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Relationships Among Student Type, GPA, and Retention Within a Proprietary Career College

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

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Walden University
2016

Abstract

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by

Steven Charles Parker-Young

MSM, New England College, 2009

BA, University of Massachusetts - Boston, 2006

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Researchers have suggested that the college student population in the United States is evolving and the number of nontraditional students is rising. New student retention and academic success were ongoing concerns at a college in the southern United States and the association of those outcomes with instructional delivery model and student type was not known. In an effort to improve new student outcomes, this study examined differences in first-quarter student retention and academic success, as measured by GPA, for courses taught strictly online or on campus, and for traditional versus nontraditional students. Guided by Bean and Metzner's conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition, this quasi-experimental study used data from 1,304 first-quarter students divided into 4 equal groups (n = 326). Groups were compared for GPA using 2x2 factorial ANOVA and for retention using chi-square tests of association. Findings showed no significant differences in retention or in the interaction between instructional delivery model and student type for GPA. A significant difference in GPA between traditional and nontraditional students, with the latter earning higher grades, was found. In addition, a bimodal grade distribution was identified in all 4 sample groups indicating the highest frequencies of students earning As and Fs, suggesting that new students either do very well or very poorly academically. Based on these findings, a white paper and presentation for campus officials was developed. The implementation of rubrics in all campus-based courses along with continuous evaluation of student performance was recommended. Positive social change may result from the use of rubrics with the new student population by increasing consistency of grading and improving understanding of expectations which may lead to better student outcomes over time.

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Section 1: The Problem

Student retention is a problem in higher education institutions. Empirical evidence has shown that attrition at any time during the program of study creates a loss for the student, campus, and the local economy (Johnson, 2012). Colleges and universities experience decreased revenue and lower enrollments as attrition rates increase, which can be costly to the institution and discouraging to the student (Johnson, 2012; Sbrega, 2012). In the last 10 years, enrollment in college online courses has tripled and continues to rise steadily (Stack, 2015). According to Allen and Seaman (2013), the prevalence of enrollment in online courses has increased from 9.6% in fall 2002 to 32.0% in fall 2011 based on the percent of total enrollment. The introduction of online courses has become a core strategy used by many community colleges and universities in response to a shift toward remote learning in higher education (Layne, Boston & Ice, 2013).

Today, more than 30% of all college students enroll in online course, and greater than half of those students attend community colleges (Wladis, Wladis, & Hachey 2014). Online education is expected to continue growing in response to an explosion of higher education enrollments as more students seeking alternative pathways to a college degree (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Due to the high cost of student attrition to both the institution and the student, there is a strong need to identify potential persistence issues associated with online courses to direct targeted support toward improving the problem (Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2013).

From research, Carr (2000) found that retention rates among students in online courses can be 10-15% lower than retention rates among students taking a similar course on campus. Regardless of the popularity of online courses, retention rates are still reported as several percentage points below similar campuses taught on campus (Frydenberg, 2007). According to Allen and Seaman (2010), although the number of students taking online college courses has surpassed one out of four students, retention will continue to be an important issue.

The demographic makeup of today's college students is evolving as adults enter or return to college at an older age. The current student population across college campuses is changing due to many adults deciding to start or return to college at an older age (Kulavic, Hulquist, McLester, 2013). Though the issue of student retention may be a problem in online courses overall, the issue may be influenced additionally by the changing demographics of today's higher education institutions and the increase in nontraditional students.

Factors often used to identify nontraditional students include aged 23 years and above, have returned to school after an extended break in enrollment from high school or college, and commute to and from campus while holding a part- or full-time job and managing family and other responsibilities (Markle, 2015). According to Markle (2015), one-third of undergraduate students enrolled in higher education are considered nontraditional. Markle stated that nontraditional students have significantly lower graduation rates than traditional students. Nontraditional students often juggle multiple

roles that compete for time and attention, such as the domains of family, work, and school (Markle, 2015). The student becomes conflicted when the attempt to meet the demands of one role is negatively impacted by the demands of another (Markle, 2015). A combination of factors may have a greater impact on first-time students who have little to no previous postsecondary education, and the problem may impact student outcomes among those who take strictly online courses, strictly campus courses, or a combination of online and campus-based courses.

According to Croxton (2014), there are external, internal, and contextual factors that can influence a student's ability to succeed in a college environment. External factors may include family obligations, time constraints, lack of workplace support, and finances (Croxton, 2014). Internal factors are due predominantly to a lack of motivation, self-regulation, and determination (Croxton, 2014). However, the context of the online learning environment, as opposed to campus-based courses, can also be a factor. Issues including inadequate computer skills, lack of interactivity, feelings of isolation, and the absence of the instructor's physical presence can all negatively impact student success (Croxton, 2014). The problem of retention of students during the first academic term and the second at a for-profit institution is understudied and given that students take either all online, a combination of online and on campus, and all on campus, the problem needs to be studied further to determine areas for improvement in retention, academic success, or both.

Definition of the Problem

According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education (2015), the regionally accredited for-profit college to be studied is a moderately sized institution located in south central United States that enrolls approximately 200 students each full academic quarter and roughly 100 students during each midsession start. The total number of active students consistently hovers around 1,070 students (personal communication, campus registrar, March 17, 2016). Due to limited classroom space and a low number of course offerings each quarter, particularly during midsession starts, the college is involved in a partnership with an online campus owned by the parent company (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, July 15, 2015). All affiliated campuses owned by the same company have a consortium agreement with the online campus to offer its courses to the campus-based schools.

The mission of the college is to prepare students for entry-level positions in the fields of culinary, fashion, design, and media (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). There are no specific requirements to take classes online, with the exception of having access to a computer. However, the college recently designed and implemented a readiness survey that students who are interested in taking online courses must complete prior to their start to identify potential risk factors. The survey is not comprehensive and does not preclude students from taking online courses (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, July 15, 2015). The survey acts as an

indicator of potential problems the new student advisor gives to the student's academic progress greater attention during their first academic quarter.

Unlike courses offered on campus that run the full 11-week academic quarter, online courses are completed in half that time. Within each 11-week academic quarter, there are two sessions of online courses that run 5 ½ weeks each. All general education courses, as well as several of the programmatic courses, are offered in the online format (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, July 15, 2015). Many classes offered on campus are unavailable in the online format.

Preliminary analysis by campus administration determined that students who take online courses during their first academic quarter earn failing grades and drop their courses at a much higher percentage than students who attend courses on campus (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, July 10, 2015). This finding is mirrored by national data which suggest that students taking distance education courses experience between a 10%-20% increase in attrition rate over students who attend classes on campus, and that the learning environment does impact students' completion rates (Ashby, Sadera, & McNary, 2011). Preliminary data collected during the analysis at the proprietary college demonstrated that the academic success rate, as determined by a grade point average of 2.0 or better, and the retention rate are in line with the findings of Ashby et al. (2011).

The dean of academic affairs constructed a comparison of cumulative averages for the past three quarters. The data show a 69% success rate for campus-based classes

compared to a success rate of 54% for online courses (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, July 10, 2015). The comparison for academically unsuccessful grades shows 20% for campus courses and 35% for online. The average for withdrawals between the two cohorts is 11% each. This study identifies academic success as earning a grade point average (GPA) of a 2.0 or better in each course, which is also the threshold for determining student academic progress (SAP). The SAP regulation, established by the Department of Education to maintain eligibility for financial aid, requires a student who fails to meet the SAP minimum of a 2.0 GPA and an incremental completion rate (ICR) of 66.67% to be either put on academic probation or dismissed from the institution (personal communication, campus registrar, March 7, 2016). Incremental completion rate is the percentage of credit completion from the total number of credits attempted. For example, a student who attempts 12 credits during an academic quarter, but passes only nine credits, will have a 75% ICR.

First academic quarter retention rates have become a concern among students who begin classes at both the start of the quarter and during midsession. The college has documented increasing first quarter attrition in each of the programs over the last 5 years (personal communication, campus registrar, August 2, 2015). In addition, it appears that letter grades and grade point averages are lower among students who take online courses. Addressing this concern is of primary importance to administration and faculty at the for-profit college, and although completion of their program is the student's goal upon enrollment, students are leaving prior to completion. The intent is

for students at the career college to seek meaningful employment opportunities upon completion from their program of study (personal communication, director of career services, August 4, 2015), but they are unable to achieve that goal due to early withdrawal either by personal choice or poor academic standing.

Wolff, Wood-Kustanowitz, and Ashkenazi (2014) found that students who are underprepared or possess poor academic skills face magnified difficulties as a result of online course enrollment, and should be required to address their academic weaknesses and reduce the number of risk factors to improve online success. Although the number of high school graduates is increasing and causing a boost in the number of traditional college students, many of them lack the proficiency to perform college-level academic work (Castillo, 2013). The nontraditional student population also tends to be more diverse, particularly in relation to writing skills, than the traditional-aged student population and this diversity is evident in online course assignments and grades (Melkun, 2012). Since many nontraditional students have been out of school for years or even decades, their writing skills have often atrophied, which impacts the quality of assignments and ultimately their grades (Davis, 2006). It appears both traditional and nontraditional students experience risk factors that could potentially detract from their ability to be successful in online courses, although it is not currently determined if one group experiences greater risk.

The college is seeking methods to support prospective and current students and assist with student progression to increase first academic quarter retention, enhance

academic grades, and increase grade point averages. No conclusive explanation currently exists for the fall in first semester retention rates among students enrolled in online courses. Data have been documented to report decreased retention rates, but efforts to further explore the issue may be timely. Online courses are among the offerings at the college each quarter for students who are unable to attend certain classes on campus at the scheduled time and day, or when a particular course is not being offered on ground. According the dean of academic affairs (personal communication, September 30, 2015), the two times students are most often faced with having to take online courses, whether they feel prepared or not, is during the first quarter and the last quarter of their program. Students close to graduation have few course needs remaining, and those courses may not be available every quarter. The two alternate options for pending graduates are independent study and online courses. New students have few course options, because many courses include prerequisites. In addition, seating may be limited the closer it gets to the end of the prior term due to current student enrollment. The reason a student enrolls in an online course may vary, as does whether the student wants to take courses online or feels there is no alternative but to take a course online.

Poor retention and academic success in online courses appear to be ongoing problems at the institution to be studied. Additionally, it is not clear what impact student type (i.e. traditional vs. nontraditional) has on retention and academic success. There appears to be a lack of empirical evidence to show whether traditional or nontraditional

students perform better and persist in their program, and whether the learning platform has a significant impact on student success. A quantitative, quasi-experimental designed study could help elucidate the efficacy of integrating new interventions for online courses preparation for improved retention and academic success if significant differences among groups are found.

Rationale

Evidence of the Problem at the Local Level

First semester retention in all programs is a primary focus of concern at this proprietary college (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, August 10, 2015). Decreasing retention rates should be recognized and addressed by academic leaders when trends become problematic. New student enrollment remains steady at the college; however, the student attrition rate across all programs comes close to the rate of enrollment. The most noticeable number of student withdrawals occurs during midsession starts, when students enroll in classes that run for only 5 ½ weeks rather than the 11-week length of a full academic quarter.

Online courses offered at the college are available through another campus affiliated with the parent company, which offers strictly online programs. Participating campuses in the online offerings completed a consortium agreement with the hosting campus, which allows students to take a variety of general and programmatic courses pursuant to stipulations within the contract (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, August 10, 2015). Teachers and administration at the online campus

are unfamiliar to students, who only have virtual access to the academic team. Student academic success is the responsibility of the online campus, but each home campus is responsible for following up with students with attendance or grade issues. Students do not receive any contact from their home campus, unless it is regard to poor attendance in the online course (personal communication, new student academic advisor, August 10, 2015).

College administration identified problems with both retention and academic success among students who take online courses and drafted a survey that students who demonstrate an interest in online courses must take at the time of admissions. However, students who do poorly on the survey are still allowed to enroll in online courses, but must first be advised by the academic dean to ensure the understanding that they may have difficulty (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, August 10, 2015).

There is limited course availability on campus each quarter due to an effort by the parent company to reduce teaching dollars. Many students choose to enroll in online courses based on the low number of applicable courses available on campus or that are offered at times that conflict with other obligations, even though these students state their concern at the time of registration (personal communication, new student academic advisor, August 12, 2015). This study assisted in the identification of areas that need interventions and processes to improve the current problem with retention and academic success in online courses.

Evidence of the Problem from the Professional Literature

Higher education institutions are faced with the challenge to not only figure out how to increase student engagement but also how to engage the different student populations across campus. Most college campuses across the country are comprised of two major groups of students, traditional and nontraditional students (Wyatt, 2011). The traditional college student is typically between 18- and 24-years-old, while nontraditional students are older and the fastest growing population among higher education enrollments (Wyatt, 2011). Based on National Center for Educational Statistics (2009) for 2017, projections indicate that enrollment of all college students will increase from 18,632,000 to 20,080,000 across the United States. Nontraditional students are expected to total approximately 8,198,000 of those enrollments (Wyatt, 2011). The reasons students may not complete their academic program and earn a degree vary widely (Wright & Wray, 2012). As part of a research study, Johnson (2012) reviewed statistical data from 4-year institutions and community colleges with the intent to quantify variables for unfinished degrees among nontraditional college students. Johnson found that approximately 35% of nontraditional students had withdrawn from college without completion of their program after 6 years. Whether the students voluntarily withdrew or failed, the early departure of students becomes a single point of failure and creates barriers to a sense of accomplishment and employment (Johnson, 2012). The loss of students can be costly to the institution as they face the challenge to meet demands with reduced money and resources (Johnson, 2012).

Students who withdraw from their programs early equate to not only a financial loss for the institution, but also to individuals and businesses in the local community.

The purpose of this research investigation was to determine if there is a significant difference in retention and academic success between traditional and nontraditional students who take courses either online or on campus to identify the need for additional preparation and resources to improve student outcomes among a particular group. The study examined quantitative data collected over the last 5 years through the latest completed academic quarter to explore possible resource options and avenues of support to assist identified students with programmatic completion, improved academic success, and assist to align outcomes with governmental expectations.

Definition of Terms

Attrition. Attrition rates within a higher education institution is the number of students who withdraw from their programs, as compared across one campus or many campuses (O'Keeffe, 2013). According to the American Institutes for Research (2010), the attrition rate amongst first-year college students is between 30 and 50% in the United States.

Cohort. A cohort is defined as a group of persons subjected to the same occurrence or set of occurrences associated specifically with that group (Teti, 2008). Cohorts in this study included traditional and nontraditional students who are enrolled in courses online, on campus, or a combination of online and campus-based courses during

their first quarter of enrollment. The cohort groups will span 5 years with 4 quarters in each year.

Completion. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (2013), completion can be defined as the student's fulfillment of a set of requirements within a program offered by a higher education institution leading to a degree, certificate, or other workforce credential.

Distance Learning. Distance learning is a virtual academic environment that uses the Internet and online technology. In an online classroom, the instructor and student attend from different physical locations. Courses are conducted as either synchronous, which requires the instructor and student to log in at the same time, or asynchronous, which allows both parties the flexibility to contribute on their own time (Shea & Bidjerano, 2013).

Nontraditional Student. Criteria used for the determination of applicable characteristics are taken from the description provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), which include a delayed enrollment to college after high school; part-time enrollment status; full-time employment status; financial independence; and aged 25 years or above. Due to limited available student data in the Student Information System (SIS), this study will determine a student to be nontraditional based on length of time between high school and college, part-time enrollment status, and aged 25 years or above.

Progression. According to Hewitt and Rose-Adams (2012), progression can be defined as the accomplishment of planned academic goals or qualifications within an established time frame.

Retention. Retention with a higher education institution relates strongly to the concerns of student departure, persistence, and attrition. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2010), retention is defined as the continuous enrollment of students from one fall semester to the following fall semester.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in the knowledge obtained through review of archival quantitative data regarding the retention and academic success of new traditional and nontraditional students who enroll in either online or campus-based courses. The evaluation of data allows for an informed interpretation of the relationships among academic success, retention, and online classes taken during the first academic quarter. Knowing the number of traditional and nontraditional students who take online courses during their first quarter at the institution, their GPA, and how many of these students are retained from their first quarter to the next provide only a limited perspective on the link between online classes, academic achievement, and student retention. Results of the study may help identify differences between traditional and nontraditional students in online coursework, and any potential differences among learning platforms, as applicable to for-profit career colleges, and may suggest a need to change the methods and qualifiers used

to schedule first-year students into online classes. The need for additional interventions may be identified to address the varied needs of a diverse population in online courses

Research Questions

The study examined the differences in academic success between traditional and nontraditional students in either of the two methods of instruction, as well as their retention during the first and second academic quarters. The independent variables are the student type, whether traditional or nontraditional, and the instructional cohort of either online or campus-based courses. The two dependent variables are the first quarter academic success, as determined by GPA, and the retention rate during the first and second academic quarter.

RQ1: Is there a difference in GPA between first-quarter traditional and nontraditional students who enroll in courses either strictly online or strictly on campus?

$H_0$1: There is no difference in first-quarter GPA between student type and instructional cohort.

H_a1: There is a difference in first-quarter GPA between student type and instructional cohort.

RQ2: Is there an association between the retention rate of traditional and nontraditional students at the completion of their first academic quarter?

$H_0$2: There is no association between retention rate and student type at the completion of their first academic quarter.

H_a2: A lower retention rate is associated with student type at the completion of their first academic quarter.

RQ3: Is there an association between the retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses?

$H_0 3$: There is no association between retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses.

$H_a 3$: There is an association between retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses.

Review of the Literature

A literature search was conducted through the Walden University online library resources. The following combinations of terms were used in the search for literature: *persistence*, *completion*, *attrition*, *retention*, and *progression*. To refine the number of search results received, the following terms were paired with persistence, completion, attrition, and progression: *student, adult, traditional, nontraditional, college, adult learner*, *higher education*, *career*, *for-profit*, *university*, *first-year,* and *first semester*. These terms assisted in identifying relevant materials in the literature to inform the topic under investigation. The education research databases utilized were engaged through library services at Walden University databases such as: Education Search Complete, and ERIC. Themes from the literature search were formed by emerging themes from the review of literature and presented in the categories of theoretical framework, differences

in enrollment between non-profit and for-profit colleges, governmental regulations affecting for-profit schools, traditional versus nontraditional students, the impact of internet self- efficacy, motivation, student integration, and engagement in their institution.

The issues of first semester retention and academic success, as determined by GPA, in higher education institutions were documented in the literature and examined from a variety of viewpoints. Contributions from previous researchers provided direction for this investigation. However, there is a shortage of literature that compares retention and academic success among traditional and nontraditional first-year students who take either exclusively online courses or campus-based courses in a for- profit career college.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used to drive this study was the application of Bean and Metzner's (1987) conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition during their research with adult learners. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a conceptual model of persistence specific to nontraditional students that narrowed the list of characteristics of nontraditional students by focusing on the differences between traditional and nontraditional students. The primary characteristics identified were age, residence, and attendance. According to Bean and Metzner, the most common difference in attrition between traditional and nontraditional students is a more significant influence the external environment has on the latter. Bean and Metzner directed their primary focus toward external factors occurring in students' life off campus. The drop-out decision

among nontraditional students is based upon four sets of variables identified in the attrition model for non-traditional students developed by Bean and Metzner. According to the model, academic variables, such as the number of study hours, have direct influence over academic outcomes, such as GPA. Academic variables can lead to involuntary dismissal based on poor grades, but there are many factors in voluntary departure from college. Students may decide to drop based on academic variables, or the variables may cause negative psychological variables, such as stress, that lead to intent to leave followed by the actual decision to withdraw from college. External environmental factors may also lead to the progression of intent to leave college to actually dropping from school.

In a student integration model, Tinto (1993) claimed that poor retention is a result of limited or absent interactions between the student and the educational environment, and social and academic integration were responsible for producing stronger student commitment to their college and increased persistence. Using Tinto's student integration model as the rationale, students in online courses offered by an unfamiliar institution with limited interactions with the home college, especially during the first academic quarter when students might need additional socialization, may lead to retention issues.

Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon's (2004) theory of student departure in commuter colleges and universities suggests the combination of economic, organizational, psychological, and sociological factors that influence commuter

students in their persistence through graduation. According to the model by Braxton et al., the theory includes the economic factor of the cost of attendance with two organizational factors, five psychological factors, four sociological factors, and four factors taken from Tinto's retention model including student entry characteristics, initial and subsequent institutional commitment, and academic integration. The combination of the 16 factors form a comprehensive theoretical model that enables a better understanding of student attrition at commuter institutions, particularly the importance of the internal campus environment and off-campus circumstances that influence student persistence.

A significant difference between the nontraditional student attrition models of Braxton et al. and Bean and Metzner (1985) is the description of the academic aspect in the institutional experience of students. Bean and Metzner's model described the academic integration process as a path connecting academic preparedness to academic behaviors and outcomes that leads to student retention. In contrast, the model developed by Braxton et al. described student participation in academic communities as the link connecting academic experience to student persistence in higher education. Braxton et al. suggested that an increase in student participation, involvement, and engagement in academic activities leads to greater retention.

Conceptual Model of Adult Persistence

Bean and Metzner's (1985) conceptual model of undergraduate nontraditional student attrition was combined with Braxton, Hirschy, and McClendon's (2004) theory

of student departure in commuter college and universities by Bergman, Gross, Berry, and Shuck (2014) to develop their own abstract model of nontraditional student persistence in higher education. Bergman et al. studied how adult student persistence is affected by entry characteristics, external environments, and the campus environment. The researchers found that adult education goals, institutional responsiveness, and encouragement from family and friends play important and constructive roles in maintaining enrollment through graduation (Bergman et al., 2014). The only student entry characteristics found to associate significantly with increased persistence were educational goals and the aspiration to earn a higher degree (Bergman et al., 2014). As the educational goal increased from one degree level to the next level, the odds of student retention increased 90% (Bergman et al., 2014). Persistence was found significantly linked to having money for degree completion and to receiving encouragement (Bergman et al., 2014). The odds of persisting increased by 40% among students who felt confident they had enough money to complete their program, increased by 61% among students who received encouragement from their families, yet decreased by 78% among students who felt their employment and course schedules conflicted (Bergman et al., 2014). There was an increase of 63% among students who felt strongly that the institution was responsive to his or her needs (Bergman et al., 2014). Adult persistence in higher education, therefore, is greatly impacted by both internal and external forms of motivation and responsibilities.

Bergman et al. determined that institutions can assist adult students overcome challenges to complete their program by providing a supportive campus environment that responds to the needs of its adult students. The findings of the study suggest that response by the campus combined with an effort to support the adult student outside of campus can positively impact retention and degree completion (Bergman et al., 2014).

Increased College Enrollment and Online Classes

Within the last decade there has been a dramatic shift in higher education toward online courses, which are now offered at most colleges and universities (Layne et al., 2013; Sutton & Nora, 2008; Wladis, Wladis, & Hachey, 2014). Today, more than 30% of all college students enroll in online courses, and online education is expected to continue growing in the years to come (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Increased concerns about student outcomes, which can be measured by course completion and grades, grow at a similar pace as online education (Layne et al., 2013; Wladis et al., 2014).

According to Bady and Konczal (2012), there is an expected increase in the number of future college students who will enroll in for-profit institutions. There was an increase of 235% in the number of students who enrolled in for-profit colleges between 2000 and 2010, which is an increase from 3 to 9.1% across all college campuses (Brady & Konczal, 2012). The number of for-profit institutions made up over 75% of all newly accredited colleges and universities between 2005 and 2010 (Brady & Konczal, 2012). For-profit institutions have existed for more than 300 years in the United States (Morey,

2004), and traditionally provided technical and vocational training below the baccalaureate level.

In the last few decades, there has been a rapid growth in the number of for-profit colleges, and the increase follows the purchase of relatively obscure colleges by national institutions (Kinser, 2007). While for-profit institutions have existed for a long time, there has been tremendous growth in the national corporations with multiple campuses and tens of thousands of students (Kinser, 2007). Students who enroll in for-profit colleges are typically adults and other nontraditional students, and often those who are unable to gain admittance to traditional or non-profit institutions (Breneman, 2006). Students are typically attracted to low-cost and convenience, which comes in the form of classes held during evenings and weekends, classes held online and at other accessible locations (Kinser, 2007). According to Turner (2006), for-profit institutions have also grown in the number of degrees at master's level and above. The growth of enrollment at for-profit colleges can be attributed to several factors, including aggressive recruitment tactics, federal student aid policies, funding for necessary expansion, and the focus on customer service (Turner, 2006).

Two factors may explain the rise in new student enrollments and the expansion of for-profit institutions. The first factor is an increase in the number of nontraditional students entering higher education during the past decade (Cochran-Smith, 2005). For-profit colleges focus on attracting nontraditional students by offering convenient locations, flexible course requirements, and alternative schedules that include evenings

and weekends (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Due to the external commitments of nontraditional students, there is likely less concern with the lack of student housing, athletic teams, or other traditional campus offerings. The second factor is the strategy used by for-profit institutions to minimize expensive programs that require laboratories, experimental equipment, and large physical space while increasing the offering of programs that require less expense (Cochran-Smith, 2005). Programs that are less expensive to offer may be more attractive to for-profit institutions due to the lack of direct federal subsidies, donations, or endowments (Fox Garrity, 2013). For-profit institutions also implement a customer service approach to increase student enrollments, which includes course schedules designed to fit work schedules and convenient locations (Fox Garrity, 2013).

Globalization and the increased demand for higher education from nontraditional students have led to a greater need for online courses and programs (Morey, 2004). According to Pontes and Pontes (2012), nontraditional college students are more likely to experience time and location limitations that conflict with attendance and academic progress, and therefore experience increased rates of withdrawals prior to degree completion and take longer to complete their program. The asynchronous nature of many online courses provides flexibility for student work and personal schedules. Online institutions, and colleges such as the institution in this study, often standardize the curriculum during course development (Pontes & Pontes, 2012). There are both advantages and disadvantages to course and programmatic standardization aside from

cost factors. The main advantage to a standardized curriculum is the perception of higher quality content based on the amount of investment. However, the investment usually results in the restriction on the instructor's academic freedom to deviate from or modify course content based on student needs and to modify instructional methods based on the needs of the student population in the classroom (Morey, 2004).

Reports by National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2012) that focused on both graduation and retention rates found that 20% of all student attrition in non-profit colleges occurs within the first academic year. In contrast, proprietary colleges lose over 47% of students in their first academic year (NCES, 2012). Graduation rates among full-time students at non-profit colleges for 2010 were 53.6%, while graduation rates among full-time students at for-profit institutions during that same period were 32.3% (NCES, 2013).

Governmental Regulation Specific to Nonprofit Institutions

An important consideration impacting for-profit institutions is governmental regulation in terms of student academic success and program completion. The institution being studied is located in an area surrounded by several military bases, and more than a quarter of the student population is using the GI Bill and VA benefits (personal communication, campus registrar, July 17, 2016). This is a concern when developing programs to increase student retention in online courses at that campus. According to O'Malley (2012), the main purpose of for-profit colleges is to make a profit for partners and shareholders, and the institutions do that mainly by securing

federal grants or loans for student tuition in exchange for a college degree and career training that leads to a stable job and income. O'Malley states that education in a for-profit college is a byproduct and not the purpose for their existence.

Among the 14 largest for-profit colleges, the GI Bill, Pell Grants, Tuition Assistance Program, and other government-backed loans accounted for 87% of revenue received (O'Malley, 2012). Military veteran students are particularly attractive customers for proprietary colleges because Post-9/11 GI Bill funds do not count as federal financial aid, and therefore do not adversely affect the 90/10 rule. Under current policy, for every dollar received from GI Bill funds, the institution can receive $9 of federal financial aid (Morris, 2014).

