

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EFFECTIVE ONLINE TEACHING FACULTY:
PERSPECTIVES OF ONLINE UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

by
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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this explorative qualitative case study was to identify the characteristics online administrators reveal as existing in their most effective, and ineffective online teaching faculty (OTF). By identifying the characteristics of effective OTF, online administrators can develop practices to reduce and avoid the negative effects associated with ineffective OTF. Negative effects include increased transactional distance and student attrition. Analyzed were personal interviews of ten online administrators from eight different universities, a year of student surveys from six courses, and faculty handbooks. Interview questions sought the best approach to online facilitation, recommendations for retention of students, factors related to course facilitation that bring positive or negative results and what attributes were found in both effective and ineffective OTF. The data collected and literature reviewed revealed an Online Student Hierarchy of Needs pyramid with four progressive levels satisfied by the Facilitation, Cognitive and Social Presences' of the effective OTF.

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

The growth in online education participation has astounded many and as of 2011 has risen to 6.1 million students, which represents an increase of 560,000 students over the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Some may recall the days of the correspondence courses with assignments mailed back and forth through the post office, or designated television stations, offering demonstrations of course concepts and the occasional video tape to watch. This type of distance learning may be all but a memory. The current online universities offer entire degree programs with interactive curriculum, state-of-the-art features like simulators, and professors standing by with knowledge and tools to address every learning style (Roman, Kelsey & Lin, 2010).

Online Teaching Faculty (OTF) is now a source of interaction and facilitation of instruction in the course room (Dunlap & May, 2011; Roman, Kelsey & Lin, 2010). For this reason, the OTF has become the instructional *face* of the online university and the administrator depends on the OTF to provide quality interaction in order to build a quality reputation for the university (Bedford, 2009; Wickersham & McElhany, 2010). Since there is a lack of face-to-face interaction with campus staff and professors, online education delivery builds reputation on perception (Velez, 2009). If the students perceive no engagement, they may choose to find another online university that gives them what they expect. A predicament remains for the online administrator in that ineffective OTF can cost the university through loss of reputation, loss of revenue, and increase in Transaction Distance (TD) - which is the psychological division between student and instructor and is a proven cause of student attrition (Falloon, 2011; Moore, 2007). Speaking from experience, this becomes troubling to the online administrator who seeks to retain his or her students in the program until they graduate.

Retention of students is paramount in the minds of university administrators and online education already suffers from lower student retention than on-ground universities (Errin, 2010). Indeed, to identify the OTF that will support retention efforts may be as important as school survival. Clearly, leaders of the OTF have an important voice that, until this study, has been silent. Plentiful is the literature examining the voice of the OTF (Bailey & Card, 2009; Bedford, 2009; Dolan, 2011; Puzziferro & Sheldon, 2009; Runyon, 2008; Schopieray, 2006; Tipple, 2010). What was not evident in literature is the perspective of the online administrator in relation to what constitutes an effective OTF. As a result, this study sought the insight of the administrators who have direct supervision of the OTF. It seemed reasonable to inquire of these educational leaders and listen to their voice.

Heyman (2010) found that the student connection with the educational institution, through quality faculty interaction, were predominant student retention triggers. Since staffing interactive instructors increases the retention of students, the administrator seeks to identify and retain the *most effective*, and *interactive*, group of OTF (Boston & Ice, 2011; Rogers, McIntyre & Jazzar;). Experts in distance education (Abrami & Bernard, 2006; Moore & Kearley, 2011; Saba, 2000) have suggested that future researchers study the approach to success in distant learning, including factors of motivation and cognition that enhance delivery of distance learning. Understanding the characteristics of the expertly interactive OTF may enhance the efforts of administrators in staffing wisely and, thereby, improving the delivery of distance learning for the student.

Background

The busy worker has less time to pursue traditional education, yet the need for formal education remains crucial (Wang, 2010). Educational visionaries integrated the

new technology to meet the needs of the time-challenged student by designing asynchronous online degree programs (Hanna, 2000). The changes free the student to study based on the individuals' schedule. Online education has now become "a dominant part of the landscape of the higher education global industry" (McFarlane, 2011, p. 3) and has, noticeably, changed the way we educate our post-secondary students now and in the future.

Distance education can be traced back to ancient Greece and the great philosophers, yet, officially recognized distance education started in 1883 through the Chautauqua Institution who granted academic degrees for the completion of correspondence schooling (Flood & Bray, 1885). In 1915, the National University Extension Association introduced the receiving and transferring of credits from correspondence courses, as well as policies and standards for those who educate at a distance (Watkins, 1991). Shortly after the creation of the Internet, distance learning evolved and transformed into a professor-taught experience for every student.

With the initiation of a virtual professor, the students could now message the professor 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Waiting for the response, lack of facial expressions or verbal queues and the feelings of isolation can be the downsides to online education when compared to traditional education (Dabbagh, 2007; Joyce & Brown, 2009; Lamer, 2009). Further noted by Hoffman (1995) was the necessity of dialogue and ability for student and instructor to respond to each other. When the instructor does not transcend what Moore (2007) coined *transactional distance*, the results can be diminished dialog and students left feeling isolated and disconnected (Falloon, 2011). When the instructor transcends transactional distance, students across geographical

communities feel connected, engaged, motivated, appreciated, and were more apt to be retained (Falloon, 2011). Hence, ineffective OTF may intensify the physical separation and feeling of isolation by facilitating the course material redundantly or mechanically (Eib & Miller, 2006). The administrator's objective in retaining students, then, is to ensure that the OTF decrease transactional distance by engaging the students in dialog that is "purposeful, constructive and valued by each party" (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 210).

The benefit of the completed research is threefold. First, administrators benefit by comparing their own universities' OTF with what this study found in traits of effectiveness. This helps with hiring practices, evaluations and coaching. Second, the OTF community gains an understanding of what higher educational employers were looking for and what leaders consider effective in decreasing transactional distance. Finally, the ultimate recipient is the student who may acquire a more efficient instructor, diminished transactional distance, and possibly earn a degree.

Situation to Self

The motivation for completing this study was to add to the body of knowledge as it relates to the online administrator's once missing voice relative to effective online course facilitation. Working closely with OTF to train, direct, and align them within our online business school, I observed overwhelming desire of OTF to perform well. Most OTF take great pride in mentoring students and supporting the goals of the university. I also witnessed the affirming comments made by administrators about OTF. These comments were rarely shared with the OTF. I hope that the information uncovered in this study will encourage OTF who maintain and exhibit characteristics of effectiveness. I also hope this study provides traditions of improvement for future online educators by

considering what their leaders find effective. Lastly, my hope is that this study will benefit other online administrators and help them build their instructional base and, ultimately, their university.

In an effort to reveal my belief system, I share that my epistemology is foundationalism founded on theism and a paradigm of objective idealism. There were foundational truths that guide my thoughts and actions. The basis of all knowledge comes from the Creator. Much of this may be beyond our ability to comprehend; however, just because I do not perceive an idea does not make it any less real. As a firm believer in the truth of the scriptures, I hold a biblical worldview that directs every aspect of my life and thought process. Most secular philosophies deny the truth of God's Word, which is contrary to my biblical worldview.

For the purpose of this study, my epistemological posture is subjective, anti-positivistic constructivism. My belief is that individuals *interpret* knowledge individually, constructing *individual* reality with many interpretations (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007), yet meshed with my biblical views, interpretation must be based on the *reality* revealed in scripture. While we may interpret what we learn differently, it does not change the reality that we may not perceive. According to Genesis 2:7, God created humankind in His image. Further, I Thessalonians 5:23 reveals that we are eternal spiritual beings that live in a body and have a soul. We may choose to ignore or deny this truth, but it does not make it any less true. To summarize, a biblically based, anti-positivistic paradigm, guides this study.

Constructivism, as the antithesis of positivism, argues that individuals construct meaning and "these constructions are transmitted to members of a society by various

social agencies and processes” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p. 22). In this study, the social agency was the online higher institution. In particular, the world of the online administrator and the meanings they transmit regarding OTF and the traits of effectiveness.

The ability to perceive both sides of this study – the OTF and the administrator – has been an aid in the analysis of the data. I do represent the administrative side of the study; however, I work closely with the adjunct faculty. One bias that I found was my own ideas and perceptions of adjunct effectiveness as it affects student progress. As an administrator, I see the best and worst of OTF behavior. I see the impact on the reputation of the school and the progress of the students. Student-centered education must be the basis of online learning (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009). It is problematic for me when OTF disregard this detail. By bracketing my own perceptions, this proved to be a manageable bias.

Problem Statement

The problem is that ineffective OTF can be costly to the university by increasing student attrition (Lamer, 2009; Sander, 2011; Tipple, 2010). The specific problem addressed is the need for a qualitative case study exploring what online administrators perceive as characteristics of effective or non-effective OTF in order to retain the OTF who bear the affirmative characteristics. Listening to the voice of the online administrator will also address a clear gap in the literature regarding administrators’ perspectives of OTF effectiveness.

The literature is replete with studies on the essential needs and motivators of the OTF (Bailey & Card, 2009; Bedford, 2009; Dolan, 2011; Puzziferro & Sheldon, 2009;

Runyon, 2008; Schopieray, 2006; Tipple, 2010). What is not evident in the literature is the perspective of the online administrator with regard to traits of their most effective instructors. Leaders of the OTF have an important phenomenon to share. Examination of this phenomenon is the purpose of this qualitative case study. Through identifying the characteristics of effective OTF, administrators can hire and retain candidates with the identified traits, and then develop policies and procedures to avoid the negative costs associated with ineffective OTF – more specifically, loss of students through dissatisfaction and the consequent loss of revenue created by student attrition.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the perceptions of select online university administrators relative to the characteristics of effective and ineffective online teaching faculty. Perceptions of the select online university administrators were categorized and coded to search for themes associated with effective and ineffective OTF traits.

Significance of the Study

The arena of online higher education is new when compared to traditional higher educational institutions, notwithstanding, this arena is progressive, growing and not declining anytime soon (Allan & Seaman, 2011). In 2006, The American Association of State Colleges and Universities noted that the preparedness for the dramatic expansion of online learning is sorely lacking and the online institutions may not have the ability to address the needs of the students and OTF. This may still be true in the year 2013 as I witness the daily struggle to meet the educational needs of students while confirming that the OTF have the necessary tools to offer quality education. In the face of online

education's rookie status, distance administrators work conscientiously to assure students have a quality education through support of the OTF (Lee, 2002).

The administrators were not the instructors, but administrators were charged with ensuring the quality of instruction and delivery that prepared students and influenced their communities (Batts, Pagliari, Mallet & McFadden, 2010). It was claimed that the challenge of student satisfaction is dependent on the connectedness with the online instructor (Heyman, 2010). Since the endurance of the online institution is dependent on student satisfaction and retention (Lamer, 2009), the significance of this qualitative case study in identifying OTF with student retaining qualities is important to university reputation and survival.

Students have identified the characteristics of an effective online instructor by answering end of course surveys and through the voice of attrition (Boston, Ice & Gibson, 2011). Student opinions about OTF post on university bulletin boards and in Internet blogs such as ratemyprofessor.com. Numerous studies have memorialized the reasons students remain motivated and the prominent factors remain to be engaged and interactive OTF (Boston & Ice, 2011; Heyman, 2010; Lamer, 2009; Schulte, 2010; Williams & Williams, 2011). Literature has adequately covered, through survey and interview, the voice of the student relative to his or her professor.

Similarly, the voice of the OTF is attended to abundantly through literature pertaining to what motivates them, what they need to become better facilitators, and what administrators can do to support them (Dolan, 2011; Gaillard-Kenney, 2006; Hoyle, 2010; Orr, Williams & Pennington, 2009). In particular, the findings from the

aforementioned studies indicate OTF have a strong intrinsic motivation to help students succeed as well as keep the independence that comes with online instruction.

Very little research on the perspective of online administrators exists. Moreover, no research existed, until now, proportional to how online administrators identify effectiveness in OTF, or ineffective traits of an OTF performance. Now heard is the voice of the online administrator. One can speculate that online learning is student centered and the administrator is simply a part of the service to that student. Another may presume that the administrators have very little to do with the relationship between student and instructor – other than providing a virtual meeting place through the university and course room. On the contrary, the administrators that lead the online faculty were intricately functioning behind the scenes to avow that the transactional distance between student and instructor is at a minimum (Miller, 2009). The online administrator carefully constructs processes and policies confirming consistency and quality of interaction and andragogy.

Conducting this study through entering the lives of online administrators, with over five years of OTF oversight, has provided sufficient data to uncover perceptions among those in administrative settings in online universities. This is especially relevant since the number of accredited online institutions in the United States is growing (Boston & Ice, 2011; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). This study has addressed the questions of what leadership finds essential in an OTF and what leadership finds unwanted. As expected, the voice of the administrator and the voice of the student harmonize in answering the question of distance learning satisfaction. Equally, the OTF now have a vantage point of knowing university employers are seeking in a distance

instructor. Likewise, the new online administrator can find a wealth of insight from the seasoned administrators in this study. Adding to the body of knowledge in this area should rouse further investigation into what educational leadership expects for future students and citizens globally.

Research Questions

The focus of this qualitative case study was to explore the characteristics of effective OTFs described by select online administrators. The following questions guided this study:

1. *How do online administrators describe effective course facilitation for their OTF?*

Students have voiced their views on how they prefer the facilitation of an online higher education course. The students prefer quick responses, frequent interaction, experts in their field, enthusiasm and relevant communication and feedback (DeLotell, Millam & Reinhardt, 2010). OTF believe they facilitate best when they make a difference in students' learning, have autonomy in the course, feel comfortable with the delivery and understand the administrative expectations (Fish & Wickersham, 2009). Many studies offer advice and objectives to administrators on how to lead their virtual teams and develop best practices (Liu, Magjuka & Lee, 2008; Martinez & Jex, 2009; Merriman, Schmidt & Dunlap-Hinkler, 2007; Turel & Zhang, 2010). This study asked administrators how they view the effectiveness, or ineffectiveness of their virtual teams and the ability to retain students. Directly asking educational leaders about effective course facilitation revealed the administrator's world and addressed the gap in literature. After all, the educational leaders were the ones to initiate policy and procedures to direct the improvement of online instruction.

2. *How do administrators describe the connection between OTF engagement and student retention?* Leaders in this study recognized the effect of increasing, or decreasing, transactional distance in online higher education. Online administrators *do* understand that online instructor interaction enhances the learning experience of the students (Chang & Smith, 2008). The online administrator may not be aware of the *theory* of transactional distance, but in this study they recognized the negative effect on a university when students do not experience dialog (Burns, 2011; Dunlap & May, 2010; Hall, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009; Pontes, Hasit, Pontes, Lewis & Siefring, 2010). Addressing this question added to the theory of transactional distance, even if only by demonstrating that online leadership is aware of its existence and how it relates to student satisfaction – even if not familiar with the name *transactional distance*. The administrators’ voicing their perception of *dialog* and its effect on retention proved significant in furnishing more about retention creating actions in OTF.
3. *How do administrators experience factors in course facilitation that may, or may not, cause student frustration or retention issues?* Dunlap and May (2011) conducted a study regarding online facilitator performance measurements. The study examined three themes that surfaced in student evaluation of facilitator courses: a) instructors that were not interactive and at times non-existent in the course, b) insufficient assignment feedback, and c) untimely in posting grades. The findings of the research showed that student perceived quality of the facilitation diminished due to the lack of instructor engagement in these three areas (Dunlap & May, 2011). The administrator hears, directly, the frustration

through contact with the student, university reports and grievance processes. At the same time, administrators hear comments and see reports about OTF actions that bring value to the online experience. By recognizing the factors causing a student to be frustrated in the course room, I discovered what events administrators shared when monitoring OTF actions that lead to reduced dissatisfaction. Student frustration with online instructors in existing research is revealed through comments about lack of relevant feedback or non-existent feedback, no communication from the instructor, lack of clear direction, and slow grading practices (Dennen, Darabi & Smith, 2007; Dunlap & May, 2011). Understanding administrator perspectives on which OTF actions either affect the students positively or negatively assists with taking actions to enhance the quality of online learning.

4. *How do administrators experience and describe the effects of ineffective course facilitation of OTF?* Increased transactional distance causes the students and OTF to feel isolated and can lead to instructional practices that are ineffective and repetitive (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Tipple, 2010). Some of those ineffective practices consist of the inability to transfer knowledge through the online medium, student dissatisfaction due to perceived poor interaction with instructors, lack of expertise and dedication from instructors, and poor response time from instructors (Graham & Thomas, 2011; Heyman, 2010; Schulte, 2010). The literature regarding ineffective OTF is not as abundant as one might think, but the literature relative to effective practices of OTF is plentiful. Perhaps the practices opposite of the effective practices exhibit ineffectiveness.

Opposite of the effective instruction principles mentioned by Roman, Kealsey and Lin (2009), the ineffective OTF demonstrate the following seven ineffective instructional principles:

1. Contact with students is not fostered.
2. Cooperation is not encouraged among students.
3. Active learning is not promoted.
4. Prompt feedback is not provided.
5. Time on task is not emphasized.
6. High expectations are not communicated.
7. Diverse ways of learning and respect for diverse talents is not taken into account.

The ineffectiveness of OTF has been reviewed through end of course surveys completed by students (Dunlap & May, 2011; Matos-Diaz & Ragan, 2010) and also appears in studies where faculty evaluate other OTF or themselves (Bedford, 2009; Schulte, 2010). Before this study, a gap remained where administrators who hire, supervise, evaluate, and possibly coach the OTF, were not properly represented in literature. This question sought to address the gap by listening to the experiences and descriptions of the administrators regarding the course facilitation of their OTF.

Research Plan

This qualitative study employed a case study design in an attempt to understand the meaning administrators assign to the characteristics of effective OTF. According to Stake (1995) the primary reason for conducting a case study is to “maximize what we can learn (p. 4). The qualitative method was chosen because I did not presume to know what meanings the administrators ascribed to the phenomenon of interest; instead, I wished to discover their descriptions and the meaning they assigned to their work as educational leaders (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). A qualitative method, according to Bogdan and Biklen (2007), is more appropriate for discovering meanings and perspectives than a quantitative method. The perspective of an effective instructor’s characteristics does not exist aside from the individual administrator; therefore, the administrators shared the reality of their world (Stake, 2010). The emerging perceptions were what I looked for and what qualitative research supported.

Exploratory case studies were defined by Yin (2009) as advantageous for researching phenomena that has yet to be recognized and requires an intuitive approach. Hence, the reasons for choosing a qualitative exploratory case study in an area previously not researched. I explored the perceptions of higher education online administrators,

which was the primary case, or unit of analysis (Yin, 2009). The interviews were with the purposeful intention of understanding the experience of the administrator in order to understand who the effective OTF were. I mention this because Yin (2009) proposes that an exploratory case study should declare what was explored and why it was explored. Yin (2009) also asks the researcher to note by which criteria the exploratory case study was judged successful. Stake (1995) contends that qualitative research should not seek to explain; rather it should seek to understand. Stake also writes, “Good research is not about good methods as much as it is about good thinking” (p. 19). Therefore, weighing in the advice of the professionals, the criteria by which to judge it a success is for me to understand my case, double-check my assertions, and to alter any generalizations. The use of member checking and the professional critique of my dissertation committee and research consultant should be of great assistance to this novice researcher.

