties. There is also a clear range in academic achievement as shown by their GPA. These students have similarities as well. They are all still enrolled or have recently graduated. They all persisted. They all survived.

Rayne

Rayne is a wife and mother of six children studying to earn her MBA with a concentration in Project Management. She works full-time at a telecommunications conglomerate where she is responsible for security and IT infrastructure. Her husband also works full time and her children have time-sensitive schedules. After trying a traditional MBA program, her professional and personal responsibilities prevented her from dedicating the time required to be a successful graduate student. Therefore, she chose to pursue her degree online for convenience and flexibility. Her ability to carve out regular time on a weekly basis affords her the opportunity to successfully navigate the weekly requirements of her online courses. Her background in project management affords her the wherewithal to schedule all things professional/personal/academic well in advance. Even with Rayne's ability to balance a hectic family schedule, a demanding professional calendar and graduate level school requirements, she recognized the risk of external/internal pressures threatening this balance.

One such external pressure did disrupt Rayne's ability to continue seamlessly through her studies. Early on in her academic career, Rayne was diagnosed with a malignant tumor on her vocal cords. Recognizing that this medical condition needed to take precedent over her professional/personal/academic studies, Rayne took the necessary measures to deal with her cancer diagnosis. Unfortunately, Rayne's insurance did not cover the cost of the entire procedure, and the chances of recovery were not guaranteed. $90,000 of personal expenses and several months later, Rayne is in remission with some difficult decisions to make. When faced with mortality and bankruptcy, it is difficult to see how a degree fits in with the priorities. Couple that with the fact that Rayne is already established in her career and the MBA is largely a personal goal; it is easy to see why she would decide to take a break from her studies.

Rayne did take a term off from her studies but never considered dropping out of her program. "I am not a quitter". She also freely admits that her support system plays a critical role in her continued success in academics. When asked what advice she could provide to someone that is struggling with the same or a similar situation when balancing school and other responsibilities, Rayne responded: "Know your why, because I know my why". When asked to expand on this, Rayne explained that she always knew that she wanted to get her advanced degree and she faced uphill obstacles throughout her life as an international student. She had personal, professional and academic challenges that she had to overcome prior to pursuing her advanced degree. She planned and waited until it was her time to get her MBA and swore that nothing would stop her from obtaining her goal. She began with the end in mind and used each opportunity and challenge to add to her academic and life experience. She "knew her why".

Scarlett

Scarlett is a single woman studying to earn her bachelor's degree in psychology. Scarlett had previously been a nursing student approximately two decades earlier but left her career in the medical field due to traumatic events that afflicted her. She was sexually assaulted by a close acquaintance while studying to become a nurse. Rather than seeking formal charges, psychological treatment or even confiding in friends/family, Scarlett suppressed the emotions and pain. Scarlett avoided the very idea that she had been a victim until it became unbearable. She developed severe anxiety and could no longer function in the environment where her assault took place. She abruptly left the medical profession and sought out therapy and other treatment. In time, Scarlett was able to leverage the advice found from the many counseling sessions. This series of events, however, did cause academic interference. Scarlett dropped out.

Approximately ten years after the treatment was regulated and Scarlett started to feel like herself again, she decided it was time to go back to school. While school was always a goal that Scarlett had for herself, she had other factors pushing her to complete her academic journey. She was struggling with a low-paying job and no longer had a savings to support herself. After much consideration, Scarlett decided that she would pursue a degree in psychology. While psychology and nursing are loosely interrelated, she felt the switch to the mental-health would allow her "pay forward the help she received when she was getting through her PTSD". In fact, Scarlett "would like to do trauma and grief counseling".

Scarlett began working full-time again and chose to pursue her degree in an online modality to take advantage of the flexibility. While pursuing her online-psychology degree, Scarlett was tested several additional times with personal and medical situations that challenged her resolve to remain enrolled. Scarlett lost her job and had three leg surgeries due to a genetic

complication. Through these events, Scarlett persevered and "slowed down" and maintained the mental fortitude to keep going. When asked why and how? Scarlett responded "I've got this". She further described the mental strategies she employed to get her through these trying times. She continually compared her current situation with that of her previous trauma and reasoned "if I can get through that, I can get through anything". This optimism and grit was about to be challenged even further.

In a matter of weeks after her most recent recovery, Scarlett was notified by her doctor that she would need a fourth leg surgery. At the same time, she received troubling news about a mammogram that came back with questionable results. She found that her optimism and psychological tricks that she used on herself in the past weren't working so well with cancer looming. She ended up dropping one of her classes to focus on her recovery. Ultimately, she decided that she needed her degree to further her career and to break through the personal trials she has been battling for more than a decade. Even if it means part-time study, she was going to continue pushing ahead. Thankfully, her fourth and final surgery was a success. Even more encouraging was the fact that the tumor in her breast tested benign. Scarlett was in the clear!

Scarlett's resourcefulness, resolve and optimism has gotten her to a point where she feels she can successfully face any challenge. She uses her past trauma to embolden her tenacity and to dampen her anxiety. She is a scholar who has the grit and resilience to make it to graduation and beyond. Scarlett now holds junior status with a 3.0+ GPA and is on pace to graduate in the spring of 2022.

Harper

Harper is an alumni seeking her second degree with the same institution. Currently, she is a 4.0 student pursuing her MBA with a concentration in Finance. Her primary motivation for

pursuing this advanced degree is career advancement. Harper has a background in event planning but found herself in a project management position after a recent promotion within a global hospitality company. Harper's supervisor encouraged her to get an MBA so she could be considered for further advancement. Harper was excited to test her transferrable skills and motivation to learn in her new role.

Harper knew she would study her advanced degree online for the flexibility and structure. She understood before enrolling that her support structure at work and home was paramount to her success as an online adult-learner. She also boasted of time-management and organizational skills that are crucial to students' success. With all the tools, behaviors and structure in place, Harper found herself surprised by falling prey to obstacles that caused her to consider her persistence in higher education.

Balancing a 40+ hour work week along with attending graduate school while balancing family and social commitments, Harper found herself "struggling to do it all". In fact, Harper was "hospitalized for three weeks for stress/depression and anxiety". This, in of itself was a new experience for Harper, the self-identified "perfectionist". She reflected that she seriously considered dropping out until she was able to come to grips with all that was on her plate. However, she took a more humbling route. She was honest with herself, her supervisor and her professors. They all were understanding and supportive and allowed her the flexibility she needed to get back on her feet.

Harper faced a common hardship for those who are thrust into early-promotion opportunities. She contemplated keeping emotions, work, school and anxiety internal so she could work out her issues independently. However, her counseling while hospitalized helped her understand the value of asking for help. Fortunately, Harper had faculty, family and supervisors

that were understanding and empathetic. Even with Harper's time-management, motivation, and organizational prowess, she was at-risk for dropping out. Fortunately, Harper reached out for help and understanding and her strong support system was enough for her to continue on in her graduate education. Harper has four classes remaining to complete her degree.

Alan Scott

Alan Scott is a self-professed "high-school dropout coming back to school to finish his bachelor's degree after a 25-year hiatus". Despite Alan Scott's early-life academic exit, he has progressed through the ranks at a global hospitality corporation through the senior executive ranks. As an executive and single father of three adult-children, Alan Scott needed to wait until the right time to return to school to pursue his degree. After four decades of experience and no professional pressure to earn his bachelor's degree, Alan Scott had "a personal axe to grind" with a focus on "getting off the corporate conveyor belt…for future opportunities that will require a degree".

Alan Scott possesses many of the qualities that adult-learners must hold in order to maximize the opportunity for successful degree completion. In addition to his personal motivation, he has exceptional time-management skills and thrives in challenging environments. He also likes the prospect of paying it forward to his fellow classmates that have less experience. However, these qualities come with competing challenges. Alan Scott has struggled with a learning disability for his entire academic career. His struggle with ADHD came to a head when he was in high school when he realized "he wasn't wired like everyone else". Though this disability played a role in Alan Scott's departure from high school, he didn't let it define him as he grew into adulthood.

