

# PERSPECTIVES OF CAREER AND WORKFORCE EDUCATION GRADUATE STUDENTS REGARDING THEIR EXPERIENCES IN AN ONLINE DEGREE PROGRAM

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study was to acknowledge the perspectives and frames of reference of 28 graduate (master's and doctoral) students regarding their experiences in an online degree program and the perceived benefits and challenges it afforded. **Method:** The study used a case study design. **Results:** Data interpretations revealed three themes: (a) accommodating adult learners; (b) a fit for self-directed learners; and (c) interaction lacking. Based on findings, higher education administrators and program faculty should consider establishing multiple and varied mechanisms for creating community among online learners.

**Keywords:** business education, career and technical education, graduate education, online learning

## Introduction

Career and technical education (CTE) programs in higher education institutions are needed to prepare competent teachers and business professionals, to recruit talented and diverse individuals into the teaching profession and business and industry, and to sustain high quality K-12 programs. However, research demonstrates a continual decline of CTE programs in the last decade and a half (Fletcher, Gordon, Asunda, & Zirkle, 2015). In fact, Bruening, Scanlon, Hodes, Dhital, Shao, and Liu (2001) identified 673 CTE programs in 2001 while Fletcher et al. (2015) found approximately 498 in existence in 2015, a decrease of 175 programs in 15 years. Further, Fletcher et al. (2015) reported an estimated total of 146 business and/or marketing education programs in the United States. Of the 146 programs, only 29 offer degrees at the graduate level.

Concomitantly, colleges, schools, and departments of education across the country have experienced declines in student enrollment in the last decade (Arbaugh, Ball, Grossman, Heller, & Monk, 2015). Researchers have attributed declines to myriad factors: (a) competition with higher education institutes across the country; (b) alternative routes to certifying/licensing teachers; and (c) the low prestige of the teaching profession along with low starting salaries. Within that context, CTE faculty and higher education administrators need to develop creative and value-added programs that attract students.

One strategy to accomplish this is to create online programs. This is especially important at the graduate level as fewer students have the ability to pursue

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advanced degrees while balancing school, employment, family, personal, and other life challenges (Fletcher, 2012). A focus on establishing CTE graduate programs is warranted because the future of the field and profession relies on increasing the supply of quality graduate students who will improve instructional and curricular practices. These programs will also assist graduate students in securing administrative and leadership roles in the field (Fletcher, Lasonen, & Hernandez-Gantes, 2013). Therefore, faculty and administrators should transform the delivery of their curricula to meet the needs of their students. Because business and marketing education faculty are more likely to use online activities (i.e., asynchronous tools, computer-based learning exercises/games/simulations, online discussions, online quizzes, reflected blogs, self-directed learning, social networking, and synchronous chats) in their courses (Fletcher & Djajalaksana, 2014), it seems appropriate and feasible to develop online programs that accommodate interested adult learners seeking advanced degrees.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to acknowledge the perspectives and frames of reference of 28 graduate (master's and doctoral) students regarding their experiences in an online degree program and the perceived benefits and challenges it afforded.

### **Review of the Literature**

Prior studies examined student learning in online environments compared to face-to-face settings (Dzibuan & Moskal, 2011; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). The majority of studies comparing online students' learning (i.e., exam scores, course grades, course assignments, and performance ratings) to face-to-face students found no significant differences. Other studies explored student and faculty satisfaction and attitudes toward online teaching and learning (Davies, Howell, & Petrie, 2010; Hall, 2011; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Findings indicated students tend to have positive learning experiences while some faculty are reluctant to embrace online teaching.

Baltzer, Lazaros, and Flowers (2007) examined the readiness of CTE doctoral programs for making the transition from face-to-face to blended and online degree programs. They found doctoral programs in technical education were diverse in terms of their requirements, missions, course delivery modes, and departments that house them. Respondents tended to have negative dispositions toward transitioning to online doctoral programs. Researchers warned of the domino effect occurring because of the aging of current faculty members and lack of junior CTE faculty to supplant them. Baltzer et al. (2007) stated:

A summation of the previous findings leads to a distressing picture of the possible future for education and research within the field of technical education. A lack of qualified professors at bachelor's-granting institutions

leads to a lack of qualified secondary school technology teachers. This ailing professional pipeline could further aggravate technology program closures in middle and high schools (pp. 38-39).

