

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE ONLINE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: A  
PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE BEHAVIORAL  
AND EXPERIENTIAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE  
ONLINE STUDENT RETENTION

by

William Delaney

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Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Business Administration

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Liberty University, School of Business

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## Abstract

The acquisition of the accounts blended and online students experienced formed the foundation for this phenomenological investigation. Emanating from the foundation, the findings of the phenomenological investigation suggested both experiential and behavioral factors influenced the blended and online students' customer experience. The phenomenological investigation concluded that the mechanics of the blended and online students' customer experience effected the blended and online students' persistence to complete the online program.

*Key words:* customer experience, game mechanics, competitive advantage, experiential learning, online

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## Dedication

This dissertation is committed to the purpose of improving online students' customer experience.

This dissertation will serve multiple purposes. First, as the genesis that provokes online instruction designers to view the online students' learning experience experientially through the optics a customer experience. Second, realization that business and academic professionals play an integral role in improving online students' customer experiences. Finally, expands future research in the areas of online students' experiential learning through the optics of a customer experience.

## Acknowledgments

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## **Section 1: Foundation of the Study**

The quintessence of marketing is the delivery of a positive customer experience. Under the marketing umbrella are varieties of techniques that create a positive customer experience. A positive customer experience translates into an emotional bond or emotional attachment between the customer and the brand (Anderson & Elloumi, 2004). The customer's emotional bond or attachment with the brand not only reinforces the brand's image but also stimulates customer retention. This research applies techniques found under the marketing umbrella to online learners.

Laing and Laing (2015) indicated that online learning, as a phenomenon, has changed the face of higher education over the past two decades. Secondary education institutions that offer undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral programs have embraced the online learning phenomenon. In spite of the wide acceptance, attrition rates remain high among blended and online learners (Laing & Laing, 2015). Descriptions, through the optics of the blended and online students' customer experiences at a small technical college in Southeast Georgia, illuminate behavioral and experiential factors that influence online student retention.

### **Background of the Problem**

Ferrentino, Cuomo, and Boniello (2016) indicated that customer satisfaction was a decisive factor for the success of a business. Embedded in customer satisfaction, according to Kotler and Keller (2007) was the customer's emotions. The customer's emotions were a derivative of a special feeling. That special feeling could be satisfaction or dissatisfaction. The satisfaction or dissatisfaction experienced by the customer was the result of the customer's cognitive comparison of the observed performance of a product or service with the customer's expected performance of a product or service. The research addressed the business problem

faced by institutions of higher learning offering online programs. Specifically, this research addresses, through the optics of blended and online students' customer experiences, the problem of student retention in institutions of higher learning.

Varieties of research constructs have addressed online student retention. For example, Boston, Ice, Diaz, Richardson, and Gibson's (2009) research focused on student retention in online programs through the optics of the community of inquiry framework. Boston et al. described the community of inquiry framework as an accepted structure designed to cognize interactions in an on-line environment and provide an understanding of how social integration might occur in online environments.

Patterson and McFadden's (2009) research approached on-line student attrition based on the constructs of gender, ethnicity, and program format. Both Boston et al. (2009) and Patterson and McFadden (2009) recommended additional research into the constructs of online student retention. Neither Boston et al. (2009) or Patterson and McFadden (2009) recommended future research that focused on testing the effect of online student retention in the context of the application of customer experience techniques. In summary, the previous research literature substantiates the limited study of online student retention through the optics of the blended and online students' customer experiences. The gap represents the absence of both operative business practice techniques and potential solutions in the literature. Consequently, validating the significance of the problem as a worthy candidate for study.

### **Problem Statement**

Retention of online and blended students is the problem addressed. According to Mayhew (2014), educators have been slow to recognize that the bastions of education must adopt business strategies to ensure organizational sustainability. Predominate among the areas of

sustainability was student retention. To explain student online retention, Layne, Boston, and Ice (2013) posited that many researchers focused exclusively on student demographic data.

Marketers, according to Rucker (2017), had long recognized that behavioral and experiential factors influenced the quality of the customer experience.

Behavioral and experiential factors' influence on blended and online student retention have received little attention according to Layne et al. (2013). Linkage exists between experiential marketing and creative thinking according to Rucker (2017). Continuing, Rucker posited that creative thinking, driven by experiential marketing, provoked a problem-solving experience. Rucker maintained that the problem-solving experience, solicited through the application of experiential marketing techniques, was applicable to online students' learning experience. The specific problem addressed is retention of online students at a technical college in Southeast Georgia.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the customer experiences of blended and online students that have completed an online program at a technical college in Southeast Georgia. The technical college's on-line programs are experiencing declining retention levels. The technical college's performance accountability system's trend report indicated that the three-year retention rate (2014 – 2016) for on-line programs was 60.4%. For academic year 2016, the on-line program retention rate was 50.0%. For the purpose of the study, the use of both face to face and distance learning elements for the delivery of the learning experience describe blended learning. The use of only distance learning elements for the delivery of the learning experience describes online learning. The definition of an online program is the delivery of at least 80% of the content in an online format. Li, Marsh, and



Rienties' (2016) research indicated that it was essential to retain existing customers and attract new customers in a competitive higher education market. Viewing the online learning experience through the optics of the customer experience, creates a distinctive approach to lowering blended and online student retention rates.

### **Nature of the Study**

Creswell and Poth's (2017) book, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, provided the researcher an awareness of the parameters governing qualitative research. Chapter one introduced the authors to the researchers. Chapter two explored philosophical assumptions and interpretive frameworks. Chapter three discussed the design of a qualitative study. Jointly, the three chapters laid the groundwork for understanding the roles that philosophical worldviews and interpretive frameworks played in the design of a qualitative study.

**Discussion of method.** The interpretive framework or worldview was the optic through which the researcher's philosophical assumptions were formed. The philosophical assumptions and interpretive framework orbited around the paradigms and theories held by the researcher. Creswell and Poth (2017) suggested that the paradigms and theories held by the researcher influenced the researcher's philosophical assumptions. Creswell and Poth indicated that the philosophical assumptions were ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological. The four interpretive frameworks or worldviews were postpositivism, social constructivism, transformation, and postmodern.

From the philosophical assumption's ontological perspective, each individual had a view of reality. Social constructivism suggested that each individual's view of reality was constructed through lived experiences and interactions with others. From the philosophical assumption's epistemologically perspective, social constructivism suggested that reality was co-constructed.

Individual experiences shaped the co-construction between the researcher and the researched. From the philosophical assumptions axiologically perspective, individual values are honored and are negotiated among individuals. From the philosophical assumption's methodological perspective, social constructivism allowed for a literary style of writing. Use of an inductive method of emergent ideas (through consensus) was obtained through methods such as interviewing, observing, and analyzing texts. Consequently, the philosophical assumption's ontological perspective, social constructivism philosophical worldview was most representative of the perspectives this researcher used when problem solving.

What differentiates the postpositivism, transformation, and postmodern philosophical worldviews from the social constructivism worldview was the researcher's goals. For example, the researcher's goal, when using the postpositivism philosophical worldview approach, was to discover contributors to probability within situations of cause and effect. The postpositivist focused on the analysis of multiple levels of data analysis, employed computer programs, and used rigorous validation methods (Creswell, 2013). The transformation philosophical worldview approach was to define the injustice suffered by marginalized groups and improve their lot in society. The postmodern philosophical worldview approach was designed to change the people's views. For example the postmodern philosophical worldview approach would be appropriate for addressing a research question on global warming. Creswell and Poth (2017) indicated that postpositivism, social constructivism, transformation, and postmodern were all appropriate vehicles for qualitative research. As the consequence of the researcher's philosophical assumptions ontological perspective and social constructivism philosophical worldview, the researcher selected the qualitative research method.

Expanding on the rationale for selecting the qualitative research method, Creswell and Poth's (2017), Creswell's (2013), and Stake's (2010) advanced that the quantitative research method and mixed research methods sought answers through cause-and-effect type questions. The cause-and-effect type questions would represent specific variables. Creswell and Poth (2017) indicated that quantitative research relied heavily on linear attributes, measurements, and statistical analysis. The application of statistical analysis techniques to the variable explain the outcome. Consequently, the quantitative method nor the mixed method approach were suitable for this research.

In contrast, Creswell (2013) advanced that the qualitative research method focused on the participants' perspectives, their meanings, and their multiple subjective views. Supporting Creswell, Stake (2010) described the qualitative research as relying principally on human observation and perspective. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), the qualitative method provided the researcher the vehicle to inquire into the meanings that a participant held about the problem or issue. The qualitative research method provides the researcher a holistic complex picture. The holistic, complex picture allowed the researcher to analyze the participant's perspective and identify factors involved in the problem or issue (Creswell, 2013).

**Discussion of design.** Creswell (2013) recognized five different qualitative designs. The qualitative designs included phenomenological, narrative, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case study. Van Manen (1990, p. 163) described phenomenon as an "object" of human experience. Phenomenological research focused on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). For example, phenomenological research is a qualitative method that could describe how grief is universally experienced. Van Manen (1990, p. 177) described phenomenology as a "grasp of the very nature of the thing."

Expanding on van Manen's (1990) description, Creswell (2013) advanced that the elementary purpose of phenomenology was to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. Moustakas (1994) indicated that the continuum of human experience was unlimited, ranging from inconsolable grief to boundless happiness and all the situations and circumstances in between.

Creswell (2013) indicated that after collecting data from persons who had experienced the phenomenon, the phenomenological research developed a composite description. The composite description crafted by the phenomenological research embodied the essence of the experience for all of the participants that experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) indicated that the description consisted of what the participants of the phenomenon experienced and how the participants of the phenomenon experienced it.

Historically, phenomenology had a strong philosophical bent (Creswell, 2013). Edmund Husserl's writings served as the primary reservoir from which phenomenology was drawn. According to Stewart and Mickunas (1990), Husserl's writings formed the foundation of four philosophical perspectives that embody phenomenology. The phenomenological perspectives, according to Stewart and Mickunas, included first, the phenomenological researcher conducting research with a broader view than that of customary experiential, quantitative science. Second, the phenomenological researcher must suspend his or her own preconceptions of experiences. Third, experiencing an object through the phenomenological researcher's own senses, that is being conscious of an object, and seeing an object out there as real. Finally, the phenomenological researcher must report the meaning individuals attributed to an experience in a few statements that capture the essence.

Creswell (2013) indicated that Husserl's ideas were abstract. Supporting Creswell's assertion, Natanson (1973) noted that Husserl called any project currently under way phenomenology. Expanding on Edmund Husserl's writings, according to Spiegelberg (1982), were Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty (1962) raised the question, what is phenomenology? Moustakas (1994), Stewart and Mickunas (1990), and van Manen (1990), writers that came after Husserl, gravitated to diverse philosophical arguments for the use of phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). Recently, according to Creswell (2013), phenomenology was prevalent in the social and health sciences, particularly in sociology, psychology, nursing, health sciences, and education. In spite of the variety of phenomenology perspectives, Creswell indicated that philosophical assumptions remain anchored. Phenomenology's philosophical assumptions remain anchored in the study of the individual's lived experiences; the view that these experiences are conscious (van Manen, 1990); and the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences. Moustakas (1994) emphasized that phenomenology did not provide explanations or analyses.

The exploration of phenomenology reveals multiple optics. First, the exploration of phenomenology is through the optics of the professional philosopher or through the optics of the professional practitioner. Levinas (1991), Merleau-Ponty (1962), and Husserl (1960), as professional philosophers, studied the historical developments of philosophical systems through the exploration of philosophical topics and themes. From their study of the works of leading phenomenologists, the professional philosophers expand on issues arising from the philosophical topics and themes. For example, a professional philosopher might investigate the possibility of the phenomenological composition of the transcendental ego or the triangulation of Merleau-

Ponty's (1962) existential phenomenology, Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology and the ontological phenomenology of Heidegger (1962).

The second optic through which phenomenology can be viewed is the optic of the professional practitioner. The professional practitioner approached phenomenology experientially. The interest of the experiential phenomenologist did not lie with the exploration of philosophical topics, themes, or issues emanating from the study of historical developments of philosophical systems, but the practical application of phenomenology. A number of phenomenological orientations exist. Among the phenomenological orientations are ethical, existential, experiential, hermeneutical, linguistic, and transcendental (Creswell, 2013).

Emmanuel Levinas (1991) laid the foundation for the ethical phenomenology orientation according to van Manen (2017). Levinas advanced the ethical analysis of alterity or "Otherness" according to Knapp (2015). For Levinas, to experience another person as an "Other" was to also experience oneself as ethically "to be-for-the-Other." Grounded in ethical relationality, Levinas' departure from classical phenomenology demonstrated one's relation to the Other, or another person. The ethical relationality, according to Knapp, constituted us, our relations, and how we interacted with others.