Social and national policies drive the efforts to create an educated workforce and open employment opportunities in a weakened economy. These policies and initiatives have little value if students are unable to complete their program. Gainful employment regulations, issued by the Department of Education on October 31, 2014, became effective July 15, 2015, and seek to protect students by ensuring colleges provide students with quality education and training that can lead to employment that allows students to repay their student loan debt (Meloy, 2015). Gainful employment regulations impact certificate programs, non-degree programs at public and nonprofit institutions, and nearly all programs offered at for-profit colleges (Meloy, 2015). College administrators and faculty have a vested interest in the student's ability to graduate, obtain employment in their career field, and manage their student loan repayments. A

program that is considered as leading to gainful employment is one in which the loan repayment of the graduate does not exceed 20% of discretionary income or 8% of their total earnings (Meloy, 2015). Programs that are unable to meet or exceed this requirement risk losing their Title IV funding eligibility (Meloy, 2015). These legislative policies impact the college being studied greatly due to their student population that consists of more than a quarter of its students using VA benefits. This would provide greater incentive to determine if a significant difference exists between GPA and retention among traditional and nontraditional students who take all online, all campus-based, or a combination of online and campus-based courses during their first quarter.

Traditional Versus Nontraditional College Students

Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) reported that there is still a lack of research that focuses on nontraditional students. Volokhov (2014) found that an increasing amount of nontraditional students are enrolling in higher education institutions, and unique challenges have been identified as these students move toward completing a college degree. However, in 2007, there were approximately 32.3 million adults aged 24 to 64 who had earned college credits, but had not earned a degree and were no longer enrolled in college (Jones, Mortimer, & Sathre, 2007). According to a U.S. Census report, traditional student enrollment numbers declined from 3.4 million to 3.2 million between 2011 and 2012, and those numbers will remain relatively unchanged through 2020 (Weston, 2013). Many nontraditional college students balance their scholastic

requirements with job and family obligations, which can affect class attendance and study time (Volokhov, 2014). The perspective brought to class by nontraditional students is often unique, and boosts the diversity of opinion and insights within the course. The goals and intellects among nontraditional students often differ from traditional students, and are used to inform their approach to college (Donaldson, Graham, & Dirkx, 1999). The needs of traditional and nontraditional students vary based on responsibility, as does their motivation toward college attendance. However, both groups could provide new insight to the other on approaches used in the process of goal achievement.

According to Nelken (2009), nontraditional students often see themselves as employees first and college students second. Although traditional students in higher education may actually be the minority on many campuses, most institutions focus on the younger students and are not necessarily prepared to meet the needs of adult students (Nelken, 2009). Kasworm (2010) affirmed the notion that colleges are more focused on the traditional student and earn their reputation from the younger population. Nontraditional students may participate less in the campus community if they feel like they do not belong due to the college's focus on younger students (Reay, 2002). The resultant feeling of academic alienation and social isolation nontraditional students experience from the college's focus on younger students may lead to institutional shortcomings related to the needs of adult learners (Kasworm, 2010).

The Role of Self-Efficacy and Motivation in Academic Performance

Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as an individual's confidence to organize the necessary skills to perform a specific task and complete it successfully. Similar to Bandura, Zimmerman (1995) found self-efficacy to be an internal belief that a person possesses the ability to execute a particular task. According to Askar and Umay (2001), individuals with a higher level of self-efficacy exert greater effort to achieve a specific task and do not give up easily when encountering a problem. In addition to impacting performance, self-efficacy also affects cognitive processes, motivation, and emotions.

According to Marakas, Yi, and Johnson (1998), individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy are more likely to tackle difficult tasks as challenges, which is an approach that increases motivation, engagement, and persistence. Individuals with a lower level of self-efficacy show weak performance and poor engagement, and abandon tasks quicker (Bandura, 1989). The level of self-efficacy varies on three measurements, which include magnitude, strength, and generality (Bandura, 1997). Magnitude is the level of inner belief an individual has that a task can be completed (Bandura, 1997). Strength is the degree of self-assurance an individual has that various components of a task can be successfully completed regardless of difficulty level (Bandura, 1997). Lastly, generality refers to the degree of confidence one has to

perform a task and apply the same performance skills to other similar tasks, such as in an academic environment (Bong, 1997).

Research conducted by Dobbs, Waid, and del Carmen (2009) provided data that suggest students new to the online platform are significantly less confident than experienced students in the belief that they can complete and earn a good grade in the online course. In addition, new online students have been shown to be less satisfied with their skills and are more likely than experienced students when encountering problems in the online course (Morris & Finnegan, 2009). In addition, the level of skill has been connected to student participation in the online classroom (Dupin-Bryant, 2004).

Regardless of prior computer knowledge, students may be new to learning and communicating in an online classroom setting, which may impact the amount of effort and persistence used when faced with problems and affect retention rates. In contrast, Muilenburg and Berge (2005) found that students who possess higher levels of skill and confidence in using online technology perceive less issues with social interaction, instructor issues, motivation, time, and support in the online classroom than students who did not possess the same skills and confidence. Eastin and LaRose (2000) found a positive correlation between Internet usage, prior experience, and outcomes with the student's level Internet self-efficacy, which is the belief that an individual possesses the required skill set and knowledge base needed to be successful in the online environment. Staples, Hulland, and Higgins (1998) found students with Internet self-

efficacy are able to overcome the fear many new users experience in the online class environment.

Motivation has been shown to be a factor in students' persistence and retention, and the connection students feel to their higher education institution is an important concept to consider when looking at why students may or may not persist at an institution (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012). The differences among goals and intellects of nontraditional students are observed in the students' motivation and study habits.

According to Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007), nontraditional students tend to use intrinsic motivation and focus more on learning subject matter than on earning good grades. In addition, older students enroll in college courses based more on personal interests, while traditional students are more often extrinsically motivated by social and parental expectations (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Students who use intrinsic motivation with a focus on learning as their goal typically display better academic coping and increased determination, and take a more positive approach toward coursework (Eppler & Harju, 1997). Bye, Puskar, and Conway (2007) also found that increased levels of subject matter interest and intrinsic motivation resulted in greater personal well-being. The perception of greater subjective well-being may lead to higher graduation rates and career success.

Justice and Dornan (2001) suggested that older students differ in their approach toward studying, and tend to use a comprehensive approach when learning a subject, while traditional students often focus on the final grade. According to research findings

of Terrell and Dringus (1999), characteristics of strong online students include an independent learning style, self-directed behavior, and an internal locus of control. Intrinsic motivation is developed through an interest and curiosity, and pertains to the student's propensity to seek out and overcome challenges (Deci & Ryan, 1985). In contrast, extrinsic motivation is the tendency to respond to a challenge based on a perceived desirable outcome, such as a reward. Deci and Ryan proposed that intrinsic motivation peaks when students feel competent and self- determining, and perform an activity for its intrinsic satisfactions instead of a separate outcome, such as a diploma or other external need. Ryan and Deci (2000) found that students whose behavior is internally regulated demonstrate more interest, confidence, persistence, better academic outcomes, and possess a better understanding of the material than students who are controlled externally.

Self-efficacy is a motivational paradigm is a person's belief in their competence level, and that he or she can successfully accomplish the required skill or behavior to achieve the task (Bandura, 1977). Students with higher levels of self-efficacy are apt to try harder, be more persistent, adopt and utilize learning strategies, and perform better academically than students with lower self-efficacy (Walker, Greene, & Mansell, 2006; Zeldin & Pajares, 2000; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994). Studies have found a strong relationship between self-efficacy and the mastery of goals (Greene & Miller, 1996; Sins, van Joolingen, Savelsbergh, & van Hout-Wolters, 2008). A high level of self-efficacy was found to predict mastery and show competence, while a lower level

predicts avoidance to avoid showing incompetence (Elliot & Church, 1997). Findings of a study conducted by Martens, Gulikers, and Bastiaens (2004) demonstrated that students with high intrinsic motivation tend to have higher academic success, explore ideas in a given time period, and a greater curiosity leading to explorative behavior. In a comparative study conducted by Redding and Rotzein (2001), which contrasted online learning against classroom learning, online instruction was shown to be highly effective. They reported an increased level of cerebral learning within the online group, as well as a higher level of achievement due to self-selection, instructional design, and motivation characteristic of adult students. Online students typically possess higher intrinsic motivation and appear to have higher levels of self- efficacy and motivation, and are willing to engage in learning and approach more difficult tasks (Wighting, Jing, & Rovai, 2008).

Studies conducted of online college students found that the level of participation among students in which they would post in the online discussion forum of an asynchronous course had a significant relationship with the students' level of motivation (Xie, DeBacker, & Ferguson, 2006; Xie, Durrington, & Yen, 2011). The findings suggested that there were higher participation rates among students with higher levels of intrinsic motivation. The frequency of students' posting participation was also found to be influenced by motivation (Xie, 2013). The extrinsic motivation of the course requirements were found to influence positive participation in the discussion

forum, and intrinsic motivation was determined to be the influence over non-participation.

The Role of Social Integration in Academic Performance

Tinto's (1993) model of longitudinal departure acknowledgds that students enter college with a variety of backgrounds, prior education, skills and abilities, intentions, and commitments. However, Tinto believed that students dropped out of college as a result of experiences that occur after matriculation than before entry into the institution, which include academic and social contact with faculty and other students. Such contact typically occurs in the classroom, as well as outside the classroom through extracurricular activities and informal peer interactions. Retention is strengthened through satisfactory academic and social integration experiences. Poor integration and retention problems may result from unsatisfactory experiences of adjustment, academic difficulty, disagreement, isolation, and possible external forces. Tinto found the process of integration as the key to decisions of retention and persistence, and the mechanism of the decision to withdraw through its effect on intentions and commitments. Tinto defined intentions as goals, such as to earn a degree or occupation. He defined commitments as the willingness to work toward the goal in that particular institution.

Tinto's (1987, 1998) theory of departure from an institution of higher education is based on student-institution fit with a focus on two processes of integration. The first process is academic integration, which is impacted by the student's academic performance and the positive or negative interactions with faculty and staff. Social

integration, the second process, is affected by the student's involvement in extracurricular activities and interactions with fellow students. Other factors that existed prior to enrollment, such as background, skills and abilities, and previous education, as well as the student's intentions and goals, can influence the decision to complete an educational program. Since it is possible for a student's commitment to change over time, Tinto (1998) concluded that involvement matters, and the intent to persist increases as the student becomes more academically and socially involved with the campus. However, nontraditional students are less likely to value involvement and interaction than traditional students (Terenzini, et al., 1994; Rendon, 1994). In addition, involvement and interaction with the institution may influence the completion rate less among nontraditional students than traditional students.

Bean and Metzner (1985, 1987) found nontraditional students to be influenced less by social integration, and greater by the quality of education received from the institution and the encouragement from their network of personal supporters. Learning outcomes and interaction with faculty and staff as part of positive academic integration, as well as having the necessary time and finances required of a college education, are all important factors among nontraditional students (Rovai, 2003). However, the positive influence academic integration has on the student's decision to persist can be negatively impacted by an insufficient amount of time or money needed to continue (Henry & Smith, 1993). The reasons adults pursue higher education typically vary from traditional- aged students, such as to learn a new trade or acquire the knowledge to

advance professionally. Nontraditional students are perhaps more focused on completing their program and learning necessary skills and less focused on socialization. Nontraditional students often enter college with a support network of family, friends, and coworkers already in place, so focus is more on coursework than the social aspects of the institution (Ashar & Skenes, 1993). Findings from a study of community college students conducted by Grosset (1991) determined that traditional college students believed integration to be more important than did traditional students. Grosset found the acquisition of study skills crucial for academic success to be the best indicator of attrition among nontraditional students, while an important predictor for attrition among both groups of students included cognitive and personal growth.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) combined three constructs as a learning model specifically developed to examine student experiences in online learning. The framework of the CoI model examines the combination of both the online experience and face-to-face learning through computer conferencing. Each construct of the model is interrelated to the others to establish the foundation for the student's overall experience in higher education. The first construct, social presence, is the ability of students and faculty to project themselves socially and emotionally in a community of inquiry (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999). Social presence is further divided into three categories in the online environment consisting of emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion (Garrison et al., 2000). Teaching

presence is the second construct, which includes developing, managing, and facilitating higher-order learning (Garrison et al., 2000), and is considered to bind social and cognitive presence together (Rourke et al., 1999). According to Rourke et al. (2000), teaching presence includes designing and managing learning sequences, providing subject matter expertise, and facilitating active learning. Common complaints often reported in online learning related to teaching presence are issues with instructor availability (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). The third construct, cognitive presence, is the process of constructing knowledge and utilizing critical thinking while moving from triggering events and exploration to the integration of ideas and resolution (Garrison et al., 2000).

In their psychological model of college student retention, researchers Bean and Eaton (2000) focused on student retention rather than withdrawal to explain relationships found in Tinto's model. They believed that students are psychological beings and issues that arise from a sociological standpoint play a lesser role in the decision to persist. Bean and Eaton argue that the student's psychological perception determines that importance of the social environment.

Findings from the National Study of Student Engagement (NSSE) and Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), along with other programs and policies focused on the developmental needs and environmental factors of college students, typically focus only on traditional students (Donaldson, Graham, Kasworm, & Dirkx, 1999). Young adult students often have the ability to live on

campus, attend classes full-time, get involved with extracurricular activities, network with faculty outside of the classroom, and join peer group programs and activities (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). The abilities of most nontraditional students is in complete contrast to those of traditional students, because typical adult college students are unable to be extremely involved in campus life due to family and work obligations, among other factors. Nontraditional students often report their sense of engagement is acquired through academic learning in the classroom rather than social experiences (Kasworm, 1995; Kasworm, Polson, & Fishback, 2002). According to Kasworm et al. (2002), nontraditional students appreciate being recognized as adults, and being allowed to create and discuss connections between their experiences and the academic content. Most adult students identified the development of strong connections with a faculty member that were established in the classroom, as well as interpersonal connections among peers, but stated a lack of time and interest in extending participation beyond the classroom. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) found that the development of relationships with faculty members and other students has the greatest influence on the academic experiences of nontraditional students.

In a study conducted by Southerland (2010), it was found that nontraditional students are typically less involved in extracurricular and social activities, and do not experience as much support from the campus environment due to their outside focus and obligations. Price and Baker (2012) determined that nontraditional students integrate socially and academically in the classroom, but are less engaged in college

than traditional students. Gilardi and Guglielmetti (2011) found that nontraditional students acquire greater meaning through the learning experience, and use fewer college services than traditional students. In a study of reentering college students (Donaldson, Graham, Martindill, & Bradley, 2000), the classroom proved to play a crucial role in the development of relationships among students through the formation of informal learning communities and interpersonal relationships with other students. Instructors and peers can assist adult learners create connections between their real-world experiences and prior knowledge to what is being taught in the classroom, which is both helpful and motivating (Donaldson et al., 2000). In addition, a meaningful learning paradigm includes class discussion of topics and small group projects, and students discover knowledge with the coaching guidance of the instructor (Donaldson et al., 2000).

During their study of an online master's program, Willging and Johnson (2004) determined that no significant reason for dropping out of an online course existed and explanations given were similar to the ones provided for dropping campus-based courses. Based on their findings, the researchers concluded that issues considered unique to the online environment, such as technology and lack of socialization, were not causes for student attrition. A similar study conducted by Terry (2001) found that though online courses typically had higher enrollment in an online MBA program, certain courses had higher attrition that the same course taught in the classroom. Some researchers found that technical issues and time demands from obligations outside of

college caused much of the student retention problem (Jones, Packham, Miller, & Jones, 2004; Russo & Benson, 2005). Many online students drop courses due to obligations of family, work, and school because they feel it is the only alternative when dealing with the situation (Diaz, 2002). Students often reason that they can return when they have enough time to focus on the class and apply themselves to learning

Implications

Many factors contribute to poor student retention, including poor quality of interactions in the online classroom, internal and external support, and self-discipline. According to Jaggars (2011), retention rates are lower among students enrolled in online college courses due to the feeling of isolation, a relative lack of structure, and a lack of support in the online classroom. Students who fail or withdraw from online courses are less likely to enroll in another class online during future academic terms (Jaggars, 2011).

Evidence found in the review of literature indicates a further need to design a method by which higher education institutions can improve poor retention rates and academic success in online classes based on student type and learning environment. This study seeks to determine if significant differences exist in retention and academic success between traditional and nontraditional first-year students who take either online or campus-based courses. Interpretation of data collected may indicate a need for the creation of a preparatory program designed to assist students in completing their online courses successfully, and the possible redesign of the online learning environment. In effect, the findings from this study may bolster a change in culture by providing data to

campus administrators, instructors, and students about methods to increase retention rates and academic success among the different student populations planning to enroll in online courses.

Summary

Online courses are not a new phenomenon in higher education. Distance learning began as a derivative of correspondence courses offered an alternative to attending a brick and mortar campus. Since then, the introduction and growth of the Internet has made online classes and programs increasingly prevalent across national and global higher education institutions. The information presented in the first section highlights the problem of poor student retention and academic success in online courses experienced by a for-profit college in south central United States, and many higher education institutions that offer online learning options. After introducing the problem at the institution being studied, the rationale with evidence from both the local level and professional was presented, followed by the identification of the research questions and the significance of the study. Next, the literature review provided a detailed discussion of the knowledge surrounding online college courses, student academic success, and retention rates among traditional and nontraditional students. Included in the review of literature were several classic conceptual models that focus on student retention and academic success among nontraditional students, differences between traditional and nontraditional college students, and differences between nonprofit and for-profit institutions.

Section 2: The Methodology

This study examined retention and academic success among traditional and nontraditional students who enrolled in either online or campus-based courses during their first academic term at a for-profit higher education institution. Data were collected from each academic term over the last 5 years.

This section presents the research methodology used in this study to collect and compare data in the form of GPA and retention rates from both traditional and nontraditional students who took either online or campus-based courses within the first academic quarter. The research design and approach subsection identifies the research questions and the corresponding dependent and independent variables. The setting and sample subsection describes the target population drawn from past and present students who have attended the institution being studied. The subsection on instrumentation and materials discusses the data collection method to be used and the collection protocol. The data collection and analysis subsection describes the hypotheses, levels of measurement, and inferential tests. The final subsections of this section describe the ethical protection of participants, the outcomes, and the dissemination of the research findings. Based on the research questions presented in Section 1, this study was designed to test the connections among GPA, retention, student type, and the primary learning environment. The conceptual model of persistence specific to nontraditional students, developed by Bean and Metzner (1985), was employed as the theoretical base

for the research study to assist in the identification of traditional and nontraditional college students.

Research Design and Approach

This study utilized an ex post facto, quasi-experimental research design to determine whether or not a similarity exists between GPA and retention of first-year traditional and nontraditional students who took courses either online or on campus. According to Creswell (2009), an experimental approach is ideal for detecting causal effects of a given treatment. The random assignment of research participants to either the control or treatment group allows the researcher to control extraneous factors that may influence results, which in turn strengthens the internal validity (Creswell, 2009). However, this study includes archival data from the past 5 years, making an experiment impossible.

To approximate the conditions of an experiment, a quasi-experimental approach was employed in instances where an experimental approach is not practical (Creswell, 2009). External factors, which can influence outcomes, could not be controlled since participants were not randomly assigned to groups in a quasi-experimental approach and the study used archival data (Vogt, 2007). A quasi-experimental ex post facto design was specifically selected due to the inability to randomly assign study participants to the individual groups.

Population

Data gathered during this study were drawn from a for-profit career college in the south central United States. This institution offers both face-to-face and online academic delivery methods and offers diploma, associates, and baccalaureate degree programs. The student population is a mixture of traditional and nontraditional students with diverse demographics; however, race and gender were not categorical factors used in the study. According to statistical data provided by the U.S. Department of Education (2015), Hispanics make up greater than 50% of the student population, followed by a 28% White population, with the remaining students falling under other race categories. The number of students enrolled aged 24 years and under is approximately 54%, and males make up slightly more than half the gender population. The marketing and admissions departments work closely with area high schools during college and career fairs to entice new high school graduates to enroll in the institution upon graduation. However, there are a large number of older students who are returning to college later in life with little to no prior college experience.

Over a quarter of the institution's population consists of current and prior military members, due to the close proximity of the campus to many Air Force and Army bases (personal communication, campus registrar, December 5, 2015). Veteran status is determined by the use of VA and GI Bill benefits, whether as the primary military member or a dependent using education benefits. The college has approximately 1,070 enrolled students in total each academic quarter, but only about 10% of those students

regularly enroll in online courses (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, September 5, 2015).

Sample Selection

Participants were assigned to groups based on predetermined characteristics that defined whether they are traditional or nontraditional and the type of learning platform taken during their first academic quarter. The predetermined characteristics used to assign students to traditional or nontraditional groups for this study consisted of the length of time between high school and college, whether full- or part-time enrollment status, and the age of the student at the time of enrollment. Preliminary population numbers taken from each of the four groups showed a disparity between traditional and nontraditional students who took either online or campus-based courses.

Researchers often use stratified sampling as a design technique to ensure sampling includes the different homogenous groups within a population and to increase the level of accuracy in establishing study parameters (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). In this study, sampling began by sorting the population into either traditional or nontraditional students based on length of time between high school and college, whether they attended campus full- or part-time, and the age of the student at the time of enrollment. Only one criterion was necessary for classifying the student as either traditional or nontraditional. The sorting further divided students into those who took strictly online courses or strictly campus-based courses for a total of four groups. Due to the small number of students who enrolled in courses online during their first academic

term, disproportionate stratified sampling was used to select students from the population to ensure there were a comparable number of participants in each sample group. The sample group with the smallest number of total participants was used as the threshold at which all other groups compared in number. Simple random sampling was conducted within each subgroup to reach similar numbers across all subgroups.

In an effort to ensure a fair measure of online and on campus course outcomes in comparison, participants included in the sample must have taken a course that is available both online and on campus. The course material, grading criteria, and expectations of learning outcomes are the same for each course taught regardless of learning platform.

Data were collected from both traditional and nontraditional students who enrolled in classes either online or on campus. Participation in the study included only students enrolled at the institution in the last 5 years. Accessibility to student records was provided through the institution and all applicable student records were examined in the review of data following ethical guidelines for protection of identity.

The disproportionate random stratified sample design prevents inequalities in selection probabilities resulting from sample bias by weighing predetermined factors. However, the size of each stratum within disproportionate sampling is not proportionate or representative to the size in each population (Nnadi-Okolo, 1990). The college used in the study has a significantly larger nontraditional student population, and the number of students who enroll in campus-based courses is also greater than those who enroll

online. A power analysis provides clarification as to the number of students needed in each group in order to determine the minimum sample size required for sufficient power to detect an effect. For this study, a medium effect size of 0.75 with an alpha value of 0.05 and power of .80 requires a minimum of 22 students in each of the four strata (Ott & Longnecker, 2010). However, this study used the maximum number of subjects available for greater power to detect an effect across all hypotheses (N = 1304).

Criteria used for the determination of whether a student is traditional or nontraditional were limited by data collected in the student information system. Common identifying characteristics used to determine a student is nontraditional, such as marital status, number of dependents, and employment status are not collected by the institution at the time of enrollment and were excluded from the student record. Therefore, the determination of a student as nontraditional was based on meeting at least one of the following criteria:

- Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year student finished high school)
- 25 years of age or older
- Attends classes less than full-time

Instrumentation and Materials

All archival data for the study were drawn from the Student Information System (SIS) of the institution under study. The SIS contains all vital statistical information that is reported to the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System for every student who

attends the institution. Academic affairs and the campus registrar are responsible for ensuring that academic data are accurately entered into the SIS following during and at the completion of each academic term. Ethical protection of students was exercised by receiving only specific information needed to conduct the study.

For the purpose of this study, academic success was determined by the students' GPA, which is a based on a scale of 0.0 – 4.0. Poor student retention effects graduation rates and causes a decrease in revenue from students who either drop out or transfer to another college. Retention was determined by whether a student enrolls in the following academic quarter. Data were reviewed to see if the student came back for their second term in a subsequent term rather than attending consecutive quarters. For this study, a student was considered retained if there was an eventual return to the program within two academic quarters.

A tally sheet was used as a guide for data collection, and listed categories of data gathered and the groupings of data within each category. The collection process added to reliability of the study, and the tally sheet was a reliable tool to consistently record data for each participant across all academic quarters. Only the dean of academic affairs collected and inputted archived data from the SIS into the tally sheet, which decreased the variability of interpretation of methods among multiple data collectors, and contributed to continuity during the collection phase. Demographic data collected included: (a) age at enrollment, (b) full- or part-time status, (c) prior education history, (d) GPA, and (e) retention status.

Data Collection and Analysis

As this study sought to evaluate the difference between GPA and retention among traditional and nontraditional in two different learning platforms, the use of archival data represented the most appropriate method for conducting this analysis. I obtained permission for collection and use of student data with written consent by the dean of academic affairs (see Appendix B for the letter of approval).

Because this study used an archival/secondary analysis of data, there was not a requirement for a consent/assent form. The information gathered from the student information system through the institution's normal educational standards review, which is conducted at the completion of each academic quarter, was utilized for this research study. Statistical representation was provided through the data acquired from each academic term.

Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate the demographics and the characteristics of each group in the study. The statistical analysis of data allowed for the exploration of characteristic differences between the groups. The guiding questions for the project study called for an examination of the relationships between collected student demographics (age at time of enrollment, full- or part-time status, and prior education history) and academic data (grades and retention) upon first semester completion. Data collected for the study included a focus on variables analyzed within each main category. A codebook was created to organize the numeric value and categorical designation with each data group (for example, nontraditional – 1,

traditional – 2). Dependent variables were similarly designated a numeric assignment within Statistical Package for Social Science SPSS 21.0 for Windows. The inferential statistics are described per each research question:

Research Question 1

Is there a difference in GPA between first-quarter traditional and nontraditional students who enroll in courses either strictly online or strictly on campus?

$H_0$1: There is no difference in first-quarter GPA between student type and instructional cohort.

H_a1: There is a difference in first-quarter GPA between student type and instructional cohort.

The independent variables for this hypothesis include the student type and the instructional cohort. It could be hypothesized that traditional students entering college immediately after high school, while lacking previous experience and self-discipline, would earn lower GPA scores in online courses than nontraditional students. The dependent variable is the GPA of each group of students. The student information system provided the needed GPA data. A 2X2 factorial ANOVA design was used to analyze the independent and joint effects of two different variables in one single study. In this research study, the effects of student type (traditional or nontraditional) and learning platform (online or on campus) was examined both separately and together as they affect student GPA. The 2X2 factorial ANOVA design helped determine if GPA

differed among student type, learning platform, or the interaction of student type and learning platform.

Research Question 2

Is there an association between the retention rate of traditional and nontraditional students at the completion of their first academic quarter?

$H_0$2: There is no association between retention rate and student type at the completion of their first academic quarter.

H_a2: A lower retention rate is associated with student type at the completion of their first academic quarter.

The independent variable for this hypothesis is the student type of either traditional or nontraditional. The dependent variable is the retention rate of each student group. The retention rate consisted of students who entered into the first academic quarter, and continued into the second academic term. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test was used to compare retention rates between traditional and nontraditional students. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test is appropriate because the sampling method for this study used simple random sampling, the variable under study is categorical, and each level of the categorical variable will have an expected frequency count of at least 5.

Research Question 3

Is there an association between the retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses?

$H_0$3: There is no association between retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses.

H_a3: There is an association between retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses.

The independent variable for this hypothesis is the instructional cohort of either strictly online or strictly on campus. The dependent variable is the retention rate of students from each instructional cohort. The retention rate consisted of students who entered into the first academic quarter, but did not continue into the second academic quarters. The chi-square goodness-of-fit test was used to compare retention rates between both learning platforms.