Alan Scott had a difficult late-childhood. He was living on his own by age 16. By age 18, he moved out of state and began a new life for himself. He defined this fresh start as "self-motivation due to a chip on [his] shoulder". Fast-forward a few decades and Alan Scott's resolve is still a primary characteristic motivating him. In addition to self-motivation, he also has three children which pushed him to be the best dad he can be. He chaperoned field trips, drove to the practices and performed the role of mother and father for his children. During this time, Alan Scott was escalating through the ranks of corporate America. Needless to say, this period of his life left little time for academics. Alan Scott knew he wanted to go back to school, but also knew that he must plan accordingly. Planning and organization are primary attributes to Alan Scott's lifelong success.

Now that Alan Scott's youngest daughter is out of the house and pursuing her higher education, it was time for Alan to start grinding that axe. He has an ability to distill large amounts of information into digestible amounts – a quality he learned through years of executive communication. He also recognizes the strong support structure that his employer has provided. He also plans ahead and is motivated to finish. He sees no obstacle that could prevent him from obtaining his bachelor's degree in business studies. Alan Scott has not earned anything less than an A since his return to school and is on his way to graduate.

Audrey

Audrey is a student in her senior year studying to complete her bachelor's degree in Food Service Management. This degree is geared towards professionals who have an earned associate's degree in culinary arts. Typically, students who embark on the Food Service Management degree path are doing so to move out of the front-line culinary work and into a managerial role. Audrey, like most students in this degree program, has hopes to do the same.

She realized early-on that she wanted to move out of the culinary space and began pursuing her bachelor's degree when she was 22. As stated, she was motivated by professional reasons to complete this degree. However, she also wanted to be the first in her family to complete her bachelor's degree. These motivations were not enough to keep Audrey enrolled. Sadly, Audrey's father became ill and passed away within four months of his initial diagnosis. The death of her father was devastating. However, it was the actions of her mother that caused Audrey to make the decision to pause her education.

Audrey's father set aside money for Audrey and her siblings to complete school. Unfortunately, Audrey's mother withdrew the money and squandered it for personal use. Audrey's age and limited income left her with no means of financing her education. Audrey was devastated to learn that the opportunity had been taken from her. Audrey and her siblings still harbor ill-will toward their mother's actions during the time of sorrow.

Years pass and situations change. However, Audrey's drive to go back to school remained a constant companion as she moved across the country to start a new life. She was in a relationship. She was still motivated by personal and professional goals. She had the proper time management and organization skills to balance personal life, professional responsibilities and academics. Further, Audrey and her siblings developed an even closer bond, irrespective of their physical living distances. They became each-others support system in all things. Audrey was ready to go back to school.

Re-enrolling in an online program takes motivation and dedication. Audrey knew the challenges and was ready to meet them head on. While pursuing her Food Service Management degree program, life wasn't perfect. She became close with her boyfriend's family and his mother began a fight with cancer. Around the same time, Audrey decided to take a break – from

her boyfriend, not from school. They remained cordial and she still supported his mother on her journey through cancer treatment. Audrey's self-motivation, time management, sibling support-system and proximity to graduation were essential to her staying engaged through her final terms. Even with these characteristics helping with the decision to stay enrolled, the researcher questioned if the values that she and her siblings exhibited was due to lessons instilled by her father, Audrey responded:

> People have a funny way of canonizing the dead; I love my dad. I do, but he was very, very strict. We definitely had those strong values of completing what you start. Definitely instilled in us from an early age. I forgot to mention my brother is in school currently. He's doing information technology or cybersecurity, something along that, boring. I can't remember the name of the school, but he... I think it's really that kind of drives us and since we have all gone through a similar experience of starting school and having to stop for financial reasons, hardships or whatever, we've always had each other to kind of lean on. I think that's kind of the driving factor it's just that set of values and trying to be there at least even though it doesn't always happen.

Audrey completed her bachelor's degree one term after this interview was completed. She was not only a first-generation college student, but the first in her family to graduate with her bachelor's degree. Her drive and determination were critical factors in her success in attaining her academic credentials. Her support system played an equally important role in her success as a college student.

Caesar

Caesar is an executive at a health & wellness corporation studying to earn his Master of Public Administration (MPA). Caesar earned his bachelor's degree earlier in his career and had

aspirations of getting an advanced degree later in life. This drive was due to personal and professional motivators – but also due to his parents setting an example early on in his life. While Caesar had professional aspirations to earn his MPA credential, he was moved more swiftly into the decision when his newly appointed supervisor voiced surprise that he didn't already have a master's degree. Caesar knew it was time to begin.

Caesar is financially stable and has made it a point to ensure his family's prosperity long after his time could expire. While Caesar had long saved and planned for financial endurance, his life was forced into further perspective when he was diagnosed with cancer for the first time. His youngest child had just turned 1 year when he received this initial diagnosis. Asking Caesar to reflect on this a little further, he expanded: "seeing her face is a reminder of life and so being there for her future. Those are some of the things that you keep in the back of your head. Important things when the job gets stressful or the classes get stressful, you're like 'hey, this is why I'm doing it'".

Caesar's past has helped him provide perspective when pursuing momentous events such as his MPA. He enjoys academic and professional challenges and he is apt at compartmentalizing tasks and priorities. These characteristics helped Caesar allay some concerns he had about going back to school after so many years. In addition to not taking much time off, Caesar was not adept at distance learning. Transitioning to the online environment took some careful navigation, but Caesar ultimately had what was needed to succeed. Caesar still balances family, a hectic, heavy-travelling professional life and academics, but he has found his stride. He feels that he "is at the upper echelons [self-actualization] of Maslow's hierarchy of needs". Therefore, he feels that he has other priorities well in order and is able to plan ahead and focus on what tasks he needs to be successful as he pursues his MPA.

Caesar has the family and professional support structure to aid in his success through his advanced degree. Caesar also has the forward-planning wherewithal to stay organized and structured in case an unexpected priority is thrust in his path. Caesar's nimbleness in his learning style and ability to focus on his goals allows him to continue on his path to graduation. Caesar is registered for his final two courses in his MPA program and will finish in the summer of 2020 with a GPA just shy of a 4.0.

Carrie

Carrie is a married security professional who has worked in the government sector for 25 years. She and her husband support several family members in their household and recently divested themselves from the government sector to work for themselves within the same industry. Carrie is studying to earn her MBA with a concentration in Organizational Psychology. She thrives on the cadence of the semester-based, fully online course structure. With her 70+ hour work week, she needs the flexibility that distance education offers. "With my work schedule and traveling requirements, in-person classes just wouldn't work with my career".

Carrie's online career began while she worked for a security segment for the government sector. During the earlier stages of Carrie's online education career, Carrie was working 70+ hours per week with hundreds of clients and stakeholders balancing multiple projects simultaneously. The demands of the job became so overwhelming that Carrie suffered many mini-strokes. Her doctor warned her that the continued stress would inevitably cause her to suffer a major and perhaps irrecoverable stroke. She had some decisions to make about her personal, professional and academic responsibilities.

She looked to her family for support and they were there to reciprocate what she had provided to them for so long in the past. Leaving school was not an option for Carrie. While paralyzed by fear from her health scare, she saw school as her safe place.

School is where I have fun so it's very relaxing to me. It's controlled. It's predictable. You have your syllabus. You've got all of your assignments. As soon as you understand what the teachers are looking for, I think it's fairly easy to complete your assignments to achieve whatever it is that they're expecting you to achieve. It's like a refuge for me.

That said, Carrie still had some critical decisions to make. As the primary breadwinner for a large family household, how can she leave the career she has known for more than two decades? She also knew that if she left, she would no longer receive employer reimbursement for educational expenses. With her family's unwavering support, she made the change.

Carrie and her husband started their own company in the same security industry. They struggled initially, but they are both back to a 70+ hour work week. The difference is the volume of stakeholders and the accompanying pressure to the government. Carrie boasts of no stress even with the grueling work schedule. She owes it to her time management and organization skills. She also focuses on her end-goal and knows that her graduation will be upon her in short order. Carrie's strong internal locus of control and family support system are paramount to her ability to continue persisting toward her goal of earning her MBA. Carrie is just shy of being a 4.0 student and is registered for her final two courses and will finish in the fall 2020 semester.

Research Questions and Meaning Units

The study's primary question *How do adult learners describe their experience of survivorship in an online course of study?* was developed as the foundation for the inquiry. To further guide the investigation, two sub-questions, grounded in the study's conceptual framework

were authored. During the analysis phase, the researcher extracted meaning units from participant interview narratives which have been organized under the corresponding research sub-questions.