Knapp (2015) illustrated the practical application of Levinas' ethical phenomenology. Using his young son as an illustration, Knapp described the situation. Living near a busy intersection, Knapp repeatedly warned his son to stay away from the busy intersection. A situation arose that Knapp observed his young son approaching the busy intersection. Instinctively Knapp ran to his young son. In a moment of emotion, Knapp admonished his son for not heeding the instructions he had been given. Knapp told his son, "You will not run into the street! Or else!"

Knapp (2015) posited that the situation with his young son demonstrated Levinas' ethical phenomenology. Levinas' indicated that to experience another person as an "Other" was to also experience oneself, the "You," as called ethically" to be-for-the-Other." Knapp's situation with his son demonstrated Levinas' ethical call to be-for-the-Other. Building on Levinas' ethical phenomenology was Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology.

"Being-in-the-world" characterizes Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology (Felder, Aten, Neudeck, Shiomi-Chen, & Robbins, 2014) or the pre-reflective lived experience (Van Buren, 1994). In his 'Preface' to the Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty (1962) compared Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology to existential phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty (1962) indicated that existential phenomenology was oriented toward studying the elemental or primordial lived experience of human beings in the world. Conversely, Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology was oriented toward the essences of the lived experience of human beings.

Continuing, Merleau-Ponty (1962) argued that existential consciousness was the individuals' awareness of elemental experiences. In contrast, Husserl (1960) described transcendental consciousness as disembodied from the individual. For Merleau-Ponty (1962), the phenomenological method resembled more closely an attitude than a psychological research method. Merleau-Ponty argued that being-in-the-world, or in direct and primitive contact with the world, superseded Husserl's (1960) requisite transcendental phenomenology orientation toward the essences of the lived experience. Merleau-Ponty's (1962) existential phenomenology shared a common being-in-the-world theme with Heidegger's (1962) hermeneutical phenomenology.

Different from Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology, which was descriptive, the hermeneutical phenomenology method was interpretive. Basic themes emanating from hermeneutical phenomenology, in addition to interpretive, were textual, dialogue, preunderstanding, and traditional. The principal proponents of the hermeneutic phenomenology movement were Heidegger (1962), Gadamer (2007), and Ricoeur (1976). Heidegger (1962) approached knowledge phenomenologically and transcendently. Specifically, Heidegger focused on the cognitive attitude and the activity of seeking knowledge. Pietersam (2000) indicated that what was distinctive about Heidegger's (1971) explanation was that he related attitude and activity to a broader matrix that focused on practicality. Heidegger's (1971) focus on practicality resulted in Heidegger's disagreement with Husserl (1960) on the boundaries of the transcendental conditions. Husserl placed the transcendental conditions in consciousness. Heidegger (1971) placed the transcendental conditions in the domain of practical being-in-the-world activities (Pietersam, 2000).

Following Heidegger (1971), Gadamer (2007) expanded on the hermeneutical phenomenology orientation. The traditional philosophies of Dilthey (1972), Husserl (1960), and Martin Heidegger (1962) influenced Gadamer (2007) according to Horak (2017). As Heidegger did through his book *Being and Time*, Gadamer's (2007) book *Truth and Method* provoked his notoriety in the hermeneutical phenomenological arena. As opposed to reducing hermeneutics to a method for the understanding of subjective meanings, Gadamer (2007) conceived it as a "theory of the praxis of understanding" (Hamlin, 2015). The medium of language and tradition provided the foundation for understanding according to Gadamer, Weinsheimer, and Marshall (2004). Consequently, knowledge, as a derivative of dialogue, emanated from the mind's ability to imagine.



Following Heidegger (1962) and Gadamer (2007) was Ricoeur (1976). Ricoeur (1976) originated the ideal of the combined method of describing and interpreting according to De Chesnay (2014). A personal yet colorful writing style sprang from Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology orientation. Grounded in Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology orientation, Lindseth and Norberg (2004) described a phenomenological hermeneutical method that illuminated the lived experience through the optics of the interpreter. For this reason, De Chesnay (2014) selected Lindseth and Norberg's (2004) blended version of phenomenology and hermeneutics for the study of being the parent of an infant with colic.

According to van Manen (2006), Derrida's (1973) linguistic phenomenology orientation orbited around language and ethics. Derrida (1973) asserted that the meaning of text had an independence of its own and was not dependent on a subject or some external textual reference. In Garver's (1973) preface to the English translation of Derrida's (1973) *Speech and Phenomena*, Garver (1973) expanded on Derrida's (1973) assertion.

Garver (1973) explained that Derrida (1973) was influenced by Heidegger (1971, 1982), Wittgenstein (1997), and Ricoeur (1976). In their writings, there was a movement from the cognition of meaning in the relationships between name and reference, perceived objects, and mental objects. The move was toward understanding the intricacy and variability of textual meaning and narrative practices that gave expression and interpretation to what humans experienced. Consequently, through the method of linguistic deconstruction, Derrida (1973) demonstrated not the resoluteness of human phenomena but the essential variance, the "difference," destabilizing all meaningful distinctions and discernable identities.

As demonstrated above, Levinas' (1991) ethical phenomenology orientation was focused on the ethics of be-for-the-Other or "Otherness." Grounded in ethical relationality, Levinas'

ethical phenomenology demonstrated one's relation to the Other, or another person. The ethical relationality, according to Knapp (2015), constituted us, our relations, and how we interacted with others. The term "being-in-the-world" characterized Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology orientation according to Felder et al. (2014) or the pre-reflective lived experience according to Van Buren (1994). Existential phenomenology was oriented toward studying the elemental or primordial lived experience of human beings in the world.

Focused on the essences of the lived experience, Merleau-Ponty's (1962) existential phenomenology orientation is in direct contrast to Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology orientation. Gadamer's (2007) phenomenology orientation was interpretive. The medium of language and tradition provided the foundation for understanding according to Gadamer et al. (2004). Consequently, knowledge, as a derivative of dialogue, emanated from the mind's ability to imagine. According to Gadamer, only through the mind's ability to imagine, is dialogue interpretation and understanding achieved. Ricoeur's (1976) hermeneutical phenomenology orientation was the combined method of describing and interpreting. The hermeneutical phenomenology orientation illuminated the lived experience through the optics of the interpreter.

Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology orientation resulted in a personal yet colorful writing style. Derrida's (1973) linguistical phenomenology orientation orbited around language and ethics. Derrida's (1973) linguistical phenomenology orientation moved from the cognition of meaning through objective analysis of subjective relationships towards understanding the intricacy and variability of textual meaning and narrative practices that gave expression and interpretation to what human's experienced.

The foundation of the ethical, existential, experiential, hermeneutical, and linguistic phenomenological orientations was Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology. According to van Manen (2017) transcendental phenomenology's basic themes of transcendental phenomenology were "intentionality," "eidetic reduction," and "constitution of meaning." In this study, the goal will be to explore and describe a phenomenon through the lived experiences of the participants and divorcing one's own preconceptions from the study. The emphasis of the study is on the experiences described by the participants. Resulting from the researcher's analysis, anticipating the lived experiences of the participants manifest into emergent themes. Consequently, Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology orientation will be the qualitative research design used for the proposed study.

Czarniawska (2004) advanced the understanding that narrative accounts were spoken or written. Connected chronologically, the spoken and/or written text gave an account of an event/action or series of events/actions. Expanding on Czarniawska's research, Creswell (2013) indicated that the procedures for implementing narrative research consisted of the following steps. First, focusing on studying one or two individuals. Second, gathering data through the collection of the individual's stories. Third, reporting the individual's experiences. Fourth, ordering the meaning of those experiences chronologically.

Creswell (2013) indicated that narrative research took a variety of forms and used a diversity of analytic practices. Diverse social and humanities disciplines grounded narrative research according to Daiute and Lightfoot (2004). Chase (2005), Clandinin and Connelly (2000), and Pinnegar and Daynes (2007) indicated that the narrative could be the phenomenon being studied (e.g., the narrative of illness), or the narrative could be the method used in a study (e.g., the techniques of studying stories told). As a method, according to Creswell (2013),

narrative opened with the experiences as articulated in lived and told stories of individuals. Writers have provided methods for analyzing and understanding the stories lived and told (Creswell, 2013). Chase (2005) indicated that narrative research's roots were in literature, history, anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and education. Chase indicated that other fields of study had implemented their own narrative research approaches. Expanding on Chase's assertion, Creswell (2013) indicated that a postmodern, organizational orientation was found in Czarniawska (2004); in Daiute and Lightfoot (2004) a human developmental perspective; in Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Ziber (1999) a psychological approach; in Cortazzi (1993) and Riessman (1998, 2008) sociological approaches; and in Elliott (2005) quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Through the optics of the types of narratives, Polkinghorne (1995) discussed a narrative mode in which the researcher extracted themes that held across stories or classifications of types of stories. A second narrative mode espoused by Polkinghorne assumed a mode with the emphasis on storytelling. Creswell (2013) indicated that using Polkinghorne's (1995) story telling mode, the narrative researcher shaped the stories based on a plot, or a literary approach to analysis. Continuing, Creswell (2013) indicated that Polkinghorne (1995) emphasized the storytelling mode in his writings. The emphasis of this study will be on the common experiences described by a number of participants. Resulting from the researcher's analysis of the experiences described, the researcher anticipates that the lived experiences of the participants will manifest into the emergence of themes. The narrative research design does not provide this researcher the appropriate vehicle to aggregate the participants lived experiences into emerging themes. According to Creswell (2013), the narrative design was most appropriate for collecting the detailed accounts or life experiences of a small quantity of participants or a single participant.

In contrast to phenomenological and narrative research, grounded theory was a qualitative research design in which the inquirer generated a theory of a process, an action, or an interaction. Creswell (2013) credited Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss for grounded theory. In 1967, the grounded theory design emerged. According to Corbin and Strauss (2007) the intent of a grounded theory was to generate or discover a theory reflective of a “unified theoretical explanation.” The grounded theory, according to Creswell (2013), could possibly explain practice through the participants that had experienced the process. Data extrapolated from participants that had experienced the process, according to Strauss and Corbin (1998), generated grounded theory. Grounded theorists, according to Creswell (2013), believed that theories should be “grounded” in data from the field, particularly in the social practices, activities, and exchanges of people. Complete with a diagram and hypotheses, grounded theory provided for the generation of a theory of social practices, activities, and exchanges of people through interconnecting classifications of data collected from participants (Creswell, 2013).

Glaser and Strauss’s (1965, 1968) collaboration produced a variety of grounded theory research. The grounded theory research included Awareness of Dying (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) and Time for Dying (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). Charmaz (2006) advocated for a constructivist grounded theory. Charmaz’s constructivist grounded theory presented a different perspective into grounded theory research procedures. The introduction of multiple interpretations resulted in grounded theory gaining popularity in other fields. The other fields included social science, psychology, education, and nursing.

Several characteristics are inherent in grounded theory research. First, over time the researcher observed distinct steps or phases of process or an action. An example of an observed process or an action could be the process of faculty support. Another example could be the

development of a general education program. Consequently, the researcher used grounded theory to explain movement or an action (Creswell, 2013).

Second, grounded theory research, according to Creswell (2013) culminated in the development of a theory of the focal process or action. Grounded theory acted as the gravity that drew together an array of theoretical categories. From the array of theoretical categories, the researcher demonstrated how the theory worked. A theory of support for faculty demonstrates grounded theory research. The grounded theory research may illuminate faculty support over time or by specific resources or by specific actions taken by individuals (Creswell & Brown, 1992).

Third, the use of memos was characteristic of grounded theory research according to Creswell (2013). The memos became part of the development of the theory as the researcher recorded ideas on the memos as data. The researcher collected and analyzed the memos. The researcher, using the ideas and sketches captured on the memos in the field, attempted to formulate the process and sketch out the flow of the focal process or action.

Fourth, data collection primarily through interviewing. The researcher correlated the emergent theme with the data or ideals collected from interview participants. The process was iterative. The researcher continued to interview new participants while returning to previously interviewed participants to fill research gaps. Simultaneously, the emerging theme evolved (2013).

Fifth, data analysis. The degree of structural rigor associated with grounded theory research varied. Strauss and Corbin (1998) advocated a rigorous prescribed structure that followed traditional grounded theory research techniques. Conversely, Charmaz (2006) advanced a constructivist grounded theory that was less rigorous than Strauss and Corbin's

(1998) traditional grounded theory research techniques. Regardless of the amount of rigor, data analysis using the grounded theory research techniques was comparable.