This issue is the same for CTE in general and its sub-disciplines (i.e., business and marketing education). With the growing need for CTE faculty (and those within the sub-disciplines) to develop and teach online courses and programs, it is critical to gain an understanding of the perspectives and experiences of online learners. This understanding could assist faculty in creating online programs that are highly effective in maximizing student learning, satisfaction, and retention.

### **Online Learning Theory**

Several emerging models and theoretical frameworks examine how to effectively engage students in online settings. One of the most popular models is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework conceptualized by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). CoI has provided a useful and comprehensive method to stimulate and guide empirical research and practice. This model is contextualized within constructivist principles and is comprised of three constructs: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Cognitive presence describes the degree to which online learners are able to make meaning of their courses by continual reflection and discussion of content. Four phases are associated with cognitive presence: (a) a triggering event marked by the identification of a problem or issue to be studied; (b) exploration of the problem individually or in a group setting through critical reflection and dialogue; (c) integration of ideas by the interaction of meaning-making by the student with guidance from the instructor for the purpose of higher-order thinking; and (d) resolution, which occurs when learners apply and transfer their new knowledge to other contexts. This particular construct is the most challenging one for researchers to investigate and is also difficult to replicate in practice (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

The construct of social presence in association with the CoI is intended to identify and describe learners' sense of emotions, interactions, and process of socialization within an online community. The idea of social presence is to determine how individuals in asynchronous settings, based on their communicative interactions, envision and identify themselves as "real people" in a virtual environment, through the use of affective expressions, open communication, and group cohesion. The construct of social presence has resulted in a considerable amount of research in comparison to the other two constructs of the CoI framework. Research has indicated that social presence does indeed affect the learning and satisfaction of online students (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006; Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 2003). Further, the increased use of online cooperative and collaborative groups provides learners with higher levels of social presence and a greater sense of community (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Rovai, 2002).

Undoubtedly, cognitive and social factors are not the only mechanisms needed for effective online learning. Students need the presence and competence of an instructor to facilitate the learning process. Therefore, teaching presence involves the conceptualization, facilitation, and direction of students in meaningful learning tasks. Critical competencies of online instructors include: (a) the ability to structure, organize, and design instruction; (b) the capacity to prompt discussion; and (c) the implementation of direct instruction. Teaching presence is also linked to satisfaction and learning of students as well as building a sense of community among learners (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006; Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 2003; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

The CoI framework is helpful in thinking about factors that contribute to effective online teaching and learning environments as well as assessing online learners on their perceived experiences and needs in an online graduate degree program.

## **Methods**

This study sought to describe the experiences, benefits, and challenges of graduate (both master's and doctoral) students in Career and Workforce Education (CWE). Thus, the case study research method was identified as most appropriate because of the nature of both the program and students being intimately intertwined with blurred boundaries between the phenomenon of interest and its context (Woodside, 2010). Further, the case study method allowed for multiple interviews to elicit deep descriptions of participants' perspectives on targeted topics (Woodside, 2010). Each participant was interviewed on two occasions—individually and in a focus group—to produce thick descriptions and for follow-up/triangulation purposes.

## **Institutional and Program Context**

Participants in this study were CWE graduate students in an online degree program in a College of Education at a state (Carnegie 1-very high research activity), large residential, four-year public university in the Southeast region of the United States. This institution has comprehensive graduate programs and is located in a metropolitan urban area. The degrees do not lead to teacher licensure and include students with and without teaching licenses.

The Master of Arts (M.A.) in Career and Technical Education is designed primarily for career and technical educators and related professionals such as career specialists who work directly with students in career-related programs in middle school, high school, technical center, and community college settings. The focus is on improving instructional, curricular, and related competencies and the development of leadership skills. As a summative evaluation experience, the master's students complete a practicum course that includes developing an electronic portfolio of artifacts and their understandings of four domains, a capstone

project that includes an action research project, and defending their portfolio in a presentation to faculty of the program. The 36-semester hour program is delivered via the Internet and consists of 12 courses taught over a two-year period.

The Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in CWE is a research degree that prepares professionals for research, teaching, and policy positions in universities, colleges, community and technical colleges, government agencies, and the private sector. The program provides professionals in related fields with the preparation needed to address important research questions central to the planning, organization, delivery, and evaluation of systems and components involving education, work, and economic development. The mission of the program is to prepare professionals who understand the interdisciplinary nature of workforce education and who are interested in contributing to the body of knowledge on the integration of education and work in schools, postsecondary settings, community organizations, and workplaces. Students' programs of study consist of CWE core courses, a cognate based on each individual's interests, a series of research courses, a qualifying examination, and dissertation work. The 70-semester hour program is delivered via the Internet.