Delimitations

The boundaries of this study were to engage participants who were administrators working in online universities. Only administrators who have over five years of experience leading virtual teams of instructors fit the phenomenon. The choice of online administrators is because of their depth of experience originating from their similar training, which makes up their professional knowledge (Stark 1995). Asking on-ground administrators to share perceptions of leading OTF when they have not experienced it firsthand would not give a true representation of the online administrator experience of leading OTF. Although a brick and mortar administrator may have an understanding of the subject of leading OTF, only those administrators that live and breathe the nuances of online education truly have a voice to share about this experience.

While most universities and community colleges in operation today understand the operation of online courses not every university or community college seeks accreditation for the fully online programs. Future researchers may be interested in the same type of study within traditional university settings; however, my focus was within universities where all programs were conducted through means of the Internet. Some universities offer courses and programs through the Internet while in the traditional on-ground course format; however, the universities that I sought to study view distance education as the premier form of education verses an alternative way to educate in a traditional school. Most of these universities function solely online. Some require a short residency of a week to a month. Some started as traditional and then created a full distance learning university.

Like other leaders in specific workplaces, online leaders comprehend the unique challenges and expectations of the specific online environment. It was also important to identify the participants who understand transactional distance, although administrators were not all aquatinted with the term, they each clearly understood concept. Transaction distance was identified as a very real factor in the online environment even if the terminology was unknown.

Limitations

The study had a limited knowledge base to rely on and the available literature with information to form my case was even more limited. Because of this restriction, I directed the study by way of an exploratory case study even though charged with being difficult to construct or authenticate (Yin, 2009). Nonetheless, Stake (1995) contends, “It is important for us to recognize that others will not use the words or methods as we do”

(p. 2). Additionally, Yin (2009) agrees that an exploratory case study will lend itself well to the lack of conceptual framework or hypotheses (p. 37).

CHAPTER TWO. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Chapter two discusses and reviews the literature pertaining to the three parties who comprise online higher education, namely, the student, professor and administrator. Each individual functions only with the existence of the other. The examination includes how transactional distance involves each party, how online education has evolved and functions, and the effectiveness of the OTF in relation to the online educational factors mentioned. The purpose is to make the gap in the literature evident, establish the history, the changes, and current state of online higher education applicable to each party. Subsequently, this review investigates how this trio of players interacts in distance education through the lens of transactional distance.

Theoretical Framework

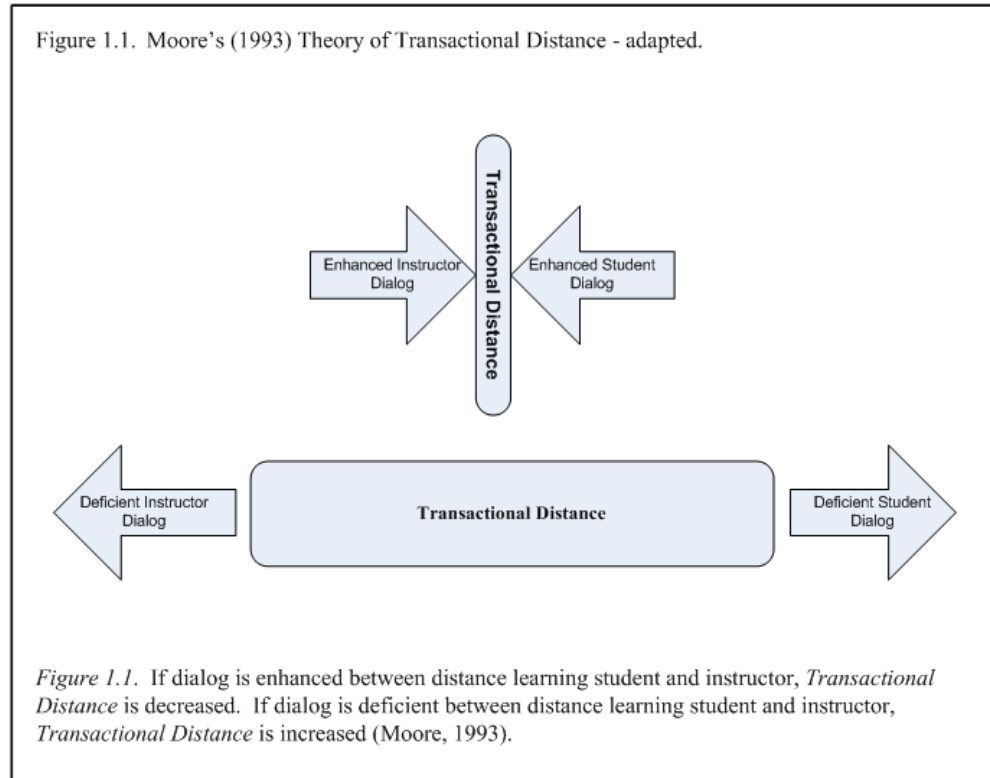
Transactional distance describes the psychological separation of the online student and instructor and, according to Stein & Wanstreet (2009), this separation can “lead to psychological and communication gaps that create misunderstandings and feelings of isolation (p. 306). Derived from John Dewey’s concept of transaction, and further cultivated by Boyd and Apps (1980), Moore & Kearsley (1996) continue by adding the factor of distance:

The transaction that we call distance education occurs between teachers and learners in an environment having the special characteristic of separation of teachers from learners. This separation leads to special patterns of learner and teacher behaviors. It is the separation of learners and teachers that profoundly affects both teaching and learning. With separation there is a psychological and

communications space to be crossed, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner. It is this psychological and communications space that is the transactional distance (p. 200).

Although geographical separation is considered here, distance could also be determined by the “way and to what extent instructors, learners and the learning environment interact with one another” (Chen, 2001, p. 328). This interaction can be face-to-face or online and still experience TD. Moore (1983), the originator of the term *Transactional Distance*, explains that there were three factors and three variables that determine TD. The factors were instructor, student and method of communication (Moore, 1983). Moore & Kersley (1996) note that with one missing factor there can be no TD because “there can be no educational transaction” (p. 200). The variables noted by Moore (1983) were dialogue, structure and student independence. Dialogue is the communication methods determined by many events, one of which is the “characteristics of the individuals involved in the interaction” (Kang & Gyorke, 2008, p. 204), namely, the instructors.

The online administrator can control the variables and factors; nevertheless, they need a clear view of what effective dialog and interaction could be. Perhaps online leaders have yet to take inventory of TD and how the interaction of OTF can be monitored by policy and procedure to ensure TD is decreased. According to Moore (2007), “as dialog increases, TD decreases...as structure increases, TD increases” (p. 94). As depicted in Figure 1.1, instructor-student dialog is the controlling factor for increasing or decreasing TD. Since the decrease of TD is desirable as a proven retention feature, the management of TD is important to educational leaders.



Potential misunderstanding and miscommunication, as explained above, is the enemy of dialog. Dialog, as defined in TD, is not only the primary tool to combat misunderstanding and miscommunication but according to measures in Bischoff's (1993) study, dialog *predicted* TD. Dialog transposes TD in that as the level of professor and student interaction increases, the transactional distance perceived by the learner decreases (Chen, 2001). Kang & Gyorke (2008) further define dialog as "the exchange of words, actions, and ideas between teacher and learner" (p. 204). Simply stated, the words, actions and ideas need to be mutual and not one directional. In an online classroom this takes place within the context of email communication, discussion boards, or telephone conversations rather than face-to-face. The distance dialog can be just as engaging, and some (Dziuan, Moskal, Brophy & Shea, 2007; Moore, 2007) believe even more so due to the time allowed to focus on the communication and constructing a response.

The theory of TD has been compared and contrasted with other theories (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008; Kang & Gyorke, 2008) and has supported distance learning by presenting dialog, structure, and student autonomy as a way of reducing TD, thereby boosting student satisfaction and retention (Gokool-Ramdoo, 2008; Chen, 2001). Though TD is in its infancy compared to other theories, its information can lead to strategies to increase interaction through dialog in distance education. My study will help to close the gap in the literature and examine the perceptions of leaders in an effort to determine which instructor traits lessen TD – especially as it relates to dialog. The administrator in course development and assessment more easily controls student autonomy and structure - the other two variables of TD. More difficult to control is the dialog that takes place between instructor and student.

Related Literature

Distance education has now become “a dominant part of the landscape of higher education” (McFarlane, 2011) and has changed the way we educate post-secondary students now and in the future. The contemporary post-secondary online student has different expectations and even claims to be a *customer* (Munteanu, Ceobanu, Bobalca & Anton, 2010). The online instructor in higher education also requires changes in skills and focus, including adopting a learner-centered approach (Fish & Wickersham, 2009). Additionally, distance administrators carefully lead their virtual teams to ensure a decrease in transactional distance, which will increase student satisfaction (Schulte, 2010). Examined in this chapter is the trio of student, instructor and administrator and their roles in post-secondary online education as seen through scholarly literature.

History of distance education. Correspondence education can be traced back to the 1700s and is considered the beginning of distance education (Jeffries, n.d.). The best

starting point for a look at the history of distance education, as we know it today, may be with the introduction of audiovisual media. In 1987, Reiser (as cited in Jeffries, n.d.) noted that the 1900s introduced recording devices with audiovisual capabilities that provided the means to create instructional films. Without realizing how prophetic his statement would be, Thomas Edison proclaimed, “our school system will be completely changed in the next ten years” (as cited in Saettler, 1968, p. 68). Though speaking about film, and being premature on the timing, Edison’s prediction is understood today by the millions of individuals who make up the body of distance learners and instructors (Allen & Seaman, 2011).

Officially recognized distance education started in 1883 through the Chautauqua Institution who granted academic degrees for the completion of correspondence schooling (Flood & Bray, 1885). In 1915, the National University Extension Association introduced the receiving and transferring of credits from the correspondence courses as well as policies and standards for those that educate at a distance (Watkins, 1991). Many forms of media have been presented since that time to bring the classroom to the distance student. Broadcasting through television, radio and satellite were the most prominent forms of educational communication to teach the masses that would otherwise not have the opportunity to earn a degree (Jeffries, n.d.).

Where students found distance education a convenience and accommodation, most in academic circles found distance education a substandard form of education, and the skepticism was shared by society as a whole (Clumbaro & Monaghan, 2009; Jeffries, n.d.; Schulte, 2010). Change and undiscovered territory were not always welcomed, especially in an area so steeped in tradition, namely, the institutions of higher education.

Traditionally, attending a classroom consists of: a) listening to a lecture, b) interacting through discussion, taking lecture notes or working in groups, c) regurgitating the course content, and d) repeating that process until the instructor awards a passing grade based on the students' demonstrating erudition of the course objectives. According to Arum & Roksa (2011), an analysis of transcripts and student surveys show that higher education is not demonstrating improvement in critical thinking and analytic reasoning in just under half of their student base. Losing the long-standing pattern of pedagogy is a loss that many in higher education do not want to admit (Jaschik, 2011). The long-standing tradition of on-ground education may be in trouble.

American industry is another skeptic of students earning a degree from a distance without benefit of the foundations of traditionally accepted education (Clumbaro & Monaghan, 2009). A study by Adams & DeFluer (2006) explained that less than three percent of hiring staff surveyed preferred an earned distance degree versus a traditionally earned degree. Vault (2001) found 110 human resource professionals, over half surveyed, preferred that job candidates note where they earned their degree – not the university, but whether it was earned online. Additionally, there was bias found against graduates earning an entire degree online versus taking a few courses online (Simon, Sinclair, Brooks & Wilkes, 2009). Gender of the hiring manager was found to be a prevailing indicator of bias towards graduates from online universities. Simon et al. (2009) reported that female hiring professionals had a more positive attitude towards the online graduates than did their male counterparts.

The differences in how the online university is structured also make a difference. For instance, for-profit universities were experiencing a high volume of enrollment, yet a

recent press release (2012) by Center for Analysis of Postsecondary Education and Employment (CAPSEE) warned that graduates of for-profit universities have a lower chance of gainful employment and lower earnings. The academic structure of a university, which can include fully online degrees, traditional brick-and-mortar classes, a hybrid of both as well as private, for-profit and not for-profit can make a difference in the perceptions of potential employers (Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009). Change may not be welcomed with open arms, especially when it disturbs choice traditions. Employers were accustomed to graduates from a ground university; however, Guendoo (2008) hypothesizes that negative university perception about distance graduates will decrease over time. As more distance students enter the workforce and prove their competence the employers may find a transformation in their thinking about how the workforce is educated.

Accepted or not, the next historical move towards course delivery was found through the creation of internet infrastructures in the 1980s (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, Kahn, Kleinrock, Lynch, Postel, Roberts & Wolff, n.d.) which began in what Thomas Edison might have declared to be the most dramatic change to not only higher education, but education as a whole. I say “accepted or not” because many in our society debate the validity of online education, according to many studies in both business and education (Blondy, 2007; Carnevale, 2007; Columbaro & Monaghan, 2009; Mandernach & Dennis, 2008; Seibold, 2007; Sumner, 2000; & Zembylas, 2008).

Online education. The age of technology has changed society and progressive educational administrators recognized early on that students in the twenty-first century need education to advance careers and prepare for the workforce (Rudestam &

Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). The introduction of the World Wide Web made the *distance* in distance education not so distant. Internet users grew from 17.5 million in 1995 to 137 million in 2002 (Greenspan, 2002). In fifteen years, the number of adults with Internet access sprang from nine percent to seventy-seven percent (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2010). Educational innovators moved quickly to establish fully accredited online programs of study, known as the mega online universities (McFarlane, 2011), to meet the needs of any student with a computer and the ability to connect to the Internet. By 1990 approximately 84 percent four-year colleges and universities were offering online courses, as well as 74 percent of the community colleges (Green, 2001).

Online learning adopted many of the same features found in face-to-face learning such as discussions, assignment drop off locations, and an announcement area that is much like the traditional chalkboard. In fact, one Learning Management System used in many online universities is called Blackboard and has collaborative tools for groups projects, discussion boards which replace the traditional class room discussions, and communication tools to keep in communication with the professor (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Many more Learning Management Systems exist with the same features and enhanced on a continual basis.

The use of a computer or laptop may become the latest addition to the history of online education as technology is constantly presenting the educational world with the newest form of connectivity. For instance, Kolb (2008) notes that smart phones were being considered as the mobile technology to provide a means to viewing podcasts and lectures, sharing documents, creating class assignments with video or still photos, organizing class schedules, communication with groups and instructors and accessing

information on the Internet for research or information. What leaders of distance education can learn from the many changes since 1987 is not to “become fixated on a particular technology and try to deliver all the different components of their courses on the technology” (Moore & Kearsley, 2011, p. 86-87). It may be best to watch the students and what technology they are using; lest today’s online leaders find themselves in the same mindset and condition as the traditionalists of yesterday. The forecast of the Pew Research Foundation researchers, Rainiel & Anderson (2008) claim that mobile devices will used, globally, as the premier choice for internet connection. The future possibilities for distance education are yet to be discovered.

The changes to higher education delivery do not come without skeptics. For the most part, the diploma mills promising a Ph.D. by offering *life experience* and handing over ten thousand dollars have tainted the view of online learning for much of society and the business world. Anyone who has completed an accredited online degree understands the effort and skill sets required. Regardless, Carnevale (2007) records that fifty-five percent of managers would choose an applicant with a degree from a traditional university over an online university. Carnevale also found that most hiring managers in the United States view the online degree as a lesser degree. In spite of significant research signifying no significant difference in learning outcomes between traditional and non-traditional degrees, the stigma remains that the graduate from an online university simply purchased a degree instead of earning it.

The cynicism about online degrees arises from a perception of lower quality in the newer academic practices of the online programs. For instance, Mandernach & Dennis (2008) note that “there appears to be a widespread perception that something very

valuable and important, although not completely identifiable, takes place in the educational context of face-to-face classrooms” (p. 46). Interestingly, when Mandernach & Dennis posted the results of their research they found that the only perceptions of superiority in traditional education had to do with networking, faculty recommendations and oral communication skills. At the same time, differences were unfounded in the areas of “content knowledge, research opportunities, applied professional opportunities, writing skills, critical thinking skills, interpersonal understanding, self-discipline and empirical research skills” (p. 50). As a result, lower quality, unless defined as networking and oral communication skills, is an irrelevant position with regard to online learning.

If physical presence in a classroom, and networking face-to-face, were the prerequisites of quality learning then one may wonder what becomes of critical thinking, applied and content knowledge, and self-discipline. Many online students have discovered a newfound freedom from distractions normally found in the physical classroom. More specifically, visual and verbal cues can be distracting (Salmon, 2002) and the extroverted students can monopolize traditional class time.

The distance-learning student. The traditional post-secondary student who drives to class, sits for hours in a lecture hall and takes notes from the “sage on the stage” (King, 1993, p. 30) has found another option. It is commonplace to find an older student working full time, or a student that is fresh out of high school carrying a lifetime of advanced technology in their minds, attending an online university. The professional, at an average age of 25-50 (Allen & Seaman, 2010), is looking to advance a career through obtaining a degree that traditional education would not allow because of time constraints

and geographical limitations. Growing numbers of adults have discovered that they can balance family, work, and life's responsibilities (Holder, 2007) with the flexibility of studying and completing academic assignments when time allows.

The largest population of students attending an online university is between 25 and 50 years of age (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). While many younger students in online higher education come to the university with expectations of *having* a degree, the mature students returning to school after many years in the workforce are looking for the authentic learning experience (Boston & Ice, 2011; Dabbagh, 2007).

Learning theory. What pedagogy is to schoolchildren, andragogy is for the adult student, according to a theory developed by Knowles (1978). The mature student wants some independence in learning and will take ownership by seeking to make decisions about the how, when, what and where of the learning experience (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Unlike a schoolchild, Knowles' (1978) theory of andragogy asserts that adults want relevant studies, the ability to define learning, the application to real-world issues, intrinsic motivation, and they seek ways to solve workplace problems now. The adult learner is dedicated and serious about what they are doing (Northrup, 2002) and learns differently than younger students.

Adult learning theory has taken its cue from a series of theorists over the years and understanding the elements, such as learning styles, previous learning experience, cultural impact and the need for engagement. These essentials identified had their beginnings in the early 1900s with theorists such as John Dewey who believed collaboration in learning and individual experiences were values to be emphasized (Guttek, 1995). Building on Dewey's premise, Piaget affirmed the significance of

meaningful learning connected to the student while engaged in new experience built on prior knowledge (Gutek). Similarly, Vygotsky believed that social connections support learning from the perspectives of other students (Gutek). Equally important, Howell (2003) brings the foundation of learning theory into distant learning by pointing out that the same characteristics of traditional students apply to distant learners.

The foundations of learning theory are important to guide online educators in presenting students with the best possible education. Equally important, especially in online education where visual cues and instant interaction are missing, is the perception of the student. Biller (1996) found that for students to learn they need a high level of comfort with the institution. Again, researchers (Ben-Ari & Eliassy, 2003; Fraser & Fisher, 1983; Konings, Brand-Gruwel & Van Merriënboer, 2005) revealed the link between online learning effectiveness, learning behavior and learning outcomes and the perception of the student. With online learning, there is not a building that the student can visually relate to, or an instructor's facial expressions or tone of voice to build perception. The perception is built by the interaction, or lack thereof, between faculty and staff support services. Misapprehension, or poor perceptions, may cause dissatisfaction, failure (Grant & Thornton, 2007; Perez Cerejjo, 2006) and attrition of online students.