Grounded theory research data analysis focused on forming a theoretical model of the observed action or process. The development of open categories accomplished forming a theoretical model of the observed action or process. Next, the selection of a single category. The single category selected would be the focus of forming a theoretical model. Additional categories were detailed using axial coding. Through selective coding, the intersection of the categories became the theory. Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest presentation of the theory as a diagram, hypotheses, or as a discussion.

Creswell (2013) indicated that in contrast to phenomenology research that emphasized the common experiences for a number of individuals and narrative research that focused on individual stories told by participants, the grounded design served a different purpose. Corbin and Strauss (2007) advanced that the purpose of the grounded theory design was to advance beyond the boundaries of the phenomenology and narrative designs. Creswell (2013) advanced that grounded theory design developed a theory through the examination of many individuals who shared in the same process, action, or interaction. Through the examination of many individuals who shared in the same process, action, or interaction, Corbin and Strauss (2007) advanced that the purpose of the grounded theory design was to produce a unified theoretical explanation. Corbin and Strauss' unified theoretical explanation generated or discovered theories intended to explain a process or action. The generated theories consequently provided researchers avenues of further research. Consequently, the grounded theory design constructs did not support the researcher's research goals.

In contrast to phenomenological, narrative and grounded design approaches, Harris (1968) described ethnography as a qualitative design technique that focused on a culture-sharing group. Typically, the culture-sharing group was large (Creswell, 2013). For example, the entire population of academics at a school or the entire population of freshmen students at a singular college. Although less typically, the culture-sharing group can be small. Examples of small culture-sharing groups could include a small group of social workers, or a small group of academics. Regardless of the culture-sharing group's size, qualitative design researcher's described and interpreted the shared and learned patterns of values, the interaction among members, behaviors, beliefs, and language of the culture-sharing group (Harris, 1968).

Agar (1980) indicated that ethnography research was both a process and outcome. Expanding on Agar's assertion, Creswell (2013) posited that ethnography research was a qualitative technique of studying a culture-sharing group in addition to studying the concluding written product of that ethnography research. Continuing, Creswell advanced that as a process, ethnography research required the protracted observation of the culture-sharing group. Absorbed into the day-to-day lives of the culture-sharing group, the ethnography researcher observed and interviewed members of the culture-sharing group.

Creswell (2013) indicated that Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Mead, early 20th-century anthropologists, laid the foundation of ethnography through comparative cultural anthropology. Following Boas, Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown, and Mead, according to Bogdan and Biklen (1992), Park, Dewey, and Mead modified anthropological field techniques in the early 20th-century. Modified anthropological field techniques focused on studying cultural groups located in the United States. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) indicated that although Park, Dewey, and Mead initially appropriated the natural sciences as a model for their research,



they differed from other researchers that utilized traditional scientific approaches. Traditional scientific research approaches observed existing primitive cultures through face-to-face collection of data. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) indicated that scientific approaches to ethnography have expanded. The expanded scientific approaches to ethnography included subtypes of ethnography with different theoretical orientations and purpose. Examples included structural functionalism, symbolic interactionism, cultural and cognitive anthropology, feminism, Marxism, ethnomethodology, critical theory, cultural studies, and postmodernism. Therefore, Creswell (2013) indicated the expanded scientific approaches to ethnography has led to a lack of orthodoxy in ethnography. The lack of orthodoxy in ethnography has created a variety of mixed approaches to ethnography.

Similar to narrative and grounded designs, the ethnographic qualitative design constructs did not support the researcher's research purpose. The ethnographic qualitative design constructs are a derivative of the grounded design constructs. The grounded theory design constructs focused on participants that were not likely to be located in the same place or interacting on a frequent basis. In contrast, the ethnographic qualitative design constructs developed a theory that focused on individuals located in the same place or interacting on a frequent basis. Furthermore, the ethnographic qualitative design focused on individuals that were members of a culture-sharing group. Consequently, the ethnographic qualitative design did not meet the criteria of the stated purpose of this research.

Following the phenomenological, narrative, grounded, and ethnographic qualitative designs, is the qualitative case study design. As with the phenomenological, narrative, grounded, and ethnographic qualitative designs, case study research was a qualitative approach. In contrast to the phenomenological, narrative, grounded, and ethnographic qualitative designs, case study

research focused on the investigation of a real-life, contemporary bounded system or multiple bounded systems (Creswell, 2013). Researchers viewed both bounded system and multiple bounded systems as cases.

Exploration over time and exhaustive data collection characterized bounded and multiple bounded cases according to Creswell (2013). Yin (2009) indicated that case study research involved the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting. The data collection involved manifold sources of information. The manifold sources of information included observations, interviews, audiovisual material, documents, and reports. The culmination of the case study research, according to Creswell (2013), was reports. The reports provided a description of the themes that emanated from the case.

Creswell (2013) suggested that the aggregation of the culture-sharing group found in ethnography could be reflective of a case. Continuing, as opposed to determining how the culture worked as emblematic of ethnography, according to Creswell, case study developed an in-depth comprehension of a single problem or explored an issue or problem using the case study as a vehicle for illustration. Stake (2010) contended that case study research was not a methodology but a choice of what to study. For example, a case within a bounded system that was bounded by time and place. In contrast Yin (2009), suggested that case study research was a strategy of inquiry. Yin described the strategy of inquiry as a methodology, or a comprehensive research strategy. Creswell (2013) viewed case study as a methodology, a type of design in qualitative research that may be an object of study, as well as a product of the inquiry.

Case study research, according to Creswell (2013), had a long and distinguished pedigree, which traversed numerous disciplines. Tracing the foundation of anthropology and sociology, the origin of modern social science case studies emerges according to Hamel, Dufour,

and Fortin (1994). As a consequence of its use in psychology, medicine, law, and political science, awareness of the case study approach emerged. The application of the case study approach was numerous. For example, anthropologist Malinowski's (1928) study of the Trobriand Islands and Thomas and Znaniecki's (1958) study of Polish peasants in Europe and America.

Present-day, the case study author has a selection of texts and approaches from which to select (Creswell, 2013). For example, Yin (2009) discussed explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive qualitative case studies and promoted both quantitative and qualitative approaches to case study development. As supporter of the case study method, Merriam (1998) advanced a general approach to qualitative case studies in the education field. Stake (1995) promoted a systematic set of procedure. The systematic set of procedure focused on a step-by-step approach to case study research.

Similar to narrative, grounded, and ethnographic qualitative design the qualitative case study design did not support the researcher's research purpose. Possibly considered a case, Creswell (2013) described in the ethnography design technique, the culture-sharing group that had common patterns of behavior, beliefs, and language. In contrast to the ethnography design technique, the case study design technique focused on the development of an in-depth understanding of a single case. For example, using the case study design technique, the researcher might explore an issue or problem bounded within the culture-sharing group. In a capsule, Yin (2009) described case study research as involving the study of a case within a real-life, contemporary context or setting. As with the narrative, grounded, and ethnographic qualitative design, the case study design constructs did not meet the criteria of the stated purpose of this research.

**Summary of the nature of the study.** Understanding the phenomenon of student retention through the optics of blended and online student's customer experience was the goal of this study. Creswell and Poth's (2017) philosophical assumption's ontological perspective, social constructivism philosophical worldview and Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology orientation were the qualitative research method and design techniques that served as the foundation for this study.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions framed this study.

**RQ1.** What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program? The first research question (**RQ1**) asked participants to share their views on the challenges experienced as online students. Thus, the question was concerned about gaining an understanding of online students' learning experience and persistence to continue an online program through the optics of the challenges the online student faced. From the literature, Layne et al.'s (2013) research advanced that future research should focus on non-cognitive variables that influence student retention. The non-cognitive variables, according to Layne et al.'s research, represented challenges that influenced blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended on online program.

**RQ2.** How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? The second research question (**RQ2**) asked participants to share their views on learning satisfaction and persistence through the optics of the customer experience. Thus, the question was concerned about gaining an

understanding of the students' opinion of online learning as a customer experience. From the literature, Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research advanced the student's lived customer experience through the optics of excellence strategies and sustainable competitive advantage. Skelton's (2005), McMillan and Gordon's (2017), McKenna and Boughey's (2014), and Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research advanced a range of excellence strategy concepts. The excellence strategy concepts focused on improving student retention through the optics of an improved student customer experience. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research indicated that a strong correlation existed between the degree of exercise of excellence strategies in education, the achievement of higher education institutions, and sustainable competitive advantage. McMillan and Gordon's (2017), Gould-Morven and Power's (2015), Ormanidhi and Stringa's (2008), Foster's (2008), Foster, Wallin, and Ogden's (2011), Porter's (1979, 1980), Li et al.'s (2016), Li, Marsh, Rienties, and Whitlock's (2017), and Kahn and Matalay's (2009) research advanced a range of sustainable competitive advantage strategy concepts. The sustainable competitive advantage strategy concepts focused on improving student retention through the optics of an improved blended and online student customer experience.

**RQ3.** How do experiential experiences influence blended and online student's learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? The third research question (**RQ3**) asked participants to share their views on learner satisfaction and persistence through the optics of experiential or practical experiences. Thus, the question was concerned about gaining an understanding of the students' estimation of the influence experiential or practical experience projects had on the learner experience and retention. From the literature, researchers (Adeosun & Ganiyu, 2012; Kazancoglu, 2014; Arora & Arora, 2015) advanced the theory of applying experiential marketing techniques to education. Through the application of experiential

marketing techniques to the education arena, the concept of experiential learning emerged.

Arora and Arora suggested (2015) that experiential learning techniques such as business simulation games and business simulation exercises were tools designed to improve student engagement and learning in the educational experience.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Through the optics of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, and academic theory the focus of this research was the reconciliation of the lived experiences of blended and online students into narratives that influenced blended and online student retention. Understanding the lived experiences in this research, expanded beyond viewing blended and online student retention through the singular optic of academic theory. Anderson and Elloumi (2004) advanced that the nuances of distance education spanned theories espoused in multiple disciplines. Anderson and Elloumi advanced that marketing was one of the theories that undergirded education and played an integral part in the lived experiences of blended and online students. From this phenomenological research new narratives emerged. The new narratives emerged through the aggregation of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, and academic theory coupled with descriptions of blended and online students' customer experiences. The emergent narratives will provide practitioners insight into blended and online students' customer experiences and the influence the customer experiences had on blended and online student retention. Furthermore, the emergent narratives will provide researchers' additional avenues for future research.

**Porters model of generic competitive strategies.** Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) research on the transition of traditional government supported post-secondary institutions toward commercial enterprises focused on the application of Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and

entrepreneurial strategy principles. Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited that Porter's (1979, 1980) framework was valuable for analyzing, developing and implementing sustainable differentiation strategies and gaining a competitive advantage in the post-secondary sector. Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008) indicated that Porter's (1980) generic competitive strategy was predicated on firms that produced close substitutes and that the firms' competitive environment had a common structure. The factors impacting the firm's competitive environment and profits, according to Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008), included the following forces; risk of new entry; passion of rivalry among current competitors; pressure from alternative products; negotiating power of consumers; negotiating power of suppliers. Ormanidhi and Stringa indicated that the aggregate influences of these forces were the determinant of the competitive intensity within the sector. The overall strength of the aggregate influences were negatively correlated with sector profits. That is, higher volatility among industry forces resulted in a decreased rate of return on the capital invested. Emanating from the forces that impact the firm's competitive environment and profits was Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies. Porter's model of generic competitive strategies provided, according to Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008), firms' insight into positioning or distancing themselves from the industries' volatile competitive forces and realizing a higher rate of return.

Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies had two dimensions. Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008) indicated that the two dimensions were the strategic advantage or competitive advantage and the strategic target or competitive scope. The strategic or competitive advantage focused on the firm's uniqueness as perceived by customers. The two kinds of strategic or competitive advantages were differentiation or lower cost. The strategic target or competitive scope focused on narrow or broad targets within the segment. The strategic target or competitive

scope focused on geographic targets, customer segments, and/or variety of products. The aggregation of the competitive advantage and strategic target dimensions created three distinct strategic choices. The three strategic choices were differentiation, cost leadership or lower cost, and focus. The focus strategic choice can be broken down further; cost focus, differentiation focus, and cost and differentiation focus (Porter, 1985).

Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited that Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies was a beneficial tool for analyzing the competitive advantage of post-secondary institutions within the university sector. Furthermore, Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited, if viewed as strategies and placed on Porter's model of generic competitive strategies, the variety of course delivery modes reveal a portrait of an emergent future. Gould-Morven and Power (2015) superimposed the course delivery modes on Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies. The course delivery mode strategies were associated with a justification that would be reconciled with Porter's model of generic competitive strategies. Approaches arising from Porter's model of generic competitive strategies for post-secondary institutions, according to Gould-Morven and Power (2015), were low cost leadership, broad differentiation, best-cost provider, focused niching based on low-cost or focused niching based on differentiation. Understanding post-secondary institutions course design and delivery through the optics of a commercial strategy assisted in clarifying the emerging character of post-secondary institutions and conceivably insight into what the post-secondary sector may look like in the future.

**Quality assurance theory.** McMillan and Gordon (2017) advanced that academic freedom, reinforced and conceived through organizational 'best practices' had the potential to create standards of innovative that impacted teaching and learning. Bruce (2004) described best



practices as documented “best in class” strategies and tactics employed by highly respected companies. In the context of supply chain management and total quality management techniques or quality assurance theory, firms often compared their internal operations to an external reference. The practice of comparing the firm’s internal operations to an external reference describes the term benchmarking. Foster et al.’s (2011) research indicated that benchmarking allowed companies to compare internal processes to an external reference. Comparison of internal processes to an external reference afforded the company the opportunity to improve the efficiency and quality of internal production methods. Expanding on McMillan and Gordon’s research, Karran (2009) advanced that the introduction of quality assurance theory would serve the dual purpose of enhancing internal organizational functions and external business partner relationships, while simultaneously creating a competitive advantage.

The application of quality assurance theory, according to McMillan and Gordon (2017), included the implementation of supply chain management and total quality management techniques. Borden (1964) believed that 12 elements made up the marketing mix. The 12 elements included product planning, branding, pricing, distribution channels, personal selling, advertising, promotions, packaging, display, servicing, physical handling, and fact-finding and analysis. Borden’s distribution channels, packaging, and physical handling elements have morphed into the contemporary quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management. According to Taylor and Taylor (2009), operations management theory ground both quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management. Researchers have recognized the significance of integrating quality assurance theory with marketing theory (Lummus, Duclos, & Vokurka, 2003). Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) advanced that a strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance

techniques of supply chain management and total quality management would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning.

**Web 2.0.** Emerging information technologies challenged the classical mass production-distribution-retailing-marketing paradigm according to Jackson and Ahuja (2016). Jackson and Ahuja posited that the introduction of what was termed the 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0' had accelerated the information technology evolution. The emerging information technology evolution required marketers to examine the application of classical marketing techniques through the optics of the information technology evolution. Jackson and Ahuja encouraged organizational marketers to use the emerging information technologies medium as a consumer touch point. Jackson and Ahuja expanded on the use of emerging information technologies medium as a consumer touch point. Jackson and Ahuja indicated that several companies had used consumer touch points to motivate consumers (e.g., Apple had implemented a point system game in their virtual marketplace). The length of time the consumer was present in Apple's virtual marketplace and the volume and quality of the consumer's input into Apple's virtual marketplace formed the foundation of the point system game.

Another example of consumer participation in a virtual marketplace was the Burberry Kisses marketing campaign (Grow, 2013). Developed in concert with Google, the idea was to improve the effectiveness of service marketing by allowing customers to participate in the marketing process (Jackson & Ahuja, 2016). In the 21st century consumers have the technology available to select from an array of consumer experiences. The consumers are increasingly seeking experiences that created in an emotional experience (Jackson & Ahuja, 2016). It is the contemporary marketers' goal to create innovative ways to elicit the consumer's emotional

experience and subsequently create and maintain a consumer brand relationship. The Burberry Kisses marketing campaign, in concert with Google (Grow, 2013) provided the consumer with added value through a creative cognitive experience shared by themselves and their peers in a virtual marketplace.

Expanding on Adesun and Ganiyu's (2012) and Kazancoglu's (2014) research, Arora and Arora (2015) advanced that experiential learning techniques that utilized gamification and game mechanics were tools designed to improve student engagement and learning in education. Continuing, Arora and Arora indicated that gamification and game mechanics offered business educators alternative educational and training techniques. The alternative educational and training techniques would mirror or simulate a real-world environment. Consequently, business educators could offer an academic balance between theory and practice.

**Discussion of relationships between concepts.** The foundation for understanding of the phenomena of blended and online student retention through the optics of blended and online students' customer experience was based on Porter's (1979, 1980) framework for analyzing, developing and implementing sustainable differentiation strategies and gaining a competitive advantage. Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) research advanced that the application of Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy principles would transition traditional government supported post-secondary institutions toward commercial enterprises. With Porter's (1979, 1980) framework in place as a foundation for understanding the phenomena of online student retention, the application of McMillan and Gordon's (2017) concepts of quality assurance were applied. McMillan and Gordon's (2017) concepts of quality assurance included the implementation of supply chain management and total quality management techniques. The aggregation of Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy concepts and

McMillan and Gordon's (2017) concepts of quality assurance concepts reinforced the foundation for understanding the phenomena of online student retention through the optics of blended and online students' customer experience.

Following the aggregation of Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy concepts and McMillan and Gordon's (2017) concepts of quality assurance were the inclusion of concepts found in Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0' research. Jackson and Ahuja (2016) advanced that the emergent information technology evolution required marketers to examine the application of classical marketing techniques through the optics of 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0.' Through the optics of Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0,' Arora and Arora (2015) advanced that experiential learning techniques that utilized gamification and game mechanics were tools designed to improve student engagement and learning in education. The relationship between Porter's (1979, 1980), McMillan and Gordon's (2017), Jackson and Ahuja's (2016), and Arora and Arora's (2015) aggregated concepts served as the basis for understanding blended and online student retention levels through the optics of blended and online student's customer experience..

**Summary of the conceptual framework.** The conceptual framework was articulated to answer the research question: How are blended and online student retention levels effected by the lived experiences of blended and online student's customer experience? The conceptual framework was grounded in Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) research that advanced the application of Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy principles. Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) advanced that Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy principles would bridge the gap between traditional government supported post-secondary institutions and commercial enterprises. McMillan and Gordon (2017) concepts of

quality assurance were weaved into Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) research that advanced the application of Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy principles. Concepts emanating from Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0' research advanced Arora and Arora (2015) experiential learning concepts. Arora and Arora (2015) experiential learning concepts advanced that gamification and game mechanics were tools focused on student engagement and learning in education improvement. Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) and Porter's (1979, 1980) research arched Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0' research and Arora and Arora's (2015) experiential learning concepts. Aggregately, Gould-Morven and Power's (2015), Porter's (1979, 1980), Jackson and Ahuja's (2016), and Arora and Arora's (2015) form the conceptual framework.

### **Definition of Terms**

The researcher uses important terms related to the experiences of the population and phenomenon of interest throughout the study. The following definitions provide clarity to the research.

*Blended learning*: combination of face-to-face with distance delivery system (Osguthorpe & Graham, 2003).

*Community/Technical colleges*: Traditionally, community colleges are two-year post-secondary institutions of higher learning that offer noncredit courses and workforce and university transfer academic programs (Boggs, 2011).

*Customer experience*: A multidimensional construct that involves cognitive, emotional, behavioral, sensorial, and social components (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016).

*On-line Learning Management System*: The combination of learning services and technology to provide high value integrated learning; anytime, anywhere (Rani, Srivastava, & Vyas, 2016).

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

The assumption, limitations, and delimitations set the boundaries for this research. Discussion of assumption, limitations, and delimitations follow.

**Assumptions.** There were four assumption in this research. First, the assumption that the participant(s) would answer the interview questions in a truthful and open manner. The participant(s) not answering the interview questions in a truthful and open manner presented the risk of erroneous research findings. To mitigate the risk of erroneous research findings, the informed consent form was used to establish the confidentiality criteria. Following is the confidentiality statement found on the informed consent form:

The records of this study were kept private. In any sort of report the researcher might publish, the researcher did not include any information that made it possible to identify a subject. Research records were stored securely, and only the researcher had access to the records. Participants were assigned a pseudonym. The interviews were conducted in a location where others did not easily overhear the conversation. Data were stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

Second, the inclusion criteria of the sample was suitable and consequently, assured that all participants had experienced an equivalent lived experience as described in the research

question. The participant(s) having not experienced an equivalent lived experience as described in the research question presented the risk of erroneous research findings. The risk that participants having not experienced an equivalent lived experience will be minimized through the use of the informed consent form. The informed consent form will set forth the lived experience criteria required of participant(s).

Following is the opening paragraph of the informed consent form: You are invited to be in a research study to describe the consumer experience of on-line marketing students at a technical college in Southeast Georgia. You were selected as a possible participant because you have completed an on-line diploma program at Coastal Pines Technical College. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. Furthermore, the background information found on the consent form states the following: The purpose of this study is to describe the consumer experience of on-line students at Coastal Pines Technical College.

Third, participant(s) were genuinely interested in contributing to the research. The participant(s) not genuinely interested in contributing to the research presented multiple risks. First, participant(s) not interested in contributing to the research would be reluctant to share their lived experiences. Second, the participant(s) reluctance to share their lived experiences would lead to erroneous research findings. There was nothing specific in the consent form that assured participant(s) were genuinely interested in contributing to the research. But the consent form did set forth the voluntary nature of the study and how to withdraw from the study. Participant(s) not genuinely interested in contributing to the research were given the opportunity to withdraw from the research.

Fourth, the participant(s) had no other motives for participating in the research. The participant(s) having other motives to participate in the research presented the risk of compromising the research. Additionally, participant(s) having other motives to participate in the research created an ethical issue for both the participant and researcher. The consent form sets forth the benefits and compensation of the research. The benefits and compensation criteria found on the consent form follows: Benefits: Participant(s) should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Compensation: Participant(s) were not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Limitations.** First, this phenomenological qualitative research study was limited to participants defined as blended or on-line students that had successfully completed an online program. Second, the research represented a snapshot of one small college in Georgia. As a consequence, the learnings may or may not be transferable to a larger university setting.

**Delimitations.** A broad range of research constructs and hypotheses have focused on student retention and marketing. The research constructs and hypotheses have examined student retention and marketing both aggregately and independently. For example, both Boston et al.'s (2009) and Patterson and McFadden's (2009) research focused on student retention. Boston et al.'s (2009) research focused on student retention through the optics of the community of inquiry framework. Boston et al. defined the community of inquiry framework as an accepted structure designed to cognize interactions in an on-line environment and provide an understanding of how social integration might occur in online environments. Patterson and McFadden's (2009) research approached on-line student attrition through the constructs of gender, ethnicity, and program format.



Marketing theory represents an enumerable array of procedures, methods, and techniques. Jackson and Ahuja (2016) advanced three points of view govern contemporary marketing research. The points of view include purists, modernists, and expansionists. For example, Borden (1964) believed that 12 elements made up the marketing mix. The 12 elements included product planning, branding, pricing, distribution channels, personal selling, advertising, promotions, packaging, display, servicing, physical handling, and fact-finding and analysis. More recently, Jackson and Ahuja (2016) proposed a marketing mix that was better suited for the 21st century. Jackson and Ahuja's research proposed the marketing mix orbits a customer-centric model. The customer-centric model focuses on people, personalities, perceptions, and participation.

Therefore, this research does not focus on student retention through the optics of cognizing social integration in online environments nor was student retention viewed through the constructs of gender, ethnicity, and program format in online environments. Furthermore, this research does not focus on marketing through the optics of the elements that make up the marketing mix. This research's focus is on blended and online student retention through the optics of the consumer's motivations to participation in a virtual marketplace.

### **Significance of the Study**

Through narrowing the gulf between marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, academic theory, and online student retention, researchers and practitioners alike benefited. The following discussion illustrates how both and researchers and practitioners benefited from this phenomenological research. The emergent narratives from the online student's lived experiences, through the optics of the customer experience, bridge the gap

between marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, academic theory, and online student retention.

**Reduction of gaps.** The traversing of the 20th to the 21st century resulted in paradigm shifts for a variety of disciplines. Marketing was no exception. In Culliton's (1948) book, *The Management of Marketing Costs*, Culliton defined the role of the marketing manager as the mixer of ingredients. Borden's (1964) article in the *Journal of Advertising* advanced that the marketing mix consisted of 12 elements. The 12 elements ranged from product planning to fact-finding and analysis.

Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) research laid out the time line of the evolution of marketing through the latter half of the 20th century. During that period, Dewitt (1974) indicated that several authors acknowledged the definition of the marketing mix was too narrow. As a consequence, communications was included as one of the elements of the marketing mix. Van Waterschoot and Van den Bulte's (1992) review of the accrued literature led to the creation of subsets of the communication element of the marketing mix. The subsets included mass communications, individual communications and publicity.