Internal and External Factors

What factors, internal and external, have adult learners encountered during their online academic career that have caused consideration as whether or not to persist and remain enrolled in an online program of study? An in-depth evaluation of this sub-question allowed the researcher to gain a thorough understanding of the challenges each participant faced as they progressed through their academic career. Codes under the category *prioritization of responsibilities* included *work-life balance, competing demands, family/school/health/work, and frustration. Work-life balance and competing demands* emerged as the primary obstacle for all study participants. Some students feel that enrolling in online classes may be less burdensome on their lives, more economical, less time consuming, and offer more flexibility in terms of course completion. Park & Choi (2009) maintain that "distance learning allows adult learners who have employment, family, and/or other responsibilities to update knowledge and skills related to their job by saving travel costs and allowing a flexible schedule" (p. 1). While online learning allows flexibility, students who bear additional responsibilities such as work and family, must find a way to balance their schedules to successfully complete an online degree. These general statements held true for the participants of this study. Every participant is a working professional and most are also managing family households and childcare commitments alongside their professional and academic responsibilities.

The internal and external factors affected all of the participants. Several of the participants had personal or familiar cancer-related scares that forced their education into a

priority perspective. Most of the participants are managing households and have to compete with the responsibilities of others in addition to their own. One participant is a single parent of three adult children. Some of the participants experienced death of a loved one during their academic career. Still other participants experienced traumatic events like sexual assault, stroke, or post-traumatic stress disorder while trying to persist through their academic careers. While all of the situations were different, all participants were subject to internal and external pressures competing with the responsibilities presented by higher education.

Personal Characteristics

What personal characteristics, traits, decisions or other factors do online, adult learner describe as vital to their academic success? This sub-question was further explored through the student-lived experiences. While all participants had competing priorities that could have potentially disrupted or ended their academic careers, all had the fortitude and wherewithal to find a way to manage their situations and continue on in their academic endeavors. Through careful analysis of this sub-question, codes under the category of *perseverance and grit* included *prioritization, internal locus of control, motivation and support system. Support system and motivation* emerged as the primary characteristics for the students who are surviving their journey through higher education. There were varying levels of *systems of support* which came from internal, familiar and external sponsors. Likewise, motivation materialized in multiple varieties including self-motivation, goal-motivation, familiar motivation, growth motivation, among others. While all of the participants in this study exhibited an extraordinary level of grit and perseverance, they displayed varying levels of academic achievement. Like the internal and external factors, the traits exhibited by the participants in this study are consistent with the

literature which describes factors such as intellect and motivation and their correlation to academic persistence.

The emergence of self-efficacy and grit as a core personal characteristic is one reason that some students may succeed where others do not. While motivation and other internal and external factors influence persistence, intellectual acumen is a core component of success in higher education. Busato et al. (2000) link intellectual ability as being associated positively with academic success. More recently, Tatarinceva et al. (2018) argued that there are many definitions of intellect and that many factors that make up intellect. "The ability to learn and the ability to adapt efficiently to environmental changes are the most important and significant factors of human intellect determining an individual's successfulness in the process of lifelong learning" (p. 6). While intelligence is a fundamental trait for success, other factors influence student persistence through a program of higher education. Key components of success include perseverance or "grit". Duckworth (2007) defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087-1088). This suggests that two individuals with similar intelligence levels would be differentiated in their prospective success by the level of grit they exhibit.

Using the research questions and semi-structured interviews to guide the inquiry, seven findings were recognized and further organized into four overarching themes that emerged from the experiences of the participants. The findings were reinforced by participant reflection upon each interview closing. At the conclusion of each interview, each participant was given the opportunity to write down a series of words summarizing and articulating what they felt was the primary reason for their continued commitment to their education in spite of internal/external

pressures. The responses were: Family, perseverance, optimism, goals, internal locus of control, grit, determination, begin with the end in mind, motivated, proactive, diligent, autonomous, destiny, life, resilience, fortitude, plan ahead, organized, pragmatic, problem-solver, time-management, and stay active.

The findings identified through the interviews and research questions were (a) autonomy (b) family, friend, faculty support, (c) self-motivation, (d) goal-oriented (personal and career), (e) competitive, (f) lifelong learner, and (g) set example for others (children, family, co-workers). Many of the themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews seemed directly attributable to student success such as (a) support structure, (b) strong internal locus of control, (c) grit/perseverance, and (d) balanced/organized/plan ahead. However, other themes also emerged that didn't immediately seem to be relevant to student persistence such as (e) optimism and (f) finding relevance between academic and professional careers.

Thematic Findings

The themes presented in the following section were developed from researcher-generated meaning units, study notes, and transcript analysis. Collectively, these themes illustrate the phenomenon of student-lived experience of persistence and survival in higher education.

Support Structure

All participants shared stories about their academic pursuits and the trials that they faced during their journeys. Similarly, all had varying levels of support from family, friends and co-workers as they progressed through their academic degree programs. Many shared the role their support-structures played in ensuring their continued success as online adult-learners. They viewed the role of their support system as essential in their successful persistence in online education. The following paragraphs include direct quotes from the participants who have

articulated a strong support-system as a primary reason for their continued persistence and survival in higher education.

Scarlett shared how her live-in boyfriend was a constant support for her. "I wouldn't have gotten through the surgeries and school, because I couldn't sleep in the bed. We have two couches, so he slept on the couch next to me, He would get up, and he would have to help me stand up, get my crutches, help me into the bathroom, help me sit down on the toilet, hold my leg up. He was very supportive, and he did a lot that wouldn't normally go in many relationships." Harper also shared her supportive family and workplace dynamic and how it helped her stay enrolled. "If I was on my own, and didn't have as great of a support group as I did, I probably would have already stopped. But lucky, luckily for me, I have, you know, a great boss, great boyfriend, great parents. So I've just been very fortunate in that fact. But I definitely know if I didn't have all that I could definitely see myself like pausing." Audrey shared that her support system was central to her ability in staying enrolled. "I have a great support system. My family and friends are always so warm and supportive and it has just really helped me sort of center and figure things out." Audrey also disclosed that distance doesn't matter when it comes to familial support. Both her friends and family live across the country, but she and they leverage their mutually supportive relationships to balance their competing priorities. "Both of my siblings live in the Midwest. My sister lives in our hometown, my brother lives out in North Dakota, but no matter where we're at, we're always the biggest cheerleader. My siblings have just been great at raising me up and helping me and I can vent to them and they give me advice." As stated, Audrey's network of support includes family and friends. "I always have someone to reach out to. My best friend lives in North Carolina. I know I can reach out to her anytime and vent and vice versa. I'm there for her." Like many non-traditional adult learners, Caesar balances his work

with school and family. He and his wife have found a way to balance the demands of having a young child in the household competing for the limited time that is available. "My wife will take my six-year-old and keep her occupied. There's times when I keep her occupied for my wife as well. We have a good balance of "you've got this, I've got that". A lot of swapping is going on for duties and stuff like that. I do all the cooking. She does a lot of laundry. Then we add on all the fun stuff like painting the house and stuff. It's a constant." Carrie's support system extended beyond friends and family. She had a community of support from when she was young and grew up in an impoverished home. "I grew up in poverty. My community rallied around me and I applied to get independent status as a student so that I could get financial aid based on my income. And the people from my church and the teachers, they all wrote letters to the university, and they all helped me get independent status." Carrie also reciprocated this support system when she was older. She supports a large family household of aunts, grandparents and children. She struggled with going to school and her ability to continue to manage her household. In turn, they echoed their support for her. "There's a whole bunch of people who are grateful for the support that they've been receiving for a long time, and everybody just said, "We'll make it work. You've wanted to go to school for a long time. We'll just make it work.""

While familial support structures are critical to the non-traditional student's ability to balance work, life and school, so too are workplace and faculty support. Harper shared how her work-life balance has been supported by her boss and his flexible workplace philosophy. "Fortunately, I have a very flexible boss who occasionally allows me to work on school while at work. If I have free time. So that's been beneficial. Indirectly, this has also helped me with time-management." Alan Scott also described his success due to a supportive workplace with talented co-workers and a work-life balance. "I am where I'm at because I had an opportunity to work

with supportive and smart people. I have a great company. That's part of it [my persistence] too. I've always taken advantage of their work-life balance." Rayne also recognized the value of faculty members empathizing with adult-student needs as she progressed through her MBA program. "In MBA [programs], most people are working, have families, things of that nature. And the professors do too, so they understand. So I think from that, I learned obviously like I don't want to abuse that, but at the same time, if something comes up, they're willing to work with you." Harper shared that the support structure at work can extend beyond your direct reports and direct supervisors and can include a larger network.