Perceived student satisfaction. If student satisfaction is recognized as an important factor for student retention, perception cannot be ignored. Perception, in the online arena, is all that the student has since the reality of the physical is absent. The creation of perception is within the hands of the university support staff and OTF. In an important study by Wuensch, Aziz, Ozan, Kinshore & Tabrizi (2008), if the student

perceived reduced quality of interaction by the online instructor the impact was dissatisfaction with the course and retention suffered. Heyman (2010) made this same discovery in a Delphi study where 90% of all three panels noted the primary concern or impact to student retention was the “quality of interaction between faculty and students” (p. 5). It takes concerted effort on the part of the OTF to raise the perception in order to make the virtual classroom appear to be a real community and *place*.

Retention research experts (Appana, 2008; Herbert, 2007; Soen & Davidovitch, 2008; Stanford-Bowers, 2008; Tinto, 1993; Veenstra, 2009; Woodley, 2004) have documented ways for instructors to build a positive perception that will retain students, which includes: creating a sense of social and academic connection to the university, attempt to make students *feel* adequately supported, give personal and individualized attention to avoid feelings of isolation, and build online presence. “Students expect instructor-led interaction and become aware of the instructor’s level of commitment, and relevant and timely feedback” (Deubel, 2004). *Becoming aware* is perception. Lamer (2009) believes instructors have the ability to cause students to *feel* like they are part of a larger community of learning and virtual distance is superseded.

Online students are vocal about why they choose not to continue learning online. For instance, in a research study investigating how adult online students share their emotional experience, the students shared their feelings about feeling alone, anxious, out of place and one student said, “the written communication through a machine does not satisfy me” (Zembylas, 2008, p. 80). This unfortunate scenario could be avoided through proactive support services and highly engaged faculty. In fact, Lamer (2009) presented five retention-boosting actions that online instructors can take so that students do not feel

alone, out of place, or that they are dealing with a machine instead of a live mentor. One of Lamer's points was recognize each student by name and offer comments to show interest in the experience of the student, which Lamer believes will enhance retention by bridging the geographic virtual divide.

In acknowledgement of the fact that retention does not rest solely on the shoulders of the OTF, Carr (2000) found that many adult online students simply find themselves facing a clash of priorities - letting the education go is sometimes the easiest decision. Retention of students is ongoing and the reasons for students dropping out are many. One reason is a low engagement level and lack student-centered activities on behalf of the instructor (Heyman, 2010). This one reason is controllable. The administrators develop policy to ensure proper management of this important part of retention, and the OTF decide if the considerable effort is part of their composition.

The younger segment of the online student base, known as the generation Nexters, is a group that has never known a world *without* cellular phones, text messages and computers (Dabbagh, 2007). Dabbagh suggests that Generation Nexters, born between 1980 and 2000, are students who represent the next sizable online student population. Online education format fits this students' way of life (Lassitter, 2009). According to Marek (2009), students in the age group of 19-30 surpass their instructors in technology; however, the student still has the expectation that the instructor will use technology as an expert. This technology-driven student will not appreciate a less knowledgeable instructor and they will look for a university infrastructure that will support their needs and expectations (Marek, 2009). Hence, this up and coming professional, more proficient in technology than most professors, may anticipate good grades as a consumer *right*

instead of something earned (Jones, 2010). Regardless of the students' age, dialog with the instructor is expected and *paid for* in the mind of the student, as well as what creates the connectedness that is so vital to retention of the student (Maguad, 2007; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010). Both age groups of adult online students are well informed and looking for substantive feedback from the online instructor in order to learn the concepts of the course and expect service (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008).

Student as customer. Some students, and universities, view the student as the consumer, and the product to be consumed as the educational experience (Runyon, 2008). Nunan, George & McClusland (2000) found “universities are moving from scholarly ivory towers to information corporations...from production to one of consumption” (p. 88). Consequently, conventional business theory places the OTF in the position of the customer service agent – or the *face of the university* (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009). If the *face of the university* is responsible to build the brand, the fate of the university lies in hiring the best and most customer-service oriented faculty and not necessarily the most academically qualified faculty (Molesworth et al, 2009). The customer seeking the services of any other company expects to receive the service they paid for. The student expecting the service they *paid for* would not surprise universities that have taken this stance.

The United States of America followed Britain in its Open University initiative and it seems that history is repeating itself with the marketisation of higher education (Molesworth, Nixon & Scullion, 2009). Molesworth et al. voice concern that the growth in many UK universities has inhibited pedagogy in order to make way for the student to “*have a degree*” (p. 278). The trend in United States universities is to cater to the wants

and desires of students, or customers. For example, Maguad (2007) argues that for a university to be successful it will need to identify the needs of their customers - students. Those who value traditional education fear that universities will no longer prepare a student for personal change and scholarship, instead, attending a university is now becoming a *right* and means to becoming employable (Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Waghid, 2006).

Inquiring of the customer to discover how and what they want to learn may have higher education heading towards less academic aptitude. In an extensive research study conducted by Arum & Roksa (2011), there was no significant gain in writing, complex reasoning or critical thinking skills in forty-five percent of traditional, on-ground undergraduate students in their first two years. Most agree that the customers' voice is important, nonetheless, if completion rates become more important than intellect then higher education will have changed and failed to produce what society assumes a college graduate should have mastered – writing, reasoning, and higher order critical thinking skills (Arum & Roksa, 2011). The voice of the student-customer is not limited to either distance education or traditional classroom education. The student-customer phenomenon is a reality in both distance education and brick-and-mortar institutions.

The dark side of the premise of *student as customer* is the idea of entitlement. A phenomenological study examining the notion of student entitlement confirmed the notation, however, not in a disrespectful tone but as an expectation of a “cultural cohort” (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010, p. 356) better known as Millennials. Jones (2010) contends that the student group that sees themselves as a customer may also understand that there is a responsibility in education and contribution is essential to learn

the concepts, which, in turn, brings the award of the product – the degree. The challenge is that entitlement suggests a *right* to the degree. It seems if a generation of students considers attending a university as a pathway to that *right*, then further retraining may be needed through the very education to which they feel entitled.

Motivation of distance-learning students. The convenience of working on assignments when time allows is what Northrop (2002) maintains as the students' motivation to acquire an online degree. At the time of this writing, most learners seeking a higher education degree do so based on the changes in the labor force and information driven industries looking to hire the educated to fill even the most uncomplicated tasks (Burns, 2011). The need for education to improve one's chances of obtaining a job, along with the convenience of earning the degree on one's own schedule, makes online learning the attractive choice.

Motivation for adult learners can also be intrinsic and based on a desire to finish an education once started, but halted as life's demands increased. One such intrinsic motivation to study online, as noted by Moore and Kearsley (2011), is for the pure enjoyment of learning and the experience of attaining goals. The motivation for the student, as a customer, may also be in the experience. Intrinsically motivating the student with supportive encouragement and a genuine interest in developing their skills may bring customer satisfaction. "Students feel a heightened sense of self-confidence when they know that the teacher is available to assist them as necessary" (Care, 1996, p. 12). The online student expects learning to come with encouragement upfront and throughout the course (Heyman, 2010). The effective facilitator may want to understand his or her role in motivating students by teaching them how to produce results. The students'

perception of the online experience can be enhanced, or ruined, as the reality of the effort needed to earn the degree is realized (Jones, 2010). This realization can create panic or may become the catalyst for deep learning given that the student has a supportive and encouraging instructor.

The distance education instructor. The increase in online student attendance creates the need for more online professors. For the working professional, who is also a student, to maintain motivation and attendance at the university, there needs to be the existence of structure and faculty interaction along with student autonomy – all of which is directed by the administrator (McFarlane, 2011; Moore, 2007). Online education has attempted to follow the patterns of on-ground educational practices of teaching. Many may contest that online education cannot follow traditional patterns of instruction with the missing factor of face-to-face communication and instantaneous feedback as found in the traditional classroom (Baylen & Zhu, 2009; Neely & Tucker, 2010; Sonwalkar, 2008). Rightfully so, since online education does not follow the patterns of instruction found in traditional universities. Nonetheless, with the exception of networking, faculty relationships and oral communication skills, the learning outcomes reflect no difference from the traditional university to the online university (Mandernach & Dennis, 2008).

Function of the distance instructor. The importance in the role of the OTF cannot be overstated. As the *face of the university* and *front line* employee working directly with the customer, or student (Maguad, 2007), understanding of retention becomes a matter of critical significance. The balancing act becomes one of holding students academically accountable for the work yet giving the student the experience of the university thereby upholding the reputation of the university. This is a mammoth

task. The OTF faces tech-savvy and highly experienced students, some of which have an air of entitlement as a customer (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson & Reinhardt, 2010). The expectation of the OTF is to be reliable, quick to respond, possess a positive tone, be an expert communicator, mentor, facilitator, instructor, encourager, be someone who is flexible, and be someone who can offer constructive and helpful feedback with flair and, most of all be available when help is needed (Hislop & Ellis, 2004). Additionally, the expectations do not end with the online learner but continue to stack in the form of the demands from the employer, better known as the administration.

The eyes of administration watch closely the quality of the course development and delivery of course facilitation that includes adherence to the policies regarding timeliness and feedback (Wickersham & McElhany, 2010). Furthermore, as the *front line* force, the OTF faces the very real issues of trying to work with a name rather than a face, or trying to help someone understand the concepts or the question versus giving them the answers, and trying to work through the language barriers of international students. The OTF grades fitting the work presented, which rarely meets with silent approval from the student (Orr, Williams & Pennington, 2009). This is just a brief synopsis of the expectations of the OTF.

Moore & Kearsley (2011) composed the following functions of the effective online instructor, which I have placed in bullet form (p. 127-138):

- Ability to identify emotions of dependency and counter-dependency of students and everything in-between and how to address them effectively
- Ability to provide emotional support, if needed.
- Ability to lead all students to independency.

- Ability to identify conflict in groups of students and intervene. .
- Ability to motivate students to become engaged in learning.
- Ability to find or create ways to engage students in discussion, analysis and producing knowledge.
- Ability to establish the environment of autonomous learning relevant to students' personal knowledge and situation.
- Ability to perceive and solve problems leading to attrition.
- Ability to offer personal feedback with analogies, questions provoking critical thinking, suggesting supplemental resources or application to real-life.
- Ability to bring interaction between students and assignments.
- Ability to monitor the students' skills to apply ideas and manipulation of information in the course and then assess it.
- Ability to formally, and informally, assess how the student is progressing, and if not progressing, to offer the needed assistance.
- Ability to gain personal knowledge of each student to apply to the learning process through support and encouragement.

Online OTF faculty members want the university administration to, seriously, acknowledge their commitment to the student and their commitment to the time it takes to assure a quality education to the online student (Green, Alejandro & Brown, 2009; Tabata & Johnsrud, 2008). According to a study by Lamer (2009) the effective OTF is “committed to building a dynamic, interactive learning environment through such strategies as instructor immediacy, knowledge of technology, name recognition, creating community and developing online personality” (p. 6). Moore (2011) explains that OTF

do not ask for much and list their major needs as support with training, orientation to the technology, and understanding the expectations of the administration.

Motivation of the distance instructor. Engaging OTF instructors, according to another recent study, creates commitment to the institution of higher learning (Sander, 2011). Adjunct faculty has been accused of not being committed (Bedford, 2009). The way commitment is created, according to Kane (2008), is through actions from the administration including; inclusion in decision-making ventures, regular phone conversations with the instructors, setting up a mentoring system with current full-time faculty in order to produce relationships and bonds, and finally to coordinate ways to allow OTFs to add to strategic plans (Kane, 2008). This is a very time consuming prospect for the deans, department chairs and full time faculty, yet, if successful it could create loyalty and vision enhancement for the part-time staff.

To understand what motivates, encourages, and engages the online instructors is a topic that has been carefully researched (Bailey & Card, 2009; Bedford, 2009; Dolan, 2011; Puzziferro & Sheldon, 2009; Runyon, 2008; Schopieray, 2006; Tipple, 2010). Discovering why OTF chose to teach online, what motivates them to leave the traditional instruction, what satisfaction they receive and what gives them reason for concern, are examined and documented in the literature (Bailey & Card, 2009; Bedford, 2009; Dolan, 2011; Puzziferro & Sheldon, 2009; Runyon, 2008; Schopieray, 2006; Tipple, 2010). The number one reason given for motivation to teach online is the independency allowed through asynchronous teaching, followed closely by the intrinsic motivation of helping a student to learn and the ultimate *ah-ha* moment (Hogan & McKnight, 2007; Sander, 2011; Tipple, 2010). The mere fact that more and more instructors are seeking online

teaching positions illustrates that not all instructors are dissatisfied with the working arrangements of the online education world (Maynard & Joseph, 2008).

Previous online teaching faculty research. According to Fish & Wickersham (2009), earlier studies regarding the OTF exposed confusion over teaching expectations, how to get the support needed to perform as expected, how to develop a quality online course and deliver a course in a collaborative and interesting way over the invisible world of cyberspace. As online instructors became most accustomed to online education, the apprehension subsided (Bedford, 2009). Maynard & Joseph (2008) point out that OTF have an equal job satisfaction to those full time faculty members and individuals inspired to teach online have similar satisfaction levels as their counterparts teaching as full time faculty.

Wickersham and McElhany (2010) studied the concerns of OTF in relation to the concerns of online administrators. What the researchers found was the two groups shared much the same concerns. Wickersham & McElhany established that the prominent concern of OTF was for the quality of education and student success, followed closely by proper course development. Another interesting outcome of this study was that administrators wanted better support systems for their OTF, which makes up the majority of their staff, and OTF wanted that support in tangible ways such as course assessment tools and release time to develop courses. Both parties want the same thing, according to this study.

In a study confirming the needs of OTF, Marek (2009) discovered that faculty desires training for course development and compensation for that course development. Also noted by Savery (2006), course development is a solid characteristic of a successful

online instructor. Other such studies, such as a quantitative design using best practices implemented by Batts, Pagliari, Mallet & McFadden (2010), gave much the same results. Instructors want training to do a better job in their roles. This is an admirable thing. Much like King Solomon of old asking for wisdom from God when he could have asked for riches, kingdoms, fame or the world. Instead, he asked for wisdom so that he could rule his people righteously. The online instructors in this study are asking for much the same thing, though one would not dare compare the Almighty to a mere educational leader in a higher educational institution, the hearts of the askers are still similar and worth the consideration. Nevertheless, the findings are from the perspective of others and not the administrator's perception, which is a gap in the literature for all online studies.

The part-time predicament. Debate has been ongoing in higher education on the value of OTF who work part time and it is claimed that they may be highly dissatisfied with their plight (Carnevale, 2004). On the contrary, recent studies have discounted this perceived predicament. Maynard and Joseph (2008) examined the job satisfaction and commitment of part-time faculty as part of a tri-level quantitative design that replicated and extended previous research with a hypothesis that all three levels, part-time, full-time, and involuntary part-time OTF would show less of a commitment to their universities (Maynard Joseph, 2008). The unexpected results “refuted the popular portrayal of part-time faculty as uniformly and comprehensively dissatisfied” (p. 149).

The results of recent research confirms the influx of instructors seeking the part-time OTF positions on a regular basis (Bedford, 2009). As Dessoiff (2009) states, “They are the teachers who know their subject content but want the flexibility or the interactive

and dynamic environment of a virtual classroom” (p.2). The choice to teach online, part-time, with the lack of compensation and benefits does not deter instructors. The autonomy that they have, the freedom to work from home and the joy they find in cyber connections with their students is addicting (Tanner, Noser, Totaro & Bruno, 2008). This is best summarized with an article written by Hoyle (2008) as a self-reflection of his journey as an OTF:

I have been an online adjunct instructor since 1996 at several institutions of higher education, and after completing my Ph.D., I may still be an online adjunct member, a title I wear with pride. Unfortunately, online adjunct members are sometimes viewed in a negative light, but we have the privilege of being able to place a greater emphasis on teaching, which is extremely important in the online environment (p. 42).

The Dr. Hoyle’s of the online world inspire other OTF. It is infectious to read how challenged and excited he was throughout his journey in learning how to maneuver through the various hurdles on information technology and course development. All the while, he keeps a positive attitude and strong work ethic. I imagine the effective OTF traits to be discovered through my study may share characteristics found in Dr. Hoyle’s reflections.

Not all online adjuncts are happy, according to various studies (Dolan, 2011; Gordon, 2003; Ludlow, 1998; Unger, 1995; & Yu & Young, 2008) and adjunct activist groups formed to campaign for better treatment and compensation. The crux of the discontent is grounded in the need for clear and concise communication from the university administration, a feeling of being undervalued, and the lack of compensation

analogous of the credentials and background offered by the adjunct (Dolan, 2011). Instead, many online adjuncts are charged with corrupting higher learning and accused of having lesser instructional ability in comparison to full time faculty (Gordon, 2003). This unfair reputation and bias has been called unethical treatment and a rally cry for a moral awakening has ensued (Unger, 1995). The needs of the adjunct, as uncovered in a qualitative grounded theory study by Dolan (2011) are quite simple and attainable. Dolan found that fair compensation, a place for the adjunct voice to be heard within the university, high-quality technology to teach students effectively, and recognition for their performance were the requests. Dolan revealed that adjuncts did not feel that face-to-face meetings with the academic managers would make a difference to their satisfaction; in fact, effectively serving the students was the primary interest rather than loyalty to the university.

The online administrators found that by hiring OTF as contingent employees, with no benefits and a short-term contract, the budget concerns are lessened (Baron-Nixon, 2007). Even working without benefits, and under a vulnerable affiliation, the growing field of OTF is willing to take the risk for the trade-off of independence (Hogan & McKnight, 2007). The OTF sipping iced tea on the beach while grading papers is appealing to many. More close to reality is the fact that OTF can teach at multiple universities, respond to uploaded assignments and emails at midnight or mid-day. Administrators are keenly aware of the appeal to work independently while fulfilling the love of teaching. Online education offers a winning situation for students, contracted OTF, and budget watching administrators.

The online education administrator. Educational leaders who work for an institution that utilizes a Web-based educational delivery system are sometimes referred to as online education administrators or distance learning administrators. For the purposes of this study, only the higher educational online administrators were reviewed. Online administrators were chosen because of their depth of experience originating from their similar training, which makes up their professional knowledge (Stark 1995). Asking on-ground administrators to share perceptions of leading OTF when they have not experienced it firsthand would not give a true representation of the online administrator experience of leading OTF. Although a brick and mortar administrator may have an understanding of the subject of leading OTF, only those administrators that live and breathe the nuances of online education truly have a voice to share about this experience.

While most universities and community colleges in operation today understand the operation of online courses not every university or community college seeks accreditation for the fully online programs. Future researchers may be interested in the same type of study within traditional university settings; however, my interest was within universities where all programs were offered through means of the Internet. Some universities may offer courses and programs through the Internet while in the traditional on-ground course format, the universities that I sought to study view distance education as the premier form of education verses an alternative way to educate in a traditional school. Some of these universities were created to function solely online. Some required a short residency of a week to a month. Some started as traditional and then created a full distance learning university.