For this research study, the data collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Science SPSS 21.0 for Windows to determine the statistical significance of the findings as calculated through a Chi-Square test.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

It was assumed that the data collected would be accurate and include all needed data from the time period specified. Classes taught in both online and campus-based formats should use the same course objectives and have the same expected outcomes. Selecting a random sample from each stratum provided a representation of the population in each group in order to make reliable inferences from the findings.

Limitations to the study included uncollected factors from the student information system that aided in more accurate identification of student type, such as financial situation, marital status, number of dependents, and employment status.

There were some delimitations to this study, and therefore the findings may not be applicable under different conditions or in a different academic institution. Because the university is a small, for-profit institution, the findings of this study may not be widely generalized. The samples used in the study were drawn from a limited pool of participants, specifically the low number of students who took online courses at the for-profit career college. The results could have been different if students from more than one campus and geographical location were included in the study, or the research was conducted at a different institution. Another possible delimitation was that the study only used archival quantitative data, which does not give as thorough an understanding of the findings as do qualitative or mixed-method designs. Adding a qualitative component to the study would have been impossible due to the age of the archival data and the varying enrollment statuses of students included in the study.

Findings from the study aided in the interpretation of first semester traditional and nontraditional student academic success and retention at a for-profit career institute. Selection of participants was limited by the number of students in each group, and some academic quarters witnessed a wider spread between the numbers of students who took online versus on-campus courses. The decision to include all academic quarters for the last five years enhanced the data results by providing a greater number of participants.

Limiting data collection to one campus administrator and the principle investigator enhanced the quality and consistency of data results. Results of the study may have the greatest potential for local change, and less potential for influence outside the institution.

Ethical Protection

This study relied on data from archival records that were collected by the institution under study as a normal part of their administrative processes. The protocol for this study was approved by Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), #06-20-16-0415392, prior to the start of data collection. The campus president and the dean of academic affairs of the participating institution granted approval to conduct this study (see Appendix B for the letter of approval). The dean further authorized his staff to make the data available for the study. While the data did include confidential information, such as demographics and other personal identifiers, all references to student name or student identification numbers were removed from the data prior to it being delivered to the researcher. Participants were given random designations prepared by a member of the academic team at the institution under investigation. The data were delivered on a password-protected thumb drive which was returned immediately following the downloading of the data. The thumb drive remained in a locked file cabinet for the duration of the study, and will be held securely for an additional 5 years, at which time it will be destroyed. The completed study was shared with the institution following final approval of the doctoral study and prior to any external publication in the hopes that the information will assist the institution in improving its programs.

According to Babbie (2010), anonymity requires the improbability that collected data could be used to identify a study participant. Confidentiality in a research study is a commitment by the researcher that if the researcher is able to identify a participant through the data collected, he or she will not do publically (Babbie, 2010). Informed consent in this study was not necessary since all data collected was de-identified before being presented to the researcher. A formal debriefing of student participants did not occur, though a presentation of the findings to the campus administrative staff was provided.

The researcher did not have access to participants' personal data; therefore, minimal threat to study participants was present in disseminating the findings. Confidential information including participant name, address, and school location were omitted from any data given to the researcher. The institution, in addition to the parent corporation, was considered de facto a participant in the study due to the chance that its identity could be implicated which could cause potential damage to the reputation of the institution. However, privacy measures were taken to ensure that findings were not traceable to the college, and were written in a way that would not be considered as a negative mark against any higher education institution. Findings were strictly for the identification of potential problems, and the creation of processes to improve academic success and retention among students who take online courses.

Dissemination of Research Findings

The highest standard of ethics was maintained by the researcher, and no false information was misconstrued to either support or refute the hypotheses. The results from the study, as well as the proposed project, were presented to the institution for review and possible implementation. Findings from the study and subsequent recommendations will be presented to administration, academic leadership, and faculty in the form of white paper during the PowerPoint presentation that provides the initial study research questions and the final focus of the project. All stakeholders will receive a copy of the presentation in electronic form for their review and reflection.

Data Analysis Results

A data analysis was conducted using SPSS v. 21.00. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The four sample groups each included 326 students from each of the following categories: traditional online students, nontraditional online students, traditional campus students, and nontraditional campus students, for a total sample of 1304.

Table 1 shows the sample distribution across all four categories used in the study.

Table 1

Sample size descriptive statistics

	Online	On Campus	n
Nontraditional	326	326	652
Traditional	326	326	652
Total	652	652	1304

Research Question 1 Findings

Research Question 1 asked whether a difference existed in GPA between first-quarter traditional and nontraditional students who enrolled in courses either strictly online or strictly on campus. The alternate hypothesis posited that there would be significant differences in GPA earned by both student types and their chosen learning platform. A 2X2 factorial ANOVA design was conducted, and findings did not support the hypothesis.

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics of the independent variables and their influence on student GPA.

Table 2

Mean and standard deviation of earned GPA among independent variables for Hypothesis 1

Instructional Cohort	Student Type	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Campus	Nontraditional	2.6	1.46	326
	Traditional	1.98	1.68	326
	Total	2.29	1.61	652
Online	Nontraditional	2.57	1.35	326
	Traditional	2.21	1.51	326
	Total	2.39	1.44	652
Total	Nontraditional	2.58	1.4	652
	Traditional	2.1	1.6	652
	Total	2.34	1.53	1304

As shown in Table 2, the dependent variable of GPA had the highest mean (M = 2.60) among nontraditional students who took classes on campus with a moderately lower standard deviation (SD = 1.46). The lowest mean (M = 1.98) was found among

traditional students who also took classes on campus, but within that group there was also the most variety in scores (SD = 1.68). The means of the nontraditional students was larger than the means of the traditional students, but less so in the online environment.

Table 3 demonstrates the use of Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances, which tests the null hypothesis that the error variance of the dependent variable is equal across groups. Levene's test was used to determine if unequal variances existed between the sample groups not attributed to the effect of the study, which would indicate significant differences between the sample groups other than the proposed measured trait (Green & Salkind, 2007). The finding that p = .00 means the assumption that the sample groups have equal variances is violated, and there is a significant difference among the four groups.

Table 3

Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Hypothesis 1

F	df1	df2	Sig.
20.34	3	1300	0

Tests of Normality were conducted to indicate whether the data comes from a normally distributed population, which would affect whether the null hypothesis of RQ1 was accepted or rejected. The Tests of Normality show the normal probability distribution among traditional and nontraditional students who enroll in either campus-based or online courses. There is a set of tests for each of the four sample groups. Each set of tests include the Kolmogoriv-Smirnov (K-S) and Shapiro-Wilk tests of Normality. Both tests compare the scores in the sample to a normally distributed set of scores with

the same mean and standard deviation. The distribution is considered non-normal if the test is found to be significant (Oztuna, Elhan, & Tuccar, 2006). The Shapiro-Wilk test is considered better than the K-S test at detecting whether a sample is derived from a non-normal distribution (Thode, 2002). In addition, a frequency distribution (histogram) and a quantile-quantile plot (Q-Q plot) were included to visually check normality. The formation of the histogram provides a visual judgment about whether the distribution is bell-shaped and provides insights about gaps in the data (Peat & Barton, 2005). The Q-Q plot is a visual method for determining if two data sets originated the population with a similar distribution, and plots the quantiles of one data set against the other. Both the expected Q-Q plot and the distribution from normal Q-Q plot are shown for each sample group in the figures below.

The following table and figures are Tests of Normalcy for nontraditional students who took campus-based courses during their first academic quarter. Figures 3-6 provide a visual representation of the grade distributions among all four sample groups.

Table 4

Test of Normality - nontraditional campus students

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[b]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
GPA	0.2	326	0	0.802	326	0

a. NormAssumptionGroup = Campus NonTraditional

b. Lilliefors Significance Correction

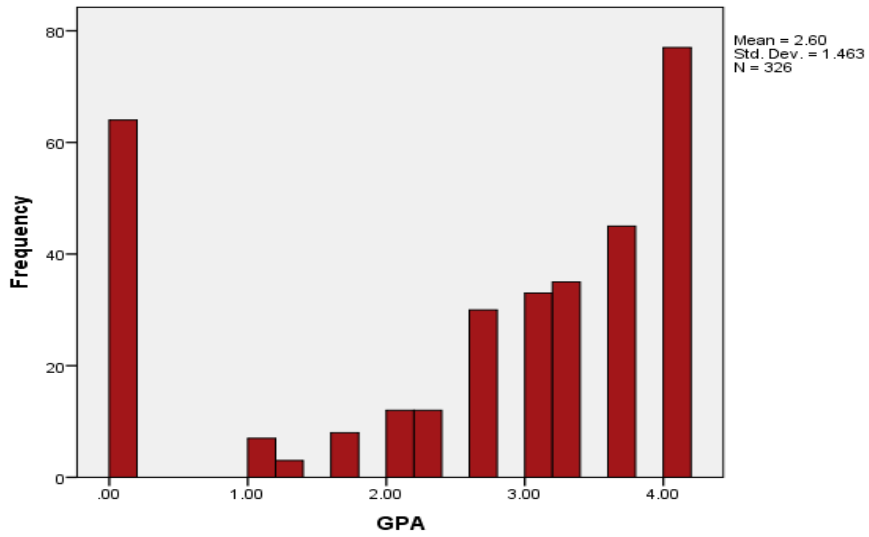

Figure 1. Frequency Distribution - nontraditional campus students

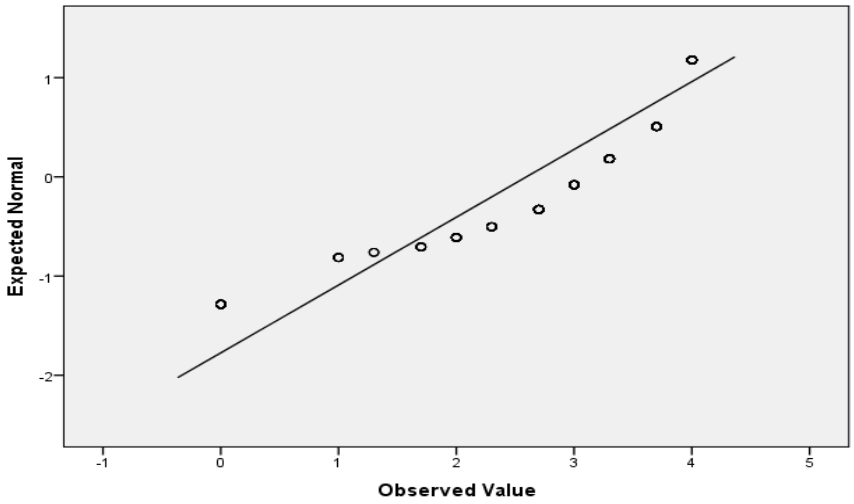

Figure 2. Expected Q-Q plot - nontraditional campus students

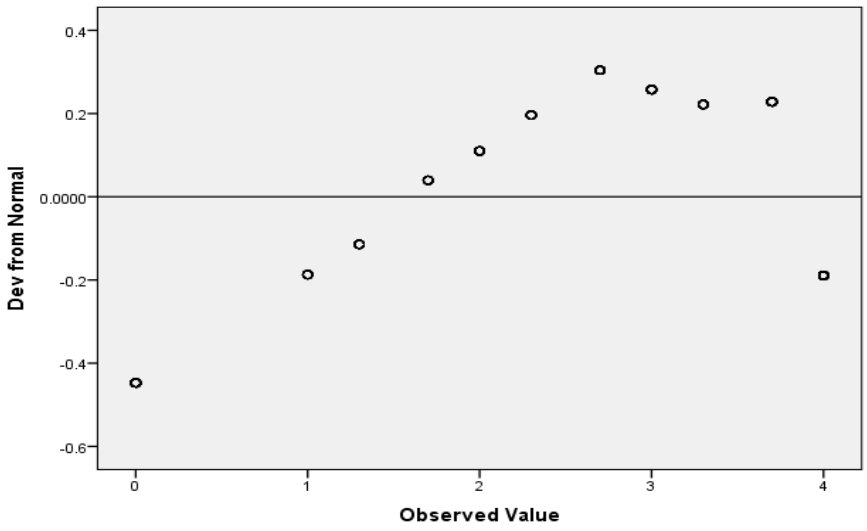

Figure 3. Deviation from Normal Q-Q plot - nontraditional campus students

The following table and figures are Tests of Normalcy for traditional students who took campus-based courses during their first academic quarter.

Table 5

Test of Normality - Traditional campus students

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[b]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
GPA	0.24	326	0	0.8	326	0

a. NormAssumptionGroup = Campus NonTraditional

b. Lilliefors Significance Correction

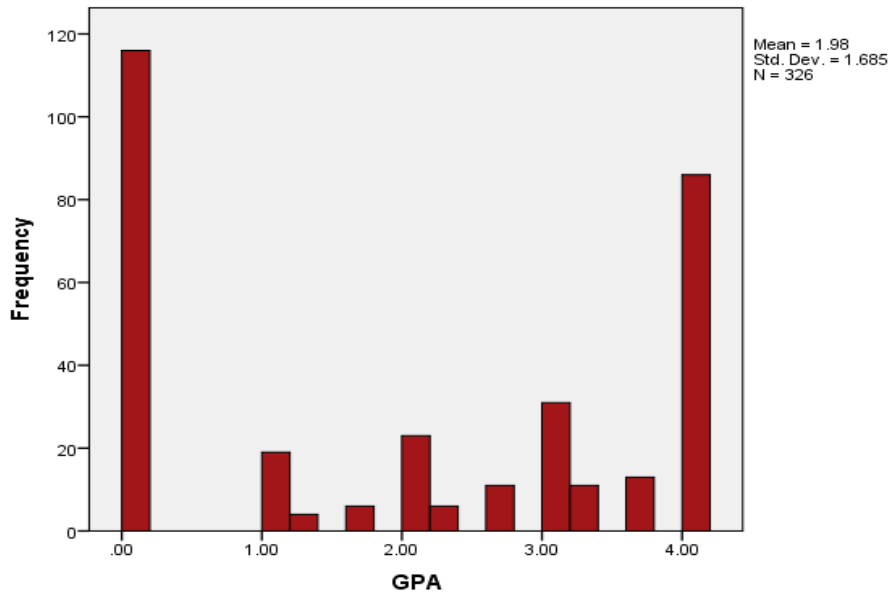

Figure 4. Frequency Distribution - Traditional campus students

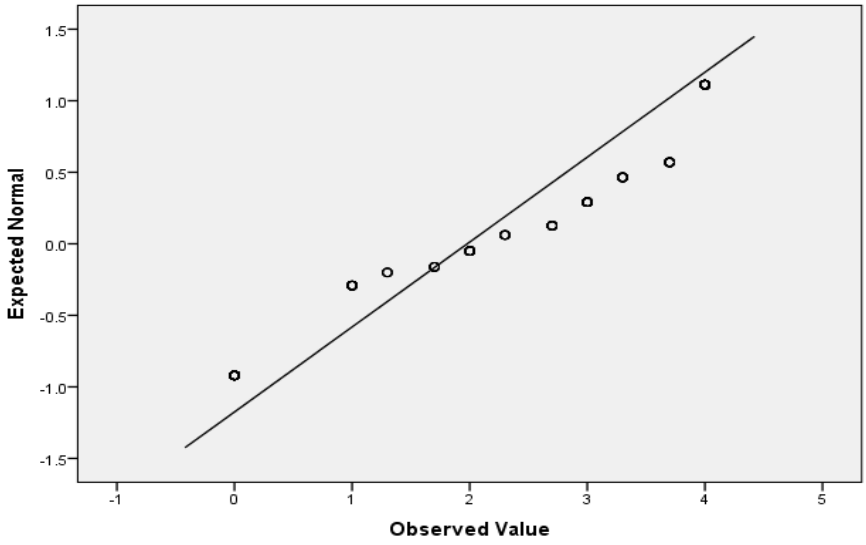

Figure 5. Expected Q-Q plot - Traditional campus students

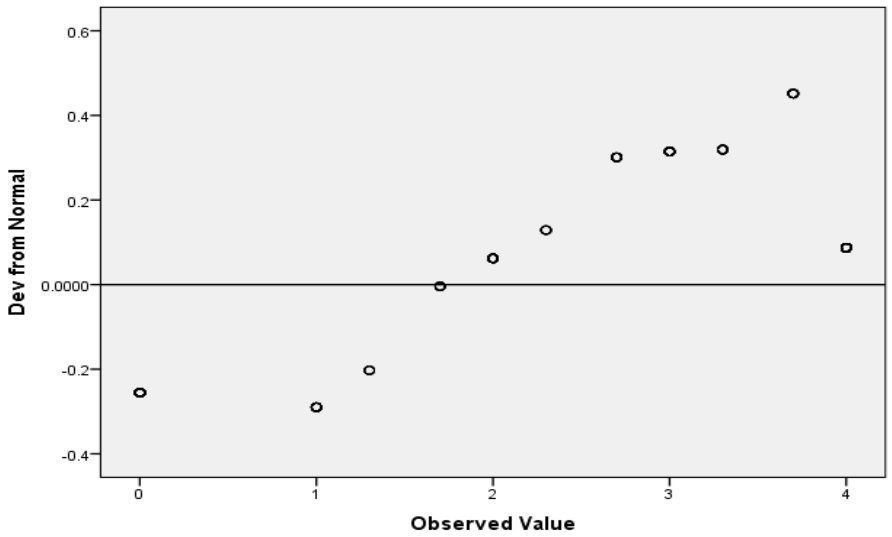

Figure 6. Deviation from Normal Q-Q plot - Traditional campus students

The following table and figures are Tests of Normalcy for nontraditional students who took online courses during their first academic quarter.

Table 6

Test of Normality - Nontraditional online students

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[b]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
GPA	0.17	326	0	0.86	326	0

a. NormAssumptionGroup = Campus NonTraditional

b. Lilliefors Significance Correction

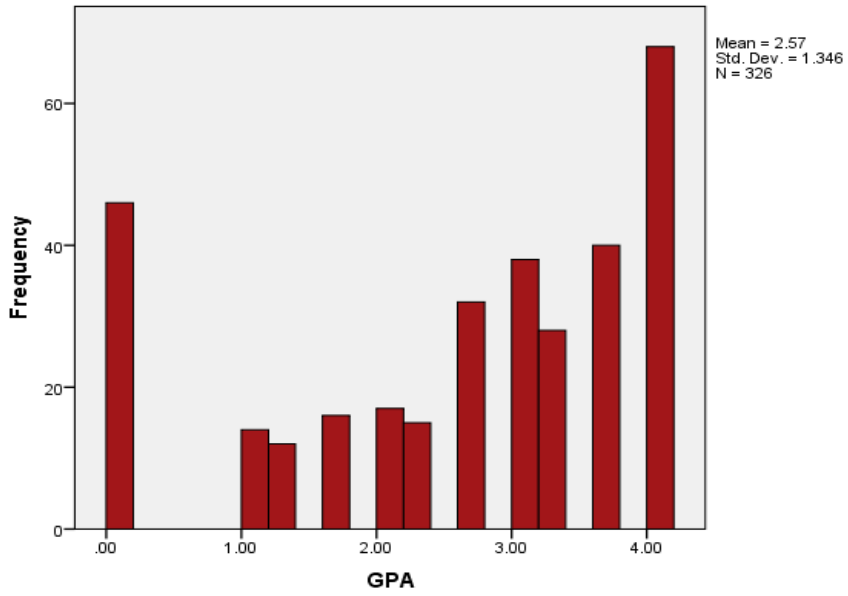

Figure 7. Frequency Distribution - Nontraditional online students

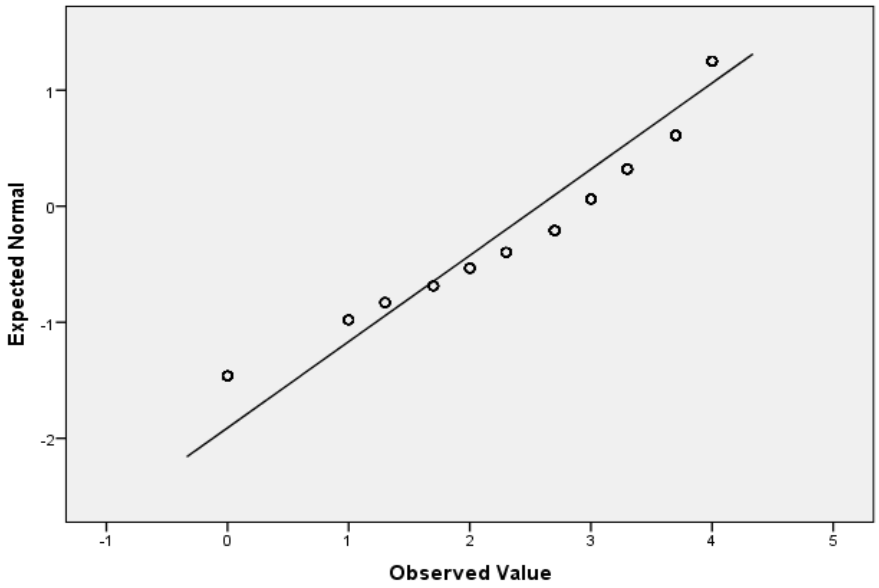

Figure 8. Expected Q-Q plot – Nontraditional online students

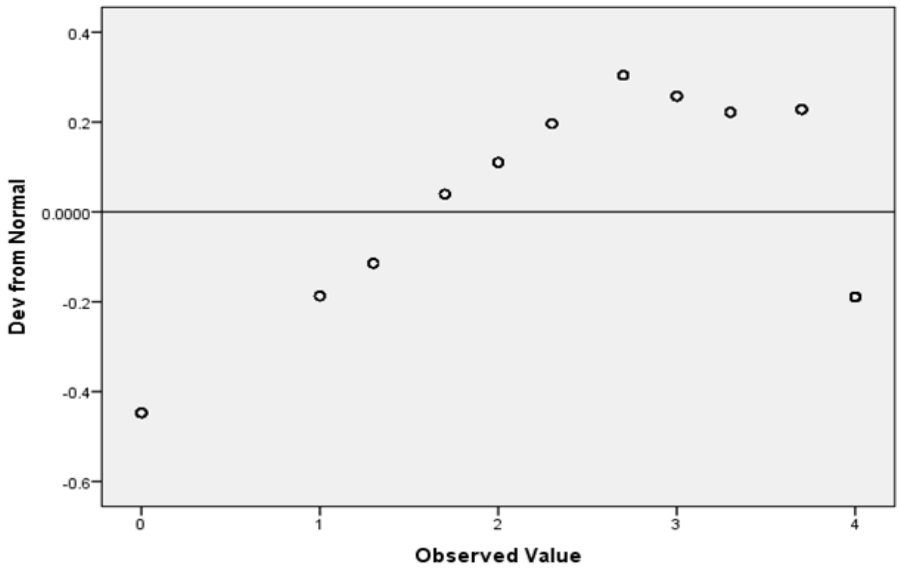

Figure 9. Deviation from Normal Q-Q plot – Nontraditional online students

The following table and figures are Tests of Normalcy for traditional students who took online courses during their first academic quarter.

Table 7

Test of Normality - Traditional online students

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[b]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
GPA	0.18	326	0	0.86	326	0

a. NormAssumptionGroup = Campus NonTraditional

b. Lilliefors Significance Correction

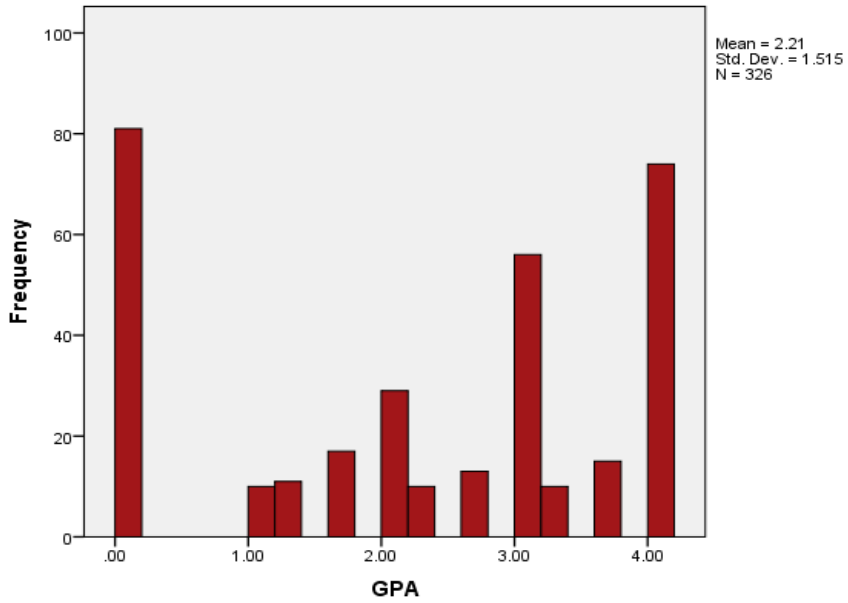

Figure 10. Frequency Distribution - Traditional online students

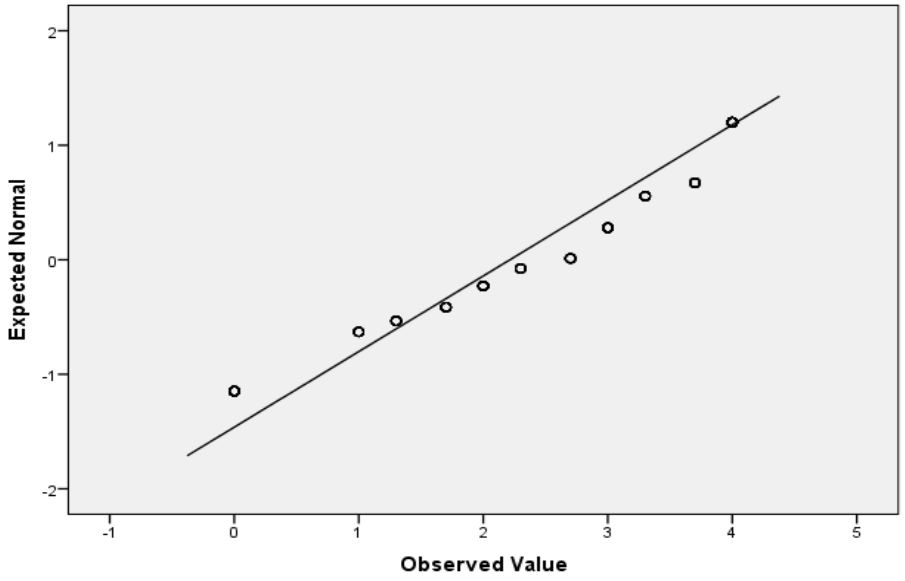

Figure 11. Expected Q-Q plot – Traditional online students

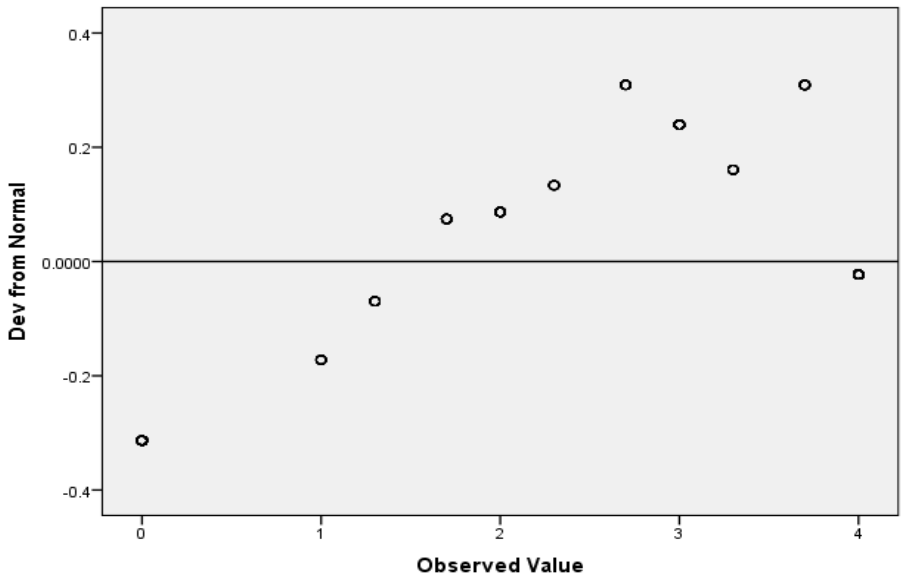

Figure 12. Deviation from Normal Q-Q plot – Traditional online students

Table 8 shows the frequency table for GPA earned in the 5-year time period by traditional and nontraditional students in both campus-based and online courses. Based on this information, 66.67% of all students earned a grade of C or better, which is considered academically successful by this study. Note the identification of high numbers of students who either earned an A or an F across all four groups.