Three required on-campus Saturday sessions (typically lasting from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.) are held on campus each year for program orientation, community building, interacting with faculty and students, and introducing and concluding courses, which oftentimes include student presentations. The program utilizes a cohort approach. A new cohort is admitted every fall term and typically has 20 to 30 participants for the M.A. in CTE and 10 students per year for the Ph.D. program. Program instructors include three full-time faculty.

## **Participants**

Thirteen master's-level students in a CTE online degree program were recruited. Participants' ages ranged from 24 to 57, with an average age of 42. There were 10 whites, 2 African Americans, and 1 Hispanic. There were 10 females and 3 males.

In addition, 15 doctoral students in a CWE online degree program participated in this study. The average age of participants was 45, ranging from 31 to 67. Participants included 14 whites and 1 African American. There were 10 females and 5 males.

The participant total was 28. To protect participants' identities, names were replaced with pseudonyms.

## **Sampling Method**

Purposive sampling was used to identify potential participants. In purposive sampling, graduate students in the CTE and CWE programs were invited to participate (Patton, 2012). Potential participants were informed that they could choose not to participate in the study and could withdraw at any time without penalty. Each participant signed an informed consent form prior to data collection.

### **Data Sources and Procedures**

All 28 participants were interviewed to learn about the factors involved in their decisions to enroll in the program, their experiences in the program, and benefits and challenges of participating in an online degree program. Data collection followed a three-phase protocol: (a) reviewing and analyzing application materials; (b) conducting 28 one-on-one semi-structured interviews, and (c) facilitating three focus group sessions. Permission to review application materials was requested from students for the analysis of demographic data, personal and professional backgrounds, and reasons/goals for applying to the program. These data provided context for the analysis of participants' perspectives. Further, individual semi-structured interviews of approximately 30 to 60 minutes were conducted by phone or face-to-face, depending on the participant's preference. The responses to one-on-one interviews were used to reframe and develop the focus group interview questions. To that end, three face-to-face focus group interviews were conducted with open-ended questions in a semi-structured approach. The focus group interviews provided a platform for in-depth discussions to gain a deeper understanding of thematic perspectives. The three focus group interviews (including approximately 10 participants in each) lasted approximately 120 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped with permission of the participants.

### **Data Analysis and Data Reduction**

A thematic approach for data analysis and reduction was used. As the term suggests, the process of thematic analysis involved the use of themes, which were identified inductively from transcribed interview data. The procedure, developed by Boyatzis (1998), involved coding themes based on categories, definitions, and indicators with analysis following. That is, interview data were analyzed by transcribing and translating data as warranted; reduced by reading, bracketing, gleaning, and winnowing text; categorized using constant comparative procedures to identify themes; and connected by theorizing as a means to connect perspectives and context (Merriam, 1998). Member checking was used to ensure credibility of data analysis. Participants reviewed their interview transcripts to ensure correctness of content; and they were encouraged to comment, clarify, elaborate, or suggest changes that would accurately represent the meaning given to the experiences (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005).

Transferability suggests "whether particular findings from a qualitative study can be transferred to another similar context or situation and still preserve the particularized meanings, interpretations, and inferences from the completed study" (Leininger, 1994, p. 106). The degree of transferability or fittingness of the findings beyond this study to other contexts or situations rests with identifiable congruence of graduate programs, students, and colleges and universities (Leininger, 1994).

## Data Interpretations

Based on individual and focus group interviews, participants expressed three overarching themes: (a) accommodating adult learners; (b) a fit for self-directed learners; and (c) interaction lacking. Participants explained themes, corresponding quotes, and the essence of their perspectives and experiences. Their comments follow.

### Online Learning: Accommodating Adult Learners

Many of the participants admitted they could not have pursued an advanced degree related to their interests if it were not online. These participants had multiple commitments to juggle including full-time employment, family, and/or other life challenges. For example, a doctoral student stated:

First of all, if it wasn't online, I'm not sure I could have juggled my schedule to make it happen. Now, I work on my courses at some pretty weird hours. If I had to be on campus two nights a week with all of my other responsibilities, I'm not sure I would be able to do it.