The reason for this inclusion is that the individuals discussed here, through an examination of literature, have embraced the non-traditional avenue of education. These men and women see the value in breaking down geographical boundaries with Internet connectivity and offering education to students around the globe. The administrators that are *contemplating* Web-based delivery of education within their institutions are traditional education administrators who work in traditional brick-and-mortar universities. The traditional administrators were not reviewed here; however it may make an interesting research direction for another researcher to consider in future.

The responsibilities of the online administrator encompass almost every aspect of the university, as a result this review examined only the leadership role as it pertains to OTF. The consensus among researchers is that there is an obvious lack of effective leadership in all organizational levels (Brown & McLenighan, 2005; Covey, 1990; Davis, 2007; Zekeri, 2004) including the educational institutions where it is regarded to be the most problematic (Johnston, 2000; McFarlane, 2010). Effective and vibrant leadership brings a successful outcome to the institute (Sharma & Dakhane, 1998), which is instinctive of distant learning organizations because of constant change, transformation and the delivery of learning through technology. Kouzes & Posner (2003) observed five practices of leadership that I believe achieve what is necessary in online educational settings: challenge the process, allow others to take action, promote shared vision, model the way and encourage the heart. The five practices are not difficult to enact, but may take time and concerted effort on the part of the leader supervising the online faculty.

The online education administrator leads faculty by defining the standards of quality and expected outcomes of those standards (McFarlane, 2011). This task is not

accomplished, according to researchers in this field (Martinez & Jex, 2009; Tipple, 2010), by simply maintaining the expectations on a web site or handbook.

Administrators have the power to motivate their teams through leading by example, inspiring innovative communication between leadership and faculty, and showing support through encouragement and effective coaching. Cascio (2000) observed that successful management of faculty performance gives administrators the ability to define and promote performance. It could be that expansion of skills and attributes of effective course facilitation are directly related to the administrator's engagement with his or her online faculty.

Part of leading any team may include the wisdom of responding to the needs of one's followers rather than looking for faults. John Maxwell (2007) noted that good leaders succeed because: a) "they are not afraid to admit they need to listen and get understanding, b) they evaluate what has happened and what steps are best to take, c) they communicate what they have observed to key players, d) they act on the basis of their discovery, even if it means change, and e) they provide direction to those involved" (p. 794). Administrators would do well to coach and offer remedial training for faculty when weakness in course facilitation is identified (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

When one is leading a group of people, one may want to consider the needs of that group and how best to meet those needs – especially if one wishes to retain the group of people. Numerous study results identify the needs of the OTF (Dana, Havens, Hochanadel & Philips, 2010; Orr, Williams & Pennington, 2009; Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009; Rogers, McIntyre & Jazzar, 2010). Rogers et al (2010) recorded four major needs of the OTF – "professional development, effective communication, balance and

developing relationships” (p. 53). Each of these needs is met through actions made by the leadership of the institution. For instance, an effective orientation model with use of teleconferences or videoconferences on a regular basis may help to avoid feelings of isolation. Add to this the give and take in the conference calls, the offer of professional development opportunities and listening to the balancing needs of each OTF, and the OTF may “gravitate to the institution...addressing these needs” (Rogers et al, 2010, p. 57).

After seven years as an educational administrator, Bugeja (2010) wrote an article to offer advice to new administrators. The advice was to turn attention to others, concentrate on what can be done for the team and “make service your top priority” (p. 1). Monitoring, motivating and assessing OTF may be more effective for the administration when he or she follows Bugeja’s advice. For instance, understanding the needs for relationship development, professional development and effective communication, the administrator can include the more seasoned OTF in development of orientation courses, mentoring new OTF and revisions of assessment models (Rogers, McIntyre & Jazzar, 2009; Roman, Kelsy & Lin, 2010). This inclusion of effective OTF in such critical administrative roles demonstrates care and respect towards OTF and builds strong connections and team strength.

In a 2009 dissertation by Hou Chun Kuong, a learning environment is described as a place with instructors, students and materials. This definition would resonate with most people and rarely a thought given towards the administrator when describing a learning environment. Most administrators would be surprised to be included in a study since they understand their role is to provide the very best in quality and direction with a

behind the scenes function. Just as other leaders across the globe that plan, implement, and may never receive notoriety - the front line groups, or the *face of the company* are the remembered - as are the OTF are to the online university.

Leading a large group of OTF brings reward and much responsibility. The reward occurs when the relationship between students and OTF result in increasing student knowledge, a degree earned and student pride carried as alumnus. This intrinsic reward can happen through graduates becoming successful in the local communities and businesses. As a result, there are extrinsic rewards such as institution reputation, increased enrollment and increased revenue for improvements and expansion (Green, Alejandro & Brown, 2009). On the other hand, the reverse happens when the relationship, or dialog, between students and OTF fails (Moore, 1993). Simply stated there is a lack of student motivation, lack of gained knowledge, attrition and lowered reputation. Monitoring the quality of course facilitation and dialog is the premier responsibility of the online administrator concerning his or her faculty (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Online education administrators might consider what engages the non-traditional students and then confirm that the OTF is achieving those factors of engagement for the online student.

University support services are but a small piece of a very large puzzle aimed at avoiding the perception of isolation that students feel with online learning. The administrator can ensure that support services are in place to address this concern, yet the larger section of the puzzle is assessing the needs of the complicated lives of the adult learner through the facilitation of the OTF. Work, family, and life challenges are factors leading to student attrition and not controllable. Controllable factors have to do with

minimizing transactional distance through placing the best and brightest customer service driven OTF in each course (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). The Sloan Consortium (2009) suggests that administrators become very familiar with the characteristics and motivations of their OTF. Meyer (2002) found that online leaders have an obligation to understand how choosing OTF could make the difference in student achievement. Again, Tipple (2010) found that efficient administrators seek to understand what constitutes an effective OTF by close monitoring and evaluation.

When hiring online faculty, the recommendation to administrators is to “make a list of desirable characteristics and ask scenario-based questions during the interview to assess the candidates’ reaction to problems that arise in the distance education environment” (Gaillard-Kenney, 2008, p. 12). The desirable characteristics have yet to be memorialized in literature, as well as recognizing factors in course facilitation that cause student attrition. The goal for the online administrator, with regard to faculty, becomes finding quality OTF who understand the measures of dialog and facilitation of an online course that in turn retains students (Simpson, 2010).

Understanding the characteristics of a proficient, effective OTF is a first step for administrators in decreasing transactional distance by increasing dialog (Conceicao, 2006; Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Tipple (2010) suggests that the chief reason for student attrition stems from OTFs who *do not* deliver quality instruction. This becomes troubling to the online administrator who seeks to retain his or her students through to graduation. The OTF is the sole source of course room instruction and it is best if each facilitates with motivational diplomacy; however, this is not always the case. Because the OTF is the instructional *face* of the university the online administrator would best serve the

institution by directing the greatest potential for attrition – the dialog and actions of the OTF (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009; Tanner, Noser, Totaro, & Bruno, 2008). A good leader knows that he or she can manage the effectiveness, or output, of faculty through careful guidance.

The effectiveness of an online instructor is defined as one who has the ability to engage the students and facilitate with quality and accuracy according to university policy (Gorsky & Blau, 2009). The student identifies OTF effectiveness much the same way - as engaging, encouraging and with personalized feedback on assignments (DeLotell, Millam & Reinhardt, 2010). Since the primary object is student satisfaction and learning, the online administrator develops policy and procedures that support unifying behavior between student and OTF – such as quick response times, individualized feedback and interactive assignments (Maguire, 2009).

Administrators have invested in the factors that OTF have stated are motivators and encouragers, such as course development compensation, coaching efforts, training time, mentoring programs, rewards and incentive initiatives (Marek, 2009). Most educational leaders have not ignored the previous research and the call for more training and support for the OTF (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009). The administrative commitment to make learning better for the student and more efficient for the OTF is evident, though not complete. Through this time of support and transition the educational leaders have been making mental notes, if not actual documentation, of what characteristics are common to the best of the best OTFs teaching teams facilitating the universities courses on a daily basis. A qualitative inquiry into what they have in their cognitive banks could be of great interest to many.

Administrators have also discovered that the use of traditional face-to-face methods of instruction do not work well for the online medium (Dana, Havens, Hochanadel & Phillips, 2010). Dana et al. (2010) states, “Administration is realizing that the qualities desired of an online instructor may be different than originally thought” (p. 30). The study does not examine just what those desired qualities might be, therefore leaving the reader, and OTF, to wonder exactly what the administration is thinking.

Leading the virtual team. Teams have become an important part of almost every company and, especially, the online educational institutions that rely on large teams of OTFs that may never be seen face-to-face. Part of leading for the online education administrator is recruiting and training online instructors which are separated, geographically. The educational leader still needs to direct, inspire, encourage and motivate the individuals that make up the virtual instruction team, even if the team is hidden. Peters & Karren (2009) write, “Teams that have little face-to-face interaction may develop trust differently than teams that interact frequently” (p. 494). Without seeing, hearing and witnessing the interactions of the OTF staff, the educational leader may have a difficult time in assessing the characteristics of the virtual team members, as deemed important by Sloan Consortium (2009). The administrative commitment carries over to the virtual teams that they lead.

A virtual team is defined as “a group of people with complementary competencies executing simultaneous, collaborative work processes through electronic media without regard to geographic location” (Chinowsky & Rojas, 2003, p. 98). Barriers to collaboration in virtual teams are many. Some barriers include: isolation, raised uncertainty, trust, complex development, training, reliance on technology and conflict

resolution (Liu, Magjuka & Lee, 2008; Martinez & Jex, 2007; Schoenfeld & Berge, 2011; Turel & Zhang, 2010). The administrator of a virtual team of OTF would do best by discerning the barriers and proactively address the needs of a large virtual team. Ignoring the task and its magnitude can have severe consequences, such as unmotivated faculty, students feeling the effects of TD and the consequences of lost retention.

Becoming familiar with one's virtual team is not only prudent but in good form. Honest, habitual and detailed communication with the purpose of engagement creates a highly resourceful and admired virtual leader (Martinez & Jex, 2007). This takes extraordinary time and commitment on the part of the administrator; however, according to Martinez & Jex (2007), inclusion of OTF in discussion and participation builds trust and respect, which promotes performance. In a virtual work self-report, Raghuram, Garud, Wiesenfeld & Gupta, 2001) found that mutual trust is important to regulating work commitment between manager and virtual team member. Each virtual administrator may need to decide if boosting performance and engendering respect is worth the time and commitment.

The online administrator has a team of hundreds living in every part of the country, and sometimes the globe. The virtual educational team uses electronic communication and may never build relationships with other OTF. This is why the building of relationship and trust is most important between the administrator and the OTF. Graen & Uhl-Bien (1995) developed leader-member exchange theory, which includes high quality, and low quality expressions of virtual relationships. The theory contends that each virtual member engages at a different level with the manager and the relationships, therefore, have varying quality of impact on rapport, interaction and

performance outcomes. For instance, most OTF do not have much opportunity to build a relationship with the administrator. Consequently, the leader-member exchange is low and may be associated with lower levels of effective work outcomes. The opposite would be true of a leader-member relationship exchange.

Insufficient research has been conducted dealing with the supervision of virtual faculty. One of the very few is a study regarding best practices of online academic leaders by Martinez and Jex (2009) which contends that administrators foster an environment that is fair and ethical showing that OTF achievement is not the only condition to positive virtual work outcomes. Another study by Cascio (2000) advises virtual leaders to build trust by managing processes instead of attempting to control people across time zones and geographical separation. Finally, the collaborative management style of leadership was discovered to be the best for mutual benefit in work outcomes (Liu, Magjuka & Lee, 2008). Leading virtually challenges the online administrator to find creative ways to keep the motivation of his or her faculty.

The contract faculty choice. Along with working virtually, the OTF work as a contingent employee within the online university. While some may have a full time position within the university, approximately 68% of the online workforce consists of part-time faculty making this is a phenomenon worthy of attention and examination (Henry, 2008). It has been suggested that the driving motivation for the administrator to use part-time faculty instead of full-time faculty is for cost saving measures and avoiding the due process related to full-time faculty (Henry, 2008; Maldonado & Riman, 2009; Maynard & Joseph, 2008; Tipple, 2010). Additionally, part-time faculty brings expertise from their business-related background, which is a missing factor in many academes.

While the administrator acquires budget savings and real-world expertise through part-time faculty, the shortcomings of part time faculty use may be reason for pause. Maldonado & Riman (2009) list a few of the reasons as; the vetting process is not as extensive as with full time faculty, training is limited and commitment to the institution may be low. Even so, online universities are making this unusual system work. By assigning professionals who are skilled at developing personalized, quality interaction with the students, other teams within the university can develop the online learning leaving dialog and customer service in the hands of the OTF (Moore & Kearsley, 2011).

One premier research study involving online part-time faculty, conducted by Bedford (2009), resulted in an interesting way to view the new part-time faculty member. Bedford's research discovered a group of degree holding individuals who rely on several part-time positions at multiple universities to meet the needs of employment within the profession of online teacher. These individuals are the bulk of those who seek to teach online (Carnevale, 2004). They view themselves as entrepreneurs who live in the flexibility of no geographic restraints and freedom to choose. Bedford's qualitative study uncovered both adjuncts that brag about the minimal effort it takes to teach online as well as living in their pajamas all day. Others interviewed in this study were appalled by selfish motivations of the pajama-donned slackers and reported that this type of adjunct gives all online adjuncts, and the quality of online learning, a bad reputation.

Another important research study conducted by Tipple (2010) examined the various factors of motivation, and the characteristics of part-time faculty. As a result, Tipple examined the various leadership styles that administrators can consider as they lead and support part-time faculty. Tipple expounded on leadership style based on an

important research by Shiffman (2009) where adjunct faculty self- categorized themselves by four motivational aspects: The Specialists who are employed outside the university, Freelancers who serve as adjuncts throughout many universities, Career Enders who are retiring, and Aspiring Academics who are up and coming.

Many in academia are unhappy about what they deem to be the overuse of part-time faculty for online teaching. Much dialog exists in both traditional and distance education about this controversy. Online adjuncts, however, are not as upset as the adjuncts in traditional universities who may not be considered for tenure opportunities (Maldonado, 2009). While this is true for mainstream traditional universities and colleges, the online adjunct understands that tenure is not an option and still finds job satisfaction (Sander, 2011) through teaching online without medical benefits and benefits that come from full time employment. The satisfaction for the online adjunct comes from scholarly engagement, flexibility (Bedford, 2009), and independence.

Summary

The relationship of student, instructor and administration is absorbing since they cannot survive without the other. The student would not receive quality education without an instructor and the instructor has little purpose without a student. Both student and instructor need the provision of materials, institution, accountability and structure by the administration. The administration has little purpose without both the student and the instructor. Though each individual in this trio may have different objectives, they need each other to obtain their goals. The voice of each is equally important. The voice of the leader in distance education is a voice rarely heard. The leader of the trio is the one person who may be able to mediate the TD. The non-traditional student is one in the trio

with the most to gain from quality online education and quality instructors who understand the non-traditional student needs.

The process of building a team of OTF is paved with many hours of verifying credentials, certifications, publications, academic achievements and professional development (Gaillard-Kenney, 2008). These processes help to meet the requirements of accrediting bodies as well as verify the qualifications of each faculty member. What these painstakingly difficult measures cannot assure is that the OTF is of sound character, good attitude, honest, trustworthy, if they care about students or if they have a stellar work ethic. The only way to determine this is through hiring and observing the individual. Administrators give enormous levels of self-governance to a relatively unknown person; turn them over to the valued customer, student, and hope that the reputation of the university remains intact in the interim.

If it were known how to effectively identify an OTF candidate and recognize the characteristics that make them a viable choice, the cost of turnover, training, coaching, support and professional development could be placed appropriately with more choice candidates than not. The future online instructors may gain insight into what their employer believes is best for online learning delivery. By reviewing the experiences of the professional administrators that live this process, preferred OTF could be easily identified, placed and retained. Policy and procedure may be re-examined to form best practices further enhancing the learning experience for the student.

CHAPTER THREE. METHODOLOGY

Previous research (Bailey & Card, 2009; Bedford, 2009; Dolan, 2011; Puzziferro & Sheldon, 2009; Runyon, 2008; Schopieray, 2006; Tipple, 2010) results have measured online instructor motivation, perceptions, student evaluation and a host of quantitative or qualitative measurements to examine the OTF. What, now, has been uncovered was the online administrator's perception of what constituted an effectual online instructor. This qualitative exploratory case study considered the views of the online higher educational leadership by listening to them in their natural administrative surroundings and permitting their lived experiences to emerge.

Design

The qualitative approach to this study allowed a greater understanding of the lived experiences of the administrative perspectives, beliefs, social events, and thoughts (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Because the administrative perspective of an effective instructor's characteristics did not exist aside from the leadership, the meanings materialized as administrators shared the reality of their world. The emerging perceptions were what I found and what qualitative research supports. Collective viewpoints of the online administrators represented that particular social network, a network that was growing as more and more universities realized the need to offer what the students are asking for – convenient online study opportunities (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). In this study, I enlisted the qualitative research methodology in order to place myself in the role of *instrument* by “using my own personal experience in making interpretations” (Stake, 2010, p. 20). Additionally, Stake (2010) believes the qualitative exploratory case study design provides a better understanding of the thought processes and perceptions of the case, or in this study, the administrators. The importance of this

specific design was that each individual deliberately experienced their world in diverse ways, which provided for rich and expansive data analysis (Yin, 2009). Case study sought to appreciate the meaning of each individual's experience and to extend understanding in an attempt to see things from their point of view (Stake, 1995). This method and design choice helped express how each administrator acquired and described their experiences with the OTF effectiveness and ineffectiveness in online instruction.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: *How do online administrators describe effective course facilitation for their OTF?* Course facilitation includes management of time for both students and instructors. Course facilitation includes monitoring performance and ensuring the accomplishment of learning objectives, as well as a host of activities and interactions that accompany facilitation (Puzziferro & Shelton, 2009; Roman, Kelsey & Lin, 2010). Interviews with the administrators in a semi-structured format allowed for a free-flow of information to reveal the meaning they attribute to effective course facilitation.

Research Question 2: *How do administrators describe the connection between OTF engagement and student retention?* Raising this question uncovered the voice of the administrator regarding the engagement process between the students and the online instructor. By mentally entering the online course room, the administrators offered first-hand experience and insightful information about effective OTF. This information was gathered during teleconference interview sessions.

Research Question 3: *How do administrators experience factors in course facilitation that may, or may not, cause student frustration or retention issues?* This

may be the most important guiding question of the three. Gathering this information through interviews, along with post analysis follow up, provided the major portion of this research study. The interview reflection on what attributes make up the most valued OTF confirmed to be a wealth of information to analyze. In addition to the interviews were the student surveys that also revealed attributes of the effective OTF. Asking the administrators to reflect on what they have heard, witnessed and experienced over the years in their most effective OTF actions also uncovered the administrator's perception of a retention-busting online instructor.