Table 8

Frequency, percent, valid percent, and cumulative percent of earned GPA across all four sample groups

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	307	23.5	23.5	23.5
	1	50	3.8	3.8	27.4
	1.3	30	2.3	2.3	29.7
	1.7	47	3.6	3.6	33.3
	2	81	6.2	6.2	39.5
	2.3	43	3.3	3.3	42.8
	2.7	86	6.6	6.6	49.4
	3	158	12.1	12.1	61.5
	3.3	84	6.4	6.4	67.9
	3.7	113	8.7	8.7	76.6
	4	305	23.4	23.4	100
	Total	1304	100	100	

The test of the two-way ANOVA, shown in Table 9, which looked at the interaction of student type and instructional cohort on GPA, was found not significant, $F(1,1300) = 2.41$, $p = .12$, partial eta squared = .00. Partial eta-squared is an estimate of the degree of association in the sample between an effect and the dependent variable (Miles & Shevlin, 2001). A partial eta-squared of 0.10 would be considered a small effect size, and Table 8 shows a partial eta-squared of .00. In addition, the main effect of instructional cohort on GPA was also found not significant ($p = .21$, $p > .05$). However, the main effect of student type on GPA was found to be significant ($p = .00$, $p < .05$). Based on data, the findings failed to reject the null hypothesis that there is no difference in first-quarter GPA between student type and instructional cohort.

Table 9

Factorial ANOVA for Hypothesis 1

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	86.19[a]	3	28.73	12.65	0
Intercept	7139.9	1	7139.9	3143.64	0
Student Type	77.11	1	77.11	33.95	0
Instructional Cohort	3.6	1	3.6	1.58	0.21
Student Type * Instructional Cohort	5.48	1	5.48	2.41	0.12
Error	2952.58	1300	2.27		
Total	10178.67	1304			
Corrected Total	3038.77	1303			

Factorial ANOVA for Hypothesis 1 (Cont.)

Source	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power
Corrected Model	.03[a]	37.95	1
Intercept	0.71	3143.64	1
Student Type	0.03	33.95	1
Instructional Cohort	0	1.58	0.24
Student Type * Instructional Cohort	0	2.41	0.34
Error			
Total			
Corrected Total			

a. R Squared = .028 (Adjusted R Squared = .026)

b. Computed using alpha = .05

Research Question 2 Findings

Research question 2 asked whether an association existed between the retention rate of traditional and nontraditional students at the completion of their first academic quarter. It was posited that there would be a significant difference in retention rates between student types at the completion of their first academic quarter. A review of the data found a retention rate of 92% across all samples. The retention rate among traditional students was 94%, while there was an 89% retention rate among nontraditional students between both learning platforms. The observed and expected count of first-quarter students retained is shown in Table 10.

Table 10

Observed and expected number of first-quarter students retained across student type

Student Type	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Nontraditional	605	598.5	6.5
Traditional	592	598.5	-6.5
Total	1197		

Table 11

Test of significance across student type

	Student Type Group
Chi-Square	.14[a]
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	0.71

The test of significance, shown in Table 11, displays the findings that the student type has little if any impact on student retention, $p = .71$, $p > .05$. The results fail to reject

the null hypothesis that there is no association between retention rate and student type at the completion of their first academic quarter.

Research Question 3 Findings

Research question 3 asked whether an association exists between the retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either campus-based or online courses. It was predicted that there did exist an association between retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students. The retention rate among students who completed online course was 91%, while there was a 93% retention rate among students who completed courses on campus. The observed and expected count of first-quarter students retained in both online and campus-based is shown in Table 12.

Table 12

Observed and expected number of first-quarter students retained across instructional cohort

Instructional Cohort	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
Campus	583	598.5	-15.5
Online	614	598.5	15.5
Total	1197		

Table 13

Test of significance across instructional cohort

	Instructional Cohort Group
Chi-Square	.80[a]
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	0.37

The test of significance, shown in Table 13, displays the findings that the instructional cohort has little if any impact on student retention, Asymp. Sig. = .37, $p > .05$. The results fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no association between retention rate and instructional cohort at the completion of their first academic quarter. The retention rates between both online and campus-based courses are very similar.

Summary

This section presented an outline of the research design and methodology used in this study. The study used a quantitative, quasi-experimental research design with a participant pool consisting of both traditional and nontraditional first-quarter students who took either online or campus-based classes. De-identified archived data were used to protect the rights of study participants. All academic quarters for the last 5 years were examined, and GPA and retention rates between traditional and nontraditional students who enrolled in either of the learning platforms were compared.

The first research question, which was whether a difference existed in GPA earned between first-quarter traditional and nontraditional students who enrolled in courses either strictly online or strictly on campus. The factors of student type and learning platform were looked together to address the research question. In addition, both variables were looked at independently since the data were easily reviewed once put into the table. Based on the findings, it was determined that there was no significant difference in GPA earned based on the interaction between student type and instruction cohort. However, a significant difference was found during the independent variable

review between student type and its effect on GPA while addressing RQ1, and is the primary focus of the project. Findings did not support the hypothesis that GPA was affected by whether the student attended online or campus-based courses, as students in both learning platforms earned comparable grades.

Both research questions 2 and 3 were found to be nonsignificant, and failed to reject the null hypotheses. Findings did not support the hypotheses that either student type or instructional cohort significantly impact retention of first-quarter students.

In sum, the results of this study failed to support the three hypotheses. However, an unintentional finding that appears relevant to the study is the disproportion among grades earned in each of the four sample groups. The histograms for each of the sample groups show that the greatest number of students earned either a 4.0 or 0.0 with all grades in between falling far below these scores. It would appear that a majority of students either do very well or very poorly in their classes. As a byproduct of reviewing data from the first research question, a relevant finding identified a significant main effect of student type on GPA earned among students in their first academic quarter. GPA was found to be higher among nontraditional students. Explanations for the difference could be that nontraditional students are a bit older, more responsible, career focused, or have some previous higher education experience.

Section 3 will look at the role of self-efficacy beliefs in college students that may have a particular influence on the level of effort students put towards their school work, perseverance in the face of a challenge, and persistence overall as either a

traditional or nontraditional college student (Bandura, 1986). Wood and Bandura (1989) found that people with strong self-efficacy beliefs took on more challenging tasks, performed more successfully, and resisted failure more than those who had lower self-efficacy beliefs. Academic success is likely being impacted by the students' confidence and preparedness for college at the time of enrollment. Addressing the needs of new traditional and nontraditional students and providing them with the tools to be successful would increase academic success in the entire campus population.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

Upon completing the collection of quantitative data and a review of findings, a purposeful project was developed to address an opportunity for change identified at the institution studied. This section details the development of an effective project designed to address specific areas for improvement in the grading methods used in all courses offered by the institution in the on-ground classroom platform. The initial project would only impact classes taught on campus, since online courses are taught through a campus under different leadership. Currently, neither campus nor online campuses utilize standardized rubrics (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, October, 29, 2016). Rubric utilization is presently left up to individual faculty member discretion, and whether each finds it necessary in their classroom. The parent company would make the determination if project findings are sufficient enough to warrant instituting the project across all campuses, including online.

The project involves the development of programmatic rubrics to be presented to students by each instructor to make the grading more objective rather than subjective in nature, as well as the training necessary to get all teachers familiar with the process. This section includes a review of literature relevant to the choice of project and its development. A plan for project evaluation has also been drafted to provide the possibility for a more even grade distribution among those earned by students in all

classes. The implementation plan and implications for social change applicable to the project are included.

Description and Goals

The primary components of this study include a visual PowerPoint presentation to college leadership and white paper on the findings for retention, academic success, disparity among grades across student type and learning platform, and the significance of using grading rubrics for assessment. The report will be presented to campus administration during the break between academic terms, and both the white paper in both hard copy and electronic will be shared for further dissemination among academic leaders and faculty members. Among those present at the meeting will be academic chairs, academic deans, and campus president. The effectiveness of the project will rely on the appropriate composition of meeting attendees to bring about substantial change.

The project was developed to address the difference in GPA between traditional and nontraditional students, and the secondary finding of the disproportionate grade distribution identified as part of the quantitative research study conducted. A bi-modal grade distribution was found in each of the four sample groups, with a majority of students in each group earning either an A or an F with few grades earned in between (Figures 1, 4, 7, and 10). Figure 13 is a representation of the comparison between unimodal and bimodal grade distributions.

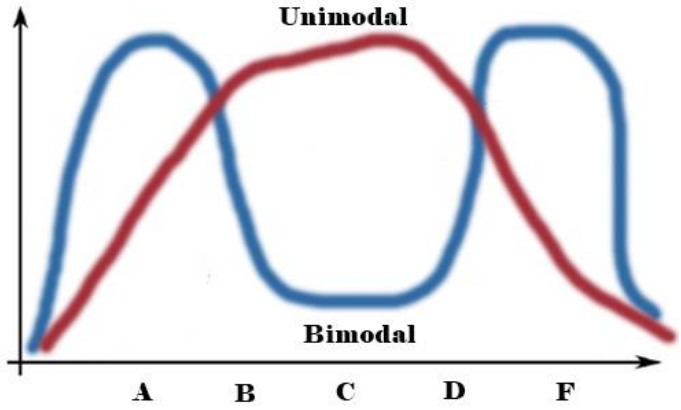

Figure 13. A comparison of unimodal and bimodal grade distribution.

A unimodal distribution is a probability distribution with a single mode, often occurring in a system of normal distribution where the distributions are not symmetrical. A bimodal distribution has two peaks, which may indicate the presence of two different groups. In terms of grades, it could be that one group is underprepared for class while the other group is over-prepared.

The project will include rubrics designed for each course taught on campus, as well as training provided for all faculty members to understand the purpose and value of utilizing rubrics in the classroom. Rubrics provide a guide to the standards for achievement, making it easier for instructors to grade work objectively and for students to understand the expectations of assignments (Sadler, 2009). Rubrics can be used to assess a specific task or performance, whether multiple parts of an assignment or its overall quality (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007).

Students would benefit from a more unified assessment of their ability to successfully complete course assignments, and the ability to predict grades based on solid guidelines for evaluation. Results of the study found a significant influence on GPA by the student type of either traditional or nontraditional, which may also be addressed by the project. Nontraditional students with prior higher education experience may have a better grasp of the expectations of college course work. Traditional students entering college soon after high school lack the proficiency of completing rigorous course requirements, which are often more demanding than what they experienced in high school. College administration would benefit from higher retention and success rates if new students had a clearer understanding of the expectations of course work and skill assessment. Faculty would also benefit by having students entering their classrooms knowing the expectations for academic success.

The project will begin by establishing guidelines for the development of rubrics to be used across all courses offered at the institution in the on ground classroom setting. The online classes will continue as they have due to the inability of the ground campus to affect change outside of its own institution. If positive results are shown from data collection after rubric implementation, the findings and project will be presented to the parent company for consideration across all campuses and online environments. Academic leads will identify a predesigned set of rubrics implement at the next enrollment cycle. In addition, a workshop will be held to train faculty how to create and implement their own rubrics for use on smaller assignments and projects in their own

class, which will assist students in the completion of their work. The team will work together to develop standardized rubrics used for all similar classes, and ensure that the curriculum and objectives of each class builds on the outcomes expected from prior courses.

The main goal of this project is to ensure both students and instructors understand the expectations of each assignment so that results are based more on objective rather than subjective criteria through the use of rubrics, starting with the campus before introducing the project to the parent company. Subjective criteria may include factors outside the quality and timeliness of work submitted. The outcome of the project will provide a greater understanding of each assignment through clear articulation of criteria and a clear description of performance levels. The use of rubrics will contribute to the empowerment of students to meet standards and make judgments by allowing them to regulate their own progress. Rubrics improve the communication between instructors and students by setting the basis and structure of learning goals. The anticipated result of rubric implementation is greater coherence between the grades earned. There should be a grade average of C across all cohorts, with fewer grades of As and Fs. If data collected after the implementation of rubrics yields an improved grade distribution across campus classes, findings will be presented to the parent company for consideration of further implementation.

Rationale

This quantitative quasi-experimental study was chosen to determine if significant differences existed in the GPA and retention among traditional and nontraditional students who took either online or campus-based courses during their first academic quarter. The design used exclusively archival data taken from the SIS, and encompassed the first five years of the institution's existence. Findings did not suggest that a difference existed between the outcomes of students taking either online or campus-based courses regardless of student type. However, the main effect of student type on GPA was found to be significant. This finding may be explained by the readiness and motivation levels of traditional versus nontraditional students. In addition, a bimodal distribution of earned grades was identified across all learning platforms, which may be due in part from the level of student preparedness and other similar factors.

Program directors and faculty have acknowledged that there does appear to be a large number of students who either do very well in class or do perform poorly with few in between (personal communication, associate program director, July 29, 2016). An accumulation of failing grades likely leads to eventual withdrawals and academic dismissals later in the program. Academic grades are used as the primary indicator of student performance and comprehension in college (Wongsurawat, 2009). GPAs indicate the student's level of achievement, the ranking of students among peers, and the understanding of course objectives (Harrison, 2007).

There are many factors that could be responsible for the bimodal distribution of grades. Failing grades may be an indication that those students were not prepared for college-level courses, while the high number of As could be the result of increased levels of motivation, readiness, and prior exposure to college-level expectations. The disparity among the grade distribution could be a result of a large number of students doing exceptional work and submitting it on time, and students doing work poorly or not submitting the work as assigned (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, August 5, 2016).

A detailed presentation and white paper were chosen as the project components because both are typically used to share information with the institution's culture (personal communication, campus president, August 15, 2016). Data were translated into a format that staff, administration, and faculty could easily understand. The PowerPoint presentation will allow for the opportunity to report findings and recommendations concisely in a user-friendly format. The white paper will allow for the sharing of study findings in scholarly manner that can be understood by stakeholders with varying degrees of statistical literacy. The pairing of a visual presentation with white paper is a suitable match for the quantitative nature of the study. The audience must understand the problem, the study results, and areas needing improvement for real change to result from the project.

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this study was to identify a local problem and develop a project to bring about meaningful change to address the issue. A review of literature on the impact of using rubrics for grading purposes and establishing institutional change was conducted to create an effective project. Findings formed the base on which the structure and strategy of the project was built. A PowerPoint presentation and white paper were determined to be the most appropriate to bring about institutional awareness of the problem identified and recommendations to initiate change. Attention was given to a clear explanation of the findings and recommendations that are meaningful to both administration and faculty at the institution. Education Research Complete and ERIC were the two major sources for peer-reviewed articles. Search terms included *rubrics, motivation, readiness, student satisfaction, high school and college collaboration, institutional change*, *reporting data*, and *project evaluation*.

Motivation and Entitlement

According to the U.S. Department of Education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012), the population of nontraditional students is expected to increase by nearly 2 million between 2010 and 2021. Although nontraditional college students often have additional hurdles, such as employment and family commitments, they seem to possess an academic advantage over their traditional counterparts as shown in higher GPA (Jenkins, 2012). Based on research by Johnson and Kestler (2013) and Johnson and Nussbaum (2012), differences in motivation and coping skills are partly responsible for

the gap in GPA between traditional and nontraditional students. Compared with traditional students, nontraditional students were found to use adaptive motivation to focus on learning new skills and decrease disruption (Johnson, Taasoobshirazi, Clark, Howell, & Breen, 2016).

Nontraditional and traditional students were found to exhibit different motivation factors, with the endorsement of learning goals used more often by nontraditional students (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003). Learning goals emphasize the mastery of subject matter, while performance goals centers on the appearance of proficiency. Learning goals have been linked with an increase in persistence and accomplishment (Elliot, 1999; Jagacinski & Strickland, 2000), so initiatives to increase learning goal motivation among traditional students may boost the effectiveness of current retention programs already in place.

Studies have found higher levels of intrinsic motivation and a greater focus on learning subject matter among nontraditional students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). Older students typically enter higher education based on cognitive interests, whereas younger students are extrinsically motivated by social and parental factors (Justice & Dornan, 2001). Students who concentrate on the goal of learning outcomes demonstrate improved academic success and persistence, as well as a more optimistic outlook towards classwork (Eppler & Harju, 1997). Increased levels of interest and motivation were found to culminate in improved personal contentment (Bye et al., 2007), which may result in increased retention, graduation rates, and academic success.

A belief that is becoming more common among college students is the notion that a diploma is an entitlement and not the result of developing new skills and knowledge (Lippmann, Bulanda, & Wagenaar, 2009). Student attitudes have shifted from the belief that hard work, effort, and attendance are means to a degree. A study by Gaultney and Cann (2001) found that 65% of college students found success to be more important than an education as a result of diploma attainment.

Millennials, those who typically fit traditional student characteristics, are considered more technologically advanced, culturally diverse, and socially linked than nontraditional students who are usually older (Worley, 2011). The most distinctive characteristic of millennial students is often their sense of academic entitlement. Students who feel entitled believe that learning should take minimal effort and that instructors are to blame for problems encountered during the process rather than themselves (Boswell, 2012). According to Sohr-Preston and Boswell (2015), academic entitlement is connected to academic consumerism, with the belief that students who are paying for their education deserve the same service and satisfaction as with any other type of commodity.

Academic entitlement has also been associated with attitude and behavioral problems, such as low self-confidence and poor study habits (Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, & Farruggia, 2008). Entitled students more frequently offer justifications for poor or late work, and offer negative grievances when they are displeased with a course or instructor (Goldman & Martin, 2014; Goodboy & Frisby, 2014). Based on the different levels of interest and motivation among traditional; and nontraditional students, the

finding that nontraditional students earned higher GPA than traditional students at the institution studied is congruent with the literature.

Utilizing Rubrics

Grading rubrics provide a shared understanding of expectations between students and faculty. Since assessments in the form of assignments and tests are the major driver for learning, shared understanding allows for appropriate and valid feedback from instructors and proper participation by the students. The proper understanding and critique assumes explicitness in the rubric criteria. Clear articulation of assessment criteria requires a clear description of the performance levels and key objectives (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004). The role of rubrics in learning assessment is significant, and there are several benefits derived from their use including clarifying learning objectives, presenting standards and expectations, assisting students to make proper academic judgments and regulate their progress, making grades transparent, and avoiding personal prejudices. The information supplied by rubrics improves the communication between students and faculty, and establishes the basis for shared understanding and open dialogue of learning goals (Menéndez-Varela & Gregori-Giralt, 2016).

Instructors use a variety of tactics to increase student learning, including the use of rubrics during assessment evaluation when grading essays and exams (Menéndez-Varela & Gregori-Giralt, 2016). A grading rubric is a matrix that specifies the levels of fulfillment for each set of criteria (Allen & Tanner, 2006). Rubrics can be used either

holistically to evaluate overall achievement or analytically to assess several parts of a skill (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007). The validity of the grading rubrics will increase based on how well students understand the language and content used in the description of expectations. A vague description of the subject matter often leads to problems when students are unable to clearly comprehend the explanation of assignment tasks. Construct validity of the rubric would become jeopardized if the description of the assessment was not clearly understood by the student and their performance was not a clear indicator of their learning outcomes (Menéndez-Varela & Gregori-Giralt, 2016).

Rubrics provide a formative and comprehensive assessment for student assessment tool for evaluating student work. Rubrics are more than a checklist of items to include in assignment, and more than a comparison of what A work versus C work looks like. A rubric articulates the expectations to successfully complete an assignment using a list of criteria that describe each level of quality. Additionally, rubrics provide more information about the strengths and weaknesses of students' writing. The criteria and standards laid out in the rubric must be transparent to both instructors and students so both know what is expected of them in order to educate and improve performance (Jonsson, 2014).

There are some flaws identified with the use of grading rubrics, including discrepancies among individual instructors applying the same rubric and inconsistencies when the same instructor uses the rubric among several students (Hunter & Docherty, 2011). It is imperative for the precision of rubric use that language is explicit and

unambiguous or instructors may assign grades based on the overall paper rather than follow the criteria set forth (Knoch, 2009). Knoch (2009) found that precise language and detailed descriptions can increase the reliability of grades and help instructors clearly distinguish different aspects of writing. A study by Li and Lindsey (2015) found that students interpret the language in rubrics differently from instructors, and rubrics do not provide clear expectations or informative feedback instructors assume they do. Rather than providing more detailed descriptive language in more detailed rubrics, Li and Lindsey (2015) recommend using shorter, more simplified language.

Specific evaluation criteria contained within a rubric has a positive impact on teaching. The criteria established prior to instruction provide focus on critical components of course objectives and increases the chance of emphasis on those objectives (Montgomery, 2002). Meaningful learning between the instructor and students comes from the integration and alignment of curriculum content, teaching method, and assessment. Rubrics with explicit benchmarks and aptitude levels allow for evaluation of many different tasks, such as essays and performance skills. In addition, allowing students to review the rubric in advance increases the likelihood of increased production quality.

Institutional Change

Upon acknowledgement that campus stakeholders see value in the project, the next step is to create an open environment for change that supports the faculty who will engage in the new processes and that enhances the mission of the institution. When

determining the process for bringing about change, it is important to evaluate the cultural factors of the institution that may add to the problem while developing resolutions. Organizational culture consists of the values and behaviors that contribute to the unique environment of an institution. Culture affects the organization's efficiency and performance, provides guidelines for customer service, ensures product quality, and impacts attendance and punctuality among staff.

The perspective of organizational culture can be used to observe institutional change (Kezar, 2001). In order to facilitate change in the larger culture of the institution, the shared perceptions, thoughts, and beliefs of each member must shift individually toward the new perspective. According to Schein (1990), people may be reluctant to accept new ideas in an organizational culture that provides stability and reduced anxiety as their methods of thinking and reacting become more instinctive, leading to a fear of change. Individuals in an organization prefer consistency over change that brings indeterminate effects from new ideas.

Communication is essential when attempting to lead planned change efforts, because it reduces ambiguity among stakeholders by creating shared meaning (Allen, Jimmieson, Bordia, & Irmer, 2007). Employee uncertainty, sense of control, and job satisfaction during institutional change can be managed effectively through communication (Bordia, Hunt, Paulsen, Tourish, & DiFonzo, 2004). Hostility from stakeholders can still occur during a planned organizational change, even with open communication. Readiness for change are displayed in stakeholders' beliefs, attitudes,

and intentions regarding the degree of change needed and the institution's ability to effectively make those changes (Armenakis, Harris, & Mossholada, 1993). The level of support or resistance to a planned change can be predicted by the readiness exhibited (Stevens, 2013). Readiness centers on the intent and substance of communication between change agents and stakeholders; however, research established three other features of effective communication during planned change (Campbell, Carmichael, & Naidoo, 2015).

First, communication must be constant. Previous studies suggested the importance of communication mostly during the initial phase (Lewis, 2000). While readiness is affected by initial communication from administrative leaders about a planned change (Hammond, Gresch, & Vitale, 2011), it progresses over time (Schwarz, Watson, & Callan, 2011). Thus, for the project initiative, successful communication needs to be continual.

Second, communication between both parties must display genuine concern for each other, rather than to satisfy their own needs (Frahm & Brown, 2007). Readiness can be affected by communication between midlevel directors and upper-level administrators, who can provide daily information. In addition, casual communication between change agents and stakeholders is also important. Successful implementation of the project will require everyone has the opportunity to voice their opinions regarding the change.

Third, the change agent must be reliable, and may be someone in a lesser position than administrative (Lewis, Schmisseur, Stephens, & Weir, 2006). Organizational issues

are occasionally pushed upward by alliances of peers to motivate support for change. Credibility of the change agents is crucial to influencing readiness, regardless their position within the organization.

To influence readiness, change agents need to communicate to stakeholders the issues of the disparity in grade distribution identified by the study and the expected distribution of grades. The change message needs to address the appropriateness of the project; to promote confidence that the project will be successfully implemented; to establish full support of institutional leadership for the project; and to explain how the project will benefit faculty, administration, and students. The change message needs to be communicated throughout the implementation of the project in an open forum where stakeholders can speak openly, and the message needs to be presented by a reliable change agent.

The setting for the presentation and implementation of the study project was selected because both faculty and administrative leadership participate in the 11th week training that takes place between the end of one academic quarter and the next. It is an opportunity to address both groups at one time and establish shared purpose. After the presentation and distribution of white paper, feedback will be gathered from each group. This approach attempts to create common purpose and influence readiness among the institution's faculty and administration.

Effective Data Reporting

The understanding of how people process information is important when deciding how to communicate data to a group of faculty and administration. According to Smiciklas (2012), a substantial percentage of the human brain is connected to processing visual information. Due to the nature of the exceedingly visual brain, graphic information is processed and meaning is received rapidly. Visual components to assist in comprehension will be included in the written report of the findings given in the presentation and white paper.

When determining the most appropriate means to share data and recommendations, the most effective methods should be selected. The method of data distribution should convey the meaning of the data so the listener can understand the importance of the information and make a connection to its impact on institutional outcomes. Understanding why can intensify the willingness of faculty and administration to collaborate (Knight-Wallace, 2014). The PowerPoint presentation and white paper will specify study findings as well as show why the findings are meaningful.

Presenting the information in a narrative format can assist in understanding scientific findings, because the shift to a conversation engages participants and can increase the efficacy of the communication (Aruffo, 2015). If the story sparks the interest of participants through narration that is meaningful and can connect them personally with the information, they may have a better chance of understanding more complex data (Mastrangeli, 2014). A portion of the presentation will be conveying a narrative of what

could be if faculty and administration supported the project. Making connections between instituting the use of rubrics in all classes and stories of students' academic improvement, faculty members will have a better understanding of how they can assist students to reach their goal of graduation. The use of the narrative format will stimulate interest and meaning into the data.

Graphs and other visual aids are used to reinforce understanding of data among participants who are not adept with statistical analysis (Drummond & Tom, 2012). Visual aids must be accompanied by a complete description of data, including findings not included in the hypotheses (Weissgerber, Milic, Winham, & Garovic, 2015). The PowerPoint presentation and white paper will include various statistical reporting methods, graphic displays, and a narrative explanation to effectively communicate with faculty and administration.

Implementation

Once the project is completed, a sample of the presentation and white paper will be submitted to the dean of academic affairs and the campus president with a request to present the full project to the other campus stakeholders at the quarterly meeting. The meeting is attended by all staff, including academic directors and faculty from each program. In keeping with the institution's culture, directors and faculty will need the approval of administration to initiate change and for the formation of committees that address different aspects of the project. The quarterly meeting is an ideal opportunity to gather all stakeholders who need to affect the change into one forum.

An assessment of the presentation given will be part of the project evaluation, which will give stakeholders the opportunity to provide feedback and identify areas where they can assist in the following steps of the project rollout. In addition to distributing white paper during the quarterly meeting, it will also be circulated electronically. After initial implementation, I may have the opportunity to lead additional future inquires, but others will also be invested in the project. The presentation assessment will identify other campus stakeholders who have the desire to become advocates for change based on study findings. Future findings and the project will be shared with the parent company if the use of rubrics is shown to improve grade distribution, which would impact other ground campuses as well as the online platform. The parent company would have exclusive decision-making power to institute the project across all its campuses.