> They are very supportive of everything and just, you know, want me to feel better. And so the woman who is immediately over my vertical, you know, her and I talked it out. And we had talked before but she, you know, kind of talked through some issues that she had gone through, at, when she was my age and just things of those nature. So they were all very supportive, which I'm very lucky.

> Audrey described her work dynamic and how her work-family have found ways to support each other. "We've always had each other to kind of lean on. I think that's kind of the driving factor. It's just that set of values and trying to be there." Finally, Caesar described his workplace philosophy and how his company shows their overarching support of employees seeking higher education. "Work is really supportive of their employees. Getting education and using that education to help the company."

Strong Internal Locus of Control

The locus of control reflects a general belief that the events in a person's life are under their personal control. More specifically, it refers to the degree to which an individual can influence their own outcomes as opposed to external factors, such as people, luck or chance

altering one's situations (Rotter, 1982). The internal locus of control tends to make individuals active participants in relation to their environment and circumstances (Ng et al., 2006). The following paragraphs include direct quotes from the participants who have articulated a strong internal locus of control as a contributing factor to their continued persistence and survival in higher education.

Rayne shared her strong internal locus of control with language including "I don't let things happen to me." She shared "I'm driven. There is always two sides to everything, and how you look at it does make a difference in how you're going to behave, and how you are going to perform, and how you are going to continue. One thing I never had, and will never have, is a victim mentality. Things don't happen to me, I happen to things. What I do is what causes what happens next. I better be doing some good things, because that's what I deserve." Caesar was one of the students who battled a health crisis while pursuing his education. He communicated his approach to handling the psychology of a cancer diagnosis. "What's going to happen and what are you going to do to get past this or what cures it or how deadly is it? All those things come into play. As you sit there and you go through that you start to go, "Okay" You do it day-by-day. You're like, "what's next? Which doctor do I have to go see? What do I have to do to make sure I can get through this?" Audrey also shared her approach for confronting challenging situations. "Situations don't define you or your story. You control your destiny. It gets crazy. But you got this!" Scarlett articulated a similar sentiment when facing a mental trial. "Perseverance needs to come from within. It always needs to come from within. I've worked with that with other people [counselors] and they guide you to that point. They're able to get you to recognize that." She still has situations occur that challenge her resolve. "There's still occasions where it [Post Traumatic Stress Disorder] will come up, but it's my reaction to the thoughts is completely different. I

recognize it now, and I don't feel the fear. I am just able to say, 'Okay, well, this is why you're thinking about that.'" Nevertheless, Scarlett continues to provide herself and others with ammunition to combat these resurging physical and emotional barriers. "It took a couple of years to get to where I was in school, but once I finally did, I was like, "All right, we're not getting derailed. Life is going to happen no matter what." Rayne provided additional insight into methods on how to combat stressors that can test students' constitutions. "So, it's really, I think, whether or not you want to pursue something in terms of education. It has a lot as to who you are as a person. Those who continue, who say, "I know all these things happened, and they suck, and they're awful, and I don't know how I'm going to get up tomorrow… but if that's all you see, then that's all you are going to have. It's going to be bad downward cycle that you just never get out of." Carrie provided a similar approach showing her strong internal locus of control. "I don't allow my emotions to drive my reactions. I try to keep everything at a logical level and I try to understand things and their perspective. There's a whole methodology that I use internally to try to defuse the situation and calm down." Alan-Scott used examples specific to his learning disability when describing his approach to controlling situations. "What I try to tell people is, when you have ADD, it doesn't mean you can't get it done. It's like, living in New England, you can't complain or have an excuse that you get to work late because it's shitty weather. You live in New England, man. Just leave early!" Alan Scott further went on to describe ways to take control of situations that present themselves as barriers.

> Something is always going to happen. I've learned over the years that that's just the way it's going to be. You got to roll with it and don't make excuses and don't pull anybody in. I'm not codependent on anyone. I'm the first person, when something goes awry, to figure out what I could have done to make it different or have the outcome to be different.

Grit/Perseverance

Intelligence is a fundamental trait for success. However, other factors influence student persistence through a program of higher education. Key components of success include perseverance or "grit". Duckworth (2007) defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087-1088). This suggests that two individuals with similar intelligence levels would be differentiated in their prospective success by the level of grit they exhibit. The following paragraphs include direct quotes from participants who have exhibited continued perseverance and grit in pursuit of their higher education degree.

Rayne proved that her grit and perseverance has served her well during challenging times throughout her life, professional and educational careers. "I'm not a quitter. I don't quit until it's grounded below the ground, and there's really nothing anybody can do. Just because I was sick, I was still functioning. It's not that I was disabled. So, that was my thinking going into it." She boldly continues on, maintaining that "at the end of the day, it really does come as to how bad you want it." Carrie has similar sentiments when describing her approach to persisting. "To me, when you start something, you finish it. So the idea of not finishing, that's not an option to me." She reflected on the time of life when she was struggling financially and how she used a similar approach to confront challenges. "I was just completely poor and supporting myself and eating mac 'n' cheese and trying to recover from just this really horrible childhood that I had. I was in therapy the entire time that I was in college. Not once did I think about dropping out. There was no way that I was going to drop out." Carrie closed out with an emphatic statement. "When I decide to do something, I do it." Audrey spoke bluntly when describing her advice to others

facing adversity when pursuing their education. "You kind of put your nose to the grindstone and you figure it out." She feels that her adversity has helped strengthen her resolve. In fact, it has given her more ambition. "It is that drive to finish it. I don't like not completing something. I definitely don't like that. If I say I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it. Therefore, with this, whatever hurdles are coming in the way, we're jumping over them." Harper integrates her support system and her fortitude in her advice on how to keep going. "Don't let yourself stop. Like work with your professors and work with your peers, because everyone's willing to give you help even if like even if you don't feel like they are, they, there's always going to be somebody who's willing to help you. So you just have to ask for it." Caesar and Alan-Scott shared similar approaches when facing adversity and pursuing your education. Caesar maintained that "the urge to just finish and get it done and see what happens next is more important to me. In my head, you push through and you finish it and get it done with." Alan Scott believes in a measured approach and relies on his tenacity. "I got a bit of an ax to grind and just really want to get it done. It's like trying to lose weight. If you try to get it all done within a month, you will fail. It takes time, but you have to stick with it." Rayne shared additional advice to those who are facing a long journey. "I finish what I start. I always finish what I start. Might not be with the results I wanted, by my God I will finish." She also shares the need to take a measured approach. "Never quit, but take the time that you need to." Audrey provided insight to those who are nearing the end of their journey. "I've got this one semester left. Unless a fireball comes down from the sky or I get hit by a bus or something, I owe it to myself to get it done." Scarlett provided several anecdotes that have proved useful in her pursuit of her degree. "I think I just want to be better. I want to feel like I've succeeded, and even having just a degree like my Bachelor's it will give me like, 'Oh hey, you have come out on the other side of everything.'"

She also shared her success from her grit, or "resilience" in her own words. "I want this. I'm 35 years old, and I have had great jobs, but I can't go further and do what I want to do without it. I'm resilient. I guess I don't look at it [barriers]. I just keep going." When asked specifically what advice she would give to someone that is struggling with resiliency, Scarlett softened a bit. "Just to love yourself. Love yourself and don't settle. Just recognize the strength in yourself." Alan-Scott remained firm with his resolve on how to persist. "I have lost any appetite for not doing the absolute best I can do. So I think if this was a long time ago, B's would be fine but I don't know I just want to make sure I'm doing the best I can. I'm taking the extra step on everything to make sure that it's a home run." Rayne shared the most compelling advice to those that are struggling through their education while facing adversity. "I think when you truly know yourself, what you want, you realize that anything becomes [possible]. Know your why. Your why is important. Your why is what's going to drive you."