Research Question 4: *How do administrators experience and describe the effects of ineffective course facilitation of OTF?* Increased Transactional Distance causes the students and OTF to feel isolated and can lead to instructional practices that were ineffective and repetitive (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Tipple, 2010). Some of those ineffective practices consisted of the inability to transfer knowledge through the online medium, student dissatisfaction due to perceived poor interaction with instructors, lack of expertise or dedication from instructors, and poor response time from instructors (Graham & Thomas, 2011; Heyman, 2010; Schulte, 2010). The ineffectiveness of OTF in this study has been reviewed through interviews and end of course surveys completed by students (Dunlap & May, 2011; Matos-Diaz & Ragan, 2010). This question sought to address the gap by listening to the experiences and descriptions of the administrators regarding the course facilitation of their OTF.

Participants

The participants for this study were 10 online higher education administrators. In particular, the administrators were deans and those that lead the online faculty in hiring,

training or supervising. The sampling was purposeful since the most productive way to discover the perceptions of online higher educational leaders was through this group of individuals (Marshall, 1996). Each participant worked for prominent online universities with enrollment of at least 5,000 students. Excluded were those that lack the experience and knowledge of working with OTF on a regular basis. Represented were both genders, as well as a diverse representation of races. Each participant had at least 5 years of experience in online university administration and most had some teaching experience in the online community. Each participant maintained current and direct supervision over online instructors, including the hiring, training, coaching, retention and termination of OTF for at least 5 years.

Sample size was not a concern since Stake (1995) explains that in case study research “my first obligation was to understand my case” (p. 4). My case study was intrinsic and my case was chosen prior to my data collection since “case study research is not sampling research” (Stake, 1995, p. 4). With this understanding, the choice of ten online administrators still served to support my case. Following the example of Stake (1995), it was not the total number of administrators, but identifying a group that helped me understand the insight this group had of OTF. With its specificity, narrowed criteria, and the homogeneity of the population, addressing saturation in the data analysis process was realized since the topic was narrow and the population equally narrow and like-minded (Charmaz, 2006; Green & Thorogood, 2004; Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006).

Setting

The sites chosen for this study were universities that operate solely online offering full degree programs through asynchronous learning and in operation for at least 5 years

with a student base of at least 5,000 students. The majority of learning is asynchronous. Asynchronous learning, as defined in this study, was an entire educational experience by way of Internet connection. All communication with faculty and staff happened without the regular support of face-to-face interaction. Included in my study were online universities that offered regional accreditation and full degree programs, whether in for-profit status or not, so that I had a well-rounded base of participants. The reason for choosing this medium was to give the very best representation of the OTF experience as seen through the online administrators who lead them. The administrators made use of telephones, email and video-conferencing to communicate with their online instructors. The graduation ceremonies were the only face-to-face contact many of the administrators had with their virtual teams, unless the university had residency requirements.

The buildings were located throughout the United States of America and were untraditional in comparison to the average brick and mortar universities. Most were corporate in appearance with cubicles for support staff and offices for executives. Many of the administrators worked remote to the actual university building and led their support staff virtually (Kolowich, 2011; Stripling, 2011). The titles within the university mirrored those in traditional on-ground universities, although they had slight variations. There was an admissions department, academic advisors, financial services department, registrar's office, library, president, provost, a dean or chair for each school and various department directors with support staff. Some of the titles were substituted with titles more familiar to the corporate world. For the purpose of this study, the deans and department chairs with terminal degrees and oversight of the OTF were recruited as participants.

The organizational structure also mirrored traditional universities. There was a hierarchical configuration with an executive level, middle managers and support staff. The deans, or department chairs, represented the middle management level while the president and chief academic officer represented the executive level. The structure included marketing departments and operation departments that focus on building the brands and ensuring that the business side of the university was running according to the mission and goals. Since the draw was not to the building, but to the website, the virtual perception was the reality. Reality was demonstrated by way of the websites and user interface of the learning management system. There was much organizational energy expended towards quick response time and quality customer service to enhance the perception of the university.

Each of the represented universities had experienced growth and had concern over attrition. The universities represented for-profit, public, and state universities. The important factor was that they all offered full programs in a web-based platform with part-time faculty teaching the courses. Each university offered bachelor degrees, master degrees, and some offered doctoral degrees. Each university represented had full accreditation as well as other accreditations or licensing programs in the various schools. The student base was between 4,000 and 150,000 with an average student age of between 25 and 50 years old. Some of the universities had a large military or international base due to the online format that supports travel internationally. Online instructors were predominantly under limited contract.

The represented online universities were under heavy scrutiny by accrediting bodies, on-ground universities and State Boards of Education. This was because many in

academic circles individuals were still unsure whether online learning was a quality form of education (Kim & Bonk, 2006). Because of the scrutiny, the online universities mentioned working harder to assess and improve the processes. The assessment cycle of each university ran on a regular basis to ensure meeting the learning outcomes. This created pressure for the administrators to find, hire and retain the very best instructors and instructional developers.

Procedures

Prior to initiation of this research project, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) through Liberty University. Liberty University IRB required permission be obtained by each university Provost or President on university letterhead. Once approval was obtained from the university senior leaders, introductory letters (Appendix A) were sent to the administrators of the eight online universities. The universities met the criterion of having fully online programs and the courses taught by OTF. The administrators had at least five years of experience supervising OTF in an online university. The administrators met these criteria to give the best perception and this group of administrators made up the *case* (Stake, 2010). I encouraged them to participate in the study and included an explanation of the interviews that followed.

Once I received responses from the introductory letter, I distributed the letter of consent (Appendix B) to a list of administrators, one at a time, until I received all signed agreements for participation from all ten administrators. Each participant received an Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) that explained the purpose of the research and a pledge to keep his or her identity anonymous. The Informed Consent Form communicated that the participation was voluntary and the form listed any dangers or

risks associated with the study. There was a promise of no disclosure of information, such as names, age, title, or name of the university, in order to protect the participants and allowed for freedom of expression. The form also contained an area for the participant to check if they would like to participate in reviewing the study after evaluation and analysis. Each participant asked for an opportunity to review the evaluation.

The Researcher's Role

My working role was an Assistant to the Dean in the School of Business and Technology Management within a for-profit online university in higher education. I had access to many other administrators throughout the online higher education industry. My relationship to the participants was that of a subordinate role, as well as a new acquaintance who understood the inner workings of the online universities. Because of the geographical separation, my dealings with the participants were remote in nature and without the distraction of physical presence. Due to my subordinated role to the participants, I was considered an insider to the administrative constituency. This arrangement created a union that allowed the administrators to be at ease with me. They recognized that I understood their predicaments and it served to produce an open dialog with honesty and genuineness as I served as the human instrument in this study (Stake, 2010).

There was, with that open dialog, a propensity on my part to be biased. I understood the consequences of a less than productive OTF and the damage to university reputation and student retention; however, I did not find it difficult to disassociate myself. I also entered the interviews with my own perceptions of what I believed were positive traits of OTF. I work closely with OTF on a daily basis; therefore, I was unsure of how my own perceptions might influence my study. I had a unique position within this study

because I stood as mediator between the OTF and the administrators. I witnessed, clearly, the difficulties OTF had with supporting difficult students, adhering to policies from many different universities, and pleasing the supervisors. On the other hand, the administrators were cognizant of the needs of the customer, budgets and assuring the retention of students. I discerned both sides clearly and empathetically.

I made use of bracketing exercises. Since bracketing is an exercise with ethical considerations (Creswell, 2007), I approached the exercise with my biblical worldview. This worldview recognizes that God sees my every action, even if no one else did. In order for me to illustrate the validity of my data collection and findings, despite my eccentricities, I needed to bracket my assumptions. For example, I reflected on how my personal experiences, personal assumptions, and my cultural reasoning influenced my outlook on the data and data analysis (Fischer, 2009). The way I controlled my natural inclinations was to; first, recognize my natural inclinations and assumptions. I did this by identifying the intrinsic interests in my study; considered where I fit in this role with relation to power, instinct and possible conflict (Ahern, 1999). More specifically, I considered the internal responses and reactions to what I heard and read throughout the research process and then set them aside. I bracketed those reactions as much as possible. I used a researcher's journal to compose narrative of my journey and identified the triggers, or signals that caused various reactions in me.

Fischer (2009) states, "continuous reflective bracketing can reveal a great deal to researchers about themselves" (p. 585). Since this was my first official research endeavor, I took the advice of seasoned researchers and the experiences they shared. For instance, according to Porter (1993) using third person in my writing reflects my

supposition of neutrality. We were asked not to use third person in the most recent edition of APA style; however, I used third person in my reflection journal to engender neutrality and to learn the exercise of bracketing. Likewise, Fischer (2009) suggested that “bracketing engagement” (p. 586) was the continued revision of understandings when I realized new ways of understanding a perceptive. Fischer also advised to consider the choice of language and carefully consider why I choose to use a particular phrases or words and if that phrase or word truly reflected the perceptions and experiences of my participants. Lastly, Fischer states, “There is no guaranteed way of indentifying and putting aside one’s values and assumptions” (p. 586), yet he offered member checking, which I used, as a way to address this limitation.

Data Collection

Prior to initiation of this research project, I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) through Liberty University where I attend as a doctoral candidate. One condition of the Liberty University IRB was to obtain permission letters from the Provosts or Presidents of each participating dean. Once I obtained approval, I sent introductory letters to the administrators of the ten universities to encourage them to participate in the study, as well as explain the process of the interviews to follow. Each participant received an Informed Consent Form (Appendix B) with the introductory letter explaining the purpose of the research and a pledge to keep his or her identity anonymous (Appendix B). The informed consent form explained that the participation was voluntary and the form listed any dangers or risks involved. Any information, such as names, age, title, or the name of the university, was kept anonymous to protect the participant and it allowed for freedom of expression. The form also contained an area for the participant to

check if they would like to review the study after evaluation and analysis, which I explained would be used for the member-checking portion of my study.

Based on a longing to attend to the voice, thoughts, beliefs, and perceptions of online administrators, I collected data through personal interviews, a year's worth of student surveys, and review of two Faculty Handbooks provided in the interview process. Merriam (1998) explained that a qualitative case study design was ideal in educational settings due to the broad and general area related to the study of andragogy. Subsequently, at the encouragement of Merriam, the qualitative case study design proved to be ideal with gathering documentation and through the transcripts generated by the interviews.

Documents and Student Surveys

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory case study was to explore the perceptions of online administrators with regard to their perceptions of effective OTF. Yin (2009) suggested that case studies have a key component of strength in the data collection arena because of the “opportunity to use many different sources of evidence” (p. 115). Yin explained that the structure and purpose of my study benefits from using three of his six sources of evidence: “Documentation, archival records and interviews” (p. 102).

Gathering documents pertaining to the current OTF annual performance reviews, termination letters, or communications to or about the OTF from each participant proved to be impossible. I asked, as the final question in the interview, “What documents are you willing to provide me with that will substantiate what you have shared with me in this interview today?” Based on my experience as a support administrator, I realized that

documents pertaining to OTF in areas such as goals, decision, policies, organizational rules, regulations, memoranda, charts or correspondence to or from OTF may be pertinent and establish my case study construct validity and reliability (Yin, 2009), but could not be shared. I was correct in that only a few administrators mentioned sharing their Faculty Handbooks, which were accessible from the main website of the university. As rich as this data might have been, the access to this information was prohibited by federal and state privacy regulations, not to mention the proprietary nature of for-profit online educational institutions. I found access to documentation a dead-end. It was not that the administrators refused to share the information; they were not able to share. I understood this as a subordinate member of the administrative team. I connected what administrators could share with the interview transcripts.

Interviews

An examination of the administrators' perceptions of OTF was the catalyst for the interview questions. The interviews occurred through recorded telephone interviews. I wanted to respect the limited time of each administrator and allowed each to provide the most convenient time for the call. The interviews were semi-structured consisting of 28 questions (Appendix C). The interviews were conducted using a digital recorder with USB capabilities in order to download the interviews to my password-protected computer. I uploaded the digital files into Express Scribe and, personally, transcribed into Word documents. I labeled each Word document with P1, P2, P3... to represent Participant 1, Participant 2 and so on. Loaded onto a separate flash drive, I saved the interview transcripts and kept them under lock and key. I copied all the transcripts to one document with each answer from each administrator under the corresponding question

answered. I printed out four separate copies of the compilation for use for coding in the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Collected data, analyzed with the qualitative exploratory case study design took on an approach which compared, combined, contrasted, sorted and ordered data used for finding patterns, relationships and links (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Once the data was gathered, I found “the repetitive patterns of action and consistencies” (Saldana, 2012, p. 5) with regard to the characteristics of the OTF – whether of a positive or less than positive nature. I placed all characteristics in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in several tabs according to effective or ineffectiveness uncovered. Next, through Microsoft Excel and an add-in called ETableUtilities, I performed what Saldana (2012) refers to Simultaneous Coding as a means to uncover patterns that were similar, different, frequently used, in sequence, correlated to other communication, or seemingly a cause. I highlighted areas of the collected data that pertained to the actions or characteristics of OTF. I used the highlighting tool in Microsoft Excel to continue matching words and phrases of resemblance. LeCompte, Preissle, and Tesch, (1993) confirmed that this action “isolates the initially most striking, if not ultimately most important, aspects of the data” (p. 181). I organized the findings into categories, printed those findings in color so that I could further evaluate the emerging categories.

The mined phrases and words analyzed using Microsoft[®] Excel unearthed relationships, counts and content for all three data collections – transcripts, student surveys, and faculty handbooks. By using printed-paper and Excel, I began the labor-intensive process of an analyst where I use color-coding, worksheets and many columns to organize my data. I searched, coded, and further analyzed for the possibility of more

categories and themes. This process aided in removing statements that overlapped and repeated, as recommended by Moustakas (1994). The use of Holistic coding and a second level Pattern coding revealed the textural descriptions of significant statements made by the administrators and I used those to construct a description of what they experienced (Creswell, 2007). Stake (2010) explained that my research was intuitive work where “our work becomes centered on what we are finding, on our patches, but we come back again and again to the research question” (p.134). I followed the directives of Stake and discovered that the research questions drove the findings. In this case, the findings were how online administrators describe OTF effectiveness, and ineffectiveness.

Saldana suggested, “Strive for your codes and categories to become more refined” (p. 10) which may call for further placement, reclassification or categorization. I followed the advice of many skilled researchers and charted my coding and categorizing course, yet Stake (2010) warned that had “much art and much intuitive processing to the search for meaning” (p. 72). I discovered the truth of this statement as intuition and art carried much of the latter part of the analysis. The refinement process and the discovery of meaning did not bring about theory development; however, Saldana advised that theory construction was not always part of a qualitative analysis, but it could be.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) data analysis will consist of “three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 10). Condensing the data was a long process that continued throughout the examination of the data and each time I discovered new meanings. The data for each category came from the significant statements of the administrators clustered into meanings (Creswell, 2007) and placed into themes.

This entire process was repeated for *each* survey, faculty handbook, and interview transcript while I constantly compared, recomposed and redeveloped until I was satisfied that I had explored the case and reached saturation. Stake (2010) wrote about two ways to discover meanings through analysis that included direct explanation regarding the individual case and assembling cases until I uncovered significance about the whole class of administrators. Stake explained that both of these were necessary in case study. I began this research journey as an undeveloped researcher; however, I took solace in the comment by Stake (2010) that “Case studies are undertaken to make the case understandable” (p. 85). This was something I believed I accomplished with integrity.

Trustworthiness

In order to address the validity of my study I kept a similar selection of participants in order to decrease study dropouts and I did not offer compensation. In addition, triangulation was important since my descriptions revealed something relevant, although debatable (Stake, 2010). In addition, I attempted to share my personal experiences throughout the data collection and kept a researchers journal in an attempt to clarify biases and assumptions and further elucidate the credibility of my case. By incorporating my experience as a dean’s assistant, I attempted to adhere to principles of good research where I interjected current discussions and accepted wisdom about the case (Yin, 2009). Next, I presented the findings to all participants for them to judge the accuracy of the report which was called “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1988, p. 314), better known as member checking. Just over half of the participants responded, all of which affirmatively. In addition, my dissertation committee served as peer reviewers to hold me accountable. Lastly, I sought to exhibit my process descriptions in full so to portray transferability. I believe I have

executed my analysis and writing well and adopted the factor of dependability. Even at that, member checking by 6 of the 10 administrators ensured that I did not miss other conclusions or alternatives in the analysis. Creswell (2009) suggested that my identification and attendance to these factors reduced the threats to validity, both internal and external.

Ethical Considerations

The scriptures, given by our Creator, instruct “whatever you do, do it heartily, as unto God, and not unto men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance: for you serve the Lord Christ” Colossians 3:23-24 (King James Version). Holding myself accountable to God’s Holy Word, I know that my Heavenly Father sees any unethical thing that I do, first, and I stand in His judgment. With that origination, I built my study upon careful listening, documenting and listening again to the concentration of this study – the administrators. I put aside, to the best of my ability, any prior ideas or biases in an effort to solely listen to and understand the lived experiences and perceptions of the administrators.

Names, true titles, or institutions were kept anonymous in this study to protect the privacy of the individuals, the universities represented, and the instructors used in examples. Not only was this the ethical path, it afforded the administrators the freedom of expression. The data was stored on one password protected computer, and then moved to a single flash drive kept under lock and key. The data was not shared with anyone other than the participants of the study, the administrators, during the member checking sequence of findings review. Even then, the administrators were not aware of each other. The IRB was the earthly gatekeeper to the ethical considerations as I entered this study.

The Liberty University IRB had the ultimate say in whether the ethical considerations were fully addressed and they approved the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study explored the online university administrators' perception of effective course facilitation. In particular, this study explored how administrators define and experience effectiveness and ineffectiveness in their online teaching faculty (OTF). Included in this study is how administrators experienced and described the impacts of such effectiveness or ineffectiveness. To appreciate the perceptions and beliefs of the administrators it is important to understand their demography. Consequently, this chapter will provide a brief overview of the participants of this study while maintaining anonymity.

This exploratory case study, bounded and integrated, focused directly on the administrator and his or her world of leading a virtual team of contingent faculty. The findings come from interview transcriptions, shared faculty handbooks and student surveys. In an effort to triangulate the data interpretations, I also followed up with a final participant review of the analyzed results. Transactional Distance theory provided the backdrop for the analysis as seen through the lens of a biblical worldview.

Participant Précis

The participants for this study comprised ten administrators from prominent higher educational online institutions located in North America. The names, titles and institutions of participants remained anonymous for the protection of the administrator and his or her academic institution. Each institution operates through use of the Internet where a geographical distance separates students and faculty and may include all countries of the globe. The fully accredited institutions each maintained a large student base and, therefore, a large faculty base.

The participants emerged from a mix of online universities including one public university, eight for-profit universities, and one state university. Each university operated with an online teaching delivery system. In other words, the facilitation of class instruction happened through use of the Internet, virtual faculty, and a Learning Management System (LMS) connecting the student and instructor to the classroom. Most of the universities represented used Blackboard[®] as their either LMS, while a few orchestrated instructions through an LMS purchased or proprietary.

In an effort to understand the beliefs and perceptions of my participants, Hayes (2006) suggested that I should consider the background information of participants, in this case, the online administrators. In keeping with that suggestion, I present Table 1 to illustrate the demography of all participants. Each participant served as an administrator with supervision of Online Teaching Faculty (OTF). Two administrators served in elevated positions as well as retained years of experience leading OTF. Each had similar responsibilities in daily operations with a minimum of five years experience leading OTF in institutions of higher learning. Participant gender included six males and four females, all retained terminal degrees, with up to twenty-six years of experience in educational administration.