Simultaneously, as the movement towards the 21st century accelerated, the paradigm that had been the foundation of communications evolved (Jackson & Ahuja, 2016). The communication's paradigm metamorphous manifests through the evolution of technology. As technology advanced, so did the skills and techniques required of marketers (Resnick, Cheng, Simpson, & Lourenco, 2016). The 21st century marketer's skill set requirements included fluency in the use of analytical tools and data mining techniques (Jackson & Ahuja, 2016). Aggregately, the analytical tools and data mining techniques weaponized the marketers. The

marketers were capable of mining consumer data and consequently synchronize the organizational strategies based on consumer profiles, segments and expectations.

The preceding discussion illustrated the evolution of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, and academic theory over the last half of the 20th century and thus far through the 21st century. The researcher, through the optics of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, and academic theory, explored the phenomenon of blended and online student retention. The researcher collected, aggregated, and analyzed artifacts of the blended and online students' lived experiences. The aggregated elements that embodied marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, academic theory, and the blended and online students' lived experiences were isolated. The isolated elements that embodied marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, academic theory, and the blended and online students' lived experiences were reconciled.

Through the reconciliation of the elements that embodied marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, academic theory, and the blended and online students' lived experiences the researcher recognized and refined themes. The emergent themes of the online student's lived experiences, through the optics of the customer experience, bridged the gap between marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, academic theory, and the blended and online student retention. Through narrowing the gulf between marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, academic theory, and online student retention, researchers and practitioners alike benefited. The researchers benefited as the result of new avenues for future research opening. The practitioners benefited as the consequence of the emergence of innovative applications of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, and academic theory to address online student retention.

**Implications for Biblical integration.** Hult, Closs, and Frayer (2014) posited that supply chain management spanned a variety of essential business disciplines. The essential business disciplines that supply chain management spanned included accounting, finance, human resources, information systems, marketing, and strategy. Ellis (2011) advanced that among the essential business disciplines influencing supply chain management, marketing was the most predominant. According to Ellis, marketing's predominant goal was the delivery of value to the end user. Ellis posited the following: "When firms make mistakes anywhere within a supply chain, the effects can ripple through the chain in both directions. These effects include disruption to production, forecasting errors, inventory imbalances, stock-outs or damaged goods, all of which usually result in increased costs that may have to be passed on to end users, thus reducing their satisfaction and loyalty" (Ellis, 2011, p. 109). Conversely, Kozlenkova, Hult, Lund, Mena, and Kecec (2015) indicated that in addition to improved organizational performance outcomes, a fine tuned supply chain program increased the end-customers' satisfaction and loyalty. Consequently, achieved was the predominant goal of marketing, the delivery of value to the end user.

Bruce (2004) provided insight into the relationship of supply change management, marketing, and biblical principles. Bruce explained specific metrics, through quality assurance theory, governed manufacturing and supply chain management. One of the specific metrics was benchmarking. "Benchmarking" (best practices, best-in-class) was a practice that compared the performance of the firm to a reference standard (Rothman, 1992). Through benchmarking, the firm measured its products, services, and practices against tough competitors or industry leaders. Not all business decision-making actions are operational in nature (Walleck & Leader, 1991). In areas such as accounting, finance, human resources, information systems, marketing, and

strategy, frequently qualitative benchmarking actions were necessary to come to a decision. Below, Bruce provided a biblically based best practices qualitative benchmarking tool model. The model evaluated the motives and actions underpinning organizational decisions through the optics of the scriptures.

Bruce (2004) advanced that scripture provided the foundation for understanding the actions and motives of humankind. To demonstrate the biblical concept of actions and motives, Bruce (2004) used Mark 12:41-44 (NIV) to lay the foundation of his argument. Bruce (2004) described the parable of the poor woman versus the rich man in terms of giving. The rich man gave from his wealth, the poor woman gave from here heart. Through the biblical lens, this parable explores both the actions and motivations of man.

According to Elwell (1996) goodness links to actions and actions link to conduct. Continuing, Elwell advanced that goodness involved not only the right conduct but also additionally avoiding evil conduct. Clouser (2003) indicated that our knowledge was a derivative of our relationship with Christ. For in him [Jesus Christ] you have been enriched in every way, in all your speaking and in all your knowledge... I Corinthians 1:5 (NIV). According to Bruce (2004), our relationship with Christ was predicated on our knowledge and understanding of the knowledge that emanated from our relationship with Christ. Outside the parameters of our relationship with Christ, the world in which we live in general and of business in particular our understanding was incomplete (Bruce; Biblical best practices: The call for Christian excellence, 2004). Given the Christians relationship with Christ, Christian actions or good actions.

Expanding on Elwell's (1996) assertion that goodness links to actions and actions link to conduct, Bruce (2004) advanced that Christians' actions are good as a consequence of the

Christians' relationship with Christ. Bruce grounded the conclusion in scripture. In scripture, according to Bruce, Jesus used the term *agathos* in reference to God. In Greek the term *agathos* means being good in its character or constitution, and is beneficial in its effect. In the *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Vine (1940) advanced that God was essentially, absolutely, and consummately good.

The following scriptures grounded Bruce's (2004) and Vine's (1940) advancements of God's goodness. Matthew 7:11, Luke 1:53, Hebrews 9:11, and James 1:17 validated that God gives good things. Romans 12:2 validated that God has a will that is good. Ephesians 2:10, Philippians 1:6, and Hebrews 13:21 validated that God has preordained humanity for good works. II Thessalonians 2:16 validated that God gives hope to all those who through faith believe. Therefore, when making decisions Christians must align their actions with their relationship with God. If the Christian's decision aligns with the Christian's relationship with God, then the decision is good.

Following the grounding of goodness in God's word, Bruce (2004) turned his attention to grounding in scripture the second concept that provided a framework for improving business practices through qualitative benchmarking. The second concept grounded in scripture is motivation. From the secular perspective, according to Bruce (2004), an inner force motivates humans. The inner force is the human conscience or simply the human will. From the scriptural perspective, the inner force that motivated the actions of Christians was not the human conscience or the will. To the contrary, the scriptures indicate the heart governs motivations. Examining the scriptures, it becomes clear that God was aware of the motives that drive the actions of both Christians and non-Christians. Jeremiah 17:10 (NIV) validated this assertion: 'I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct,

according to what his deeds deserve I test the mind, even to give to each man according to his ways, according to the results of his deeds.’

Luke 19:1-9 was an example of the right motive and the right action. The focus of Luke 19:1-9 was Zacchaeus. Biblically, at the time in Jericho, Zacchaeus a tax collector wears the label of sinner. As Jesus entered Jericho, Zacchaeus was perched in a tree. Zacchaeus was perched in the tree so he could see Jesus. Jesus saw Zacchaeus in the tree and called to him. Jesus directed Zacchaeus to come down from his perch. As Zacchaeus came down from his perch, Jesus continued speaking to Zacchaeus. Jesus indicated that He would be spending the night in Zacchaeus home. Zacchaeus was overwhelmed with joy that Jesus had said that he would be spending the night at the home of a tax collector, a sinner. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus, that immediately, he would give half of his possessions to the poor. Zacchaeus continued, and for those I might have cheated, I will pay you back four times the amount. Zacchaeus’ actions and motives were good and demonstrated scripturally Bruce’s concept of the right motive and the right action.

In contrast, Adam and Eve’s experience in the Garden of Eden demonstrated an example of the wrong motive and the wrong action. Genesis 3:1-13 cataloged Adam and Eve’s experience with the serpent in the Garden of Eden. The act that precipitated Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden was the violation of God’s commands. Specifically, Eve’s action of taking a bite from the fruit that God had forbidden her to eat. Eve’s motivation for taking a bit from the fruit that God had forbidden her to eat was to transform herself in a way that she would be like or equivalent to God. Consequently, demonstrating scripturally Bruce’s concept of the wrong motive and the wrong action.

Scenarios found in the business arena now have a template grounded in scripture that reflect Bruce's (2004) concept of the right motive and the right action and the wrong motive and the wrong action. As indicated in the opening paragraph in areas such as accounting, finance, human resources, information systems, marketing, and strategy, often qualitative benchmarking tools are necessary to make decisions or resolve issues. For organizations attempting to weave their faith into their business culture, Bruce (2004) advanced that business decisions could be broken into three areas. The three areas were best practices, biblically based best practices, and biblically based practices. Biblically based best practices was the sweet spot that provided the optimum advantages that were embodied in best practices and biblically based practices. The biblically based best practices embodied the qualitative benchmarking tools necessary to make organizational decisions and resolve organizational issues based on scripture.

To implement the biblically based best practices qualitative benchmarking tools, Bruce (2004) developed a continuous process improvement model. The continuous process improvement model applied the biblically based best practices' qualitative benchmarking tools. Following is an example of the application of Bruce's (2004) continuous process improvement model. A marketing company was grappling with cost-effectiveness. To reduce costs, the firm developed a strategy to downsize the staff. The human resource director discussed with the sales manager a process known as managing out. Managing out was a technique designed to provoke an employee to resign from their job. As a result of the marketing out technique, the firm minimized legal exposure (Holt, 2004). As a consequence of the conversation with the human resource director, the sales manager communicated to one employee that a new "performance program" was being considered. The performance program communicated to the employee included workload and sales quotas that were impossible to achieve. The strategy design



purposefully provoked the employee to resign from the firm. What decision does Bruce's (2004) biblical best practices model lead to with the preceding scenario?

First, looking through the optics of Bruce's (2004) motives and actions, does the elimination of staff reduce costs? The action of reducing staff does not negatively impact the sales and service of the organization's products or services. Consequently, the action of staff elimination to reduce costs passes the good test. Does the practice of managing out pass the good test? Is the managing out practice based on factors that include honesty, justice, and integrity? Here the managing out practice failed to pass the good test. Consequently, the scenario above illustrated the right motive, to reduce costs, but the wrong actions, by not informing all employees of the performance program.

**Relationship to field of study.** The researcher offered the following to illustrate this phenomenological study's relationship to the marketing cognate. Mayhew (2014) suggested that higher education was one of a few groups of service industries that had both public and private sector suppliers. Mayhew (2014) indicated that administrators and educators had been slow to recognize the changing marketplace and consumer demand in the higher education sector. Notions of corporate and commercial strategies, for much of the higher education sector's history, were unnecessary and deemed inappropriate for public universities according to Gould-Morven and Power (2015). Gould-Morven and Power's research on the transition of traditional government supported post-secondary institutions toward commercial enterprises focused on the application of Porter's (1979, 1980, 1985) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy principles. Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited that Porter's (1979, 1980, 1985) framework was valuable for analyzing, developing and implementing sustainable differentiation strategies and gaining a competitive advantage in the post-secondary sector.

Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies had two dimensions. Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008) indicated that the two dimensions were the strategic advantage or competitive advantage and the strategic target or competitive scope. The strategic or competitive advantage focused on the firm's uniqueness as perceived by customers. The two kinds of strategic or competitive advantages were differentiation or lower cost. The strategic target or competitive scope focused on narrow or broad targets within the segment. The strategic target or competitive scope focused on geographic targets, customer segments, and/or variety of products. The aggregation of the competitive advantage and strategic target dimensions created three distinct strategic marketing choices. The three strategic marketing choices were differentiation, cost leadership or lower cost, and focus. The focus strategic choice could be broken down further; cost focus, differentiation focus, and cost and differentiation focus (Porter, 1985).

Continuing, Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited that viewing, as strategies, the variety of course delivery modes found in the academic arena and placing the strategies on Porter's model of generic competitive strategies, a revealing portrait of a possible future would emerge. Gould-Morven and Power (2015) superimposed the course delivery modes on Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies. The course delivery mode strategies were associated with a justification that would be reconciled with Porter's model of generic competitive strategies. Approaches arising from Porter's model of generic competitive strategies for post-secondary institutions, according to Gould-Morven and Power (2015), were low cost leadership, broad differentiation, best-cost provider, focused niching based on low-cost, or focused niching based on differentiation. Understanding post-secondary institutions course design and delivery through the optics of a marketing theory assisted in clarifying the emerging

character of post-secondary institutions and conceivably insight into what the post-secondary sector may look like in the future.

Oberserving marketing theory through the optics of blended and online student learning, factors that influenced the blended and online student's customer experience emerged and contributed to this phenomenological research.

**Summary of the significance of the study.** The combination of three areas provided the studies' significance. First, the reduction of gaps was discussed. The researcher predicated the reduction of gaps discussion on elements of the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework was grounded in Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) research that advanced the application of Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy principles, Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0,' and Arora and Arora's (2015) experiential learning concepts. Collectively, Gould-Morven and Power's (2015), Porter's (1979, 1980), Jackson and Ahuja's (2016), and Arora and Arora's (2015) research illustrated a potential gap in the literature. Specficially, literature on the phenomenon of blended and online student retention through the optics of the blended and online student's customer experience.