Participants spoke about how online learning afforded them the flexibility they needed to juggle multiple responsibilities. They noted how pursuing an online degree enabled them to work on assignments anytime, anywhere. The key element was that they had the freedom to manage their own learning at times that worked best for them as opposed to being required to travel to campus at certain times during the week. Susan (doctoral student) indicated:

Being able to sit down at 10 o'clock at night and do your assignments. While it is lonely, it is convenient because you don't have to be at class at a certain time. So, if you are a morning person and you want to get up and work on your schoolwork, then that is when you can do it. I think the level of learning is probably just as much as if I were in a classroom. It just requires a little more self-discipline to do it.

Amy (doctoral student) acknowledged:

The benefits far outweigh the challenges, particularly to folks with full-time careers or full-time responsibilities in other areas. I travel a lot for work, so an online class allows me to work wherever I am.

Jeffrey (doctoral student) stated:

The challenges for me include giving up a lot of weekend time. Because I don't have class on Monday night and Wednesday night and so forth, I tend to do a lot of my work on the weekends; and one of the benefits of the online program is that I have the flexibility to choose when I want to work.

Many of the participants were mothers who had young children. They talked about the need for flexibility in studying and working on assignments as well

as the need to be home throughout the day to take care of their children. Karen (doctoral student) stated:

My daughter was one when I first started, and my son was four. I would not have been able to sit in a classroom on Saturdays. It gave me the flexibility to be able to realize my goals without taking time away from my family. They don't even know I'm in school because I get up in the middle of the night when they are sleeping, and it has worked out for me that way.

Alexis (master's student) described her situation:

I so enjoy being able to work at my own pace and not have to be at a certain place at a certain time. That can also be to your detriment when you don't carve out the time properly. So, I like it better for me, being a mom and running my own business.

Dorothy (master's student) had a family and needed online courses to balance work and family:

For me, the convenience factor for online is the biggest, single selling point. I can still do all the things to be available for my family and be available for my regular job and still be able to devote as much time as I need to for this.

Similarly, Linda (master's student) needed a flexible program:

There are benefits of being online; it certainly is much easier in terms of my schedule. I can find two or three hours here so I am going to sit down and do work. That has certainly been a huge benefit in my life because I'm responsible for many things and many people besides myself.

It was evident after interviewing the participants that the flexibility the online medium provided was critically important to their ability to pursue an advanced degree.

### **Online Learning: A Fit for Self-Directed Learners**

While students in the online program lauded the appealing and, in some cases, critical nature of participating in courses that enabled them to have the flexibility and convenience of working anytime, anyplace, they also acknowledged the difficulties in managing their own work schedules to include time for studying and writing. Participants clearly indicated that they believed online learning works for certain types of students. The students that participants described as most suitable for the online environment included those who had the ability to manage their own schedule, had self-discipline, and were most successful in a self-directed learning setting. For example, Don (doctoral student) acknowledged his own struggles in the program and thought he might not have had the right characteristics for an online learning environment. He commented:

I probably would do better with a face-to-face program than online. Working full-time, it does allow me to work at my own pace; but at the same time, I'm a procrastinator so that hurts because I keep putting off and I get behind.

John (doctoral student) also admitted his challenges in pursuing an online degree and trying to meet course deadlines. He believed:

The challenges are definitely time constraints. It is absolutely ridiculous the amount of time I've been working on this degree. Online does not make it easier. That's one misconception. It is very difficult to put everything together and do the readings and create something around all this information that is framed around what the assignment may be.

Katie (master's student) discussed:

The challenges are, you're being your own manager. You really have to have good time management. The only person that's going to make you do it is you. No one is checking on you. You are really in charge of your own destiny.

To that end, Jessica (master's student) shared the following advice for anyone interested in pursuing an online degree. "You have to be motivated, and you have to be a self-directed learner. You can't procrastinate."

Tom (master's student) followed up by stating:

It's good, but I think someone that's coming into this program not aware, thinking that it's online and I can do it whenever I want. That's absolutely not the case. You're going to put a lot of time into the course, and I think more so than if you were going to a classroom.

Karen (doctoral student) believed she fit the profile of an online student as she flourished in an online environment. She described herself as a self-directed learner and did well at managing her time:

To get your work done on time and meet any other requirements that I had with whatever I had going on in my life. So that was tough, but it was fair in the sense that I felt like my professors all understand that we were there because we wanted to be. The biggest challenge was meeting deadlines and keeping up with the assignments.