When the administrators gave descriptions of their daily responsibilities, they consistently mentioned the task of leading and managing faculty. This task was the most pronounced responsibility due to frequency of mentioning it through the interview. Even when discussing curriculum and students, OTF were associated. Each administrator discussed the three most prominent responsibilities in the intriguing order of, 1) faculty leadership, 2) curriculum and content delivery, and 3) student concerns and escalations.

It was clear that all three parts were interrelated and each intricately connected to the success of the student because they were student-centered.

Table 1.

Demography of Participants

| Demographic Category | |
|---|---|
| Academic Degree Level | Terminal (100%) |
| Current Institution | State (1) For-Profit (8) Public (1) |
| Years as an Online Administrator | 5 - 10 years (5) 11 - 26 years (5) |
| Years Leading Online Faculty | 5 - 7 years (7) 10 years or more (3) |
| Gender | Male (6) Female (4) |
| Administrative responsibilities (only those performed by <i>all</i> were mentioned) | Instructional Quality Assurance Interventions & Escalations Curriculum Development and Maintenance Student Affairs Program Development Oversight of Department Assessment New Academic Initiatives Ensures Adherence to Accreditation Bodies Oversight of Course Delivery – Including Faculty and Facilitation Faculty Hiring, Evaluation, Vetting & Monitoring |

Accolades for each university’s progress, goals and mission were a reoccurring subject readily shared by each participant. Participants were enthusiastic about sharing the progress of the institution, consistently measured by increased enrollment, new technological initiatives underway, and retention of both student and faculty. When asked about the rate of faculty turnover, one participant said, “People seem very happy here. They work hard; they are dedicated, committed to our students. I am really happy

that the turnover rate is as low as it is.” With the exception of one university, the faculty turnover rate was extremely low and attributed to an upfront training system and subsequent support of newly hired faculty.

Without exception, each university had a faculty training system in place, most of which included a faculty-mentor who shadowed the new hires to ensure comprehension and adherence of the instructional expectations. Interestingly, the one university with the high faculty turnover rate did not have a faculty-mentor element in place. The administrators shared the demographics of their faculty, as illustrated in Table 2. I asked the administrators about the profile of their OTF with relation to credentials, experience, scholarly activity, course load, and university loyalty. On average, all universities hired and assigned courses equally with criteria of credentials and experience. Without exception, each OTF held one degree higher than the level taught. In addition, OTF held a terminal degree to teach doctoral courses. Many administrators hired recent graduates from other online universities, but the majority preferred previous online teaching experience.

Except for one university, each university represented did not require scholarly activity; however, it was encouraged by all universities and rewarded by others through awarding stipends or promotions. Each university monitored or recorded the scholarly activity of OTF and reported that their OTF were publishing. Terms such as “we are after them to publish” or those that published are “a minority” hinted of an underlying message that OTF would not be as apt to publish without the rewards or monitoring. This *message* was true with over half of the participants.

All institutions limited the amount of courses or students an OTF could teach.

The reason given, overall, was to maintain the quality of instruction for students. Quality was attributed to the ability of the OTF to give attention to the student without distraction. The description of distractions was the way OTF overextend by working at too many universities, sometimes referred to as *professional adjuncts*. One participant stated, “Usually you can pick up on that because of the amount of interface they have with your students.” All participants reported that OTF work for other universities. “We have no say over that,” said one participant.

Table 2.

Demography of Online Teaching Faculty (OTF)

| Demographic Category | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| Academic Degree Level of OTF | Either a Master degree or a Doctorate degree. All Institutions require a degree above the degree taught. Average OTF holding a terminal degree is 62.5%. |
| Number of OTF Led by Participants | From 150 - 2000 |
| Degree Earned by OTF | Both traditional and online universities with a higher percentage from traditional |
| Degree Last Earned by OTF | From 2 months to 30 years. |
| Preferred Teaching Experience | Online (4) Traditional (2) Both (4) Each administrator said, “mixed.” Yet 6 had a preference. |
| Publishing | Yes. Encouraged within all 10 institutions. |
| Reward for Scholarly Activity | No requirement (7) Promotions (2) Stipend (2) Not required but monitored (2) Required (1) |
| Courses or Students Taught | Measured by course (1-4) Measured by student (15 – 50) |
| Teaching at More Than One Institution | Yes (10) |

Findings

The purpose of chapter four was to detail the data analysis and the results of this research. The study explored the perceptions of ten online university administrators regarding the characteristics of effective and ineffective online teaching faculty. The guiding research questions developed in this qualitative exploratory case study came from my assumptions, founded on the proclamations of previous research. The case study now gives voice to an untapped wealth of knowledge about the OTF's at their finest, and most ineffectual. The research questions were as follows:

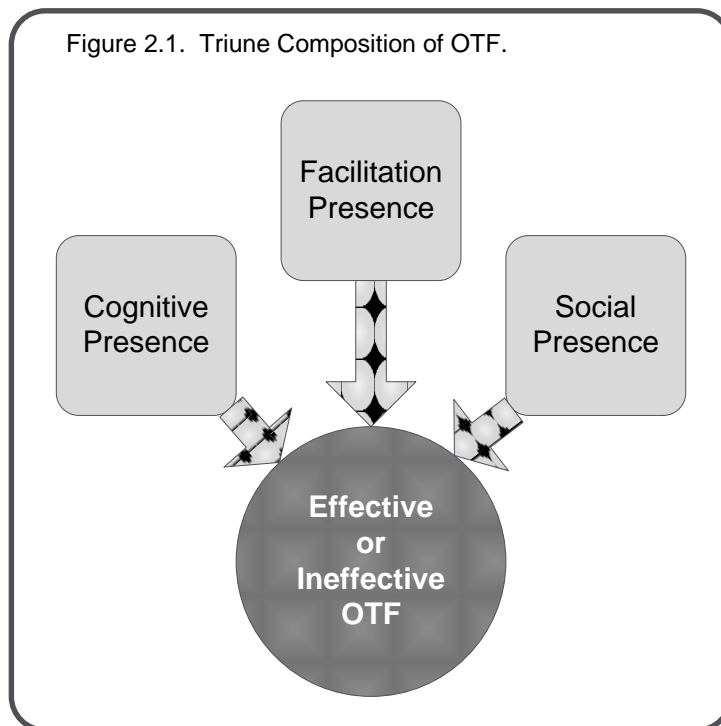
1. How do online administrators describe effective course facilitation for the OTF?
2. How do administrators describe the connection between OTF engagement and student retention?
3. How do administrators experience factors in course facilitation that may, or may not, cause student frustration or retention issues?
4. How do administrators experience and describe the effects of ineffective course facilitation of OTF?

Administrators Describe OTF Effectiveness

It became apparent that there was not one answer to this question of how administrators describe effective course facilitation. Through holistic coding, categorization, and second level pattern coding, three prominent themes emerged which overarched the entirety of how administrators view effective course facilitation. The three emerging themes were Social Presence, Facilitation Presence, and Cognitive Presence. The three stood consistent throughout the analysis of all data and remained as part of both effective and ineffective course facilitation. The idea of presence was the most important

factor to course facilitation according to all ten administrators interviewed. Though the use of the word “presence” was infrequent, the frequency of phrases and words describing presence was astounding. Most frequently used words and phrases by all administrators denoting presence, in order of frequency, were:

- In the classroom
- Highly interactive, engaging, student focused and responsive
- Helpful, understanding and encouraging
- Connected
- Captures student attention
- Builds trust
- Builds sense of community
- Launches dialog



Social presence. The administrator’s description of OTF explains Social Presence as the personality, the ethical nature, and display of that ethical nature. Social presence speaks of the manifested character of the OTF. This was the essence of the person. Social presence was areas of the OTF that were instinctive, built in or part of an OTF’s very being. For example, concern, care and encouragement of individual students may not be something learnt through credentialing. The person with Social Presence lived this way in every aspect of their lives and the carryover into the online classroom was simply part of his or her persona. Although the Social Presence comes through in what they do, this was more *who* they were.

Administrators described the OTF with Social Presence as “emissaries” and those with “reverent power that exudes from some faculty whereby it doesn’t exude in others.” The reverent power, further described by one administrator, was “that reverence where students want to do well because of them, where they do not want to let that faculty person down. I think that is very critical.” These were characteristics not learned from books but intrinsic. Another administrator put it this way, “they don’t leave that student until they are comfortable that the student understands what they are presenting. They are purposeful, candid, and able to lift the student. They make the student feel as if this professor cares about their whole academic experience. They go above the expected contact to respond with feedback to silence.” Giving a picture of the most effective OTF, an administrator said, “They provide student with a real sense of genuine concern and willingness to help that student, any student at any time.” This speaks of integrity and character – Social Presence.

Each of the ten administrators described the OTF with Social Presence, in order of frequency, as:

- An encourager
- Passionate about each student
- Creator of community
- Trust builder
- Supportive and caring
- Having a sense of humor
- Establishes relationships
- Positive communicator
- Friendly

Facilitation Presence. The administrator's description of the OTF makes Facilitation Presence the act of management of the course room and how the OTF handles this management task. This presence was evident through actions, or what the OTF did in the online learning environment. This presence was the major focus of the administrators in this study. Administrators mentioned this presence more than any other presence. Facilitation Presence consists of "being in the classroom," or Learning Management System (LMS), "consistently", and "managing the activities of this forum." The management of the course room includes "using the technology to be responsive, timely, connected, engaged and dependable." Meeting the expectations of the job may be the best way to explain the presence of the facilitator.

Each of the ten administrators described the OTF with Facilitation Presence, in order of frequency mentioned, as:

- Timely / Time Manager
- Synchronous
- Engaged
- In the Classroom
- Goes Above Expectations in Responding
- Consistent
- Interactive
- Actively involved
- Technologically Advanced
- Launches Dialog

Cognitive presence. The administrator’s description of the OTF makes Cognitive Presence the knowledge base of the OTF. This was what they conveyed to the student, mentioned one administrator, by way of their “expertise and ability to distribute this knowledge.” The OTF with Cognitive Presence has “something concrete to bring to the course,” as stated by another administrator. This presence was the culmination of their credentials and life or work experience that makes them the expert. This presence was what they know and how they take what they know to the student. Administrators describe them as “scholarly communicators who drive student learning through connecting and making learning fresh and relative.” Cognitive Presence was equal to Social Presence in the frequency discussed by administrators.

Each of the ten administrators described the OTF with Facilitation Presence, in order of frequency mentioned, as:

- Knowledgeable / Expert

- Gives Purposeful Feedback
- Makes Learning Relative to Students
- Creates a Rich Learning Environment
- Committed Online Education / Student
- Asks / Answers Questions
- Communicator
- Passion for the Subject

Effectiveness. Much the same way the data revealed a triune theme for presence in the online classroom, analysis established effectiveness in three ways: what it was, what it meant, and what it did. As illustrated in Table 3, Effectiveness has a meaning, it had action, and it had an existence. Effectiveness through Social Presence adds more meaning to the definition of effectiveness than the other two. However, Social Presence was lowest in describing the act of effectiveness. It was difficult to gauge the effectiveness of personality and ethics, yet they were undeniably linked to the meaning of effectiveness overall.

Cognitive Presence was where the act of effectiveness was most evident, yet did not describe the existence, or what effectiveness *was* when compared to Facilitation Presence. Cognitive Presence was how effectiveness was executed. After all, most universities measured learning outcomes. This dimension was a direct link to the impact of the OTF with Cognitive Presence. In contrast, Social Presence did not demonstrate the same implementation of effectiveness attributed to Cognitive Presence mostly because it was difficult to determine.

Facilitation Presence holds the most evidence of effectiveness existence and action. Facilitation Presence was the most common way to confirm the performance standards of OTF. Administrators can quickly monitor the course expectations of OTF by watching attendance, responsiveness, and communication. Effectiveness through Facilitation Presence was the upmost in the minds of the administrators. To the administrators, Facilitation Presence was the most important indicator of effectiveness. The number one reason given by administrators to end a working-relationship with OTF was “missing in action” or “unresponsiveness.” Both were cases reflecting a lack of Facilitation Presence.

Table 3.

Effectiveness in Relation to Presence

| Social Presence | Cognitive Presence | Facilitation Presence |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Highest in meaning or the intent | Highest in action – what it does | Highest in action – what it does |
| Lowest in action – what it does | Lowest in existence – what it is | Lowest in meaning or the intent |

While each of the three presences’ have differences in the way effectiveness was described, the connections between the three were undeniably important to the whole definition of effectiveness in course facilitation. One presence cannot complete the whole of effectiveness without the other presence. As one participant stated when asked about the three most important attributes of online faculty members, “If OTF are missing one of these it is almost impossible, in the long run, to work with them because there is always going to be something missing.” This participant was referring to three attributes that match exactly with the three presences ultimately found in this study. If OTF have

strong Social Presence but lack in Facilitation Presence, that lack of timely response or grading could counteract the enhanced community created and end poorly.

Feedback. Feedback requires the incorporation of all three presences'. Feedback was the act of grading the work of students in the course room. Each of the ten administrators described effective feedback in the following ways: accountable, substantive, timely, appropriate, rubric-based, interactive, quality, written, growth enhancing, encouraging, building, purposeful, candid, anticipated, lifts the student, followed, detailed, supportive, positive yet critical, useful, specific, resonates, dynamic, and not rushed. Feedback using Social Presence encompasses the encouragement, supportive, and student-lifting aspects. The intangibility of Social Presence does not make it less important. In fact, several administrators noted just the opposite. For instance, when asked about the most important attribute of OTF, one administrator shared that the most critical was “feedback, not just feedback,” but also the “supportive spirit” who gives “feedback that will really resonate with the student and want them to do better.” Another administrator referred to an OTF who sought to “supply as much help and support as possible...with pats on the back.” This was the feedback of the OTF with Social Presence. As important as Social Presence was, if there was a lack of response with appropriate expertise the student was left with nothing more than a supportive friend.

Add to Social Presence the feedback of a well-trained expert, or Cognitive Presence, and the student has “supportive, encouraging, expert commentary” applied to his or her writing, as mentioned by one administrator. The combination of Social Presence and Cognitive Presence were “sought out” by the administrators. The feedback

in this pairing of presences' was what administrators refer to as "learning through positive interaction." One administrator said it best about *perfect* feedback, "...helps them [student] understand not only what they do well but what they can do better the next time and when that next time comes the instructor remembers they said it and builds on that. It is a beauty to behold when you see it."

Even so, administrators noted that the dynamics of passionate expertise and enthusiastic encouragement can easily be lost if an OTF does not practice time-management and responsiveness. Administrators mentioned *time management* more frequently than any other topic for course management. Therefore, Facilitation Presence stood out as a foundation for the other two presences'. Without the necessary quick responses to communication and grading, the administrators noted that the asynchronous modality of online education could steal student momentum and motivation.

Administrators used words such as "expect & require" when discussing the monitoring of feedback in relation to facilitating the course. Expectations referred more to what an OTF will bring to the course through Social and Cognitive Presence – the tone and expertise connections. The requirements referred to the Facilitation Presence, or the timeliness and policies in the course room.

Administrators Discuss OTF Factors Related to Retention

The connection between retention of students and the engagement of OTF continued to unfold through the lens of Social, Cognitive and Facilitation Presence, as well as the framework of Transactional Distance. Recall that Transactional Distance was the psychological distance between the student and faculty that requires transcendence in order for students to feel connected, rather than isolated, which was a proven factor of

student retention (Falloon, 2011 & Moore, 2007). Closely related was question three, which sought the administrators' perceptions of the factors in course facilitation linked to student frustration and attrition. In both questions, the study examined engagement and dialog through the minds of the administrators. While only 4 of the 10 administrators were acquainted with the term transactional distance, it was clear that they understood the meaning behind the theory and the importance placed on engagement between faculty and student. Words most commonly used by the administrators to describe engagement between faculty and students were the following interchangeable words: interface, engagement, interaction, communication, dialog, community and attentiveness.

Engagement defined. The requirements of engagement rest within Facilitating and Cognitive Presence where OTF actively engaged students through the classroom. Participants described active engagement in terms of the policies regarding expected communication turnaround times and timely feedback. The participants related turnaround times to “answering email, discussion posts or providing feedback on assignments.” One administrator described engagement as “leaving a footprint.” The administrator explained the meaning of this phrase: “A footprint means that you are interacting on some level with students.” All participants agreed that interaction was a bare minimum expectation of all OTF in course facilitation.

Raising the minimum expectation to the level of effective engagement was where the addition of Social Presence joins. Administrators did not view meeting the minimum expectations as *effectiveness*. Yes, it was viewed as acceptable, but not a trait of the effective and preferred OTF. “Not only the fact that they *are* communicating, it is *what* are they communicating,” said one participant. The administrator continued by sharing

the fact that the student was “feeling part and connected to the classroom...that is what is important to me.” The OTF social character collaborates this feeling of connectedness. The OTF, whether realizing it or not, was decreasing the psychological distance, as discussed in the theory of Transactional Distance, thereby increasing chances of student retention.

Factors of student retention. When asked what component was most important in retaining students, nine of the ten administrators instantly answered “faculty.” The one administrator that did not instantly respond with “faculty” did say, “keeping them engaged,” which points to faculty engagement as well. The OTF were the individuals most likely to “keep students engaged,” as noted by several administrators. Therefore, it would be safe to say that engaged faculty was the number one component to retaining students, according to the administrators questioned. One administrator exclaimed, “It is the human factor.” All three of the presences’ were necessary to experience true connectedness and the feeling of community. One administrator fervently shared, “if they [students] feel they are being responded to, they will stay. If they feel like nobody cares or the lead times are too long, then they will leave.”

Data mining through one year of student surveys from six courses from one of the universities, I discovered a relationship to what the administrators said they seek while managing student attrition – a link to the *presences*’. Analyzing the student surveys in six classes over a period of a year uncovered three major categories of OTF characteristics, both positive and not positive. Shown in Table 4 were the three major categories that became apparent, which included characteristics of Cognition, Emotion

and Ethics. These three present a close association to the Social, Facilitative, and Cognitive presences’.

Table 4.

Student Surveys and Literature Findings

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| Cognitive / Lack of Cognition | Characteristics pertaining to online instructor knowledge and tasks of facilitation |
| Emotional / Lack of Emotion | Characteristics of a social and relational nature pertaining to the online instructor |
| Ethical / Lack of Ethics | Characteristics dealing with the personal character and nature of the online instructor |

Student responsibility. A surprise awaited me when I asked the administrators, “What do you believe is the most important success factor in online education?” Previous literature typically answered this question with *faculty*, as exposed through student and faculty perspectives. Eight of the ten administrators, all with the 1000-foot viewpoint, referenced the student more so than faculty. The eight administrators understood that unless the student has “persistence and motivation to be in the class,” online success was not controllable. I found that this perspective aligned with some literature specific to adult students (Burns, 2011; Park & Choi, 2009; Zembylas, 2008). “Student commitment to accomplishing their goals”, “time management”, and “purposeful engagement” were factors necessary for success in online education, according to administrators in this study. Although this was not the focus of my study, the consistent message about student commitment throughout the interviews made this

important enough to include. One administrator said, “In the end, all of our support networks, advisors, high quality faculty, tutoring services...if the student isn’t there and isn’t trying to access them, then there is not a whole lot that we can do.”