Following the reduction of gaps discussion section of the significance of the study, the researcher integrated biblically the implications of the phenomenon of blended and online student retention through the optics of the blended and online student's customer experience. Bruce (2004) provided insight into the relationship of supply change management, marketing, and biblical principles. Bruce provided a biblically based best practices qualitative benchmarking tool model. The model evaluated the motives and actions underpinning organizational decisions through the optics of the scriptures. To implement the biblically based best practices qualitative benchmarking tools, Bruce (2004) developed a continuous process

improvement model. The continuous process improvement model applied the biblically based best practices' qualitative benchmarking tools.

Finally, the significance of the study's relationship to the marketing cognate was discussed. Rucker's (2017) research advanced that experiential learning was a derivative of experiential marketing. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research provided insight into the student's lived customer experience through the optics of quality assurance theory's excellence strategies and sustainable competitive advantage. Jointly, Rucker's (2017) and Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research demonstrated the linkage between marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory, academic theory, and the marketing cognate

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

Review of the professional and academic literature focused on the changing marketplace and changing consumer demand in the marketplace and higher education. Primary among the forces that changed consumer demand in the marketplace and higher education was the communications and data exchange paradigm shift. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research suggested that information and communication technology advances laid the foundation for the emergence of the World Wide Web. According to Harasim (1993), the World Wide Web provided post-secondary institutions a different learning delivery methodology. From the communications and data exchange paradigm shift emerged a new lexicon according to Perkin's (2013) and Spiller and Tuten's (2015) research. The new lexicon included terms that included web analytics, data, social media and content marketing. The new lexicon that emanated from the paradigm shift created researchers the opportunity to explore and advance innovative concepts. The innovative concepts resulting from the emergence of web analytics, data, social media and content marketing enabled researchers the opportunity to understand blended and

online student retention through the optics of the student's lived customer experience. Rucker's (2017) research advanced that both experiential learning and experiential marketing were derivatives of creative thinking. Consequently, researchers advanced that interwoven with experiential marketing concepts are experiential learning concepts.

In addition to Rucker's (2017) research that advanced experiential learning as a derivative of experiential marketing, Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research advanced the student's lived customer experience through the optics of excellence strategies and sustainable competitive advantage. Skelton's (2005), McMillan and Gordon's (2017), McKenna and Boughey's (2014), and Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research advanced a range of excellence strategy concepts. The excellence strategy concepts focused on improving student retention through the optics of an improved student customer experience. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research indicated that a strong correlation existed between the degree of exercise of excellence strategies in education, the achievement of higher education institutions, and sustainable competitive advantage. McMillan and Gordon's (2017), Gould-Morven and Power's (2015), Ormanidhi and Stringa's (2008), Foster's (2008), Foster et al.'s (2011), Porter's (1979, 1980), Li et al.'s (2016), Li et al.'s (2017), and Kahn and Matalay's (2009) research advanced a range of sustainable competitive advantage strategy concepts. The sustainable competitive advantage strategy concepts focused on improving student retention through the optics of an improved student customer experience.

**The changing marketplace in post-secondary education.** Mayhew (2014) indicated that administrators and educators had been slow to recognize the changing marketplace and consumer demand in the higher education sector. Notions of corporate and commercial strategies, for much of the higher education sector's history, were unnecessary and deemed

inappropriate for public universities according to Gould-Morven and Power (2015). Clark (1998) indicated that initially higher education's mission was providing bastions for the advanced learning and training of clergy. Clark (1998) advanced that as higher education evolved, most recognized strongholds for advanced learning and training were an elitist's rite of passage preserved for only certain well-to-do families.

***The only game in town.*** Mayhew (2014) suggested that higher education was one of a few groups of service industries that had both public and private sector suppliers. In economic terms, higher education enjoyed a virtual monopoly on supply. In colloquial speech, higher education had been "the only game in town" according to Mayhew. Therefore, supporting Pister's (1999) and Scott's (1998) research, Mayhew (2014) indicated that administrators of higher education had little incentive to respond to variations in demand and gave little consideration to the market forces that influenced variations in demand.

Expanding on Mayhew's (2014) argument, Pister (1999) and Scott (1998) argued that institutions of higher education should receive financial support from the public sector. Pister (1999) and Scott (1998) suggested that by receiving financial support from the public sector, institutions of higher education would avoid participation in the competitive market place. Contrary to the suppliers of other services, according to Pister (1999) and Scott (1998), suppliers of higher education were different. Consequently, the leadership of higher education institutions exhibited little interest in changing the nature of the product, service, or distribution model.

***Three tiers of higher education.*** The United States Land Grants Acts of 1862 and 1890, according to Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), provided incentive for the number of secondary education institutions to increase. Between 1850 and 1900, secondary education institutions grew in number from 250 to 821. By the last half of the 20th century, the higher education had

evolved into three tiers. Ivy League colleges represented the first tier higher education institutions (Gould-Morven & Power, 2015). Examples of the Ivy League colleges founded in the 18th and 19th century were Harvard, Dartmouth, Princeton and Brown University. The second tier colleges, according to Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), emerged in the latter half of the 20th century. There was a tri-fold reason for the emergence of the second tier higher education institutions. First, the baby-boomer generation, by sheer volume, required the expansion and growth of additional higher education institutions (Gould-Morven & Power, 2015). Second, the GI Bill, also known as the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (Clark, 1998). The GI Bill provided a range of benefits, including education for returning World War II veterans (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004). Third was the Truman Commission Report. The Truman Commission Report's goal was to first instill in individuals the importance of higher education and then create a greater stratum of participants in higher education (Gilbert & Heller, 2013). A variety of higher education institutions emerged from second tier colleges, including junior colleges and technical colleges. The third tier colleges, according to Brubacher and Rudy (1997), were colleges upgraded to universities between 1987 and 1997.

***Marketing's emergence in higher education.*** Limited options for post-secondary students emerged from the three tiers. With the three tier options, post-secondary students could select a school based on their grades and/or based on location (Gould-Morven & Power, 2015). The post-secondary students' ability to select an institution of higher learning based on grades and geographical considerations represented the emergence of marketing in higher education. Liu, Mirzaei, and Vadoros (2014) provided an example of the emergence of marketing elements in the higher education arena. Using the financial sector as an illustration, Liu et al. indicated that institutions of higher education, similar to banks, were subject to the rival-competition

marketing element. The efficient banks would grow by acquiring higher market share from inefficient banks. Liu et al. advanced institutions of higher learning achievement of a competitive advantage through the application of the rival-competition model. That is, an institution of higher learning could grow at the expense of the growth of its rivals.

Continuing, Fillion and Delorme (2014) provided a second example of the emergence of marketing elements in higher education. Fillion and Delorme (2014) described the monopolistic-competition model as similar markets geographically separated. Organizations offered the geographically separated markets equivalent products and/or services. But each organization operated with monopolistic power and did not encroach on the sub-market of another. With the emergence of the three tier options and the marketing elements in higher education, according to Gould-Morven and Power (2015), post-secondary students were no longer limited to the institution of higher learning's territorial monopolistic-competition.

***Impediments to excellence in higher education.*** Expanding on Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) research, Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) discussed Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) three-tier system through the optics of excellence in higher education. Higher education is traditionally the gold standard for learning excellence. Emanating from higher education, all other learning sectors looked toward the gold standard set by higher education to formulate strategy. However, embedded in the gold standard for learning excellence were multiple obstacles. For example, Capelli (2014) indicated that all occupational sectors had reported that education related skills among recent graduates that entered the U.S. labor force were lacking. Graduates' shared a common shortcoming according to Arora and Arora (2015). The vehicle through which the graduates demonstrate the common shortcoming is their inability to understand the connections and interrelationships between and across functional and



interdisciplinary areas of business. Walker's (2014) research expanded on Arora and Arora's (2015) research. Walker's (2014) research advanced that marketing graduates should be digitally literate and capable of coding.

*Accreditation agencies.* Glenn's (2011) research attributed the students' shortcoming to accreditation agencies. Evidence exists that the transformation of marketing curriculum standards is necessary to meet future business requirements, but accreditation agencies, including the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, continue to ignore the signs. Consequently, because of accreditation agencies shortsightedness, business colleges continued to develop vague standards and broad latitude to define and measure curriculum objectives. In addition to accreditation agencies' reluctance to provide standards with specificity, Spiller and Tuten (2015) reflected on an empirical study of 259 business professors in a research article by Glenn (2011). The research found many of the academic professors had reduced the analytic-thinking and math requirements in their courses.

*Curriculum alignment.* Faulds and Mangold (2014) provided insight into the curriculum alignment necessary to incorporate analytic-thinking, math skills, and social media applications into the marketing program curriculum. Faulds and Mangold's research indicated that marketing program curriculum realignment would include program goals, learning outcomes, and instructional assessment. Burgess (2012) indicated that linkage between program goals of the college, learning outcomes, and marketing courses was essential for successful implementation of analytic-thinking, math skills, and social media applications into the marketing curriculum.

*Digital natives and immigrants.* Prensky's (2001) research forecasted the 2018 shortfall of 1.5 million managers and analyst with essential analytic-thinking and math skills. Analytic thinking and math skills included, but were not limited to, web analytics, data mining, social

media and content marketing. Prensky attributed the projected shortfall to the digital divide between students and instructors. Prensky indicated there was an assumption that academics were digital immigrants while conversely students were digital natives. Lester (2012) described digital immigrants as individuals that have had limited exposure to technology. Frequently, digital immigrants viewed media-based technology as a foreign language they have not yet mastered (Lester, 2012).

Lester (2012) described digital natives as modern college students. The digital natives used social media as an opportunity for self-expression. Through social media, according to Lester, the digital natives could communicate, collaborate, and connect with others. Walker (2014) asked the questions, what was the purpose of introducing technology into curriculum if the students already understood social media applications and were better at using social media applications than academics? Walker continued, should academics simply accept that student are digital natives and academics digital immigrants and consequently not include analytic-thinking, math skills, and social media applications in curriculum?

*Analytic-thinking and math skills.* Glenn (2011) indicated that there were several reasons why there was a reduction of math and analytic-thinking requirements in the business curriculum. First, there was no consensus among academics on what business students should learn and how the student should learn. Second, high student-faculty ratios and limited lab equipment. Third, administrators view business programs as sources of income. Consequently, there was little support from leadership to change program standards or curriculum.

*Relevance to research.* In the study's problem statement, Mayhew (2014) indicated that educators had been slow to recognize that the bastions of education must adopt business strategies to ensure organizational sustainability. The changing marketplace in post-secondary

education literature provided the foundation for the researcher to understand the obstacles that slowed academics' adoption of strategies that focused on organizational sustainability. Mayhew explained that initially, higher education had been "the only game in town." Following World War II, a three-tier higher education system emerged (Gould-Morven & Power, 2015; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). With the maturity of the three tier higher education system, rudimentary elements of marketing emerged in the higher education system (Gould-Morven & Power, 2015; Liu, Mirzaei, & Vadoros, 2014; Fillion & Delorme, 2014). Capelli's (2014), Arora and Arora's (2015), Walker's (2014), Glenn's (2011), Faulds and Mangold's (2014), and Prensky's (2001) literature further granulated the impediments to excellence in higher education. Aggregately, the changing marketplace in post-secondary education literature provided the foundation for the researcher's understanding of the obstacles that influenced academics' adoption of strategies to ensure organizational sustainability.

**Marketing and higher education's paradigm shift.** According to Gould-Morven and Power (2015), Western universities were moving away from the traditional government supported post-secondary institutions and towards commercial enterprises. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research indicated that universities faced an onslaught of new challenges. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research indicated that the emerging challenges included domestic and international competition, diversity of the student population, changing workforce requirements, and organizational financial stability. As did commercial enterprises, post-secondary institutions reexamined their strategies. The emerging strategies must address not only attracting and retaining new and continuing students, but also address domestic and international competition, diversity of the student population, changing workforce requirements, and organizational financial stability.

*New challenges.* Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research advanced that overarching the onslaught of new challenges was the emergence of accelerated developments in the field of information and communication technology. The accelerated developments in the field of information and communication technology manifested themselves through the development and commercial applications of the World Wide Web. The World Wide Web offered both non-brick and mortar and brick and mortar post-secondary institutions an opportunity to carve out a niche in the post-secondary sector. The communications and data exchange paradigm shift, according to Harasim (1993), provided the post-secondary institutions a new learning delivery platform. The new learning delivery platform allowed post-secondary institutions to transcend barriers of time and distance. The transcendence of barriers of time and distance afforded post-secondary institutions the opportunity to offer students a quality education at a lower cost.