Balanced/Organized/Plan Ahead

Online education attracts working professionals and other non-traditional students who may not otherwise have access to quality education. These adult learners are motivated, but also balance work, family and other responsibilities. These responsibilities can manifest as obstacles – and adult-learners have to prioritize their education below their other responsibilities. To manage effective prioritization of responsibilities, these students must remain vigilant in their planning and organization skills in approaching and completing their online studies. The following paragraphs include direct quotes from participants who have articulated planning and organization skills as essential to their success in online education.

Harper shared how she likes to approach her courses. "I like to go in, look at the class, and luckily with being online you can see the end-of-term project. So I'll work through the end-

of-term project every week as I learned things that are applicable to the project. So that's definitely helped with time management." Caesar's organizational skills are more specific. "I organize my weeks. I organize by each semester. Really looking at the syllabus to see what's up next and what I need to do. That organization of knowing exactly when, where, what, why and how everything needs to be done is super important to you to complete it." He maintained that "organizational skills have helped [him] push through." Rayne also recognized the importance of planning ahead in online courses as an adult learner. "To be able to do this and succeed, you have to plan. You have to stick to a schedule. Without it, things just go out of whack and if you're not diligent, you can get screwy, and that's when you say 'Eff this, I'm not doing nothing'". Scarlett shared the sentiment of time management. "Plan ahead. Take more time on certain things that will require more time. Budget your time." Carrie recognized the need to understand professors' expectations at the onset of each course. "I'm a motivated self-learner. I try to figure out early in the class, as quickly as possible, what the professors' expectations are so that I can meet their expectations with all of the assignments." Carrie also made it a point to articulate the need for scheduling ahead. "I have a set schedule, where I complete my homework and all of my assignments according to a fixed schedule. And that way, I can communicate to my clients, 'This is my school schedule. We can work around it'". Rayne, who works in project management, found a way to bring her professional organizational skills to the classroom. "In project management, I need to keep things on track. I need to make sure that all the parties involved are doing what they're supposed to so that I can do what I'm supposed to. The same thing applies at the house. Something that took a long time for my husband to understand in how I handled having being single for a few years, raising five children, and doing the work full-time as well, is that I handle my household as I would handle a business. I need to plan ahead."

Finally, Alan-Scott also believed in planning ahead. However, he felt a measured approach was the most scalable way to achieve your goals. "Chip away at it. You don't have to solve everything immediately. If one class is the best for you, stick with one class. Better to do that than take two classes and then get overwhelmed and then take time off. When you step away from something it's tremendously difficult to get back to it. I would rather remain on the bicycle and just take the lever down to level one than get off at level 10."

Optimism

Optimists are people who have a positive outlook on their future. They expect things to work out in their favor. This isn't to say that optimists live in a fantasy or daydream, but that they orient themselves toward a positive outcome. Four of the seven participants recognized the importance of keeping a positive attitude and how it helped each of them maintain an open mind to meaningfully stay engaged with their faculty members, coursework and fellow students. The following paragraph includes direct quotes from participants who demonstrated the value of optimism in the face of adversity as they pursued their higher education degree.

In a stunning show of sanguinity, Scarlett showed how her periods of extreme challenges helped her see positive outcomes from negative situations. "That's how I used to look at it [sexual assault and subsequent dismissal from nursing program] was happening like, 'Oh, okay. I'm glad that this happened, because I would've been burnt out from nursing in a few years'". Harper also showed how her optimism when facing multiple surgeries as she persisted in her education. "When I started in the winter term, I knew I was going to have a surgery soon thereafter. I knew, 'All right well, it's online anyway, so I'm going to have my surgery and things will work out'". Rayne, too, had to persevere through her education while facing surgery. "I have had to undergo multiple surgeries and decided that I would take it as a sign that I am

going too fast. I did take a break, it was actually this past summer, and it was I dropped one class, because I had been taking two classes all along. I took it as a positive that I had flexibility." Carrie shared how her optimism carried her through events when her PTSD emerged. "It definitely, it put a wrinkle in who I was for many years. I never felt like I was me for probably until a few years ago, but I don't know. I'm lucky to be alive, lucky to have people that care about me and love me, and I'm lucky that I'm in a relationship where I'm not afraid every day."

Finding relevance between academic and professional careers

Career development learning is the acquisition of capabilities that are useful to the lifelong development and management of one's career, grounded in an ongoing authentic learning based process that builds knowledge of the world of work and one's self (Bridgstock, 2009). This suggests that there is an added benefit when studying higher education content when it relates to the student's career/profession. The student's career identity acts as a 'cognitive compass' (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2004), supporting their learning and career choices, and helping them to make sense of learning experiences. The participants of this study unanimously articulated the benefits they realized through application, integration and intersection of their academic and professional careers. The following paragraph includes direct quotes from the participants who valued the overlap of professional and academic experiences.

Rayne works in project management and recognizes the value of incorporating her professional mindset into her educational journey. "Because of my work experience [in project management] that I bring into the house, I think that is what actually helped me the most." Scarlett, who is studying psychology and strives to ultimately work in a psychology setting, puts her studies into action whenever she can. "You learn about the brain and the reactions of people,

and basically how we're raised, it tends to affect how we interpret things and how we feel about certain situations. There's definitely quite a few things already that you recognize like, 'Oh, we learned about this is psychology, and this is why.'" Caesar has found relevance in his studies and the opportunity to immediately apply his skills to his profession. "The skills that I'm learning in these classes of problem solving and things like that, of asking the proper questions, have really helped me to have a sound argument of my policies or of my mission statement and things like that. It works out well." Harper recognized the need to pursue a graduate degree in order to advance at her company.

> So the position that I'm currently in, when I took it I had, in order to move up at all, I have to have an MBA. This degree will definitely help me whether it's to get a better salary, get another opportunity. It will definitely help me down the line to further that. If you're just getting something to get something because you think it's going to do something, then you're going to fail.

> She also finds value in connecting her personal and professional careers.

> Whenever we have like discussion boards, or we're able to choose our project topic, I will typically use a reference point. Or I'll do some more research on [my company] if I don't know the answer or, for instance, I did a project a few classes ago where I had to compare two companies so I compared [my company] with another company. To kind of, I've really been trying to correlate what I do with my degree and vice versa so that it's even more meaningful.

> Alan-Scott is a seasoned executive and went back to school after a multi-decade hiatus. However, he was able to easily find relevant content into action in his professional capacity. "I'm taking the stuff and I'm immediately applying it. I'm finding myself putting stuff to action

in my current role." Audrey found relevant overlaps between her academic and professional careers. "I've been applying real-world marketing strategies for a long time. There may be one or two [courses] that I've looking at that I might test out of given my work experience and its proximity to the course content." Finally, Caesar was able to articulate his particular approach through applying historical concepts and finding ways to contribute to his professional and academic career based on his professional and academic experiences. "Understanding history and concepts is important. Things rotate, keep coming around. Some of the concepts from the 60's, 70's and 80's are coming back. So you're, like 'Oh, let me read up on this. I see it again'. It helps you really to communicate with my superiors and also helps me communicate with my employees." Caesar sees the overlap of his public administration and his professional career. "There's a lot of similarities from Public Administration to corporate life. A lot of philosophies. I'm a big proponent of Maslow's Hierarchy. For some odd reason it just hits me." He further likes to pay it forward by also sharing his professional experience in the classroom. "I try to lend my professional expertise to my business courses. What I'm trying to do is lend some of that expertise in the interactions with the other students and peer reviews. I'm fortunate enough to have worked for a while with a bunch of really talented individuals."