Administrators Discuss Ineffective Course Facilitation

Most administrators experienced the distress of ineffective OTF more than they experienced the joy of effective OTF. Due to the current nature of the role of the administrator, communications to and from the administrator were rarely to relay a positive experience. Instead, the responsibilities of administrators were to the resolution of concerns and challenges faced by both students and faculty.

“Being rude and being derogatory in their feedback to the student. That’s probably my number one pet peeve,” said one administrator when asked about how OTF could find a rift in employment with an online university. This same question resulted in the much the same response from almost all administrators interviewed. The close second answer was irresponsibility as found in “unresponsiveness”, “habitual absence,” “inappropriate attitude or tone”, and “ignoring policy.” Not every challenge was the result of faculty missing the three presences’ in the classroom. As mentioned before, many challenges were due to the lack of student time-management and commitment. Nonetheless, four of the administrators mentioned that the ineffectiveness of an OTF was “just the opposite of the effective faculty,” “exactly the opposite.”

Ineffectiveness was most evident in Facilitation Presence (see Table 5) where the most basic actions of course management were missing. Missing Facilitation Presence, according to one administrator, “halts the entire learning process for an online student.” Another administrator explained that ineffective facilitation presence was an OTF who

was “overextended.” “The first thing they let go is the online student,” according to another administrator. Each administrator said the same thing, in different ways, that ineffectiveness was an OTF who was “paycheck driven more than they are student driven,” or sometimes known as a “professional online adjunct.” “Feedback is canned and not commensurate to the work presented,” insisted another administrator. “Feedback is the same comments to each student”, one more administrator exclaimed, “such as *nicely done* or *couldn’t have said it better*.” One administrator summed it up well by saying, “It makes me sad. These are the worst of the worst.”

Table 5.

Ineffectiveness in Relation to Presence

| Social Presence | Cognitive Presence | Facilitation Presence |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Highest in meaning or the intent | Highest in action – what it does | Highest in action – what it does |
| Lowest in action – what it does | Lowest in existence – what it is | Lowest in meaning or the intent |

Summary

The findings provided information to the OTF and online leadership communities about how groups of online administrators from prominent online universities perceived effectiveness and ineffectiveness in the course room. The research questions that guided this study identified Facilitation, Cognitive, and Social Presence as overarching factors related to effectiveness in student motivation and retention.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

This chapter offered a brief overview of the results, a discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research followed by a conclusion. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to discover the perceptions of effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, of Online Teaching Faculty (OTF) through the voice of the online administrators who led them. Particularly, the study purposed to find answers to the following questions:

5. How do online administrators describe effective course facilitation for the OTF?
6. How do administrators describe the connection between OTF engagement and student retention?
7. How do administrators experience factors in course facilitation that may, or may not, cause student frustration or retention issues?
8. How do administrators experience and describe the effects of ineffective course facilitation of OTF?

Overview

Ten online university administrators agreed to participate in interviews for this study. Eight deans and two senior level administrators, six of which were men and four of which were women, shared their thoughts through a series of twenty-eight open-ended questions (see Appendix C). The study was purely exploratory since I was not sure what administrators would, or would not share. Yin (2009) agrees that an exploratory case study lends well to the “lack of conceptual framework or hypotheses” (p. 37). With great candor and sincerity, each administrator provided enough information to answer each of the four guiding research questions and to provide results that should assist in future empirical research.

Discussion of Findings

To give a point of reference to the exploratory nature of the study, I applied the lens of Transactional Distance Theory and the impact of increasing or decreasing transactional distance relative to the characteristics of OTF. Though not all participants had knowledge of the term *Transactional Distance*, each participant discussed the very core of dialog and its importance to student learning and retention. Clearly, the administrators in this study understood how important the role of the OTF was reducing transactional distance. When asked what the most important component in retaining students was, all administrators mentioned quality faculty and nine of the ten administrators mentioned this as most important.

Through the one-thousand foot viewpoint of the ten administrators, the association between student retention and success in online learning was quality OTF and was evident. The analysis of the interview transcripts revealed answers to the four questions by way of three overarching characteristics of OTF: Social Presence, Facilitation Presence, and Cognitive Presence. The study revealed that OTF operate in each of the three presences', whether effectively or ineffectively. OTF were identified as effective if the OTF operated in all three presences', ineffectively if they did not. If an OTF operated in all three, that person had a strong ethical nature, instilled with student-centeredness and managed the course room energetically.

Effectiveness demonstrated in the OTF was in what effectiveness does (see Table 3) within the three presences'. Facilitation Presence was one of the three presences that was noticed most. It was the management of the course by way of engagement, timely responses to questions and assignment submissions. Facilitation Presence was the quick

communication that students, and administrators, depend on for good time management. All administrators interviewed mentioned time management more frequently than any other topic for course management. Therefore, Facilitation Presence stands out as a foundation for the other two presences'. These effective OTF have heightened time management skills within the course resulting in timely responses and enhanced interaction. Social Presence was the most difficult to distinguish since it was determined to be the very character of the OTF. Finally, effective OTF will have the ability to connect with the student, cognitively, in order to drive student learning and keep learning fresh and germane, which was identified as Cognitive Presence.

During the analysis of the student end of course surveys I found something that I instantly compared to my earlier readings of Maslow (1954) and his *hierarchy of needs* pyramid. What became apparent to me was the pyramid of student needs. The recall of Maslow's pyramid occurred, in particular, when analyzing the student survey data. It was clear to me that when there was a lack of cognitive traits in OTF the student comments focused on the word *need*, which coincided with clarity, direction and guidance. It was almost as if the students could not see any other trait in the OTF and the consequence was an unmet *need*. Much like Maslow's pyramid where lower levels of needs must be met prior to being concerned about higher-level needs, students did not realize a higher level of instruction with an OTF lacking in the cognitive characteristics. However, once there was no lack in OTF cognitive traits, the students need moved to the second level and connected on an emotional stage where they felt the social presence. Students no longer made mention that the OTF was *unclear*. My supposition was

because the need for clarity no longer existed. The student now moved to the next level (see Figure 3.1).

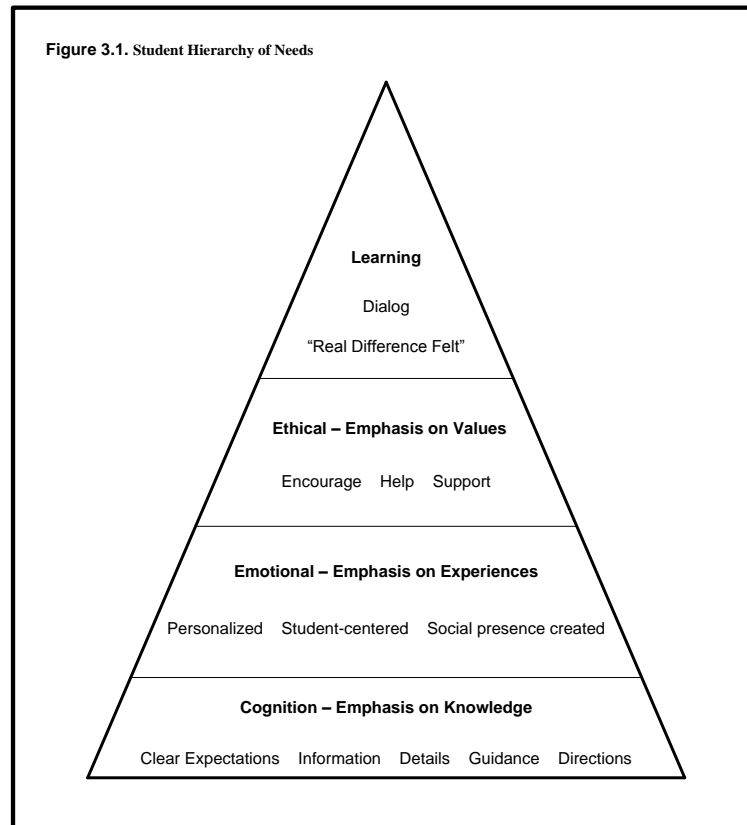


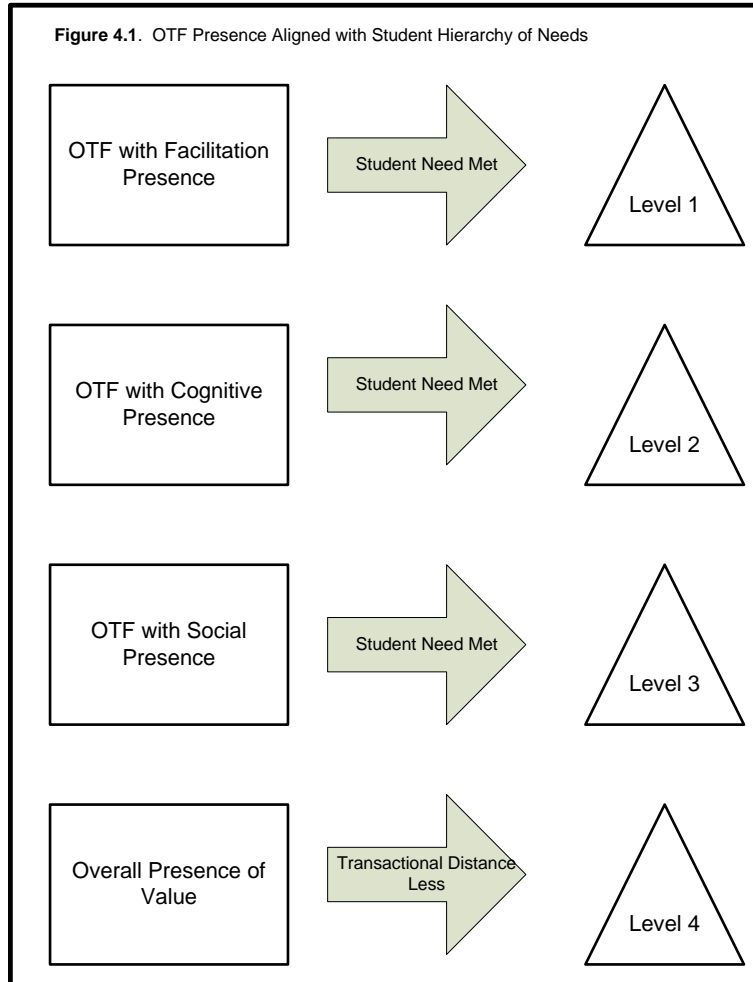
Figure 3.1. Student Hierarchy of Needs. Adapted from the literature. Samora, D. (2013). Unpublished.

In the second level, the need for clarity was no longer mentioned and the needs in Level 1 addressed. Within level two, when the OTF does not meet the emotional need, there came an outpouring from the students for more interaction, communication and a need for interaction. Interestingly, there was not a cry for clarity, but a need for *availability* of the OTF. Once Level 2 need for presence was met, the data analysis exhibits the traits in Level 3. Descriptions of the OTF were shorter and described as fair, enjoyable, supportive and exceeding expectations. Students used the word *excellent* more than any other word to describe the ethical traits of the OTF, followed closely by

the word *helpful*. Students now perceive learning excellence in Level 3. Intriguingly, when the OTF did not have the characteristics displayed in the third level, all three levels of need returned – no clarity, no social presence, and no instructor. In addition, the students used words like *rude, critical and unprofessional* to describe the ethics of the OTF when ethical characteristics were missing and the student need unmet.

The final level was what I believe transpired once all traits of OTF were present and student needs met – learning and dialog happened. Dialog was what Moore's Transactional Distance Theory seeks to attain. True dialog may turn out to be, as with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the self-actualization for the online student and OTF. In no way am I proposing that this model was theoretically sound, yet, it may present an interesting springboard for future research. As suggested by Silverman (2005), the purpose behind analyzing documents in a qualitative study was to tell the story of the participants or describe their lives and depictions the texts tell rather than statements that were true or false. My perspective of the document analysis and student surveys was not intended to be true or false, but to tell the story I found in the analysis.

Retrospectively, the discovery of the themes of Cognitive, Social and Facilitation Presence fits with the findings of the Student Hierarchy of Needs. Clearly, if OTF had effectively mastered Facilitation Presence, then met were the basic student needs of Level 1. In this example, Level 1 of the Student Hierarchy of Needs realized satisfaction with Facilitation Presence (see Figure 4.1). Students had clear directions, guidance and the information needed to complete the academic tasks.



Level 2 needs were then satisfied by the OTF bringing Cognitive Presence to the classroom. Students experienced socialization, individualized attention and begin to engage emotionally, as if on a team. The attainment of Level 3 needs came by way of the OTF with Social Presence. Course management and teaching were in place, therefore, Social Presence “goes above and beyond,” which was a term used by administrators to describe a characteristic of effectiveness in OTF.

The final presence was Value Presence. Value Presence was not what the OTF possessed, but rather what happened because of the OTF operating in the other three presences’. The value extended to the student, administrator, and institution. This Value

Presence was what Moore (1997) discussed as dialogue. Administrators recognized this value when sharing their thoughts in the interviews. Administrators said that effective OTF” bring value through adding personal touches to a course”, “building an enhanced sense of community” for students, and “causing the students to feel respected and cared for.” One administrator calls this Value Presence a “recipe for retention.”

Recalling the Student Hierarchy of Needs, without the Facilitation Presence effectively setting clear expectations, relaying information, offering guidance, and providing details and direction for the course, the students’ most basic needs were not met and usually resulted in protest to the administrators, or worse, increased attrition. The Value Presence in this case was “students not getting what we promised them” and students who “get frustrated in the class,” in the experience of interviewed administrators. One can work towards a more caring and supportive attitude, however, the OTF with a natural inclination of encouragement and student support was the golden ticket to Level 4 of the Online Student Hierarchy of Needs.

Facilitation Presence was also the first presence that met the needs of the student in the online environment. This was critical to retention of students. Facilitation presence was not necessarily the motivational factor; however, it was the most basic of needs for the student as seen in the Student Hierarchy of Needs (see Figure 3.1). Much like Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs where a person’s most basic needs of food and shelter occur before higher order needs of acceptance and ultimate self-actualization, the online student could not reach the *dialog* mentioned in Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory without first having met the basic needs of clear expectations and directions.

Referring to Figure 3.1, the Online Student Hierarchy of Needs, the OTF with effective Facilitation Presence met the online student's need for clear expectations, information, details, guidance and directions. OTF who gave timely responses to questions about how to complete an assignment, expectations, and guidance through the LMS covered the need for Level 1. Students who were under the leadership of the OTF with effective Facilitation Presence no longer noted any of the concerns in Level 1 as a *need*. Conversely, if an OTF was ineffective in Facilitation Presence, the student appeared trapped in Level 1 and chances for reaching dialog within the course was unlikely.

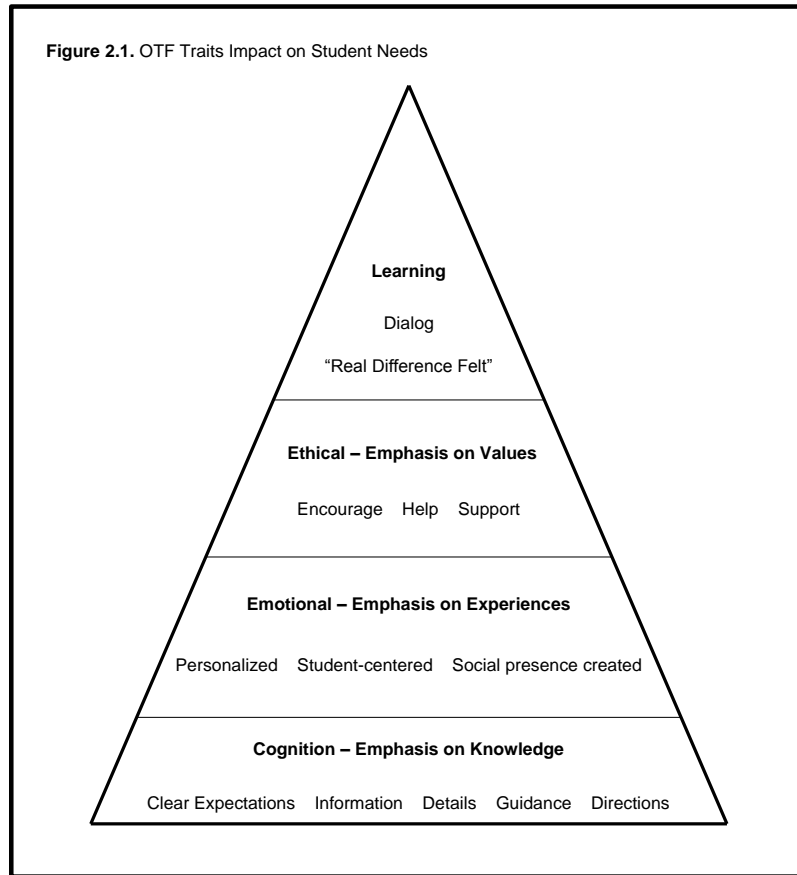
Negative Cognitive Presence was how ineffectiveness destroyed the learning outcomes. When the most basic learning was not taking place, the learning outcomes depth will reflect it. This lack of depth was a direct link to the impact of the OTF with ineffective Cognitive Presence. For instance, administrators explained that ineffective OTF "have no passion for their subject", "no passion for their students", "not committed to the student learning their part," and "not committed to student learning" – "which just seems absurd," exclaimed one administrator. Again, there was an apparent invalidation in student needs from Level 2 of the Student Hierarchy of Needs. Since the ineffective OTF were not student-centered and did not make it beyond Level 1 in the pyramid, it was no surprise that Level 2 was unmet.

Predictably, an OTF missing Social Presence could not rise from ineffectiveness to meet the student needs in Level 3. If an OTF did not meet the most basic needs of Level 1, it makes sense that higher levels of need were deficient, such as support and encouragement. Not so predictable was the fact that only one administrator mentioned

traits of ineffective OTF that related to Social Presence. Though it made sense based on the findings in the Student Hierarchy of Needs, it was a marvel to see that, unknowingly, administrators had a sense of this aspect and left it out of the conversation. The one administrator who described the negative Social Presence of ineffective OTF gave a very interesting statement revealing the lack of ethical nature. He stated, “They [ineffective OTF] place themselves on such a high pedestal that the student is fearful of asking questions. In fear that the faculty will put them down or feel that the question is something they should already know.”

When an online student passed Level 1, the OTF operated with Cognitive Presence (see Figure 2.1). Cognitive Presence was the knowledge base the OTF imparted to the student and the place where students connected to the scholarly communications of the OTF. The effective OTF helped the drive the learning and interacted out of true concern for the student learning. One administrator described the OTF with Cognitive Presence this way:

They care about students. It is obvious that they are passionate about their subject material, their discipline, and through their enthusiasm, through their interactions with student, they are actually able to start kindling that same passion in the student in their classrooms. In other words, they are training other people who can follow in their footsteps.



The OTF with effective Cognitive Presence were the instructors noted as “dedicated and committed to online education,” one administrator stated, and “those committed to the betterment of online education would understand that comment.” “There is a commitment”, another administrator voiced, to “timeliness and communication that supersedes that of traditional education.” As seen in Level 1 of the Online Student Hierarchy of Needs, the online student depended on the OTF to give directions, clearly, and then provide consistent follow up in Level 2.