Simultaneously, according to Jackson and Ahuja (2016), the same communications and data exchange paradigm shift was challenging the classical mass production-distribution-retailing-marketing paradigm. Jackson and Ahuja posited that the introduction of what was termed the 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0' had accelerated the information technology evolution. The expansion of cyberspace was all-inclusive and overpowering. The expanding cyberspace influenced the consumers' routine in every dimension according to Jackson and Ahuja. The paradigm of how people related to information, brands, and other people shifted.

The paradigm shift, according to Jackson and Ahuja (2016), introduced a lexicon that included, but not limited to virtual domains, corporate blogs, online communities, social networks and wikis. Organizations, institutions, and companies jettisoned the classical mass production-distribution-retailing-marketing paradigm. The organizations, institutions, and companies adapted to the emergent paradigm. Jackson and Ahuja indicated that the emerging

information technology evolution required marketers to examine the application of classical marketing techniques through the optics of the information technology evolution. Jackson and Ahuja encouraged organizational marketers to use the emerging information technologies medium as a consumer touch point.

*Consumer touchpoints.* Halvorsrud, Kvale, and Folstad (2016) research focused on consumer touch points through the analysis of the actual customer journey using the customer journey framework. Using the customer journey framework, Halvorsrud et al. protracted the concept of customer journeys. The concept of customer journeys was actualized through a structured instrument. The actualized structured instrument facilitated the investigation of customer service delivery through the optics of the customer's actual experience. Consequently, Halvorsrud et al.'s customer journey framework introduced a conceptual framework for modeling customer journeys in terms of touchpoints.

*Customer journey framework.* Halvorsrud et al.'s (2016) research on consumer touch points, using the customer journey framework, had traits that were similar to Coe and Letza's (2014) research on Kaplan and Norton's (1992, 1993, 2000) balanced score card. Halvorsrud et al. (2016) indicated that the customer journey framework provided organizations a visual representation of the contributory, discernable dimensions of the customer journeys. The real time visual representation of the customers' journey allowed service providers to observe the unfolding customer experiences. As the customers' journey deviated from the organizations planned course, real-time adjustments could be made to the setting. As indicated, Coe and Letza's (2014) research on Kaplan and Norton's (1992, 1993, 2000) balanced scorecard confirmed similar techniques found in Halvorsrud et al.'s (2016) research were present in Coe and Letza's (2014) research on Kaplan and Norton's third generation balanced scorecard.

*Service quality.* According to Sousa and Voss (2006), frequently the view of service quality was from a single-channel standpoint. Sousa and Voss's research advanced there was an advantage for quality measures that included the overall customer experience. Halvorsrud et al.'s (2016) research focused on service quality through the optics of customer journey analysis. Halvorsrud et al. viewed customer journey analysis as an extension or complement to blueprinting. Blue printing represented the organization's plan for a customer. Conversely, touch points or journeys represented the customer's actual experience from the customer's point of view. The gulf between the organization's plan for a customer and the customer's actual experience from the customer's point of view was described by Halvorsrud et al. as the discrepancy gap.

*Discrepancy gap.* Halvorsrud et al. (2016) conceptualized the discrepancy gap using Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry's (1985) influential gap model. Bitner, Zeithaml, and Gremler (2010) advanced that several conduits existed through which the discrepancy gap might be reduced. Expanding on Bitner et al.'s suggestion, Meyer and Schwager's (2007) research indicated that to mitigate the discrepancy gap, that service providers required a keen understanding of the dynamics that formed the customer's subjective experiences at individual touch points. With an understanding of the customer's subjective experiences at individual touch points, service providers could develop and implement methods or techniques that were focused on reduction or elimination of customer dissatisfaction.

Rienties et al.'s (2016) research applied Halvorsrud et al.'s (2016) and Coe and Letza's (2014) research on Kaplan and Norton's (1992, 1993, 2000) balanced score card. Rienties et al. (2016) developed a dashboard that provided faculty, staff, and leadership real time student and institutional analytics. The real time student and institutional analytics presented via the

dashboard was derived from real time data. Rienties et al. affirmed that this level of analyses would bring institutions of higher education much closer to identifying problems at a level where the institution could investigate and act upon.

*Motivate consumers.* Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) research expanded on the use of emerging information technologies medium as a consumer touch point. Jackson and Ahuja indicated that several companies had used consumer touch points to motivate consumers. For example, Apple had implemented a point system game in their virtual marketplace. The length of time the consumer was present in Apple's virtual marketplace and the volume and quality of the consumer's input into Apple's virtual marketplace formed the foundation of the point system game. Another example of consumer participation in a virtual marketplace was the Burberry Kisses marketing campaign (Grow, 2013). Developed in concert with Google, the idea was to improve the effectiveness of service marketing by allowing customers to participate in the marketing process (Jackson & Ahuja, 2016). In the 21st century, consumers had the technology available to select from an array of consumer experiences. The consumers were increasingly seeking a mental and/or physical state that created an emotional experience (Jackson & Ahuja, 2016). It was the contemporary marketers' goal to create innovative ways to elicit the consumer's emotional experience and subsequently create and maintain a consumer brand relationship. Jackson and Ahuja's research advanced that the practical benefit of using a product was insufficient for the millennial demographic segment. Born in the digital age, the millennial demographic segment demanded not only innovative ways to engage with the brand but also an emotional experience. The Burberry Kisses marketing campaign, in concert with Google (Grow, 2013) provided the millennial demographic segment with added value through a creative cognitive experience shared by themselves and their peers in a virtual marketplace.

*Relevance to research.* The literature reviewed in the marketing and higher education's paradigm shift section linked to the research's purpose statement and research question one (**RQ1**). In this research's purpose statement the researcher posited that viewing the online learning experience through the optics of the customer experience, created a distinctive approach to lowering online student retention rates. Halvorsrud et al.'s (2016) research focused on consumer touch points through the analysis of the actual customer journey using the customer journey framework. Halvorsrud et al.'s (2016) research dissected the customer experience at each touch point of the customer journey. Halvorsrud et al.'s dissection of the customer experience provided the mechanism through which the researcher gathered an understanding of the customer journey, touch points, and the customer experience. With an appreciation of the linkage between the customer journey, touch points, and the customer experience, the researcher cognized and applied the concepts to the online students' customer experience.

The higher education's paradigm shift literature additionally provided the researcher insight into addressing research question one (**RQ1**). Research question one (**RQ1**) asked; What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program? Layne et al.'s (2013) research advanced that future research should focus on non-cognitive variables that influence student retention. The non-cognitive variables, according to Layne et al.'s research, represented challenges that influenced blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program. The marketing and higher education's paradigm shift literature provided the researcher multiple insights. First, a consciousness of the challenges that threatened blended and



online students' learning experience. Second, a consciousness of just how the challenges influenced the blended and online students' learning experience.

**Web Analytics, Data Mining, Social Media, and Content Marketing.** Perkin's (2013) research indicated web analytics, data mining, social media and content marketing were emerging marketing trends. Continuing, Perkin advanced that web analytics, data mining, social media and content marketing were essential skill sets required of future business hires. Perkin posited that by 2018 there was a projected shortfall of 1.5 million managers and analyst with these essential skills. Spiller and Tuten (2015) supported Perkin's (2013) research. Spiller and Tuten's (2015) research indicated that to prepare marketing students for the future, web analytics, data mining, social media, and content marketing skills were essential.

**Data analytics.** Rienties and Toetene (2016) posited that data analytics resulted in greater accuracy beyond the specific research findings within a single module or discipline. Rienties and Toetene indicated that by joining multiple datasets containing terabytes of data across a range of 40+ modules in online and blended learning settings, the significance of data analytics would be realized. Rienties and Toetene (2016) indicated that determining the trends in learning and teaching from rich data sources had been undertaken by scholars in the learning analytics community. Predictive modeling techniques in education, according to Rienties and Toetene's research, was an emergent technique. Through analyzing the impact of learning design on learner satisfaction and academic performance across a range of modules, a cross-sectional study could provide critical acumens beyond the research findings within a single module or discipline. Rienties and Toetene suggested that coupled with pedagogical information acquired through learning design, data analytics provided predictive modeling techniques in the education arena.

**Web analytics.** Jackson and Ahuja (2016) indicated that web analytics was used for consumer profiling. Through consumer profiling, using web analytics, the consumer's DNA was extracted from the consumer data. With the consumer's DNA extracted from the data, marketers used modeling techniques. The modeling techniques were used to make decisions on consumer segmentation, forecasting consumer trends, and engaging the targeted segment. Supporting Jackson and Ahuja's research, Rienties et al.'s (2016) research advanced that several educational institutions and distance learning organizations used web analytics. Rienties et al. advanced that through web analytics analysis, not only was student success/failure predicted, but web analytics analysis provided leadership insight into areas the higher education institution's strategy was failing and where the higher education institution's strategy was successful.

**Data mining.** Jackson and Ahuja (2016) indicated that with the emergence of the era of big data marketers had been provided increasing volumes of detailed data that was readily available online. Using web crawlers, the readily available online data offered the marketer the opportunity to harness customer intelligence through data mining. Rienties et al.'s (2016) research indicated that the analysis of big data played multiple roles in the higher education environment. Big data analysis provided insight into the trends that persuaded and dissuaded students' success. Additionally, big data analysis provided insight into how the higher education institution could improve student enrollment and retention (Rienties et al., 2016).

Drachsler and Greller's (2016) research indicated that meaningful big data analysis required an individual with the aggregate skills of advanced statistical analysis, pedagogical understanding, and ambassadorship. Continuing, Drachsler and Greller's research stressed that few people within the high education setting possessed the aggregate skills necessary to provoke the right questions from teachers and organizations, and the ability to answer the data questions

in an appropriate manner. Buckingham et al. (2013) indicated that to make sense of the data it was essential that the big data analysis included the participation of senior managers and faculty. Without the participation and support of senior managers and faculty the big data made little sense. With the participation and support of senior managers and faculty the web analytics specialist translated the senior managers' and faculty's questions into meaningful and insightful data analysis.

Expanding on big data analysis, Buckingham et al. (2013) described the web analytics specialist as a data scientist. Buckingham et al. indicated that the following attributes described a data scientist. The data scientist was someone who wanted to know what the question should be. The data scientist was someone who embodied a combination of curiosity, data gathering skills, statistical and modelling expertise. The data scientist was someone that had strong communication skills. Continuing, Buckingham et al. indicated that the data scientist's working environment must allow for self-provision data. By allowing the data scientist self-provision data the data scientist was not required to rely on data that was formally supported in the organization.

***Social media monitoring.*** Bekkers, Edwards, and de Kool's (2013) research focused on the phenomenon of social media monitoring. Bekkers et al. defined social media monitoring as the uninterrupted methodical surveillance and exploration of social media networks and social communities. Bannister (2005) indicated that social media monitoring tools provided for tracking movements and transactions, intercepting communications, and reading and interpreting data. The expansion of social media, according to Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017), not only enabled communications between consumers and brands, but also between and among consumers. Bekkers et al. drew a distinction between social media monitoring and webcare.

Quast and Nocker's (2015) research indicated that webcare originally described a web economy strategy that was customer-focused.

The elements of webcare included online marketing, customer care, and reputation management according to Bekkers et al. (2013). Social media monitoring could often be, but not always, the first phase of webcare. With the emergence of webcare was a new vernacular. The language of webcare included terms such as positive electronic word-of-mouth, negative electronic word of mouth, marketer initiated webcare, and advocate-initiated webcare (Weitzl & Hutzinger, 2017). Positive electronic word-of-mouth, according to Doh and Hwang (2009), had a positive influence on online response observers.

Negative electronic word-of-mouth, according to Doh and Hwang (2009), had a negative influence on online response observers. Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017) indicated that a negative electronic word of mouth communication also had a detrimental impact on the organization's product or service. Continuing, Weitzl and Hutzinger advanced that negative electronic word of mouth affected both brand reputation and brand evaluations. Lee and Song's (2010) researcher advanced that many organizations used marketer-initiated webcare to moderate the damaging impact of negative electronic word of mouth. Consumers used online public forums to engage in pro-brand activities according to Colliander and Wien (2013). The defense of brands against criticism was also known as advocate-initiated webcare. Weitzl and Hutzinger (2017) described advocate-initiated webcare responses as a form of positive electronic word-of-mouth that was in direct response to a negative electronic word-of-mouth online post.