Conclusion

The preceding narrative was constructed to provide a voice to the student experience and insight into what traits adult-learners possess that allow them to persist in their online education career when others might have dropped out. The lived experiences of the students included in this study are strongly linked to their identities as working professionals and adult-learners. They benefit greatly from the flexibility of online education and recognize the value of achieving their degree. Since the terms adult-learners and non-traditional students are used interchangeably in

this study it is understandable that most in this category will have faced obstacles that will challenge the prioritization of education over other personal or professional responsibilities. The students in this study have demonstrated the requisite grit and perseverance to succeed even in the face of adversity. Students in this study also exhibited a strong internal locus of control and all had strong support structures outside of their educational orbit. While they feel the pressure of having too much to do, they make their online studies a priority because it adds value, speaks to their personal passions, and is purposeful. Finally, they experience personal satisfaction from their successful academic advancement in spite of adversity. Chapter 5 presents a detailed discussion of thematic findings, informed by the literature review. Additionally, the chapter presents recommendations for future study and considerations for those seeking to understand characteristics of students who thrive and persist in the face of internal and external adversity while pursuing their academic degree.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The popularity of online learning has continued to burgeon as have the benefits to non-traditional learners looking for access to higher education. The benefits of online education stems largely from the flexibility and accessibility working adults, military personnel, non-traditional learners and those that just cannot attend college in the traditional, brick and mortar setting (Prougestaporn, Visansakon, & Saowapakponchai, 2015; Sull, 2016). However, despite the popularity and growth of online education, high dropout rates and low persistence and retention rates continue to be a concern (Lee, Pate & Cozart, 2015). In fact, James, Swan, & Daston (2016) state that "online learning continues to grow across post-secondary institutions across the United States, but many question its efficacy, especially for students most at-risk for failure" (p. 76). Bawa (2016) notes "despite increasing enrollment percentages from earlier years, online courses continue to show receding student retention rates" (p. 1) and there is a need to understand why. Dropouts among adult online learners enrolled in online programs are six to seven times higher than traditional students (Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Despite this reality, there are those who persist through graduation.

The elements influencing the impact of online student persistence and retention is complex and can be circumstantial through student experience. The resulting phenomenon of survival in higher education is accounted for through the student-lived experience and is supported by relevant literature. While there are several theories about online persistence, motivation is one of the most frequently studied variables in relation to dropout (Chyung, 2001; Chyung, Winiecki, & Fenner, 1998; Doo & Kim, 2000; Jun, 2005; Levy, 2007; Menager-Beeley, 2004). However, motivation alone is not enough to keep a student enrolled. Park (2007)

describes other individual characteristics, such as age and employment status, external factors, including family and organizational support, as well as internal factors, such as family and work obligations and their relation to student persistence. These internal and external factors emerged as a finding affecting the student experience as they persisted through their higher education program of study. Most of the participants are managing households and have to compete with the responsibilities of others in addition to their own. While all of the situations were different, all participants were subject to internal and external pressures competing with the responsibilities presented by higher education. While the internal and external forces were contributing factors to the challenges faced by the non-traditional learners, the students in this study have demonstrated the requisite grit and perseverance to succeed even in the face of adversity. Students in this study also exhibited strong internal loci of control and all had strong support structures outside of their educational orbit.

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of students categorized as at-risk, non-traditional adult learners who persisted in pursuit of their higher education degree. These students have demonstrated perseverance and grit when faced with challenges that might have caused them to drop out of school. The data obtained were used to address the following research questions:

- How do adult learners describe their experience of survivorship in an online course of study?
  - What factors, internal and external, have adult learners encountered during their online academic career that have caused consideration as whether or not to persist and remain enrolled in an online program of study?

○ What personal characteristics, traits, decisions or other factors do online,

adult learner describe as vital to their academic success?

The findings from this study will help the administration and faculty understand the types

of challenges that non-traditional, adult learners face while they pursue their degree.

Furthermore, recognizing the types of qualities and characteristics of gritty students will help

frame the dialogue with future students in similar situations. Duckworth et al. (2007) define grit

as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals" and state that grit "entails working

strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure,

adversity, and plateaus in progress" (p. 1087). Finally, if there is a way to replicate the

characteristics found in the participants, the university will be able to improve their persistence,

retention and graduation rates.

Review of Methodology

This interpretative phenomenological study sought to explore how adult learners

experience the phenomenon of psychological survivorship. More pointedly, this study focused

on the retention and persistence experiences of students who overcame adversity during their

online academic career. Seaman et al. (2018) shared that in the United States, "distance

education enrollments increased for the fourteenth straight year, growing faster than they have

for the past several years" (p. 6). Part of this growth is due to the accessibility and ability to

pursue higher education for those that were once otherwise unable. There are myriad reasons

why an adult learner may not have chosen to pursue a higher education degree. One common

reason is the mere proximity of brick and mortar institutions with respect to the adult learner's

home or job. Additionally, job and family commitments can prevent an adult learner from

pursuing higher education in the traditional, face-to-face fashion. Although there have been

notable increases in the education availability of non-traditional learners, online education has become a competing priority in students balancing their life. In the past decade, there have been increases in online learning delivery and a corresponding increase in enrollment with millions of students taking advantage of online learning (Liu, 2012). Despite the increase, large-scale implementation of online education, and increased demand for online education among adult learners, there are still barriers to successful completion of online courses and programs. Dropout rates have continued to increase in the online environments compared to traditional face-to-face environments (Lee & Choi, 2011; Lint, 2013). However, some students face hardship and misfortune and somehow still persevere. The intent of this study was to understand the lived experiences of non-traditional, adult learners within an institution of higher education who have successfully demonstrated grit and perseverance in response to adversity and internal and external pressures while pursuing their degree. Through purposive, non-random sampling, participants were selected based on a self-identified characteristics of having survived in their pursuit of a higher education degree. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with each participant. Each of the semi-structured interviews of the student participants lasted between 60 and 80 minutes. The interviews produced ample data that supported the qualitative research for this study. Consequently, the participants' perceived experiences related to this study were discovered and documented.

Findings

Finding 1: Grit and a strong internal locus of control can overcome external factors, regardless of GPA.

Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a nontraditional model of persistence to address the unique situations of non-traditional students and posited that environmental and external factors

determined persistence. The emergence of self-efficacy and grit as a core personal characteristic is one reason that some students may succeed where others do not. Three of the participants were enrolled in undergraduate, baccalaureate programs. Two out of the three undergraduate participants had lower academic achievement proficiencies with GPAs of less than 3.0. These two students exhibited grit and identified as having a strong internal locus of control. It should be noted that there is less variability among the students in this study pursuing a graduate degree. The institution for which this study is focused requires graduate students to hold a minimum GPA of 3.0. The first overarching finding is that a strong internal locus of control and grit are more associated with student persistence than GPA. While intelligence is a fundamental trait for success, other factors influence student persistence through a program of higher education. Key components of success include perseverance or "grit". Duckworth (2007) defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087-1088). This suggests that two individuals with similar intelligence levels would be differentiated in their prospective success by the level of grit they exhibit. This study supports the theory that Bean and Metzner (1985) advanced insofar that external factors influence the non-traditional student's ability to persist. However, this finding shows that students with grit and a strong internal locus of control can overcome the external factors that would typically cause a non-traditional student to drop out, regardless of their GPA.

Finding 2: Increasing support structures and integration of professional and academic experiences allows for further development of social learning/engagement.

The social constructivist theory describes learning as a social process which is neither limited to an individual, nor passive. Meaningful learning takes place only once an individual is

engaged in social activities (Jackson, Karp, Patrick & Thrower, 2006). "In the past two decades, one of the most important innovations in the US higher education system has been the steady increase in distance education through online courses" (Xu, 2019, p. 2). In addition, this trajectory is expected to continue and should be part of strategic planning for long-term higher education sustainability and success. NCES (2016) supports this growth, noting that "in 2016–17, approximately 3,500, or 76 percent, of all degree-granting institutions reported offering online courses" (p. 2). Convenience, cost and access are key attributes for the continuing demand and expansion of higher education. However, more students and employers are recognizing the quality and benefits of distance education. If the worldview of learning influenced through theory of social constructivism and the increased prevalence of online education are both true, how do non-traditional, online adult students learn with limited access to social settings? Further, with the non-traditional, adult learner's higher risk of dropping out due to internal and external factors, how do some students manage to persist? This study shows that online adult-learners supplement the need for in-class social interaction with familial, community and workplace support structures. All participants shared stories about their academic pursuits and the trials that they faced during their journeys. Similarly, all had varying levels of support from family, friends and co-workers as they progressed through their academic degree programs. Many shared the role their support-structures played in ensuring their continued success as online adult-learners. They viewed the role of their support system as essential in their successful persistence in online education. Further, students in this study have found additional benefits contributing to their persistence through application of academic and professional experiences. Career development learning is the acquisition of capabilities that are useful to the lifelong development and management of one's career, grounded in an ongoing authentic learning based process that builds

knowledge of the world of work and one's self (Bridgstock, 2009). This suggests that there is an added benefit when studying higher education content when it relates to the student's career/profession. Students in this study have used their support structures and integration of professional and academic worlds to supplement social constructivism and to persist against the external factors facing non-traditional, adult learners.