### **Online Learning: Interaction Lacking**

One person stated: "It can be a little lonely." Because the participants were pursuing their studies at a distance, they noted the challenge of lack of interaction while completing the courses. Though some participants enjoyed working by themselves the majority of the time, several desired more frequent interaction with their colleagues and instructors. Further, several participants were reluctant to ask questions to avoid the possibility of being singled out or perceived as not

understanding the content, thus creating a negative impression of themselves. Linda (master's student) thought of her online experience as isolating.

The challenge is, for me, not being in a setting with other students. I really don't love being by myself. I don't always get what I should out of a one-page explanation or even a ten-page mutual summary. I have a million questions still, and I feel like I'm a burden if I'm going to call or send an e-mail. So, I spend a lot of time just trying to figure things out. This [the on campus session] is exciting to me. This is what I thrive on.

Katie (master's student) concurred with Linda and was concerned that asking questions could result in the instructors having negative perceptions of her abilities. Additionally, she described the emotional experience she had with receiving written feedback on assignments and projects without being able to see non-verbal communication from her instructors.

I find it challenging to be working on things at home. As I read, I too come up with questions. I feel that if I e-mail, I'm singling myself out or I might not look like I'm understanding things. So, I try to figure it out on my own. Another issue might be some of the feedback that we receive. We don't really have an opportunity to discuss that feedback so it can be received in a totally different way than what it was meant. But, it's been wonderful having the flexibility. I travel with my job so an online program was an only option for me.

Bob recommended the following to improve communication:

I would think maybe a little bit more opportunity to communicate between the members of the cohort. We've used Elluminate [a web conferencing program] in some courses, but Elluminate was still pretty much instructor driven as far as the discussion that would take place. I would think either an opportunity to communicate through Skype sessions or maybe a little more frequent interaction at the campus.

Another student stated, "I enjoyed my cohort members...that kept me going." Related to the lack of communication in an online program, participants described the cohort model and the on-campus sessions as key elements in their online experience that promoted their retention and likelihood of completing their degrees. The participants enjoyed and believed they benefitted from the interaction, discussions, and relationships they built with instructors and colleagues in the program. Alexis explained it:

Interactions with colleagues have helped me be successful. You know that someone else was struggling with you. Knowing that someone else is worried about your well-being and wanting you to be successful with them is very important. I think the interaction as a whole—face-to face, e-mailing, phone calls, whatever—is very important.

Linda agreed with Alexis and said, “The face-to-face interactions are huge for me. I’m not sure I would have kept going if we didn’t have them. I look forward to them.” Janelle believed the cohort model and on-campus sessions were key elements to designing the program. She stated:

I think the whole reason for this retreat is to decrease the dropout rate of students because you grow and you have a bond. You feel you’re connected to a group of people. I feel like if we did not meet face-to-face, we would not be as comfortable with each other.

## Discussion

Study participants articulated their experiences in an online graduate degree program as well as the perceived benefits and challenges of their participation. It was evident that the online nature of the program enabled them to pursue a degree despite their multiple and varied life challenges. Most participants admitted that they would not have been able to pursue an advanced degree if the program were not available online. Prior research emphasized the critical nature of developing online courses and programs to accommodate older students who have employment, family, and other life obligations (Allen & Seaman, 2007; Fletcher, 2012; Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Dziuban & Moskal, 2011; Gaytan, 2007; Kim, Kwon, & Cho, 2011). Therefore, the development of online courses and programs has created educational opportunities for a population historically underserved.

While the participants described numerous benefits of the online environment, including the convenience of studying and working on course assignments any time and any place (McEwen & King, 2011), they also acknowledged the inherent challenges of pursuing an online degree. First, participants, especially master’s students, described the problematic nature of regular communication with their instructors and colleagues. While participants admitted they had the ability to email and call their instructors on the phone, they were reluctant to contact them because they were concerned about creating negative impressions of themselves. Instead, many participants resorted to finding solutions to their own questions rather than seeking the help of instructors.

Many participants noted the lack of interaction and described their experiences as lonely. Prior research found that online learners’ sense of isolation, disconnectedness, and loneliness were contributing factors to high attrition rates in online courses and programs (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004; Heyman, 2010).