Level 2 was critical due to the presentation of feedback. Feedback in Level 2 was personalized, student-centered and created a sense of community. Dedication to the ways of online education was more apparent in Cognitive Presence than the other two.

Cognitive Presence was where administrators measured outcomes and Facilitation Presence was where administrators observed performance. Cognitive Presence, measured in the feedback given to students, was a need critical in getting the student to Level 4.

Feedback was the most frequently mentioned aspect of the online learning environment. Since online education used the asynchronous mode of communication, the type of feedback presented required effectiveness in all three presences'. Administrators described effective feedback in terms relatable to all three presences and encompassed the needs in all four levels of the Online Student Hierarchy of Needs. One administrator passionately explained, "Feedback to me is the most critical- and it's just not minimal feedback, but its feedback that will really resonate with the student and want them to do better." Another administrator summed up feedback, applying all three presences', this way:

It [feedback] has a way of lifting the student into wanting to perform even better, and that the information that was provided on that feedback can really be seen in the next assignment where the professor knows that the student has followed up on it. So in order to do that, there has to be trust between the student and the faculty person. The faculty has to be a person who is able to exude trust from the student. The better professors are ones to do that, they look to communicate with the student. They are very response when the student contacts them. They spend time with the student. They don't leave that student until they are comfortable that the student understands what they are presenting. They make the student feel

as if this professor cares about their experience, not only their education but also their whole academic experience. When they provide feedback, it's detailed and its supportive and even critical feedback can be supportive. The best faculty knows how to do that. So, that to me is the ideal professor in the online environment.

Level 3 incorporated Social Presence, built on the foundation of the other two presences'. In this third level, the students had the direction they needed. The student had personalized academic attention, and for dialog to take place, the student experienced the encouragement, help and support found in the effectively administered Social Presence of the OTF. At this level, no longer did administrators receive negative comments from students about the lack of guidance or instruction. Instead, this was the level where the positive comments appeared about how helpful, knowledgeable and special the OTF was to the student. Transactional distance has decreased, dialog has happened now at Level 4. The students at this level consistently held that there was a "real difference felt." Online education was found to be mostly perception. Universities operating online, many times, did not have traditional buildings that house faculty, nor did they look like universities. Online classrooms existed in perception. If an OTF built a mental community through his or her effective adaption of all three presences', the result was the student *felt* part of the university and emotional ties were established.

When administrators described the ideal online classroom, they spoke of a highly interactive, dynamically enhanced course room, closely monitored by the instructor, and all with the sense of community. Most administrators felt that they were achieving the ideal online classroom, except for one administrator who shared that "there is no ideal

classroom. It is a work in progress.” All administrators mentioned the need for their universities and OTF to keep current with technology so that the tech-savvy world of students could continue learning through use of their smart phones, iPads, and Kindles as an extension of their course room. The OTF with Facilitation Presence was also identified by an administrator as one who would further his or her effectiveness by “remaining innovative and technologically astute.”

An interesting finding through the interview transcripts was the frequency at which the administrators mentioned effective course facilitation as being *synchronous*. This was an interesting discovery since each university operates online asynchronously. When administrators discussed engagement, dialoging, and interactivity in the course room, administrators spoke of the importance of the phone calls, or Skype calls, and times of synchronous communication. Administrators encouraged a hybrid system with both synchronous and asynchronous communication. A hybrid system was logical for the effective, whole, OTF who operated in Social, Cognitive and Facilitation Presence. The OTF with all three presences in operation would find the use of both synchronous and asynchronous rewarding. Sharing knowledge and experience with an encouraging tone in a timely fashion makes up the whole. From the perspective of the administrators, active and engaged students were “following their social predilection for being engaged in the classroom because we are dealing with students who are very much social mediates.”

Policy-making could be what most people think of when educational administration comes to mind. After all, they were the individuals who created, revised and updated policies in universities. The fascinating thing throughout the interviews was

only twice did administrators mention policy. Policy, mentioned once during discussions, dealt with training faculty and once discussed in standardization of course material. While policy drives the operations of the university, it appeared that administrators were more concerned with engagement and learning.

Previous studies explained that the OTF felt undervalued, wanted more compensation because of their credentials, and felt accused of having less ability when teaching online (Dolan, 2011; Gordon, 2003; Ludlow, 1998; Unger, 1995; & Yu & Young, 2008). This captured my attention since working in the Office of the Dean has taught me just the opposite. OTF are the lifeblood of online universities and when they are effective, they are highly valued. My attention to this was the reason for asking a few of the questions (see Appendix C), such as the definition of an online adjunct, the profile of OTF, and the future of OTF in the perception of the administrators. What I discovered was that administrators *do* value OTF. Especially those OTF who go beyond the expectations, were loyal to the university, and put the student first. According to a grounded theory study by Dolan (2011), OTF found satisfaction serving students rather than being loyal to a university. There was a slight divide with what administration finds valuable and what OTF found satisfying.

When asked about what administrators would change about how they led OTF, there was either a long pause or the question, “about how I *lead* them?” There seemed to be a detachment when administrators thought about leading OTF. This intrigued me. From the OTF perspective, the administrators are the leaders. It could have been due to the way administrators view the role of leading virtually. Once the administrators thought about the question, they quickly had many ideas of how to improve how they led.

Most of the answers had to do with increasing engagement with OTF, such as more face-to-face time. This was one thing that Dolan (2011) found was not a factor of satisfaction for OTF, neither was loyalty to the university. Two of the administrators interviewed seemed to know this. One administrator discussed how most OTF were “not committed to the university” and “it is difficult to engage with those that have a choice whether to engage or not – and may not want to engage.” The other administrator realized that wanting more time to engage OTF was counterproductive since the “the key to the whole process is time management. By doing more meetings or training, there is a negative effect.”

When asked about the future on the OTF, administrators discussed the global aspects of online teaching, the changes to how we teach, and ensuring that the next generation of OTF understands the aspects of learning and OTF with online teaching experience. There was also discussion about a more mobile teaching environment with high-tech instruments, more full time OTF to meet accreditation pressure, more graduates seeking to teach online and the unlimited possibilities of distance learning. One administrator said, “Faculty is now competing against technology.” He explained that avatars might soon teach the fundamentals and rote learning while the new “demand for that high quality faculty who can really engage student and provide students with value in the class” will be teaching the strategy and innovation. Another administrator noted that a push for full time OTF would make the online adjunct rare.

An interesting inclination I noticed throughout the interviews was administrators did not use the term *adjunct*. When I asked the administrators for a definition of an *online adjunct*, they responded by noting the OTF environment (unseen), then OTF status

(part time), and finally OTF function (teaching). Other than that question, the administrators did not use the term *adjunct*. Instead, they used the terms *faculty*, *faculty member*, or *instructor*. Some administrators still used the term *faculty member* even though the question used the term *online adjunct*. My inclination was that the nomenclature was a direct reflection of the daily conversations of each administrator as he or she referred to virtual faculty.

The reason I asked for the definition was to compare the definition to the reality of administrator perceptions later in the interview. There were studies pointing to how OTF believed others viewed them as lesser (Dolan, 2011; Gordon, 2003; Ludlow, 1998; Unger, 1995; & Yu & Young, 2008). However, the reality from this study was that neither *adjunct* nor *part-time* took prominence as a designation of whom OTF were. Quite the contrary, administrators in this study made comments like, “we could not do it without them,” or, “they are our greatest asset.”

At the top of the list of complaints that administrators heard from OTF were “too much work”, “excessive demands” or “rigorous processes.” This was not surprising since what administrators experienced with OTF was that they all “work at more than one university.” Quickly following the over-extended work pattern was the call for more students. This seems to be divergent, yet many of the OTF were attempting to make an honest living at one or two universities and found it almost impossible to survive. This was the reason given for why OTF asked for more students. Lastly, the OTF wanted more academic freedom. This falls right in line with what administrators shared about all curriculums standardized. There was not much room for academic creativity when the

syllabus was standardized. Interestingly, there was only one mention about pay as a complaint. Perhaps the request for more students was the way OTF requested more pay.

Limitations

This study examined the effective, or ineffective, traits of online teaching faculty according to the perceptions of online administrators. The limitations of the study were as follows:

1. The study was limited to four-year online universities and represented eight of those universities. No traditional universities, or on-ground universities, were included in this study.
2. The study was limited to part-time online teaching faculty and the ten administrators who lead them. Full-time faculty was not included in this study.
3. The study was limited to a small, purposeful sampling case study design including ten online university administrators. The actual number of university administrators working through the online environment exceeded 250 with for-profit online universities alone. This did not take into account the state, public, and private institutions.
4. This study was limited to 10 interviews and a collection of two university Faculty Handbooks as posted on the public website of the universities. The proprietary nature of the for-profit online institutions made it impossible to gather documentation for analysis. I understood this going into the study. When I asked for documentation as the last question in the interview (see Appendix C), only two of the ten administrators were able to supply documentation to support what they shared with me. The documentation shared were the Faculty Handbooks

located on the main university website. This was helpful in corroborating what the administrators shared about policy and OTF expectation, but not for effectiveness traits.

Recommendations

The propositions and recommendations of this study were offered through the findings. Administrators need a system to train OTF in the expectations of effectiveness, and then create a system of confirming the met expectations. Nine of the ten administrators shared that they, personally, were responsible for reviewing the feedback of OTF. This responsibility can be time consuming and take away from strategic planning and enhancement of curriculum and programs. Perhaps the computer scientists fascinated with online education can develop a system of automated alerts when the most basic of expectations go unmet.

Secondly, this study uncovered a trend uprising in online education with regard to hiring more full-time faculty than contracted OTF. There are many different pieces to this puzzle, including, but not limited to: the financial implications of such a change, the differences in learning outcomes when comparing the two entities, the virtual team aspect of such a growth spurt, and the loyalty factor with such a change.

Thirdly, an examination of how online administrators lead the virtual instructional staff. Do administrators view themselves more as colleagues, managers, or leaders? Do administrators see themselves as working with OTF, or do they experience disconnect due to the disengaged, contracted nature of online adjunct faculty? The administrators in this study seemed to struggle with the question of how they lead OTF. Almost every administrator hesitated when asked this question. Perhaps they are a disconnected leader

or perhaps they view themselves differently than other virtual leaders. This could prove to be an important study.

Fourthly, this study found that OTF have traits of effectiveness, or ineffectiveness related to three presences' and the three presences' can affect the needs of online students – either positively, or negatively. Is this still true for hybrid structured online university systems? It is true for traditional, on-ground universities. Taking the relationship of student needs and the three presences' may provide interesting results.

Fifthly, there were a few interesting findings from what the ten online university administrators shared about how each of their universities utilizes standardized syllabi, yet a lack of academic freedom was one of the OTF complaints mentioned by the administrators. Even so, contracted OTF may not remain loyal to the institution. How does this mix of academic freedom and loyalty cooperate? As one administrator stated, “how can we engage them knowing that they don't have to be engaged?”

Lastly, the administrators in this study captured my attention with what they shared about the most important success factor in online education. I expected the answer to this question to relate mostly to OTF. The revelation was when each administrator pointed to the student and the commitment of the student. “The person who is in the class has to want to be in that class,” shared one administrator. Others made statements such as, “time management of the student,” “student persistence and engagement,” or “the student successfully completing the course.” It seemed so simple and maybe that was why I overlooked it – but the administrators did not overlook it. An interesting study would be to delve deeper into what online administrators observe in students who are committed and are successful in completing their goals.

Conclusion

This study started with anticipation that by understanding what administrators observed as effective and ineffective characteristics of OTF the online educational system could staff and train OTF to become more effective. In addition, saturating online classrooms with effective OTF should increase retention of students, create a rich community of learning, and strengthen learning with much needed dialog. Listening to the ten online administrators has enhanced the literature on this topic. Peeking into the thoughts and perceptions of these ten administrators has aided in filling a gap in the voices of higher education.

The need for an effective OTF to operate in each of the presences' was illustrated as crucial to decreasing transactional distance resulting in true dialog discovered in Level 4 of the Online Student Hierarchy of Needs. The need for OTF *presence* was a reoccurring theme in this case study. Additionally, each administrator expressed the necessity of student commitment and time management as the number one factor of online educational success. Lastly, an unexpected discovery was the difference between the administrators' and OTF perspectives with regard to loyalty and the desire to be engaged with the leadership of the university, seemingly the why administrators hesitated at the thought of *leading* the OTF.

Now, at the end of this study, my hope transformed to reality. The OTF, who are serious about distance education through the mode of the Internet, or whatever the future brings, can use the findings of the study for self-evaluation and comparison to how they currently teach the adult students looking for rich learning through dialog. Equipped with viewpoints provided by the administrators, OTF may want to examine the factors of

loyalty and Facilitation Presence. Armed with the Online Student Hierarchy of Needs, OTF can reaffirm their actions in the course room to demonstrate true cultivation of adult student needs. Finally, OTF can peek-in to the true value they add to each university. Previous studies revealed that OTF felt undervalued. This study may reduce those misperceptions. There was a “shift in thinking among the public” about online education and “the respect for the professionals [OTF] will be there,” said one administrator.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Cover Letter to Participants

Dear Participant:

My name is Dina Samora. I am a doctoral candidate at Liberty University in the School of Education under the direction of Kenneth D. Gossett, PhD. You are invited to participate in a research project entitled: *Characteristics of the Effective Online Teaching Faculty: An Administrators Perspective*. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the perceptions of ten online university administrators relative to the characteristics of effective and ineffective online teaching faculty. Liberty University's Institutional Review Board has approved this study.

The study seeks to ask online university administrators a few semi-structured interview questions regarding online teaching faculty. It is our hope that you will find this study worthy of your participation. There are no identified risks from participating in this research.

The interview is confidential. You may refuse to participate, as this research is voluntary. The interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete. There is no compensation for your participation and to protect your identity your responses to the interview questions will only be reported in composite form in the writing of my manuscript. The data collected from the interview will be kept in a password-protected computer in my home for three years.

Thank you for consideration. Your participation is greatly appreciated.

Respectfully,

Dina Samora

APPENDIX B

Consent Form

Characteristics of the Effective Online Teaching Faculty: An Administrative Perspective

Dina Lee Samora

Liberty University

School of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study to discover what online administrators perceive as effective facilitation through online teaching faculty. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an online administrator with a supervisory role for the online instructors. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Dina Samora, Doctorate of Education Candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to provide a better understanding of what the online administrator finds imperative in online teaching faculty. The primary research question is:

How do online administrators experience and describe the characteristics of effective, or ineffective, course facilitation of online teaching faculty?

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things:

- Be willing to schedule a teleconferenced interview using a phone. Be willing to have the interview recorded for ease in transcription of data.
- Member-check: I ask that you consider reading my analyzed findings as a follow up review for the purpose of checking the accuracy of the perceptions found, and to verify that I have adequately represented your meanings.
- Total length of interview should not exceed 45 – 90 minutes.
- Member checking should take an hour to review.
- Total length of research process is undetermined but should not last over 1 year. The research process includes the interview, my analysis of the interviews, and then a follow up review (member-check) to include your verification of the accuracy of what you have shared during the interviews. I do not expect this process to last over 3 months.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:

The study has minimal risk, which is no more than you would encounter in everyday life. The most significant risk would be that of hurt feelings from the online teaching faculty who reads the perceptions shared that are less than positive in nature; however, your identity and the identity of your institution will not be disclosed.

Compensation:

Compensation is not offered in the research study; however, I will gladly share my final study results with you, which may help with future policy creation or online teaching faculty hiring practices.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept private and under lock and key on a flash drive or password protected computer. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant or his or her academic institution. Research records will be stored securely and only I will have access to the records.

- The interviews will be recorded; however, names will not be used, nor asked for.
- The name of your institution will not be used, nor your official title. To ensure your protection, and the protection of your institution for which you work, the use of pseudonyms will include institution 1 - 10 and Administrator A - J. For instance, when referring to your institution I may write, "Institution #5 hires online adjunct faculty with certain credentials...." When I refer to you, or your institution, I may write, "Administrator E believes that online teaching faculty facilitates best when..."
- Transcribed data will be entered into a software program on a computer that is password protected.
- No other researcher or person will have access to this information – only the researcher.
- Data will be stored on the computer for one year after the research is complete and the dissertation awarded and then stored on a flash drive under lock and key for 2 more years.
- Data will be deleted from the software after three years.

- All digital recordings will be erased as soon as transcribed into the software program.
- If you withdraw as a participant, all recordings will be deleted immediately, and all transcripts will be shredded (destroyed).

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Dina Lee Samora. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact them her at 4910 East Valley Lane, Rimrock, AZ, 86335. Phone: 928-567-4363, Email address: dlsamora@liberty.edu.

You may also contact the Advisor of this Doctoral candidate at: kdgossett@liberty.edu

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, Dr. Fernando Garzon, Chair, 1971 University Blvd, Suite 1582, Lynchburg, Virginia 24502 or email at fgarzon@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

I agree to have my voice, from the interview, audio-recorded and transcribed.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C

Interview Questions

1. What type of institution are you reporting on? (private, state, for-profit, etc.)
2. How long have you been an administrator in higher education?
3. How long have you been in a leadership role pertaining to online adjunct faculty?
4. Please provide as much detail as possible about the responsibilities of your administrative role in your university.
5. What is your definition of an online adjunct?
6. What is the profile of your faculty?
 - Degree level?
 - From what type of institution? (private, state, for-profit, online, etc.)
 - How long ago was last degree earned?
 - Experience teaching face-to-face, or just online?
 - Have faculty published? Faculty currently performing scholarly research?
 - How many courses/students is Faculty teaching at once?
 - Faculty teaching at more than one school/university?
7. How do you recruit faculty?
8. What type of initial training is provided for faculty?
9. What is your rate of faculty turnover?
 - Is that rate acceptable to you? (not used if rate was acceptable)
 - Why do you think the rate is X? (not used if rate was acceptable)
 - What do you think would have a positive or negative impact on the rate?
10. How much interaction, and what kind, is expected between faculty and students?
11. Do you have a mechanism to review substantive feedback provided to students by faculty?
12. Is course content standardized, or does faculty provide their own content?
13. What is the most common complaint among the faculty?
14. Please describe the ideal online classroom.
15. Thinking of your most *effective* adjunct faculty members, describe them in as much detail as possible.
16. What are the three most important attributes of an online faculty member that you value the most?
17. Thinking of your most *ineffective* adjunct faculty members, describe them in as much detail as possible.
18. What are three biggest problem areas that could easily cost someone their job as an online faculty member?
19. Share a specific event that ended with the reduction of an online teaching faculty member.
20. What do you believe is the most important success factor in online education?
21. What do you find is the most important component in retaining students?
22. In your opinion, what is the greatest detriment to student retention?
23. Are you familiar with the term “Transactional Distance?”
24. Describe your perception of dialog in the online classroom environment.

25. Thinking about your leadership of online adjunct faculty, what would you change if you could?
26. If it were an ideal online higher education world, describe what you see concerning your adjunct faculty.
27. What does the future of the online teaching faculty look like to you?
28. Would there be documentation that you are able to provide to support what you have shared with me today?