Interpretation of Findings

The research question, "How do adult learners describe their experience of survivorship in an online course of study?" guided the research. The themes that emerged through the analysis of the interview transcripts and field notes were the presence of a support structure, exhibiting a strong internal locus of control, grit/perseverance, balanced/organized/ability to plan ahead, optimism and finding relevance between academic and professional careers. The following sub-questions framed the students' lived experiences as they pursued their academic degree:

- What factors, internal and external, have adult learners encountered during their online academic career that have caused consideration as whether or not to persist and remain enrolled in an online program of study?

- What personal characteristics, traits, decisions or other factors do online, adult learner describe as vital to their academic success?

The research portrayed voices of the student experience and insight into what traits adult-learners possess that allow them to persist in their online education career when others might have dropped out. The lived experiences of the students included in this study are strongly linked to their identities as working professionals and adult-learners. They benefit greatly from the flexibility of online education and recognize the value of achieving their degree. Since the terms adult-learners and non-traditional students are used interchangeably in this study it is

understandable that most in this category will have faced obstacles that will challenge the prioritization of education over other personal or professional responsibilities. The students in this study have demonstrated the requisite grit and perseverance to succeed even in the face of adversity. Students in this study also exhibited strong internal loci of control and all had strong support structures outside of their educational orbit. While they feel the pressure of having too much to do, they make their online studies a priority because it adds value, speaks to their personal passions, and is purposeful. Finally, they experience personal satisfaction from their successful academic advancement in spite of adversity.

The framework stemmed from the theory of social constructivism, which argues that meaning is derived from the interaction of experiences and inspiration within an individual's reality (Creswell, 2012, p. 24). Social constructivism is derived from Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) theory that learning is a result of social interaction. Social constructivism "is perhaps the most common version currently in favor and…normally evoked by the term 'constructivism'" (Swan, 2005, p. 4). Researchers use social constructivism to determine "social phenomena from a context-specific perspective….as value-bound rather than value-free, meaning the process of inquiry is influenced by the researcher" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 28). This study includes the researcher's assumption that most adult learners will be faced with internal and/or external pressures that would cause them to consider stopping out and/or dropping out of their online program. "Research suggests that students in online courses are between 3 percent and 15 percent more likely to withdraw, compared to similar students in face-to-face classes" (Xu, 2019, p. 2). While online education is theoretically available to all learners, more adult-learners take advantage of online or distance education. That said, the same, non-traditional, adult learners have responsibilities unlike that of traditional, face-to-face college students. The existence of

additional professional and personal responsibilities lends additional opportunities for disruption in continued learning. With a higher likelihood to face internal and external pressures, non-traditional, adult-learners must possess the intellectual acumen and the self-efficacy or grit in order to persist in their online education.

While motivation and other internal and external factors influence persistence, intellectual acumen is a core component of success in higher education. Busato et al. (2000) found that intellectual ability is associated positively with academic success. More recently, Tatarinceva et al. (2018) argue that there are many definitions of intellect and that many factors that make up intellect. "The ability to learn and the ability to adapt efficiently to environmental changes are the most important and significant factors of human intellect determining an individual's successfulness in the process of lifelong learning" (p. 6). While intelligence is a fundamental trait for success, other factors influence student persistence through a program of higher education. Key components of success include perseverance or "grit". Duckworth (2007) defines grit as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (pp. 1087-1088). This suggests that two individuals with similar intelligence levels would be differentiated in their prospective success by the level of grit they exhibit. Grit emerged as a primary thematic finding for students who persisted in their higher education degree program. However, additional themes also emerged. These themes include the presence of a support structure, exhibiting a strong internal locus of control, balanced/organized/ability to plan ahead, optimism and finding relevance between academic and professional careers.

Implications

The findings from this study stemmed from the student-lived experiences of persistence and survival in higher education. Shapiro et al. (2011) published findings in the National Student Clearinghouse demonstrating non-traditional adult learners have a substantial gap in graduation attainment when compared to their traditional counterparts. The study showed a six-year graduation rate for a population of 327,487 non-traditional, adult learners of 42.1% (p. 7). Further, Tinto (1987) leverages a theory first introduced by sociological theorists, Emile Durkheim and Arnold Van Gennep, through their studies of cultures and societies. Tinto takes their research and expands their theory of participation and the correlation of not committing suicide. Suicide in this context means leaving the institution. Students who retain or persist are considered to have survived. This particular theory aligns with the research on self-efficacy and motivation as driving factors for online retention and persistence.

Recent studies have identified grit, defined as passion and perseverance for long term-goals, as a college student success variable (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Studies have demonstrated that "grit predicted achievement in challenging domains over and beyond measures of talent" (p. 166). This research demonstrated that grittier students outperformed their peers, with researchers measuring this performance through grit scores (Duckworth et al., 2007). Grit has been deemed a college student success variable; however, there is a lack of research about what causes college students to have grit. This researcher hoped to address this particular gap in the existing literature. By documenting the student-lived experiences, insight was provided into the phenomenon of survival in higher education as expressed by the student voice. This insight may serve as the foundation for further critical inquiry.

The results of this study appear to indicate that students who have a strong internal locus of control, grit and a support system are most likely able to overcome internal and external pressures that may have caused other students to drop out. Other factors, such as organizational skills, professional relevance, and optimism also contributed to the student's survival. The participants included in this study were diverse in discipline of study and professional experience; however, a common narrative emerged linking their journey through and survival of higher education. They faced internal and external pressures that could have caused another in their place to drop out; yet they persisted. There are several models and theories in educational and psychological literature on the lack of motivation as a barrier to success in higher education (Mellard, Krieshok, Fall, & Woods, 2013). However, this study connects how motivation, grit and a strong internal locus of control can soften the same barriers faced by adult learners.

Recommendations for Action

Participants in this study were all drawn from one non-profit, private institution in the northeastern United States during a single academic semester. All students had unique, personal lived-experiences resulting in their survival in higher education. While the situations were individual, there were common themes among all participants. Motivation, grit and perseverance were common characteristics of the successful online adult-learners in this study. However, these traits are internal in nature. That said, there were external factors, including the presence of a constant support structure that also emerged as a reason for student persistence. Universities seeking to improve their retention and persistence of non-traditional, online learners should look to replicate the core tenets of what a support structure provides to struggling students.

The second recommendation is that of student persistence and retention awareness. All participants in this study appeared shocked when they learned of the high dropout rate of online

adult-learners. The students in this study were self-described motivated and driven learners with a consistent vision for their goal of completion. However, some students without such a strong constitution might lose sight of the goal of graduation as they journey through their higher education career. Students could be partnered with mentors to help maintain the motivation that learners have as they begin their journey. If students are made aware of the common struggles facing online adult-learners, they would feel less overwhelmed and be more likely to partner up with mentors for support.

Recommendations for Further Study

Based on the findings of this study and the aforementioned limitations, the researcher recommends additional studies with larger populations and alternate methodologies. This qualitative, phenomenological study was conducted at a single non-profit, private institution in the northeastern United States. A broadened, mixed-methods study could be conducted at peer four-year and community colleges in the neighboring vicinity that also serve non-traditional, adult, online learners. Students in this study were recruited due to their self-described success in facing adverse situations as they persisted in their higher education careers. Additional studies should focus on students who faced similar adversities to ascertain their response to continuing or postponing studies. The themes that emerged for the participants in this study may be lacking in those that were not able to persevere through internal and external pressures. Another focus of further study should be the same examination of persistence and retention characteristics among first-generation college students in comparison to their counterparts. There is an abundance of literature on first-generation college students and their struggles with persistence and retention. It would be beneficial to advance this study to understand how characteristics of grit and motivation increase the chance persistence for first-generation students. With these additional

focuses on the student journey through higher education, more concrete recommendations could be made to improve retention and persistence rates for online, non-traditional students.

Conclusion

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of students categorized as at-risk, non-traditional adult learners who persisted in pursuit of their higher education degree. These students demonstrated perseverance and grit when faced with challenges that might have caused them to drop out of school. The findings from this study will help the administration and faculty understand the types of challenges that non-traditional, adult learners face while they pursue their degree. Furthermore, recognizing the types of qualities and characteristics of gritty students will help frame the dialogue with future students in similar situations. The lived experiences of the students included in this study are strongly linked to their identities as working professionals and adult-learners. The students in this study have demonstrated the requisite grit and perseverance to succeed even in the face of adversity. Students in this study also exhibited a strong internal locus of control and all had strong support structures outside of their educational orbit.