Participants also struggled with the need to meet course deadlines while managing their time. Stated differently, the participants discussed the notion of studying and working on course assignments and projects anytime and anywhere, but concomitantly discussed the inherent challenge of adhering to course schedules. Those students who tended to procrastinate seemed to have the most problems with the online learning environment. Those students who perceived themselves as effective managers of their time seemed to appreciate and flourish

in an online environment. Therefore, participants believed the online environment was more suited for those individuals with certain individual characteristics, such as self-directed learners. According to Howell, Williams, and Lindsay (2003), adult learners tend to be problem-solvers, autonomous, and self-directed in their learning approach. In addition, they oftentimes participate in higher education because of their genuine interest in the subject matter. Given these general characteristics, online courses and programs are likely a good fit for most adult learners.

Nonetheless, the online program did attempt to combat participants' feelings of loneliness by requiring three annual on-campus sessions where students and faculty interacted, discussed course content, and established a community of learners. In fact, participants seemed to enjoy this aspect of their online program and indicated that the on-campus sessions contributed to their persistence. Establishment of the on-campus sessions aligns with Tinto's (2006) model of student persistence, which emphasized the relationship between academic and social integration with persistence. It is also consistent with the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework developed by Garrison and Arbaugh (2007), which emphasized the need for cognitive, social, and teaching presence for effective online teaching and learning. In that regard, students and instructors make meaning by sharing ideas, become socialized within an academic online community, and are directed and facilitated by instructors who engage students in meaningful learning (Christen, Kelly, Fall, & Snyder, 2015). Moreover, findings from a meta-analysis examining the influence of online instruction on students' learning demonstrate that online learners modestly outperformed their face-to-face student counterparts when the online learning experience was blended with face-to-face components (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Plus, high-quality interaction between faculty and students contributes to retention of students in online programs.

## **Conclusions**

Career and technical education programs as well as their sub-disciplines (i.e., agricultural, business and marketing, family and consumer sciences) across the country are experiencing the effects of shrinking postsecondary institutional budgets, fewer programs, and declining student enrollments (Fletcher et al., 2015). Additionally, programs are now competing with online, for profit, and alternative teacher licensure programs. Thus, educators have an opportunity to reach out to historically underserved groups, such as adult learners, as well as reach populations in the state, nation, and internationally. These students oftentimes have family and other life challenges that prevent them from pursuing advanced studies. However, since change often occurs slowly, some contemporary graduate programs in business education as well as in the broader field of CTE still have not fully embraced the new paradigm of accommodating adult learners. To that end, Garrison and Akyol (2009) argued:

At the heart of any new paradigm are ideas that challenge accepted assumptions along with emerging technologies that dramatically raise possibilities that could not be imagined within the old paradigm. This would appear to be what is happening as online and blended learning ideas have begun to shift the thinking and practice of educators and leaders in higher education (pp. 19-20).

Therefore, the time is now for educators and administrators to break away from the status quo and embrace emerging technologies that reach a broader range of students.

In addition, with the proliferation of distance education as a common educational delivery mode in higher education, increased scrutiny and criticism has seriously challenged its merit (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Mitchell & Geva-May, 2009). Despite widespread hesitancy to embrace distance education as a legitimate component of higher education, the access it affords adult learners pursuing graduate education is undeniable. Therefore, educators must continually improve the quality of the online learning environment to accommodate the growing need.

### **Recommendations**

Higher education administrators and program faculty should consider establishing multiple and varied mechanisms for creating community among online learners. For participants in this study, this community was partly developed through the use of on-campus sessions throughout the year. These sessions built student engagement. Another factor assisting in the development of a community of learners was the establishment of a cohort model where students enroll in the same courses as their colleagues who enter the program at the same time. Opportunities for collaboration among the cohort are essential and could also be fostered through group projects.

Additionally, more frequent interaction among students and faculty could occur through synchronous chats (i.e. Skype, Elluminate) to provide increased cognitive presence as well as a greater teaching presence through podcasts, webcasts, and instruction videos. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to ask questions and gain feedback in whatever manner they desire (i.e, e-mail, phone calls, Skype sessions) for course assignments.

Students interested in pursuing their degrees online should be told the common benefits and challenges of distance learning. They should be encouraged to manage their time to ensure meeting course deadlines. Faculty should provide frequent reminders to keep students on track in completing their courses as well as their programs of study.

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