Potential Resources and Existing Supports

Many of my colleagues on campus are aware of the research topic I selected, and their support will be the greatest resource to the project. Campus administration and peers provide encouragement to all those pursuing an advanced degree. Prior to the submission of a formal request, I am confident that I will be permitted to present my findings to campus stakeholders at the next quarterly meeting and implement the project as proposed. Several potential participants were identified during my course of study who hold various positions of influence and recognize the problem of lower GPA among traditional students and the bimodal grade distribution. The plan is to engage these

individuals in further discussions and combine efforts to drive the project forward. The diverse backgrounds and experiences of participants will combine to enrich discussion, and provide several possible models for rubric creation.

A limited quantity of resources will be required to implement the proposed project. Handouts of the PowerPoint slides, a computer, audio/visual technology, and assembly space will be needed for the initial meeting. Existing support include professional development hours that faculty have built into their schedules throughout the year, with most falling between academic terms.

Potential Barriers

Potential barriers of the proposed project include available funding, unwilling or uncooperative participants, commitment of administration, and resistance of the parent company to implement the project across its other campuses. The proposed project would likely fail without proper funding to cover work hour expenses of adjunct faculty during nonteaching hours. Although all instructors will be required to utilize rubrics in their classrooms, obstinate faculty members may slow the transition and decrease the effectiveness of the project. The institution has operated over 5 years without the use of rubrics, so leadership must first be persuaded that a significant change is needed in order to affect change. Institutional leadership must believe the problem identified by the study is worthy of addressing and providing solutions. If administration is not convinced, the chances for a change in practice will be diminished. All stakeholders need to be committed for systemic change to occur. Other potential barriers include the lack of time

for faculty and directors to attend the necessary workshops and the failure to find appropriate training space. It is difficult to foresee if the parent company would find any proposal valuable enough to institute across its campuses, which would impact the use of rubrics in the online classrooms.

Proposal for Implementation and Timeline

An initial presentation of findings and recommendations will be submitted to the dean of academic affairs and the campus president. Once they have reviewed the submission, a subsequent meeting may be necessary to discuss any proposed changes that need to be made prior to presenting to the other stakeholders. The first step of the project implementation includes a presentation and preliminary meeting with administration before scheduling the full presentation with faculty and directors. An informal meeting with key directors and selected faculty will be conducted to identify any additions or corrections that need to be made to the presentation. Once the presentation and supporting materials have been approved, the full presentation will be scheduled for the quarterly meeting that follows term end. Following the presentation, an actual plan of implementation according to feedback and recommendations will be initiated.

Roles and Responsibilities of Student and Others

Researcher. As the researcher, I am accountable for confirming that all aspects of project implementation are executed. I will attend and facilitate all meetings, and provide all stakeholders with handouts of the project proposal and incorporate corrections as

suggested. I will comply with the timeline agreed upon, and ensure that all meeting locations and resources are available at the day and time agreed upon.

Stakeholders. Administration, directors, faculty, and students are all considered stakeholders in this project. All campus-level stakeholders, with the exception of students, are responsible for attending scheduled trainings. They are accountable for implementation of the project in the own program areas and classrooms. To ensure the success of the project, stakeholders will collaborate with associates, be actively engaged, ask questions, and provide feedback as necessary. The speed at which recommendations for change result in change will depend on the cooperation of all stakeholders.

Project Evaluation Plan

Evaluations are vital to program success because they keep track of what is and what is not successful. Evaluations are designed to detect effectiveness of program components. The performance of program evaluations will assist in the determination of whether specific elements are necessary and if revisions would generate greater success (Spaulding, 2008). Formative evaluations, which provide more timely feedback, will be used during the early stages of the project to address issues and establish ensuing steps. A summative evaluation, which takes addition time and resources, will be conducted after the first year of implementation.

Prior to training workshops, in which course rubrics will be drafted and shared, directors and faculty will view the initial presentation and give constructive feedback. Evaluation sheets will be distributed to all attendees that ask open ended questions meant

to gather as much honest feedback as possible. The evaluation form, which can be completed anonymously, will include my contact information to submit follow-up questions. The goal of the preliminary evaluation is to determine if the PowerPoint presentation and white paper were effective in communicating the problem and research findings. Formative evaluations will continue throughout the first year of implementation, and conclude with a written report that summarizes the feedback.

After the project has been initiated, a final grade report will be run at the end of each academic term that shows the letter grade earned in each on ground course by each student. The mean GPA earned by traditional and nontraditional students will be compared to check for improvement. In addition, the number of each letter grade will be calculated, and a frequency distribution will be plotted that shows the scattering of grades in hopes that it has shifted toward a normal bell curve. Grades from the online classes will also be collected and plotted along a frequency distribution to compare the use and nonuse of grading rubrics in the classrooms.

Implications for Social Change

Social change resulting from this study could include increased academic success rates across all programs, and an improved retention rate, which in turn leads to more qualified graduates entering the job market. Higher retention rate would likely come with increased student satisfaction, leading to more referrals for potential students. The impact of the project is beneficial for students and their families, because students will persist successfully and with greater satisfaction.

This project may generate increased collaboration among faculty and administration on a consistent basis as they establish programmatic and classroom rubrics. This collaboration could lead to more discussions within the institution and other schools within the sister schools and local community. A discussion on education may lead to new strategies which could lead to additional projects to assist with academic success and retention. Once complete, the project may have local effects with the possibility of far-reaching effects if accepted by the parent company, with the potential to help students, faculty, at other campuses across the country.

Conclusion

This section described the resultant presentation and white paper project from a quantitative study that focused on academic success and retention of new students at the institution. The development of the presentation and white paper were informed by the findings of study, which found traditional students earning lower GPAs than nontraditional students, as well as a significant disparity across grades earned in online and campus-based courses. Implementation, evaluation, and assessment of the project were discussed in this section. The final section of this doctoral study will serve as an inclusive summation and conclusion of the project, as well as a reflection of what was learned personally through the process of the study.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Introduction

The purpose of the current study was to determine if GPA and retention rate were affected by student type, instructional platform, or a combination of both. With the exception of the effect student type has on GPA, no significant difference was found to reject the null hypotheses. However, an unexpected finding was brought to light by the data, which became the focus of the project. The letter grades across all four sample groups showed a higher than normal count of As and Fs, with all other grades spread out across the remaining spectrum. The disparity of grades suggests that students either comprehend expectations of assignments and achieve high marks, or turn in subpar work and achieve all failing grades. There are very few students shown to earn an average grade. Based on these findings, a project was developed to disseminate information based on the results.

Project Strengths

The presentation and white paper project has much strength that addresses the problem identified in the study. The first strength is that the reported data came directly from the SIS that houses the quantified data used in the study, which is considered free of bias and distortion due to academic oversight. By categorizing and reviewing the grades and retention rates among first-quarter students, I was able to provide direction and recommendations based on hard data. The project offers of cyclical model of assessing the problem, data collection, analysis, modification, and reassessment of new data to

address the need for ongoing evaluation. The use of a cyclical model would allow for a quarterly review of findings to identify strengths and weaknesses of the current rubrics, followed by changes for improvement. Figure 14 is a graphic representation of a model of cyclical evaluation as applied to the project. The figure represents an ongoing process of identifying a problem, analyzing data, making modifications to practice, and reassessment of the results.

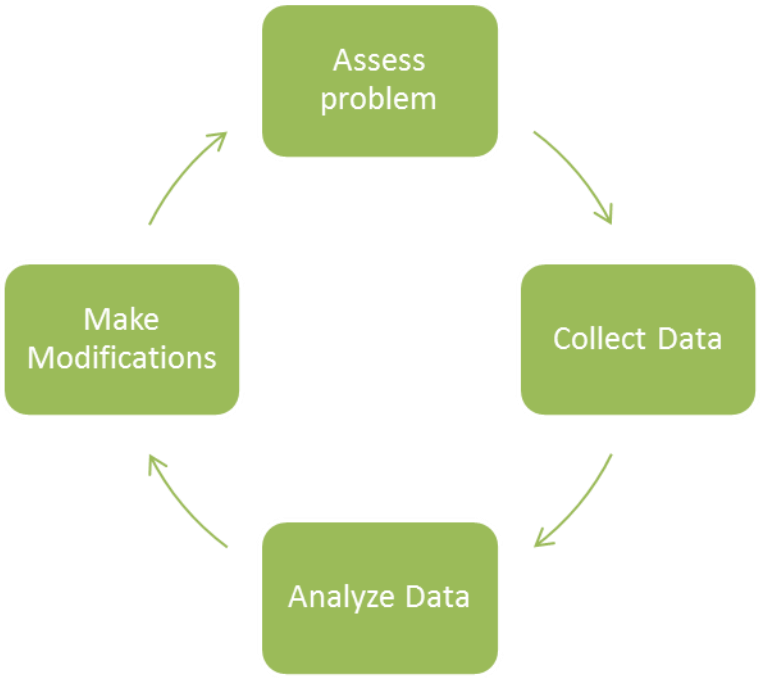

Figure 14. A model of cyclical evaluation.

In addition to the problem of bimodal grade distribution, the presentation and white paper project assist in the explanation of its meaning and how rubrics may help to make improvements in the GPA among traditional students. The project identifies data-driven recommendations, and calls for a commitment to action by administration and

faculty. Cooperative action will be vital to bring about real change at the institution. The presentation and white paper provide an understanding of the problem and identify how they can contribute to further assessment and improved grade distribution.

The project delivery method is a strength because it ensures that the necessary stakeholders at the campus have access to the study information. I plan to present the project during the quarterly meeting that occurs at the end of each academic term and is attended by all administration, academic leaders, and faculty. Attendees will have the opportunity to commit to putting the project into action and bring about the improvements in practice. The presentation will be available online, and the white paper can be distributed in either print or electronic format to stakeholders not present during the quarterly meeting. This delivery method supports the distribution of information to all stakeholders necessary to bring about significant change.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

As with any research study, there are limitations associated with the project. First, the scope of the study is small. Sample groups were chosen based on the original hypotheses, which were adequately sized based on the initial study. It would have been possible to review all grades achieved in the same 5 year period to reach more precise findings. The project does not include any qualitative data that could further explain the findings. Only assumptions can be made as to why many students either earn As or Fs without giving students and faculty the opportunity to state their personal factors affecting performance and evaluation. Interviews or surveys with open-ended questions

would give much more insight and elicit information to address the current grade disparity. In addition, the presentation and white paper communicate the problem and offer recommendations for change, but the project cannot be successful without the input and involvement of administration, academic leaders, and faculty. There are opportunities for addressing the limitations going forward. Future inquiry could collect additional qualitative data from faculty and students that could provide a narrative explanation for the findings. It would be beneficial to have an understanding of the reasons for grade disparity. Collecting a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, along with ongoing evaluation, would keep the problem in front of institutional leadership.

Potential limitations of the proposed project could also occur if academic leaders and faculty are not committed to addressing the problem, or if there is resistance from the parent company to implement changes across its campuses to include the online platform. The project provides a means to restructure the current grading system, but it is not guaranteed that it will be implemented uniformly in all classrooms. The information will be distributed to all stakeholders, and administration will be responsible for ensuring academic leaders and faculty are implementing the change. If instructors are allowed the choice to participate in the initiative application, those who do not choose to contribute will decrease the overall effective of the project. Other possible limitations include a lack of time for faculty to attend the training workshops where the rubrics will be drafted for each course, and finding a suitable meeting space for the workshop. Requiring faculty, particularly adjunct instructors, to attend workshops outside of their regular paid work

hours may limit participation. All academic leaders and faculty must participate in the project for systemic change to occur. Logistic problems can be addressed by making attendance in the workshops mandatory, and compensating adjuncts for nonteaching time.

Scholarship

Months were spent researching a problem I believed I had identified at my institution, and the process entailed a great deal of repetition. When the process began, I believed that I could easily complete the project assignment within a few short months. There were very few problems in the gathering and analyzing of data. However, once I began to put the findings into words it was realized that I am not the skilled statistician I thought I was. I had always prided myself as a good writer, until I was faced with writing a doctoral-level scholarly paper that was consistent from beginning to end. Still, I think my writing ability made the process easier than it could have been. In contemplating the doctoral process, I noted time and motivation were major obstacles in the project development. I realize the unrealistic assumption that I could complete the project in a short time. The pressure I placed on myself to finish early caused motivational issues that worked contrary to my expectations.

The research process has taught me much about scholarship. Research-based practice was reinforced from the start, when the problem was first identified. The evolution of this study increased my understanding of the need to exercise systemic inquiry to the many facets of academics. I have developed a significant appreciation for

the use of academic study, and have acquired an increased authority afforded by higher academic achievement. Though I have yet to graduate, I have been given multiple opportunities to contribute ideas and take part in service improvements across my institution.

I believe that decisions that impact the institution and stakeholders should be based on research and not instinct. In my current position, I have witnessed the creation of policies and processes made at the corporate level that impact multiple campuses and are not based on research. Millions of dollars were spent to roll out initiatives that fail shortly after taking effect, because they were found impractical and ill-conceived. This study started out with the belief that differences existed in GPA and retention rates among first-year students depending on student type and instructional platform. I went into the study with the notion that a project would be drafted to address this problem, only to find through research that my belief was wrong. However, through the research process, I discovered another problem that became the focus of my project.

Project Development and Evaluation

Project development was complex and took months of planning. Many considerations were made during the planning process, including the determination of the problem studied. Objectives and timetables were laid out upon completion of data review. Project development was not as easy as my preconceived assumption. I believed I could gather the data, review it, and have a complete paper with a matter of a few weeks. However, it has taken over a year to complete the project.

Evaluation of the project will be ongoing. It is anticipated that evaluations will be conducted at the completion of each academic quarter once all grades have been posted. There is little flexibility to the timeline based on the nature of the data, which are collected at the end of each quarter when grades are posted and prior to the following quarter. As more information is gathered during project implementation, adjustments will be instituted as necessary. Future research will include the use of qualitative data collection methods to provide further evaluation and identify areas for improvement.

Leadership and Change

Although I have been given several opportunities to lead and participate in institutional change, the project development process accentuated the fact that substantial change comes through the inclusion of the campus stakeholders. Leaders can only lead when there are followers and no one individual can be responsible for carrying the weight of institutional change. To bring real change, a leader must motivate others to commit to the goal of the project outcomes. A group of committed stakeholders may form the united coalition necessary to participate in the challenging and time-consuming work of developing and implementing rubrics across all classes offered at the institution. The authority of scholarly achievement and knowledge I have developed in this subject will help to reinforce my ability to lead the project beyond presentation to instituting practical change.

Analysis of Self as Scholar

The progression of project development through identifying a problem to determining a solution has given me the opportunity to learn about myself as a scholar. I knew I enjoyed statistics from previous classes, but I learned I have a fondness for data collection and analysis. The opportunity to learn new methods of analyzing data with the assistance of a methodologist was challenging yet invigorating, especially when making connections between the findings and real-world situations. The completion of literature reviews were made somewhat difficult because I was captivated by articles and information not directly related to my study but interesting to me as an academic scholar. In addition to timely literature, outdated and inapplicable articles were still valuable in providing direction to the project design and content. The importance of basing decisions and solutions on data rather than gut instinct resonated with me throughout the entire research process from inception to completion.

Analysis of Self as Practitioner

As the study progressed, I realized that I am a practitioner with many questions, and often self-reflect while examining and assessing my assumptions. I am far more likely to question others, including superiors, rather than become complacent in a false agreement. I am unwilling to believe that there is only one way to reach a conclusion, and am interested in investigating many possible paths to a successful outcome. I want to understand the reasons behind particular processes and policies based on an aspiration to create a culture that appreciates research-based methods over impulsive or personally

motivated practice. I find myself full of questions and a thirst to gain knowledge through rigorous academic inquiry.

Analysis of Self as Project Developer

The process of drafting a study and subsequent project to tackle an identified problem at the institution was a valuable educational experience paired with the academic research process. Findings from the initial study were not significant, and I was given a second opportunity to review the data and focus on a newly identified problem. Project development provided an opportunity to connect the problem, data, and proposed institutional change while preparing visual information presented to campus stakeholders. The process increased my confidence and skill set to take a project from concept to completion.

The Project's Potential Impact on Social Change

The ability to generalize the findings beyond the institution due to the scope of the study and the small student population is a weakness, though the individualized attributes contribute to the prospect for local change. Because the study was confined to students of the institution, the findings are highly relevant to the setting. The research findings represent a significant opportunity for change in the grading process at the institution. If administration and academic leaders understand the problem and devote resources to rubric development, the results could be more authentic grades, increased faculty and student satisfaction, and higher retention rates. Grades would be more authentic based on the removal of most subjective grading criteria and the focus on specific objectives

predefined by the rubrics. Faculty should find grading less rigorous due to the use of specific guidelines to score each assignment, and student would have a clearer understanding of expectations. The retention rate among students may increase based on a better understanding of expectations, and improved communication with instructors due to constructive feedback.

Through the process of the literature review, I identified a gap in regards to studies focused on for-profit institutions. Most literature on student type, retention rates, and academic success focused on larger non-profit universities rather than smaller campuses own by for-profit corporations. Though the specific findings cannot be widely generalized to other institutions without further study, the study does add to the lacking knowledge of grade disparity and rubric use at smaller for-profit colleges.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

Research findings and project recommendations provide substantial propositions for the campus and point to further steps toward action and assessment. Opportunities for improvement of the grading system are clearly defined in the presentation and white paper project. The improvements outlined could contribute to a better distribution of academic grades, improved relations between faculty and students, and increased student retention. Additional research would provide further insight into the reasons for grade disparity seen across all four sample groups, and way to serve the students better. For example, qualitative data could be gathered from faculty about their usual grading methods and thought processes, and from students regarding their approach to completing

assignments. Such information would provide greater depth to the study, and may explain additional factors leading to bimodal distribution of grades. Future research could also include the quantitative data collected from all students, rather than focusing specifically on first-quarter students. The focus on first quarter students in this study was based on the original research questions, and only included courses taught in both online and campus-based formats. It would be interesting to see if the problem of grade disparity is true across the entire student population and all courses.

The study and project could serve as a model for other institutions interested in evaluating their grading methods and outcomes. The study could also be a model for determining the academic success and retention rate among student type and instructional platform. The cyclical structure of identifying a problem, collecting relevant data, analyzing the findings, transforming current practice based on the findings, and reassessment of the original problem is applicable in many settings, including nonacademic institutions.

Conclusion

The study and project were developed to address the problem of grade disparity across the institution, which could potentially lead to improved academic grades and increased retention rates. However, the identification of the problem arose from the study of unrelated research questions, which proved to be insignificant. The shift in focus demonstrates what I find to be the greatest takeaway from this project, which is the importance of research in the process of creating institutional change. The project offers administration, academic leaders, and faculty recommendations for combating grade disparity along with a model of ongoing assessment. Throughout the process of developing this study and project, I have had the opportunity to expand in scholarship and leadership while increasing my skills in research and reflection. The project has the capacity to cultivate significant change in practice across the campus, and act as the starting point for further examination and development for future projects. This project will add to the academic literature on bimodal grade distribution and college readiness in for-profit institutions, as well as in larger universities.

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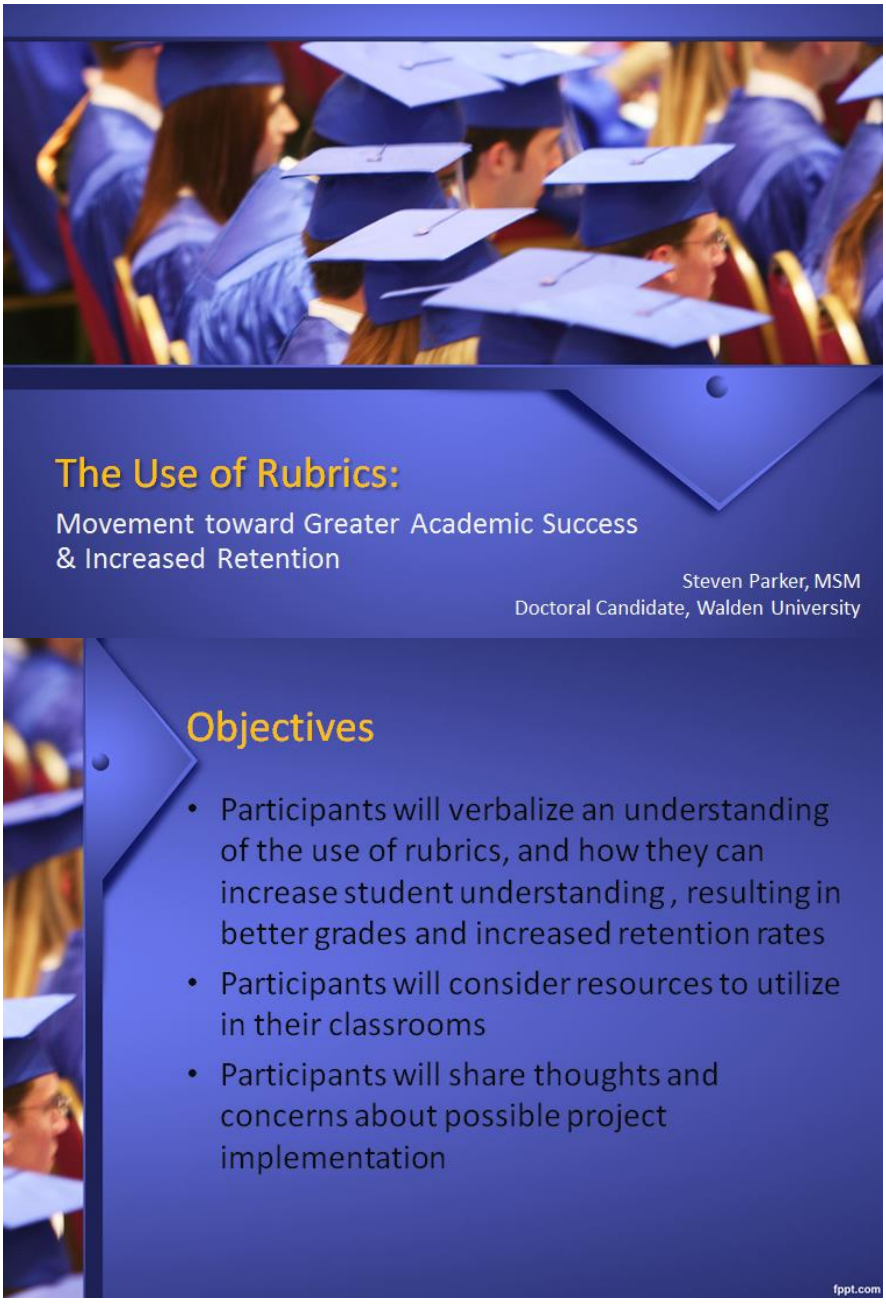
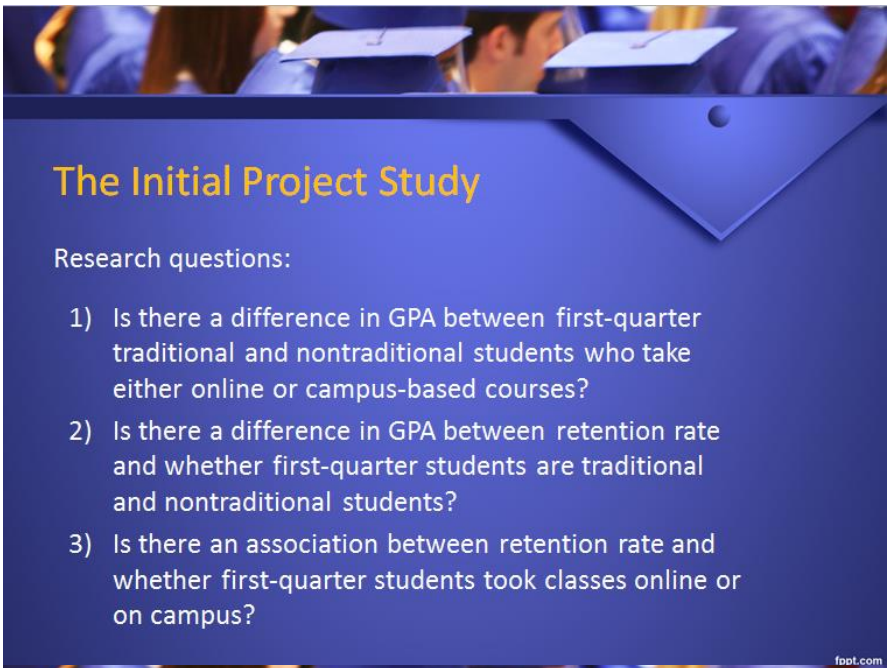
Appendix A: The Project