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Appendix 1 – Interview Protocol

1. **Introduction:** The researcher will introduce self to participant and thank him/her for participating. This will be followed by a review of the goals of the study, the duration of the study, and the topics to be discussed during the interview:

> *The focus of this study is to gain an understanding of the experience of non-traditional students during their tenure at a regional institution in the northeastern United States. As a student who has been faced with adversity during their academic career and that would have justifiably caused the majority of students to stop out or dropout, you have been identified as a resilient student. I will be asking you questions about what that experience has been like for you. The interview will last no longer than an hour and will be recorded. I may take some notes during the conversation; however, these will be limited. You may ask questions at any time during the interview and you are free to decline to answer a question, should you choose. Lastly, I need you to select a pseudonym for use during this study. You may suggest one or choose one from the list that I have here. [List will be provided to participant to choose a pseudonym, if desired]*

2. **Consent:** The participant will be asked to review the consent form that was previously provided and will be asked if he/she has any questions regarding its content. After any questions are addressed, the participant will be asked to sign two copies of the consent form. One will be given to the participant and the researcher will retain the other.

> *Please take a few minutes to review this consent form. It is identical to the one that was shared with you when you agreed to participate in the study.*
> *[Participant will be given time to read/ review the form.]*
> *Do you have any questions regarding the terms outlined in the consent form? [If there are questions, they will be addressed.]*
> *I will now ask you to sign both copies of the consent form. I will sign them as well. You will retain one copy and I will keep the other.*
>
> *Thank you. If you are ready, we will now begin with the interview.*

Appendix 2 – Interview Questions

I can see that you are currently studying _____. What is your experience in the ____ industry?

     If not given during the response, follow up with:

How do you expect that this degree will help you to break into or move up in the ____ industry?

Would you share with me the primary reasons why you chose to pursue your degree online?

Many adult-learners, such as yourself, balance work, family, school and other responsibilities. Would you share what types of responsibilities that you currently balance while pursuing your online degree?

With all that you are balancing, how do you find the time and energy to dedicate to your studies?

Have you experienced a situation during your academic career that has been above and beyond your current demands of balancing work, family, school and other responsibilities? If so, would you share the details of this situation?

Research suggests that adult, online learners, such as yourself are up to 15 percent more likely to stop out or drop out of school when compared with on-ground students. This is partially due to the fact that most adult-learners, such as yourself, taking online courses, are balancing multiple responsibilities. Given this statistic, what is it that keeps you motivated as an online student?

Was this same motivation enough when you faced the situation you shared with me earlier?

If not, what additional measures did you take to keep going and persist in your pursuit of your degree?

I am thoroughly impressed by your perseverance and grateful that you were willing to share your story with me. Thank you!

<div align="center">

Appendix 3 – Consent to Participate

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

</div>

Title of Study:	Surviving Higher Education: Retention & Persistence through the Lens of Psychological Survivorship

Investigators:

Name:	**David Cartwright**	**Dept:**	COE	**Phone:**	401-598-4826
Name:		**Dept:**		**Phone:**	
Name:		**Dept:**		**Phone:**	

Introduction

- You are being asked to be in a research study of/about persistence in higher education.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you have self-disclosed personal or professional hardships that you encountered during your academic career which could have caused you to stop out or drop out of school altogether. You demonstrated characteristics of grit, perseverance and determination through your decision to remain enrolled.
- Please read this form. You may also request that the form be read to you. The purpose of this form is to give you information about this research study, and if you choose to participate, document that choice.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study now, during or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate.
- Your participation is voluntary; however, you may withdraw at any time.
- You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study.

Why is this study being done? What is the purpose of this study?

- The purpose of the study is to examine the experiences of students who face adversity in pursuit of their academic career and yet persist, when others may have chose to drop out.
- Ultimately, this research will be published and maintained in a dissertation database.

What will I be asked to do?

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Participate in an in-person or skype interview about your experience as an online student. In particular, you will be asked to describe the internal and external pressures you faced and overcame as you persisted through your online program. The interview should take no more than 60 minutes.

What are the risks and/or discomforts of being in this study?

- The only conceivable risk is that of difficult feelings from reliving a circumstance that was particularly troublesome during your academic career.

What are the benefits of being in this study?

- The benefits of participation are primarily for the researcher to discover the phenomena that may exist for students who have faced adversity during their online academic career and were able to persist. This could further help frame the dialogue between advisors and other future students who experience similar challenges.

Will I be compensated for participating in this study?

- no

How will my privacy be protected? How will my data be kept confidential?

- This study is anonymous. We will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.
- The records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and all electronic information will be coded and secured using a password-protected file. There will further be audio and video recordings of this interview. Only the researcher will have access and listen to/watch these recordings and will only be used for educational purposes. Upon conclusion of the study, all recordings will be destroyed. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

May I refuse to participate in the study?

- Yes. The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you.
- You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* without affecting your relationship with the investigators of this study or Johnson & Wales University.
- You have the right not to answer any single question, and you have the right to request that the researcher not use any of your data.
- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the university.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.

What if I decide I no longer want to participate in the study? May I withdraw?

- You have the right to withdraw completely from the study at any point during the process and for any reason.
- You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason.
- If you choose to withdraw from the research study there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits that you are otherwise entitled to receive.
- If you are not satisfied with the way in which this study was conducted, you may convey your concerns to the chair of the JWU IRB at instutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu or 303-256-9640 and/or david.cartwright@jwu.edu or 401-598-4826

What are my rights as a research participant?

- You will be informed of any significant findings developed during the course of the research that may affect your willingness to participate in the research.
- If you sustain an injury while participating in this study, your participation may be ended.
- If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant that have not been answered by the investigator(s), you may contact the chair of the JWU IRB at institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu or 303-256-9640.

Whom may I contact with questions?

- For more information regarding this study, please contact the principal investigator at David.Cartwright@jwu.edu or 401-598-4826.
- If you choose to participate in this research study and believe you may have suffered a research-related injury, please contact the chair of the JWU IRB at institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu or 303-256-9640.
- If you have any concerns or problems that you believe occurred as a result of your participation, you may report them to the chair of the JWU IRB at institutionalreviewboard@jwu.edu or 303-256-9640.

<u>Will I receive a copy of this consent form?</u>

- You will be given an electronic and paper copy of this consent form

<u>Will I be informed of the findings from this study?</u>

- If you would like, a summary of the results of the study will be sent to you. Would you like a summary of the results sent to you? _____Yes _____No

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily and my signature below indicates I understand the information and consent to participate in this study. I also confirm, by signing below that I have not had the primary researcher as a faculty member during my academic career at JWU.

You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep, along with any other printed materials deemed necessary by the study investigators.

_____   _____
Participant's signature or   Date
Legally authorized representative

_____
Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

_____   _____
Principal Investigator's signature   Date

_____
Printed name

Consent to Audio Recording/Video Recording and Transcription

The study involves the audio recording/video recording of the interviews. Neither the name nor other identifying information about the participant will be associated with the recordings or with the transcript. Only the researcher(s) will listen to or view the recordings.

The recordings will be transcribed by the researcher. Once the transcription is checked for accuracy, the recordings will be erased or destroyed. Interview transcripts may be reproduced in whole or in part for use in presentations or written documents that result from the study; however, neither the name or any other identifying information (such as voice or picture) of the participant will be used in such presentations or documents. Further, immediately following the interview, the participant will be given the opportunity to have the recordings destroyed, either in whole or in part.

- -

Please check one of each of these pairs of options.

Recording the Interview

- ❑ I consent to having my interview recorded.
- ❑ I do not consent to having my interview recorded.

Transcription of Interview

- ❑ I consent to having my recorded interview transcribed into written form.
- ❑ I do not consent to having my recorded interview transcribed into written form.

Use of Transcriptions

- ❑ I consent to the use of the written transcription of my interview in presentations and written documents resulting from the study, provided that neither my name nor other identifying information will be associated with the transcript.
- ❑ I do not consent to the use of the written transcription of my interview in presentations or written documents resulting from the study.

Signature of Participant _____ Date _____

I hereby agree to abide by the participant's instructions as indicated above.

Signature of Principal Investigator _____ Date _____