The Initial Project Study
Research questions:
1) Is there a difference in GPA between first-quarter traditional and nontraditional students who take either online or campus-based courses?
2) Is there a difference in GPA between retention rate and whether first-quarter students are traditional and nontraditional students?
3) Is there an association between retention rate and whether first-quarter students took classes online or on campus?
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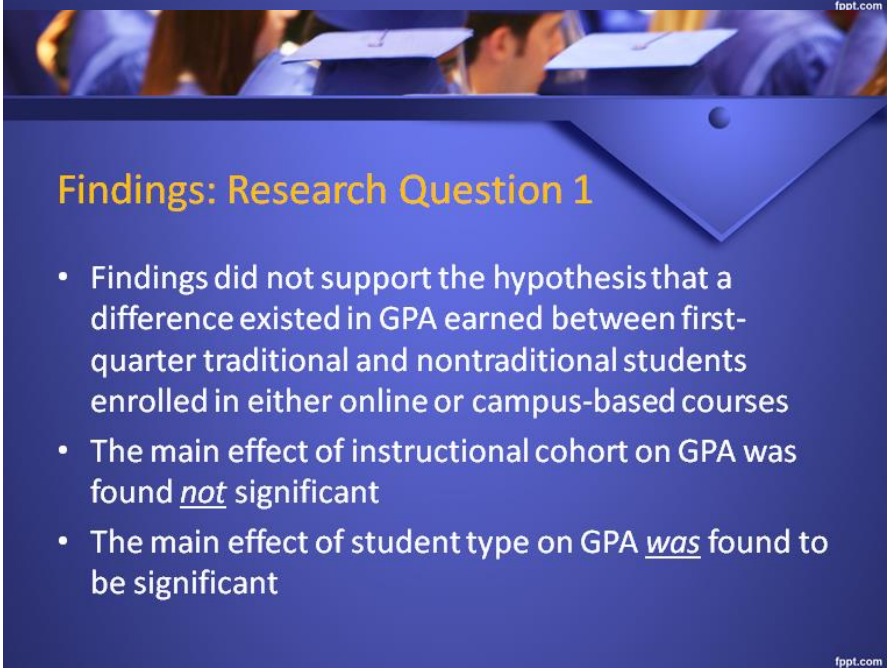
Findings: Research Question 1
• Findings did not support the hypothesis that a difference existed in GPA earned between first-quarter traditional and nontraditional students enrolled in either online or campus-based courses
• The main effect of instructional cohort on GPA was found *not* significant
• The main effect of student type on GPA *was* found to be significant
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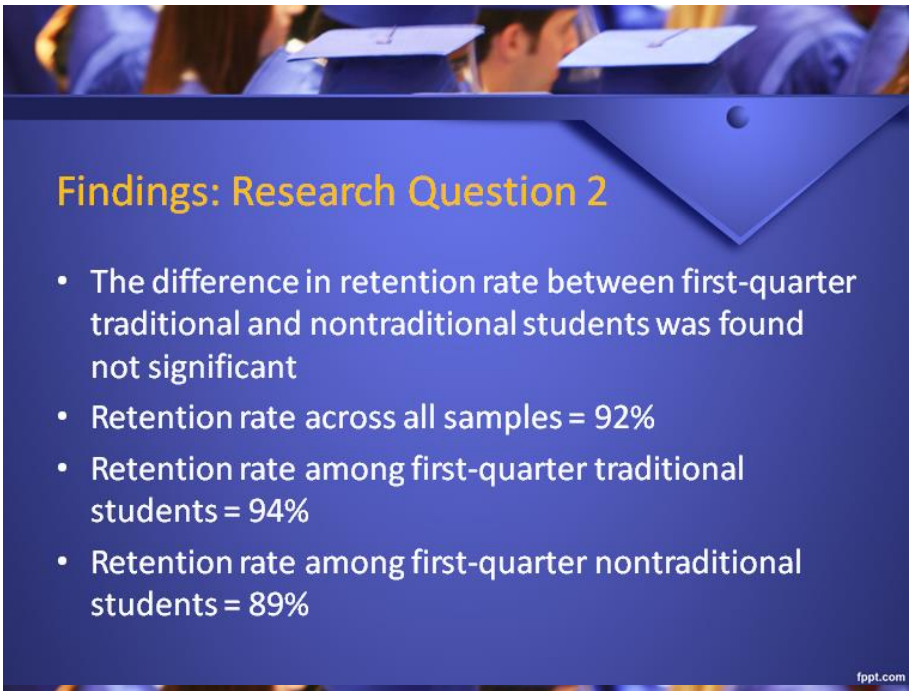
Findings: Research Question 2
• The difference in retention rate between first-quarter traditional and nontraditional students was found not significant
• Retention rate across all samples = 92%
• Retention rate among first-quarter traditional students = 94%
• Retention rate among first-quarter nontraditional students = 89%
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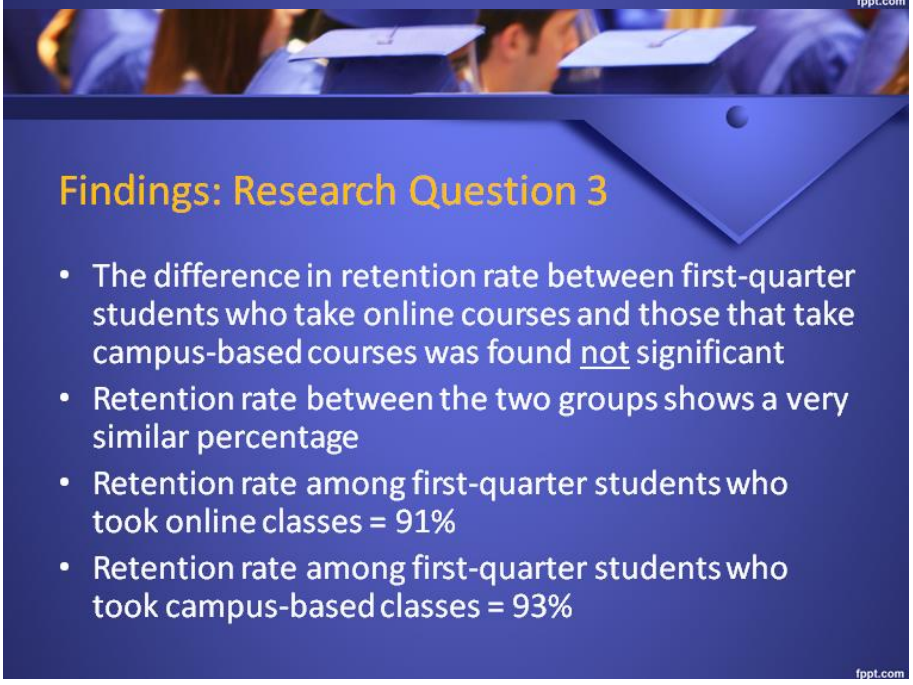
Findings: Research Question 3
• The difference in retention rate between first-quarter students who take online courses and those that take campus-based courses was found not significant
• Retention rate between the two groups shows a very similar percentage
• Retention rate among first-quarter students who took online classes = 91%
• Retention rate among first-quarter students who took campus-based classes = 93%
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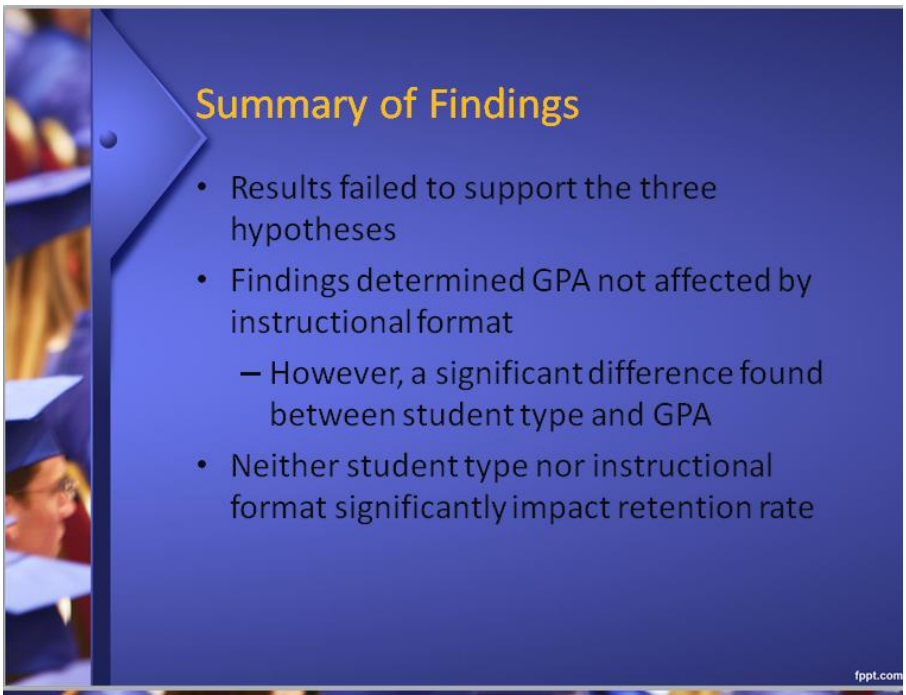
Summary of Findings
• Results failed to support the three hypotheses
• Findings determined GPA not affected by instructional format
– However, a significant difference found between student type and GPA
• Neither student type nor instructional format significantly impact retention rate
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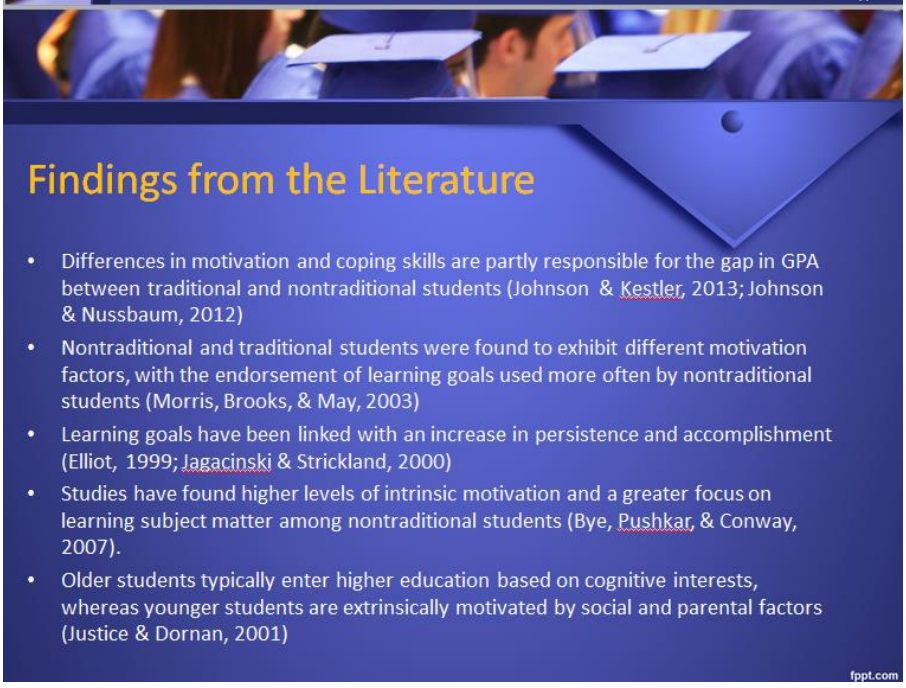
Findings from the Literature
• Differences in motivation and coping skills are partly responsible for the gap in GPA between traditional and nontraditional students (Johnson & Kestler, 2013; Johnson & Nussbaum, 2012)
• Nontraditional and traditional students were found to exhibit different motivation factors, with the endorsement of learning goals used more often by nontraditional students (Morris, Brooks, & May, 2003)
• Learning goals have been linked with an increase in persistence and accomplishment (Elliot, 1999; Jagacinski & Strickland, 2000)
• Studies have found higher levels of intrinsic motivation and a greater focus on learning subject matter among nontraditional students (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007).
• Older students typically enter higher education based on cognitive interests, whereas younger students are extrinsically motivated by social and parental factors (Justice & Dornan, 2001)
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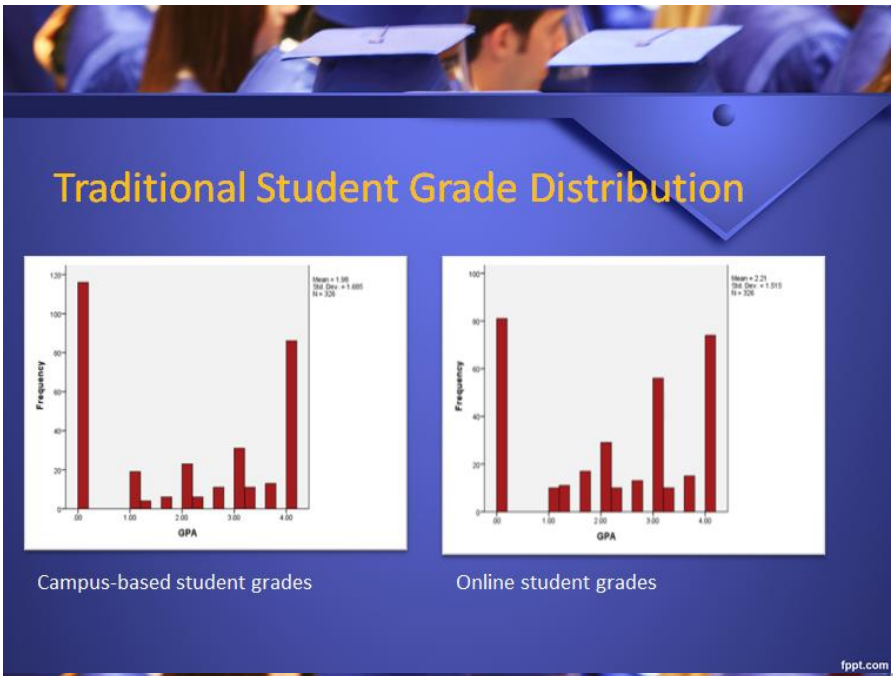
Student Type and GPA

- Possible factors for the significant main effect of student type on GPA earned among first-quarter students:
  - Maturity and age
  - More responsible
  - Career-focused
  - Previous college experience

Unintentional Finding

- Disproportionate distribution of grades earned across all study groups
- A majority of students either do very well in class, earning a 4.0, or extremely poor, earning a GPA of 0.0


Traditional Student Grade Distribution
Frequency
GPA
Campus-based student grades
Frequency
GPA
Online student grades
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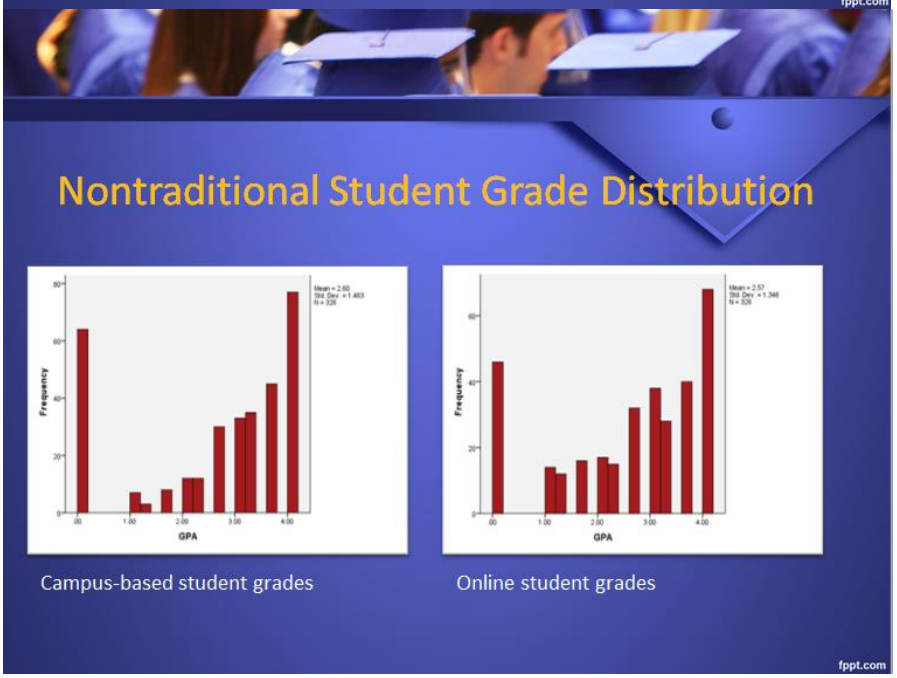
Nontraditional Student Grade Distribution
Frequency
GPA
Campus-based student grades
Frequency
GPA
Online student grades
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Possible Reasons for High Number of As and Fs
High Grades
Mastery of subject matter
Good attendance
Completes assignments
Maturity level
High level of motivation
Clear understanding of expectations
Low Grades
Not prepared for college-level courses
Numerous absences
Not turning in work
Incomplete assignments
Maturity level
Lack of initiative & motivation
Disengagement
F
A
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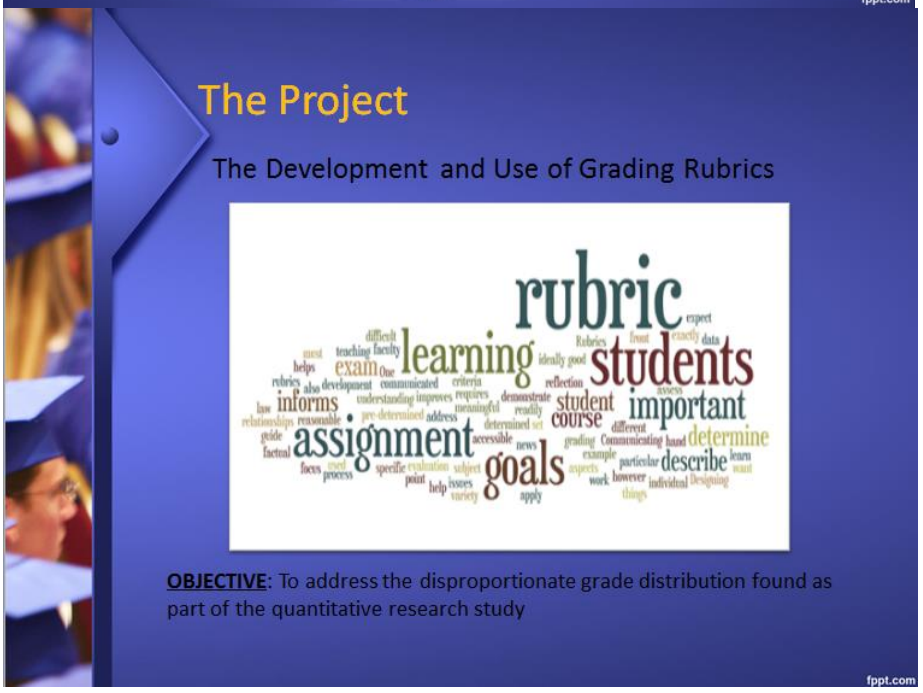
The Project
The Development and Use of Grading Rubrics
rubric
learning
students
assignment
goals
important
informs
student
course
determine
describe
exam
OBJECTIVE: To address the disproportionate grade distribution found as part of the quantitative research study
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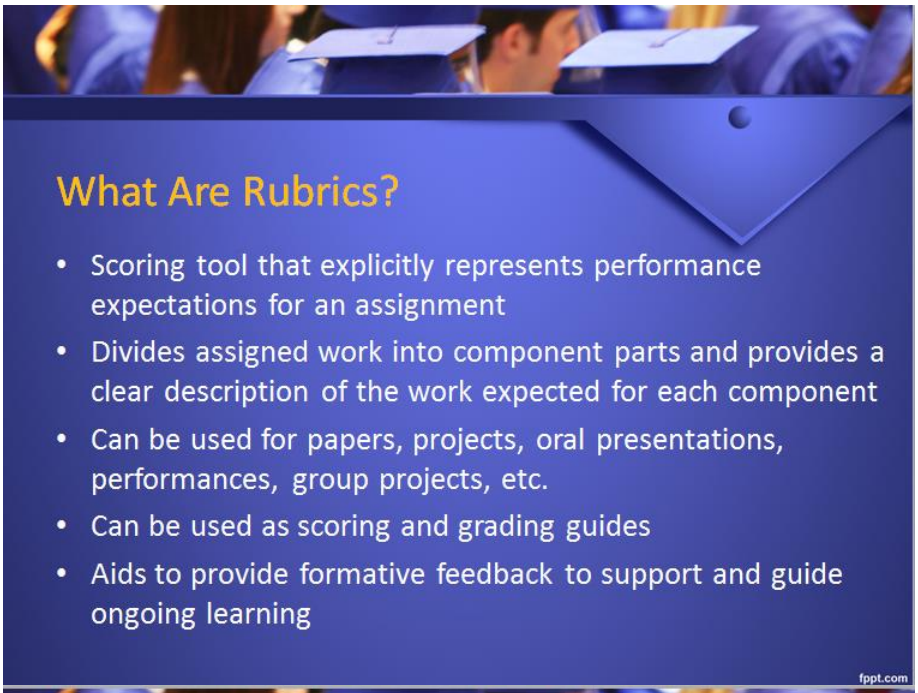
What Are Rubrics?
• Scoring tool that explicitly represents performance expectations for an assignment
• Divides assigned work into component parts and provides a clear description of the work expected for each component
• Can be used for papers, projects, oral presentations, performances, group projects, etc.
• Can be used as scoring and grading guides
• Aids to provide formative feedback to support and guide ongoing learning
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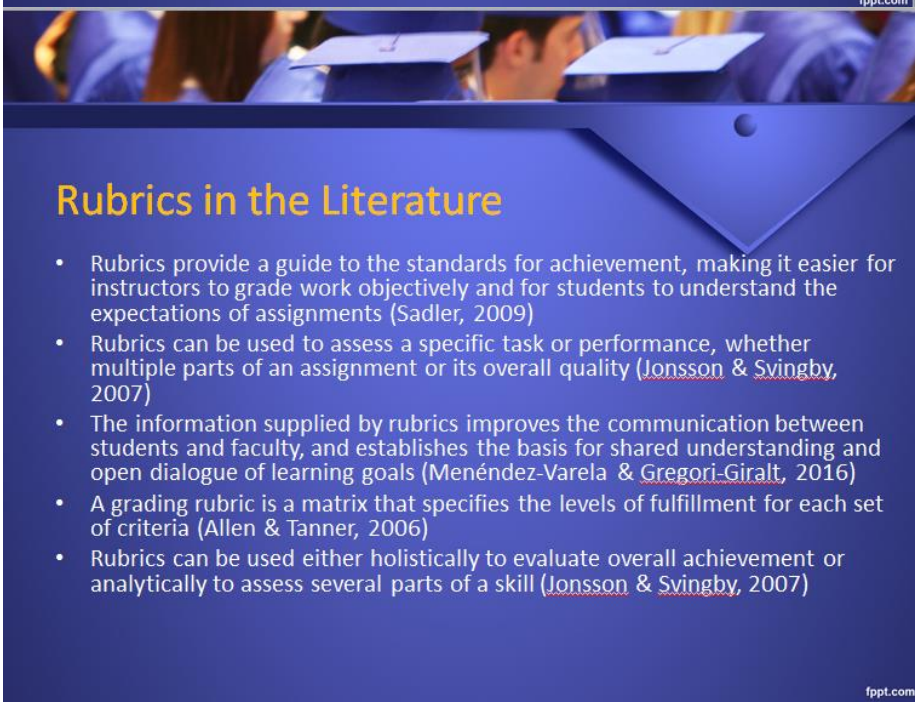
Rubrics in the Literature
• Rubrics provide a guide to the standards for achievement, making it easier for instructors to grade work objectively and for students to understand the expectations of assignments (Sadler, 2009)
• Rubrics can be used to assess a specific task or performance, whether multiple parts of an assignment or its overall quality (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007)
• The information supplied by rubrics improves the communication between students and faculty, and establishes the basis for shared understanding and open dialogue of learning goals (Menéndez-Varela & Gregori-Giralt, 2016)
• A grading rubric is a matrix that specifies the levels of fulfillment for each set of criteria (Allen & Tanner, 2006)
• Rubrics can be used either holistically to evaluate overall achievement or analytically to assess several parts of a skill (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007)
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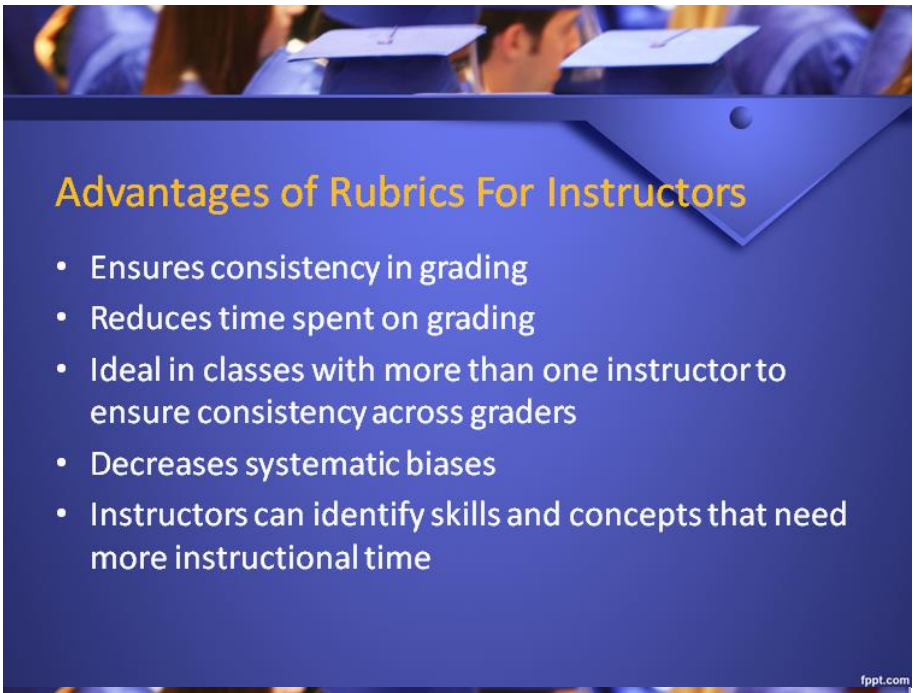
Advantages of Rubrics For Instructors
• Ensures consistency in grading
• Reduces time spent on grading
• Ideal in classes with more than one instructor to ensure consistency across graders
• Decreases systematic biases
• Instructors can identify skills and concepts that need more instructional time
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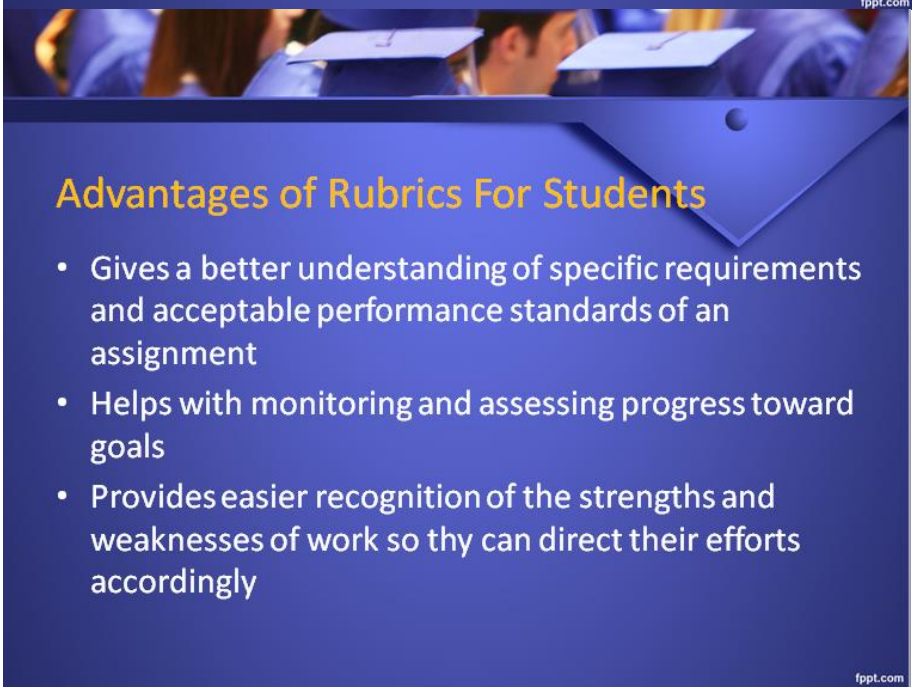
Advantages of Rubrics For Students
• Gives a better understanding of specific requirements and acceptable performance standards of an assignment
• Helps with monitoring and assessing progress toward goals
• Provides easier recognition of the strengths and weaknesses of work so thy can direct their efforts accordingly
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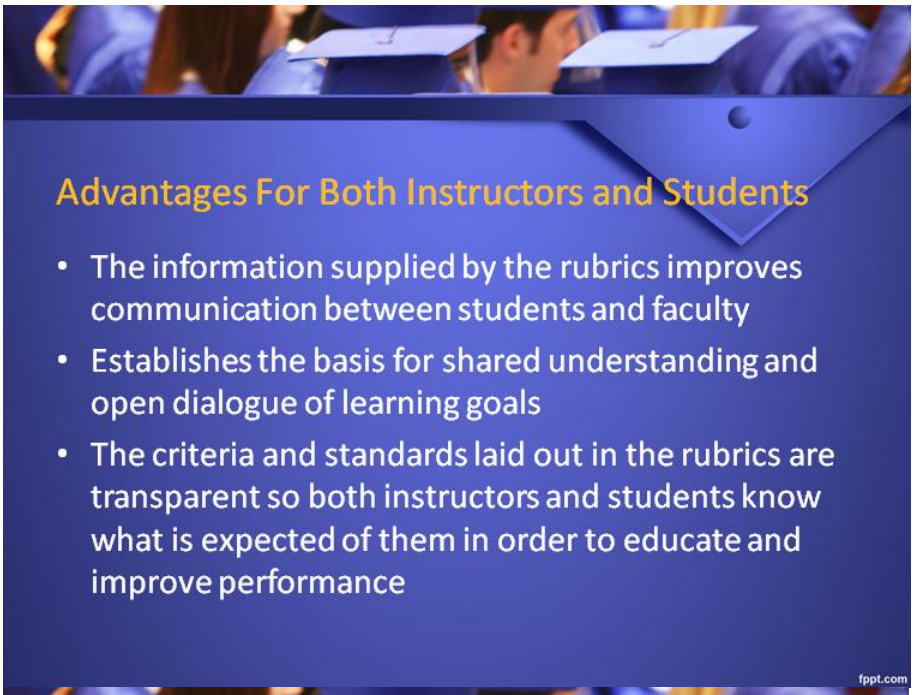
Advantages For Both Instructors and Students
• The information supplied by the rubrics improves communication between students and faculty
• Establishes the basis for shared understanding and open dialogue of learning goals
• The criteria and standards laid out in the rubrics are transparent so both instructors and students know what is expected of them in order to educate and improve performance
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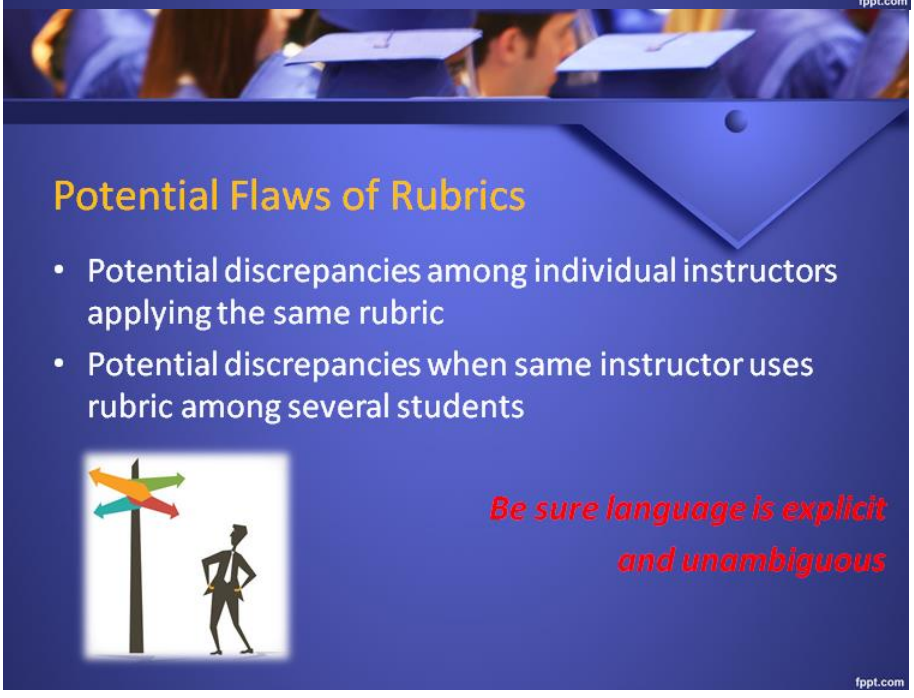
Potential Flaws of Rubrics
• Potential discrepancies among individual instructors applying the same rubric
• Potential discrepancies when same instructor uses rubric among several students
Be sure language is explicit and unambiguous
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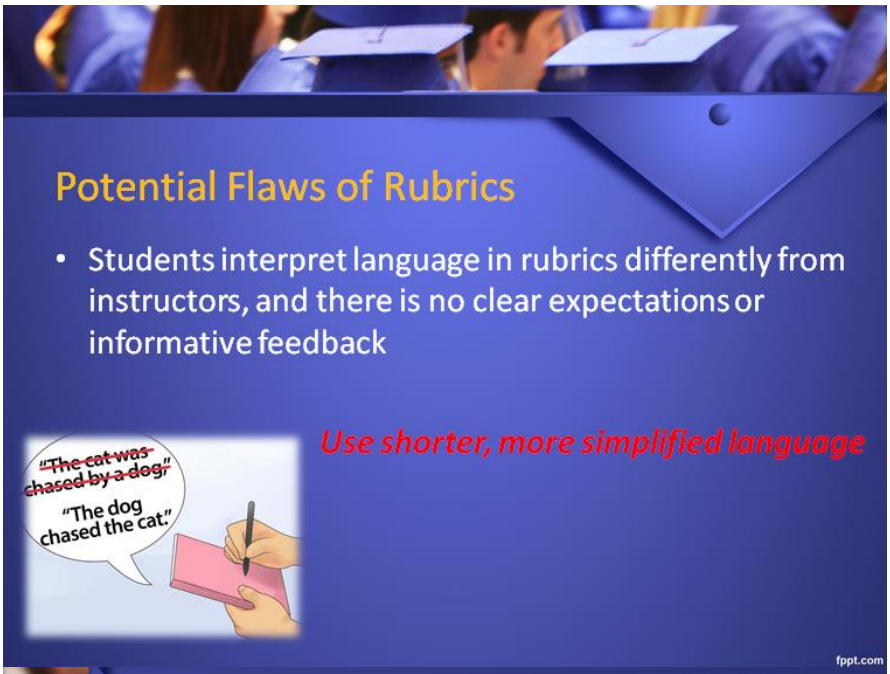
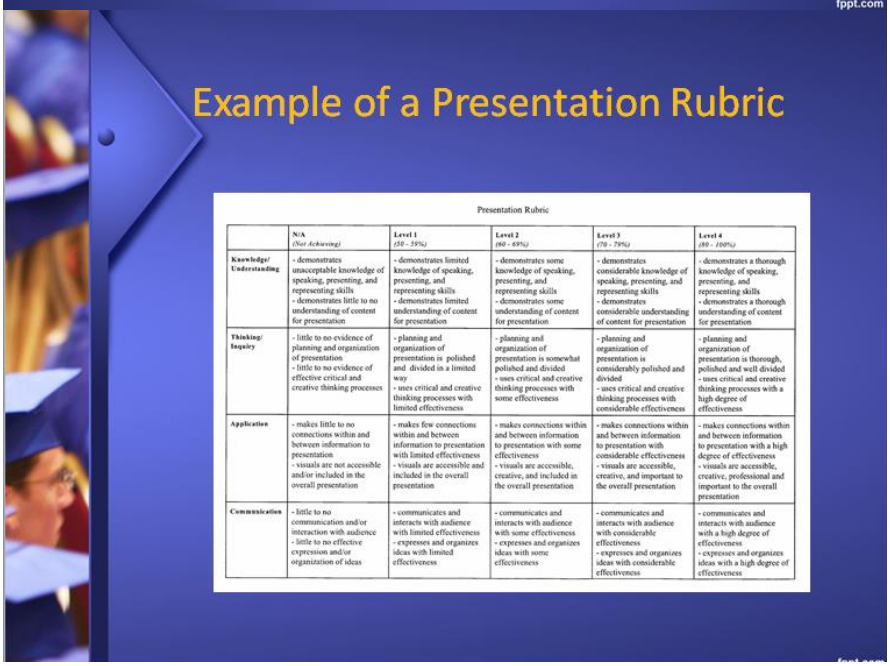
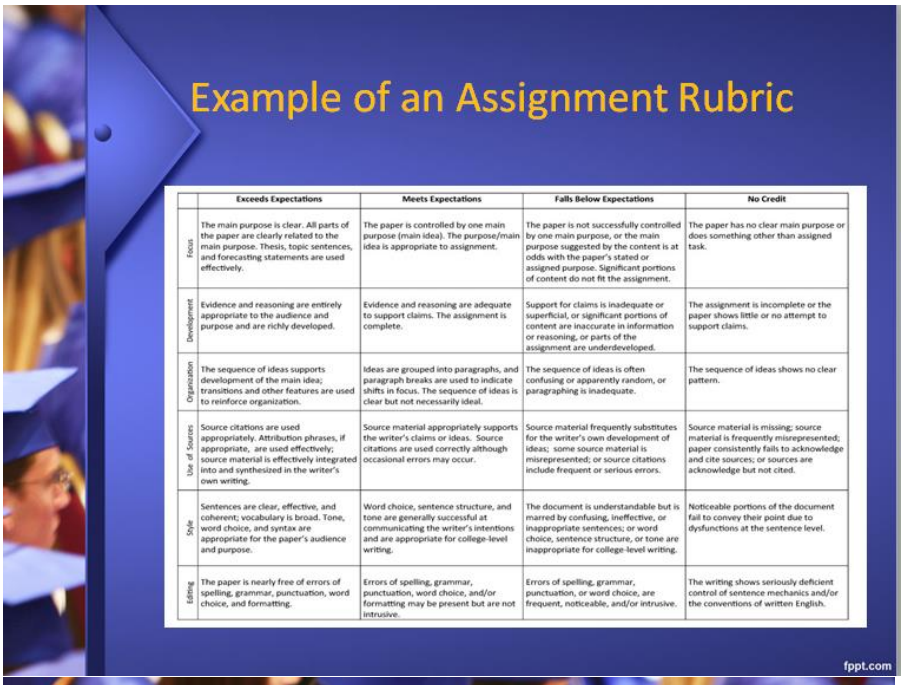




Presentation Rubric

	N/A (Not Achieving)	Level 1 (50 - 59%)	Level 2 (60 - 69%)	Level 3 (70 - 79%)	Level 4 (80 - 100%)
Knowledge/ Understanding	- demonstrates unacceptable knowledge of speaking, presenting, and representing skills - demonstrates little to no understanding of content for presentation	- demonstrates limited knowledge of speaking, presenting, and representing skills - demonstrates limited understanding of content for presentation	- demonstrates some knowledge of speaking, presenting, and representing skills - demonstrates some understanding of content for presentation	- demonstrates considerable knowledge of speaking, presenting, and representing skills - demonstrates considerable understanding of content for presentation	- demonstrates a thorough knowledge of speaking, presenting, and representing skills - demonstrates a thorough understanding of content for presentation
Thinking/ Inquiry	- little to no evidence of planning and organization of presentation - little to no evidence of effective critical and creative thinking processes	- planning and organization of presentation is polished and divided in a limited way - uses critical and creative thinking processes with limited effectiveness	- planning and organization of presentation is somewhat polished and divided - uses critical and creative thinking processes with some effectiveness	- planning and organization of presentation is considerably polished and divided - uses critical and creative thinking processes with considerable effectiveness	- planning and organization of presentation is thorough, polished and well divided - uses critical and creative thinking processes with a high degree of effectiveness
Application	- makes little to no connections within and between information to presentation - visuals are not accessible and/or included in the overall presentation	- makes few connections within and between information to presentation with limited effectiveness - visuals are accessible and included in the overall presentation	- makes connections within and between information to presentation with some effectiveness - visuals are accessible, creative, and included in the overall presentation	- makes connections within and between information to presentation with considerable effectiveness - visuals are accessible, creative, and important to the overall presentation	- makes connections within and between information to presentation with a high degree of effectiveness - visuals are accessible, creative, professional and important to the overall presentation
Communication	- little to no communication and/or interaction with audience - little to no effective expression and/or organization of ideas	- communicates and interacts with audience with limited effectiveness - expresses and organizes ideas with limited effectiveness	- communicates and interacts with audience with some effectiveness - expresses and organizes ideas with some effectiveness	- communicates and interacts with audience with considerable effectiveness - expresses and organizes ideas with considerable effectiveness	- communicates and interacts with audience with a high degree of effectiveness - expresses and organizes ideas with a high degree of effectiveness


Example of an Assignment Rubric
Exceeds Expectations
Meets Expectations
Falls Below Expectations
No Credit
Focus
The main purpose is clear. All parts of the paper are clearly related to the main purpose. Thesis, topic sentences, and forecasting statements are used effectively.
The paper is controlled by one main purpose (main idea). The purpose/main idea is appropriate to assignment.
The paper is not successfully controlled by one main purpose, or the main purpose suggested by the content is at odds with the paper's stated or assigned purpose. Significant portions of content do not fit the assignment.
The paper has no clear main purpose or does something other than assigned task.
Development
Evidence and reasoning are entirely appropriate to the audience and purpose and are richly developed.
Evidence and reasoning are adequate to support claims. The assignment is complete.
Support for claims is inadequate or superficial, or significant portions of content are inaccurate in information or reasoning, or parts of the assignment are underdeveloped.
The assignment is incomplete or the paper shows little or no attempt to support claims.
Organization
The sequence of ideas supports development of the main idea; transitions and other features are used to reinforce organization.
Ideas are grouped into paragraphs, and paragraph breaks are used to indicate shifts in focus. The sequence of ideas is clear but not necessarily ideal.
The sequence of ideas is often confusing or apparently random, or paragraphing is inadequate.
The sequence of ideas shows no clear pattern.
Use of Sources
Source citations are used appropriately. Attribution phrases, if appropriate, are used effectively; source material is effectively integrated into and synthesized in the writer's own writing.
Source material appropriately supports the writer's claims or ideas. Source citations are used correctly although occasional errors may occur.
Source material frequently substitutes for the writer's own development of ideas; some source material is misrepresented; or source citations include frequent or serious errors.
Source material is missing; source material is frequently misrepresented; paper consistently fails to acknowledge and cite sources; or sources are acknowledge but not cited.
Style
Sentences are clear, effective, and coherent; vocabulary is broad. Tone, word choice, and syntax are appropriate for the paper's audience and purpose.
Word choice, sentence structure, and tone are generally successful at communicating the writer's intentions and are appropriate for college-level writing.
The document is understandable but is marred by confusing, ineffective, or inappropriate sentences; or word choice, sentence structure, or tone are inappropriate for college-level writing.
Noticeable portions of the document fail to convey their point due to dysfunctions at the sentence level.
Editing
The paper is nearly free of errors of spelling, grammar, punctuation, word choice, and formatting.
Errors of spelling, grammar, punctuation, word choice, and/or formatting may be present but are not intrusive.
Errors of spelling, grammar, punctuation, or word choice, are frequent, noticeable, and/or intrusive.
The writing shows seriously deficient control of sentence mechanics and/or the conventions of written English.
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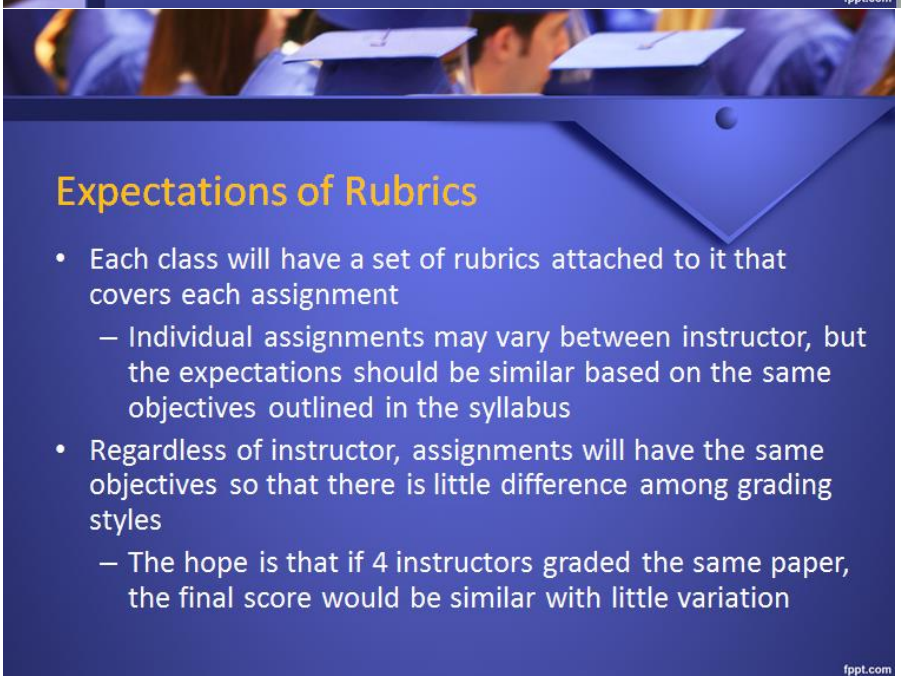
Expectations of Rubrics
• Each class will have a set of rubrics attached to it that covers each assignment
– Individual assignments may vary between instructor, but the expectations should be similar based on the same objectives outlined in the syllabus
• Regardless of instructor, assignments will have the same objectives so that there is little difference among grading styles
– The hope is that if 4 instructors graded the same paper, the final score would be similar with little variation
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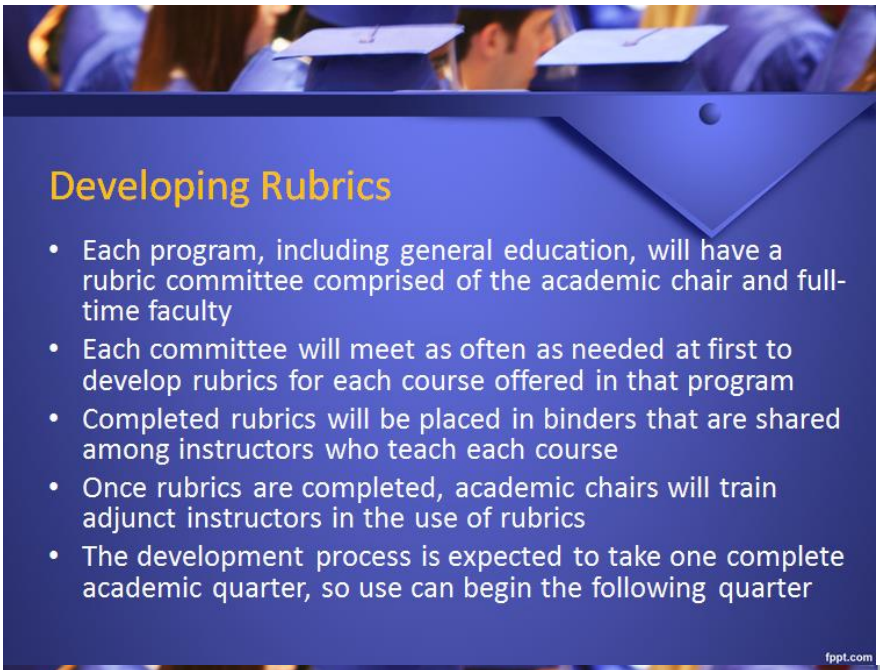
Developing Rubrics
• Each program, including general education, will have a rubric committee comprised of the academic chair and full-time faculty
• Each committee will meet as often as needed at first to develop rubrics for each course offered in that program
• Completed rubrics will be placed in binders that are shared among instructors who teach each course
• Once rubrics are completed, academic chairs will train adjunct instructors in the use of rubrics
• The development process is expected to take one complete academic quarter, so use can begin the following quarter
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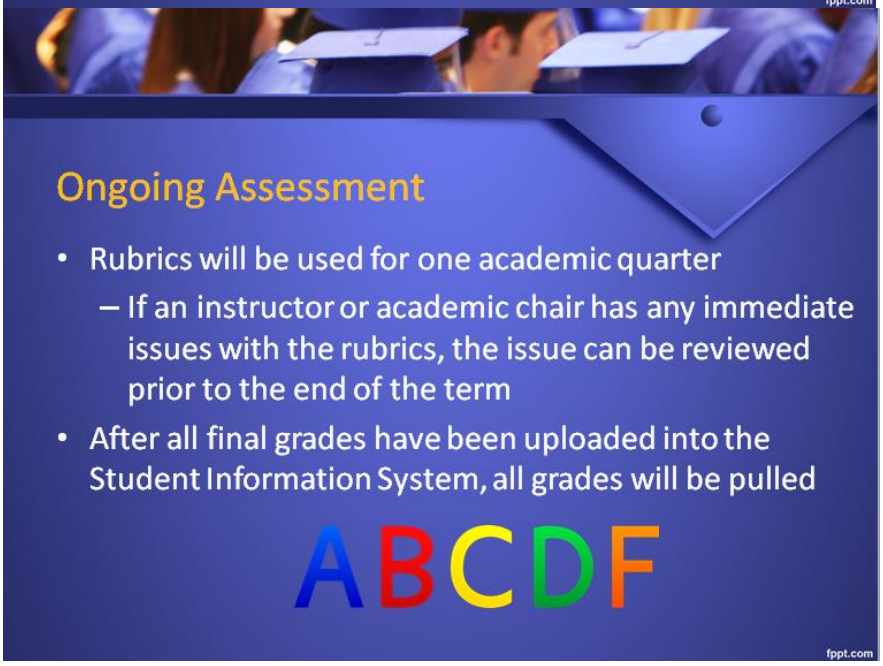
Ongoing Assessment
• Rubrics will be used for one academic quarter
– If an instructor or academic chair has any immediate issues with the rubrics, the issue can be reviewed prior to the end of the term
• After all final grades have been uploaded into the Student Information System, all grades will be pulled
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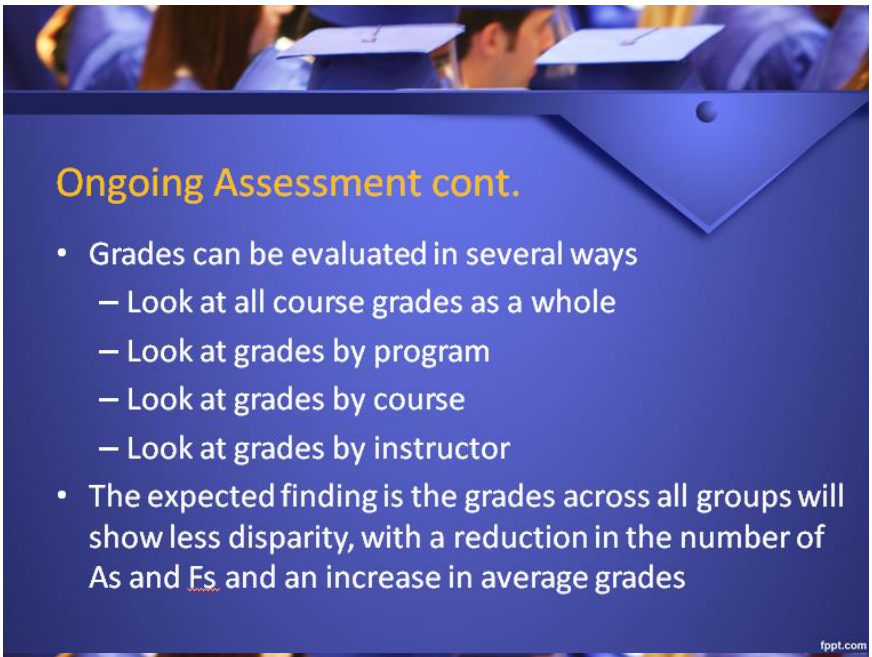
Ongoing Assessment cont.
• Grades can be evaluated in several ways
– Look at all course grades as a whole
– Look at grades by program
– Look at grades by course
– Look at grades by instructor
• The expected finding is the grades across all groups will show less disparity, with a reduction in the number of As and Fs and an increase in average grades
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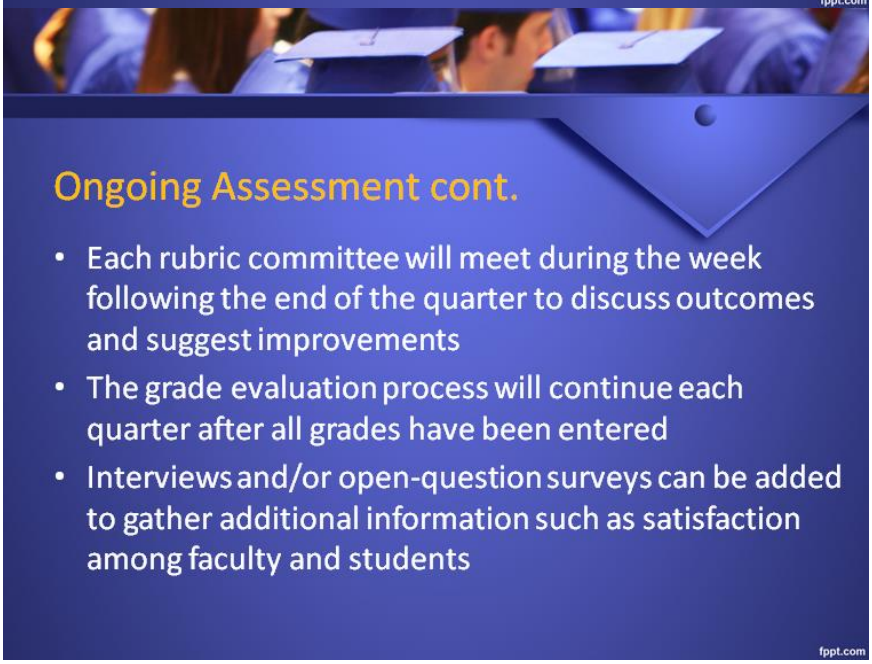
Ongoing Assessment cont.
• Each rubric committee will meet during the week following the end of the quarter to discuss outcomes and suggest improvements
• The grade evaluation process will continue each quarter after all grades have been entered
• Interviews and/or open-question surveys can be added to gather additional information such as satisfaction among faculty and students
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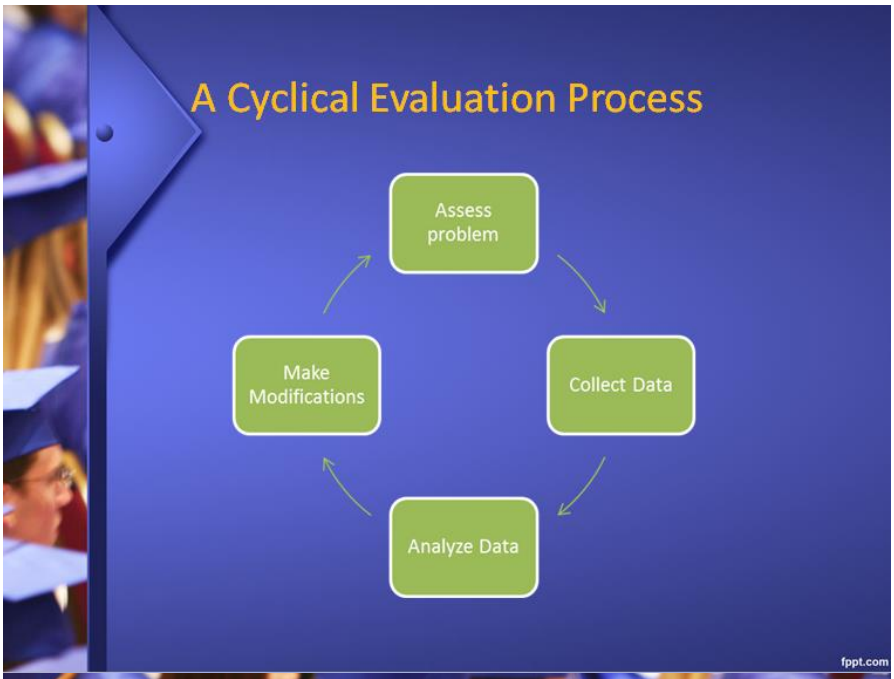
A Cyclical Evaluation Process
Assess problem
Collect Data
Analyze Data
Make Modifications
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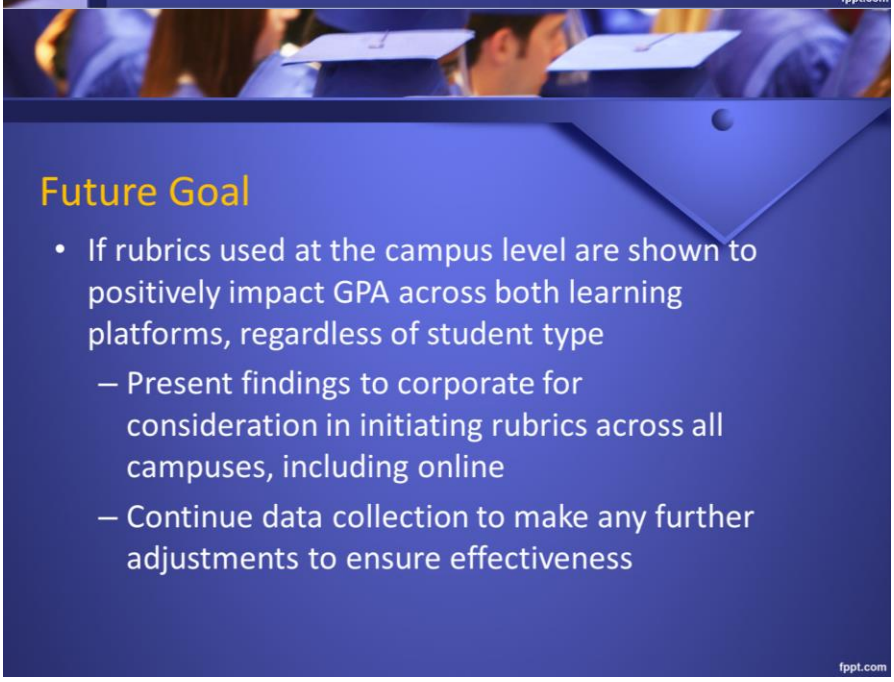
Future Goal
• If rubrics used at the campus level are shown to positively impact GPA across both learning platforms, regardless of student type
– Present findings to corporate for consideration in initiating rubrics across all campuses, including online
– Continue data collection to make any further adjustments to ensure effectiveness
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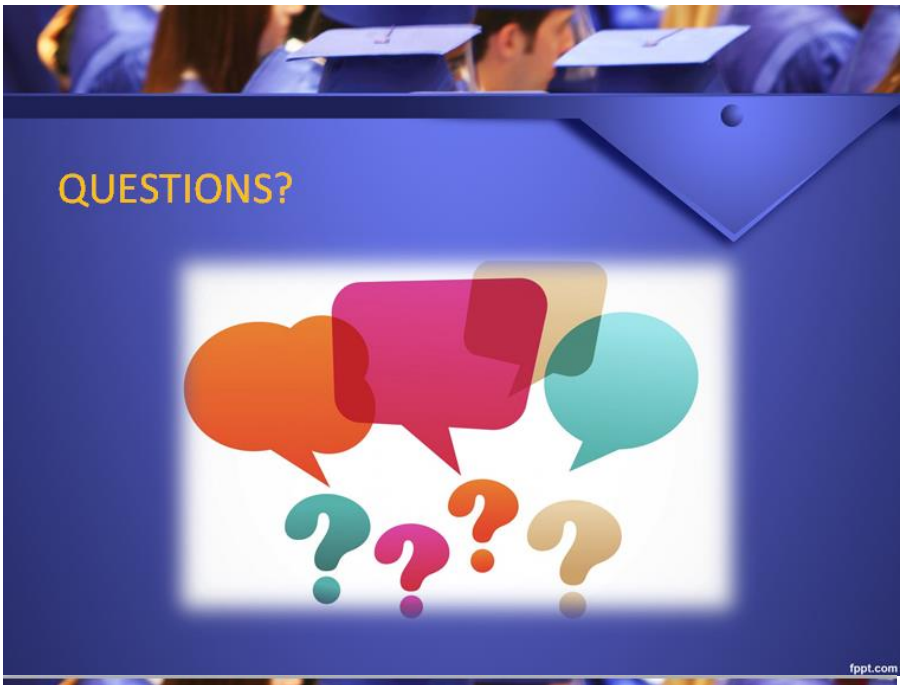

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Johnson, M. L., & Nussbaum, E. M. (2012). Achievement goals and coping strategies: Identifying the traditional/nontraditional students who use them. *Journal of College Student Development*, *53*, 41–54.

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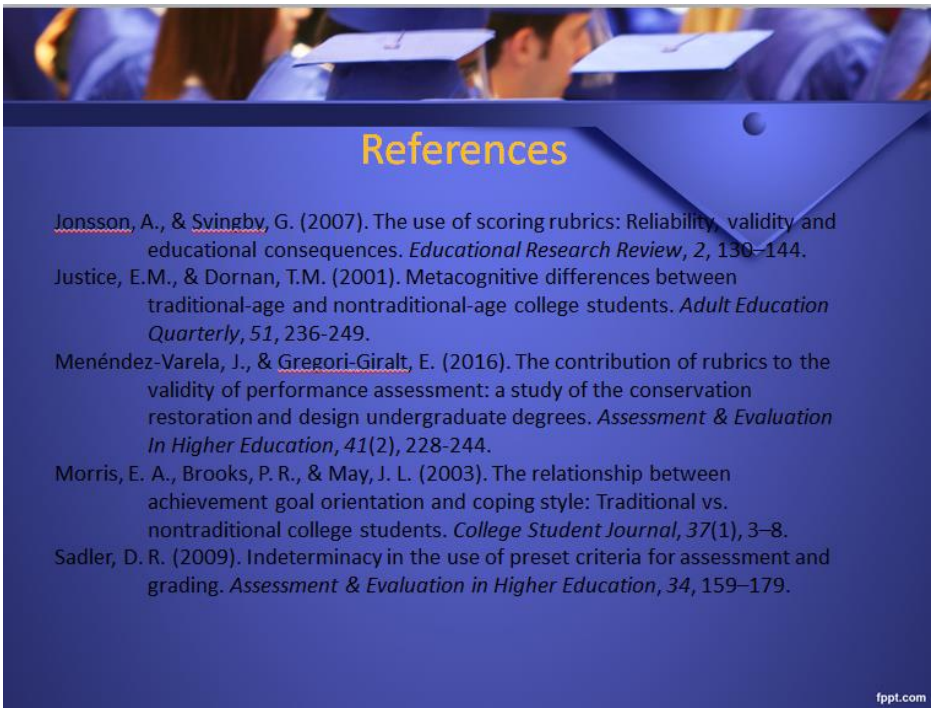
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Appendix A Continued: Project White Paper

Relationships Among Student Type, GPA, and Retention

Within a Proprietary Career College

by

Steven Charles Parker-Young

MSM, New England College, 2009

BA, University of Massachusetts - Boston, 2006

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

January 2017

Introduction

Student retention is a problem in higher education institutions. Empirical evidence has shown that attrition at any time during the program of study creates a loss for the student, campus, and the local economy (Johnson, 2012). Colleges and universities experience decreased revenue and lower enrollments as attrition rates increase, which can be costly to the institution and discouraging to the student (Johnson, 2012; Sbrega, 2012). In the last 10 years, enrollment in college online courses has tripled and continues to rise steadily (Stack, 2015). According to Allen and Seaman (2013), the prevalence of enrollment in online courses has increased from 9.6% in fall 2002 to 32.0% in fall 2011 based on the percent of total enrollment.

Today, more than 30% of all college students enroll in online course, and greater than half of those students attend community colleges (Wladis, Wladis, & Hachey 2014). Online education is expected to continue growing in response to an explosion of higher education enrollments as more students seeking alternative pathways to a college degree (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Due to the high cost of student attrition to both the institution and the student, there is a strong need to identify potential persistence issues associated with online courses to direct targeted support toward improving the problem (Hachey, Wladis & Conway, 2013).

From his research, Carr (2000) found that retention rates among students in online courses can be 10-15% lower than retention rates among students taking a similar course on campus. Regardless of the popularity of online courses, retention rates are still

reported as several percentage points below similar campuses taught on campus (Frydenberg, 2007).

Introduction to the Local Problem

First semester retention in all programs is a primary focus of concern at this proprietary college (personal communication, dean of academic affairs, August 10, 2015). Decreasing retention rates should be recognized and addressed by academic leaders when trends become problematic. New student enrollment remains steady at the college; however, the student attrition rate across all programs comes close to the rate of enrollment. The most noticeable number of student withdrawals occurs during midsession starts, when students enroll in classes that run for only 5 ½ weeks rather than the 11-week length of a full academic quarter.

There is limited course availability each quarter due to an effort by the parent company to reduce teaching dollars. Many students choose to enroll in online courses based on the low number of applicable courses available on campus or that are offered at times that conflict with other obligations, even though they state their concern at the time of registration (personal communication, new student academic advisor, August 12, 2015). This study was designed to assist in the identification of areas that need interventions and processes to improve the current problem with retention and academic success in online courses.

Traditional Versus Nontraditional Students

Wolff, Wood-Kustanowitz, and Ashkenazi (2014) found that students who are underprepared or possess poor academic skills face magnified difficulties as a result of online course enrollment, and should be required to address their academic weaknesses and reduce the number of risk factors to improve online success. Although the number of high school graduates is increasing and causing a boost in the number of traditional college students, many of them lack the proficiency to perform college-level academic work (Castillo, 2013). The nontraditional student population also tends to be more diverse particularly in relation to writing skills than the traditional-aged student population, and this diversity is evident in online course assignments and grades (Melkun, 2012). Since many nontraditional students have been out of school for years or even decades, their writing skills have often atrophied, which impacts the quality of assignments and ultimately their grades (Davis, 2006). It appears both traditional and nontraditional students experience risk factors that could potentially detract from their ability to be successful in online courses, although it is not currently determined if one group experiences greater risk.

Criteria used for the determination of applicable characteristics used to classify a student as nontraditional for this study were taken from the description provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2009), which include a delayed enrollment to college after high school; part-time enrollment status; full-time employment status; financial independence; and

aged 25 years or above. Due to limited available student data in the Student Information System (SIS), this study will determine a student to be nontraditional based on length of time between high school and college, part-time enrollment status, and aged 25 years or above.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used to drive this study was the application of Bean and Metzner's (1987) conceptual model of nontraditional student attrition during their research with adult learners. Bean and Metzner (1985) developed a conceptual model of persistence specific to nontraditional students that narrowed the list of characteristics of nontraditional students by focusing on the differences between traditional and nontraditional students. The primary characteristics identified were age, residence, and attendance. According to Bean and Metzner, the most common difference in attrition between traditional and nontraditional students is a more significant influence the external environment has on the latter.

Bean and Metzner directed their primary focus toward external factors occurring in students' life off campus. The drop-out decision among nontraditional students is based upon four sets of variables identified in the attrition model for non-traditional students developed by Bean and Metzner. According to the model, academic variables, such as the number of study hours, have direct influence over academic outcomes, such as GPA. Academic

variables can lead to involuntary dismissal based on poor grades, but there are many factors in voluntary departure from college. Students may decide to drop based on academic variables, or the variables may cause negative psychological variables, such as stress, that lead to intent to leave followed by the actual decision to withdraw from college. External environmental factors may also lead to the progression of intent to leave college to actually dropping from school.

Sample Selection

Participants were assigned to groups based on predetermined characteristics that defined whether they are traditional or nontraditional and the type of learning platform taken during their first academic quarter. The predetermined characteristics used to assign students to traditional or nontraditional groups for this study consisted of the length of time between high school and college, whether full- or part-time enrollment status, and the age of the student at the time of enrollment. Preliminary population numbers taken from each of the four groups showed a disparity between traditional and nontraditional students who took either online or campus-based courses.

Researchers often use stratified sampling as a design technique to ensure sampling includes the different homogenous groups within a population and to increase the level of accuracy in establishing study parameters (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). In this study, sampling began by sorting the population into either traditional or nontraditional students based on length of time between high school and college, whether

they attended campus full- or part-time, and the age of the student at the time of enrollment. Only one criterion was necessary for classifying the student as either traditional or nontraditional. The sorting further divided students into those who took strictly online courses or strictly campus-based courses for a total of 4 groups. Due to the small number of students who enrolled in courses online during their first academic term, disproportionate stratified sampling was used to select students from the population to ensure there was a comparable number of participants in each sample group. The sample group with the smallest number of total participants was used as the threshold at which all other groups compared in number. Simple random sampling was conducted within each subgroup to reach similar numbers across all subgroups.

In an effort to ensure a fair measure of online and on campus course outcomes in comparison, participants included in the sample must have taken a course that is available both online and on campus. The course material, grading criteria, and expectations of learning outcomes are the same for each course taught regardless of learning platform.

A data analysis was conducted using SPSS v. 21.00. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, while inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The four sample groups each included 326 students from each of the following categories: traditional online students, nontraditional online students, traditional campus students, and nontraditional campus students, for a total sample of 1304.

Research Questions

Research Question 1 asked whether a difference existed in GPA between first-quarter traditional and nontraditional students who enrolled in courses either strictly online or strictly on campus. The alternate hypothesis posited that there would be significant differences in GPA earned by both student types and their chosen learning platform. A 2X2 factorial ANOVA design was conducted, and findings did not support the hypothesis (Table 1).

RQ1: Is there a difference in GPA between student type and instructional cohort?

$H_0$1: There is no difference in GPA between student type and instructional cohort.

H_A1: There is a difference in GPA between student type and instructional cohort.

Table 1

Factorial ANOVA for Hypothesis 1

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	86.19[a]	3	28.73	12.65	0
Intercept	7139.9	1	7139.9	3143.64	0
Student Type	77.11	1	77.11	33.95	0
Instructional Cohort	3.6	1	3.6	1.58	0.21
Student Type * Instructional Cohort	5.48	1	5.48	2.41	0.12
Error	2952.58	1300	2.27		
Total	10178.67	1304			
Corrected Total	3038.77	1303			

Source	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power
Corrected Model	.03a	37.95	1
Intercept	0.71	3143.64	1
Student Type	0.03	33.95	1
Instructional Cohort	0	1.58	0.24
Student Type * Instructional Cohort	0	2.41	0.34
Error			
Total			
Corrected Total			

a. R Squared = .028 (Adjusted R Squared = .026)

b. Computed using alpha = .05

Research question 2 asked whether an association existed between the retention rate of traditional and nontraditional students at the completion of their first academic quarter. It was posited that there would be a significant difference in retention rates between student types at the completion of their first academic quarter. A review of the data found a retention rate of 92% across all samples. The retention rate among traditional students was 94%, while there was an 89% retention rate among nontraditional students between both learning platforms. The results fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no association between retention rate and student type at the completion of their first academic quarter (Table 2). The retention rate between both traditional and nontraditional students shows a very similar percentage.

RQ2: Is there an association between the retention rate of traditional and nontraditional students at the completion of their first academic quarter?

H02: There is no association between retention rate and student type at the completion of their first academic quarter.

HA2: A lower retention rate is associated with student type at the completion of their first academic quarter.

Table 2

Test of significance across student type

	Student Type Group
Chi-Square	.14[a]
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	0.71

Research question 3 asked whether an association exists between the retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either campus-based or online courses. It was predicted that there did exist an association between retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students. The retention rate among students who completed online course was 91%, while there was a 93% retention rate among students who completed courses on campus. The test of significance (Table 3) displays the findings that the instructional cohort has little if any impact on student retention, Asymp. Sig. = .37, $p > .05$. The results fail to reject the null hypothesis that there is no association between retention rate and instructional cohort at the completion of their first academic quarter.

RQ3: Is there an association between the retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses?

H03: There is no association between retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses.

HA3: There is an association between retention rate and instructional cohort of first-quarter students who take either online or campus-based courses.

Table 3

Test of significance across instructional cohort

	Instructional Cohort Group
Chi-Square	.80[a]
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	0.37

In sum, the results of this study failed to support the three hypotheses. However, an unintentional finding that appears relevant to the study is the disproportion among grades earned in each of the four sample groups. The histograms for each of the sample groups show that the greatest number of students earned either a 4.0 or 0.0 with all grades in between falling far below these scores. It would appear that a majority of students either do very well or very poorly in their classes. As a byproduct of reviewing data from the first research question, a relevant finding identified a significant main effect of student type on GPA earned among students in their first academic quarter. GPA among nontraditional students were found to be higher.

Program directors and faculty have acknowledged that there does appear to be a large number of students who either do very well in class or do perform poorly with few in between (personal communication, associate program director, July 29, 2016). An accumulation of failing grades likely leads to eventual withdrawals and academic dismissals later in the program. Academic grades are used as the primary indicator of student performance and comprehension in college (Wongsurawat, 2009). Grade point averages indicate the student's level of achievement, the ranking of students among peers, and the understanding of course objectives (Harrison, 2007).

Focus of Project

The project was developed to address the difference in GPA between traditional and nontraditional students, and the secondary finding of the disproportionate grade distribution identified as part of the quantitative research study conducted. A bi-modal

grade distribution (represented in Figure 1) was found in each of the 4 sample groups, with a majority of students in each group earning either an A or an F with few grades earned in between (Figures 2-5).

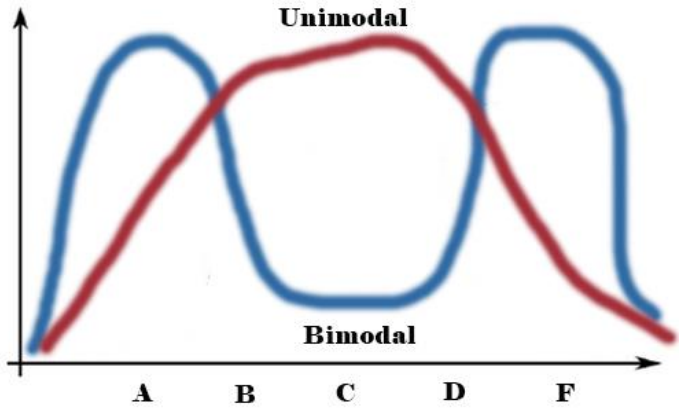

Figure 1. A comparison of unimodal and bimodal grade distribution

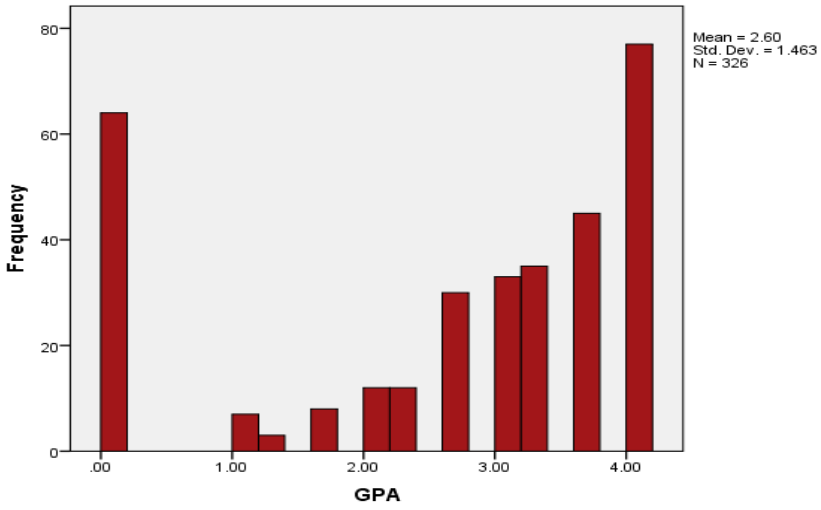

Figure 2. Frequency Distribution - nontraditional campus students

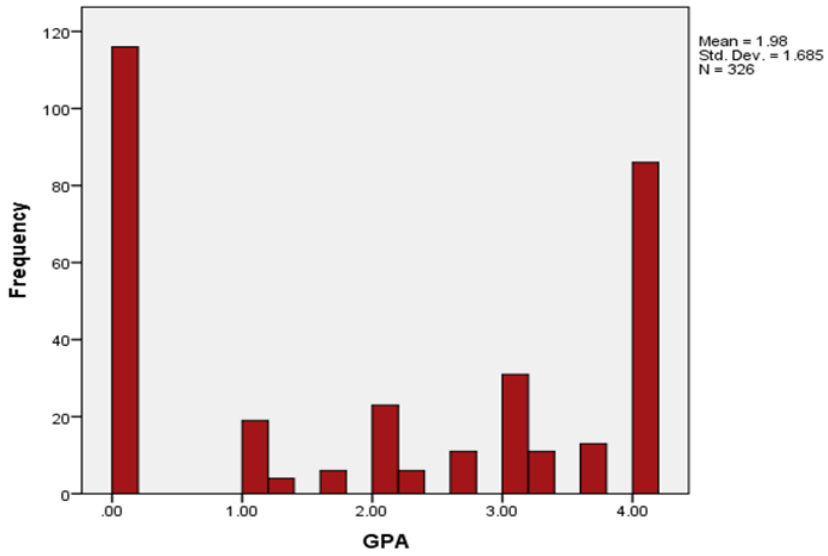

Figure 3. Frequency Distribution - Traditional campus students

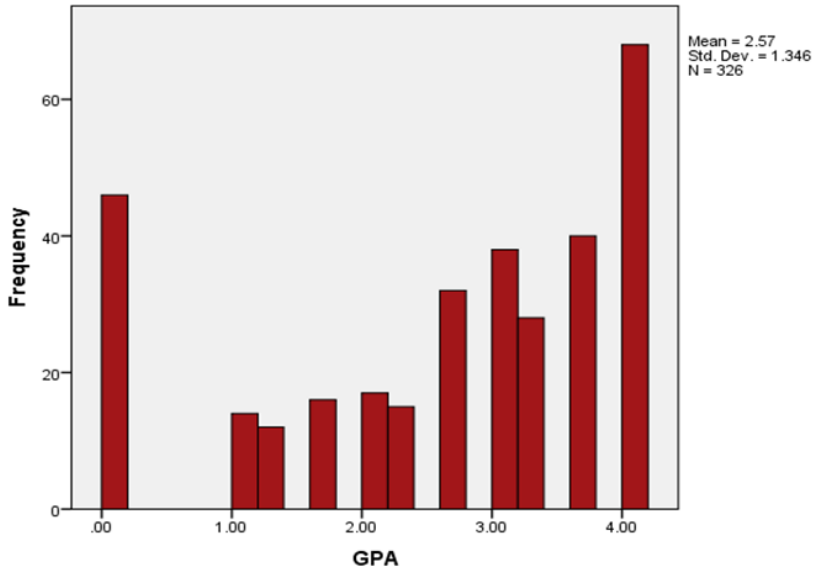

Figure 4. Frequency Distribution - Nontraditional online students

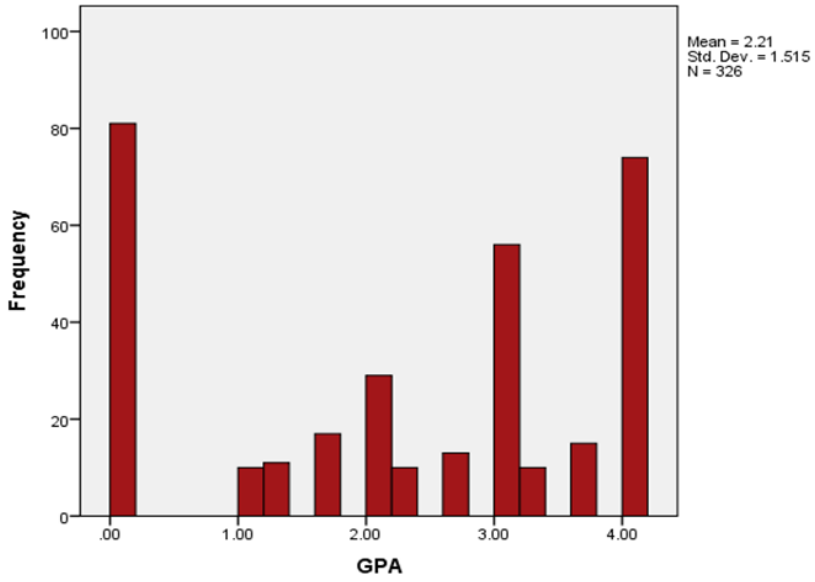

Figure 5. Frequency Distribution - Traditional online students

Table 4 shows the frequency table for GPA earned in the 5-year time period by traditional and nontraditional students in both campus-based and online courses. Based on this information, 66.67% of all students earned a grade of C or better, which is considered academically successful by this study. However, note the identification of high numbers of students who either earned an A or an F across all four groups.

Table 4.

Frequency, percent, valid percent, and cumulative percent of earned GPA across all four sample groups

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	307	23.5	23.5	23.5
	1	50	3.8	3.8	27.4
	1.3	30	2.3	2.3	29.7
	1.7	47	3.6	3.6	33.3
	2	81	6.2	6.2	39.5
	2.3	43	3.3	3.3	42.8
	2.7	86	6.6	6.6	49.4
	3	158	12.1	12.1	61.5
	3.3	84	6.4	6.4	67.9
	3.7	113	8.7	8.7	76.6
	4	305	23.4	23.4	100
	Total	1304	100	100	

The Project

The project will include rubrics designed for each course taught on campus, as well as training provided for all faculty members to understand the purpose and value of utilizing rubrics in the classroom. Rubrics provide a guide to the standards for achievement, making it easier for instructors to grade work objectively, and for students to understand the expectations of assignments (Sadler, 2009). Rubrics can be used to assess a specific task or performance, whether multiple parts of an assignment or its overall quality (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007).

Students would benefit from a more unified assessment of their ability to successfully complete course assignments, and the ability to predict grades based on solid guidelines for evaluation. Results of the study found a significant influence on GPA by the student type of either traditional or nontraditional, which may also be addressed by the project. Nontraditional students with prior higher education experience may have a better grasp of the expectations of college course work. Traditional students entering college soon after high school lack the proficiency of completing rigorous course requirements, which are often more demanding than what they experienced in high school. College administration would benefit from higher retention and success rates if new students had a clearer understanding of the expectations of course work and skill assessment. Faculty would also benefit by having students entering their classrooms knowing the expectations for academic success.

The project will begin by establishing guidelines for the development of rubrics to be used across all courses offered at the institution in the on ground classroom setting. The online classes will continue as they have due to the inability of the ground campus to affect change outside of its own institution. If positive results are shown from data collection after rubric implementation, the findings and project will be presented to the parent company for consideration across all campuses and online environments. A predesigned set of rubrics will be identified by academic leads and implemented to begin with the next enrollment cycle. In addition, a workshop will be held to train faculty how to create and implement their own rubrics for use on smaller assignments and projects in

their own class, which will assist students in the completion of their work. The team will work together to develop standardized rubrics used for all similar classes, and ensure that the curriculum and objectives of each class builds on the outcomes expected from prior courses.

The use of rubrics will contribute to the empowerment of students to meet standards and make judgments by allowing them to regulate their own progress. Rubrics improve the communication between instructors and students by setting the basis and structure of learning goals. The anticipated result of rubric implementation is greater coherence between the grades earned. There should be a grade average of C across all cohorts, with fewer grades of As and Fs. If data collected after the implementation of rubrics yields an improved grade distribution across campus classes, findings will be presented to the parent company for consideration of further implementation.

Project Evaluation

Evaluations are vital to program success because they keep track of what is and what is not successful. Evaluations are designed to detect effectiveness of program components. The performance of program evaluations will assist in the determination of whether specific elements are necessary and if revisions would generate greater success (Spaulding, 2008). Formative evaluations, which provide more timely feedback, will be used during the early stages of the project to address issues and establish ensuing steps. A summative evaluation, which takes addition time and resources, will be conducted after the first year of implementation.

After the project has been initiated, a final grade report will be run at the end of each academic term that shows the letter grade earned in each on ground course by each student. The mean GPA earned by traditional and nontraditional students will be compared to check for improvement. In addition, the number of each letter grade will be calculated, and a frequency distribution will be plotted that shows the scattering of grades in hopes that it has shifted toward a normal bell curve. Grades from the online classes will also be collected and plotted along a frequency distribution to compare the use and nonuse of grading rubrics in the classrooms.

Findings from project evaluation will be shared with the parent company so they may determine if the use of rubrics across all campuses, including the online campus, is a consideration. Evaluations will be an ongoing effort after each academic term to determine any needed improvements to the process.

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Appendix B: Campus Consent for Study

[redacted]

January 26, 2016

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Walden University
100 Washington Avenue South
Suite 900
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401

Dear Members of the Committee:

On behalf of [redacted] I am writing to formally indicate my support of the research proposed by Steven Parker, a doctoral student at Walden University. We are aware that Mr. Parker intends to conduct his research by examining archival data that includes grade and retention information of our current and former students. In addition, this letter serves as assurance that this institution complies with the requirements the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), and will ensure that these requirements are followed in the conduct of this proposed study.

As an executive officer of the institution I give Mr. Parker permission to conduct his research at our campus. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact my office at [redacted]

Regards,

[redacted]

[redacted]