To combat negative electronic word of mouth Lee and Song (2010) indicated that companies adopted a marketer initiated webcare strategy. The marketer initiated webcare strategy took two forms, reactive webcare and proactive webcare. Solicited two-way

communication with an organization characterized reactive webcare. Unsolicited two-way communication with an organization characterized proactive webcare, according to Bekkers et al. (2013). Weitzl and Hutzinger's (2017) research indicated that proper webcare could lead to positive brand-related reactions among complainants. Positive brand related reactions among complainants included positive brand evaluations, improved customer loyalty, and satisfaction. Bekkers et al.'s (2013) research provided an example of proactive webcare in the education arena.

The secondary school students' revolt, confronted the Netherland's Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science with an issue. The issue confronting the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science orbited policy enforcement. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science required that first and second year secondary education students be exposed to 1,040 hours of instruction. Bekkers et al. (2013) explained that the parents, teachers, and students met the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science's requirement with anger. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science realized quickly they were behind the curve on the issue.

Using social media, according to Bekkers et al. (2013), parents, teachers, and students had coalesced on the issue. The mobilization through social media had provided to the protesting parents, teachers, and students a platform. The social media platform provided the protesting parents, teachers, and students the opportunity to discuss, unify, and strength their displeasure with the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science's position on the issue. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science was not prepared to deal with the new, social network-driven forms of protest against policies. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science had no knowledgeable staff or procedures in place to react to the social network-driven protest.

As a result of parents, teachers, and students protest, the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science designed and implemented an online monitoring strategy according to Bekkers et al. (2013). The online monitoring strategy provided the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science with a digital scan of online discussions. The online monitoring strategy prompted the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science, at the embryonic stage, to the discussions of education-related issues in the virtual sphere. The Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science saw the online monitoring strategy as an extension of traditional media monitoring that provided an additional source of information.

***Content marketing.*** Walker's (2014) research advanced that content marketing involved attracting and retaining customers. The customers were attracted and retained through the publishing of useful and interesting content on an organization's website. The useful and interesting content was further disseminated using social media. Walker's research indicated that blogging was vital to an effective content marketing strategy. Zerfass, Vercic, and Wiesenberg (2016) defined content marketing strategy as an organized blueprint designed to create, deliver, and govern content. The content marketing strategy arched dissimilar platforms and focused on targeted audiences. Walker's (2014) research quoted 2013 statistics from the American Content Marketing Institute. The American Content Marketing Institute statistics indicated that 91% of business-to-business organizations used content marketing. Of the 91% of business-to-business organizations that used content marketing, 77% used blogs.

***Relevance to research.*** Research question two (**RQ2**) sought to understand the online students' customer experiences. To understand the online students' customer experiences, it was essential the researcher had an appreciation of the emergent technologies designed to view, analyze, and modify the online students' customer experiences. Web analytics, data mining,

social media and content marketing were the high order tools purposed to view, analyze, and adjust the online students' customer experience in real time. Rienties and Toetenel (2016) indicated that an appreciation of the trends in learning and teaching from rich data sources was essential to enhance the online students' customer experience. Equally essential was the researcher's appreciation of just how the dynamics of online learning design influenced learner satisfaction, academic performance, and student retention.

**Experiential marketing.** Customers addressed intellectually through a creative cognitive experience are beneficiaries of an experiential marketing event. The design of the experiential marketing event engaged the customer intellectually (Rucker, 2017). Experiential marketing techniques focused on engaging the customer cognitively and creating an extraordinary customer experience. Researchers (Adeosun & Ganiyu, 2012; Kazancoglu, 2014; Arora & Arora, 2015) have advanced the theory of applying experiential marketing techniques to education. Through the application of experiential marketing techniques to the education arena, the concept of experiential learning emerged. Experiential marketing tools designed to create an extraordinary cognitive experience could also create experiential learning experiences. The experiential learning tools would include simulations, gamification, and immersion.

***Creative cognitive experience.*** Adeosun and Ganiyu (2012) defined a creative cognitive experience as an experience that is cognized in a creative way through the act of thinking about the particular experience. The creative cognitive experience, according to Kazancoglua (2014), connected imaginative cognition with experiential marketing by creating experiences that spoke to the customer intellectually. Both the design of the problem-solving experience and the solving of the problem demanded creativity, be it experiential marketing or experiential learning.

Runco (1994) indicated that both were derivatives of creative thinking. The development of creativity in the marketing arena, according to Runco, required a transformation from conformist thinking to non-conformist thinking. Rucker (2017) advanced that creative thinking aided marketing creativity. Through creative thinking, aided by marketing creativity, large audiences are engaged in a cost-efficient way, experiences created, relationships formed, attention attracted, messages propagated and social sharing encouraged (Rucker, 2017).

Schmitt (1999) indicated that observing marketing as a concept, isolated from creative cognitive experiential learning, the influence of creative thinking was apparent. Schmitt's assertion was supported by Smith, Ward, and Finke (1997). Smith et al.'s research suggested that the main aspect of experiential marketing was experiences. Continuing, Smith et al. suggested that the experiences from experiential marketing as well as experiential learning encouraged creative thinking.

***Experiential learning.*** Expanding on Adeosun and Ganiyu's (2012) and Kazancoglu's (2014) research, Arora and Arora suggested (2015) that experiential learning techniques such as business simulation games and business simulation exercises were tools designed to improve student engagement and learning in marketing education. Continuing, Arora and Arora indicated that business simulation games and business simulation exercises offered business educators alternative educational and training techniques. The alternative educational and training techniques would mirror or simulate a real-world environment. Consequently, business educators could offer an academic balance between theory and practice.

***Simulation.*** Arora and Arora's (2015) research focused on business simulation games and business simulation exercises. Arora and Arora's supply chain management-marketing lab game was an experiential lab game designed to expose the student to the service supply chain of



the advertising industry. Arora and Arora's experiential lab game provided students multiple opportunities. First, an experiential learning opportunity and second an experiential marketing opportunity. The supply chain management-marketing simulation game afforded students the opportunity to experience, firsthand, the interactions and intricacies that created the gulf between marketing and supply chain management. Arora and Arora's supply chain management-marketing simulation game provided a realistic alternative to supply chain management and marketing faculties for teaching service supply chain management in an experiential setting.

Lester's (2012) research focused on producing an experiential learning experience for undergraduate students. Lester's pedagogics objective was to create, for the student, an observable experience. Lester selected a basic college advertising course as the vehicle for undergraduate students to observe the application of integrated marketing communication strategies. Typically, the advertising course's final project deliverable was an advertising plan. Lester expanded the final project deliverable to include the implementation of the advertising plan using social media.

The project, according to Lester (2012), encouraged undergraduate students to transform their obsession for social media into marketing potential. Undergraduate students in the advertising class were responsible for establishing their own advertising agencies. The established undergraduate student advertising agencies then competed against other undergraduate students' advertising agencies. The undergraduate students' advertising agencies were competing for the account of a legitimate business client.

Lester's (2012) project structure adopted components of Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) gamification research. Lester (2012) implemented elements of Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) games mechanics. Zichermann and Cunningham's game mechanics

transformed the undergraduate student's behavior. By transforming the undergraduate student's behavior, the undergraduate student's perception of the advertising course project was modified. Consequently the undergraduate student no longer experienced the advertising course project through the optics of an advertising class assignment. The undergraduate student experienced the advertising class project through the optics of a game.

*Gamification.* The second element of Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) gamification research adopted by Lester (2012) was rewards. Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) research indicated that game mechanics rewards included, but were not limited to, points, badges, levels, challenges, and rewards. Lester (2012) introduced the rewards element of gamification through competition. The undergraduate students' advertising agencies were competing for the account of a legitimate business client. The competition invoked the reward element of Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) games mechanics.

An emerging alternative training method was gamification. Deterding, Dixon, Khaled, and Nacke (2011) defined gamification as the use of game design elements in non-game contexts. Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) defined gamification as a vehicle to engage users and solve problems through the process of game-thinking and game mechanics. Zichermann and Cunningham suggested that unprecedented behavior modification could be achieved by transitioning an experience into a game. Expanding on Zichermann and Cunningham's assertion, Jakubowski (2014) indicated that proper game design had the potential to increase individual productivity through the modification of human behavior. An element of the game that Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) described as essential was game mechanics. Game mechanics was the vehicle used by Zichermann and Cunningham to provoke game participation. Through game mechanics, game participants were provided rewards. Game

mechanics rewards included, but were not limited to, points, badges, levels, challenges, and rewards. Zichermann and Cunningham indicated that the goal of gamification was long-term customer engagement and customer loyalty.

Expanding on Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) research, Jakubowski (2014) focused on gamification in the context of business and education. According to Jakubowski's (2014) research, Deterding et al. (2011) and Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) stressed that making a game was not the goal of gamification. To the contrary, the goal of gamification was to take a routine activity and incorporate the elements of games. Through the incorporation of the elements of games, the routine activity became engaging. Jakubowski's (2014) framework design outcomes included improved student activity during lectures, gamification mechanics implemented into the grade system, and immersion of the students by proper narrative layering of the course.

*Immersion.* Jakubowski (2014) indicated that the proper use of narrative elements could increase engagement of the student by the immersive influence of the situation that was taking place in the classroom. Blascovich (2002) and Blascovich and Beall (2010) expanded on Jakubowski's (2014) immersive influence. Blascovich (2002) and Blascovich and Beall (2010) described immersive influence in the context of digital immersive virtual environment technology. Digital immersive virtual environment technology was media-based. The technology transported the users via sensory interfaces to a synthetic environment. The synthetic environment could provide enumerable user scenarios. For example, Jakubowski's (2014) synthetic environment scenario design could enhance the students learning experience.

*Relevance to research.* Research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) sought to understand the online students' customer and experiential experiences. To understand

the online students' experiential experiences, it was essential the researcher had an appreciation of the influence experiential experiences had on the online student's customer experience.

Researchers (Adeosun & Ganiyu, 2012; Kazancoglu, 2014; Arora & Arora, 2015) had advanced the theory of applying experiential marketing techniques to education. The experiential marketing theory literature and gamification theory literature served as the linchpin connecting blended and online students' customer experience, with marketing's experiential experiences.

***Excellence strategies.*** McAlpine, Maguire, and Dean Lee (2005) advanced that a myriad of excellence strategies have been offered. Skelton's (2005) research confirmed the range of contrasting views of the concept of excellence in education. Skelton's research identified four trends in higher education that were viewed as emblematic of teaching excellence.

***Pursuit of the truth.*** Skelton's (2005) research confirmed the range of contrasting views of the concept of excellence in education. Skelton's research identified four trends in higher education that were viewed as emblematic of teaching excellence. First, Skelton's (2005) research recognized that traditional education was designed for the social elite. Supporting Skelton's (2005) research, Clark (1998) advanced that as higher education evolved, most recognized strongholds for advanced learning and training were an elitist's rite of passage preserved for only certain well-to-do families. The heart of the traditional view was founded in disciplinary knowledge. The epistemology of the traditional view was the pursuit of the truth. Lecture was the method of delivery for the traditional view. The teacher's role was that of an expert in the subject area. The purpose of the traditional view was cultural enhancement of the student.

***Meritocracy.*** Second, Skelton's (2005) performative view was designed for the meritocracy or tested competency and ability. According to Brown and Tannock (2009)

meritocracy consisted of two components. Those components included skills and the ability to use those skills to achieve material results. For example, according to Woolridge (2006), Bill Gates claimed that ‘if it weren’t for 20 key people, Microsoft wouldn’t be the company it is today.’ The heart of the performative view was founded in rules and regulations according to Skelton (2005). Epistemology of the performative view was knowledge that works. Work-based learning was the method of delivery for the performative view. The teacher’s role was that of an enforcer. The purpose of the performative view was system efficiency.

***Relationships.*** Third, Skelton’s (2005) psychologized view was designed for individuals. The heart of the psychologized view was grounded in the relationship between the instructor and student. The epistemology of the psychologized view was subjective interpretations. Group learning was the method of delivery for the psychologized view. The teacher’s role was that of a psycho-diagnostician. The purpose of the psychologized view was effective learning.

***Participatory dialogue.*** Fourth, Skelton’s (2005) critical view was designed to inform. The heart of the critical view was founded in the material conditions. Epistemology of the critical view was social critique. Participatory dialogue was the method of delivery for the critical view. The teacher’s role was critical or critic. The purpose of the critical view was emancipation.

***Instruction excellence.*** In contrast to Skelton’s (2005) illustration of excellence in higher education, Kane, Sandretto, and Heath (2004) selected a different path to understanding excellence in education. Kane et al.’s research focused on identifying and investigating the attributes of a group of excellent instructors. Weimer (1990) indicated that since the 1930s researchers have attempted to isolate the elements that are indicative of excellent instructors. McLean (2001) and McMillan and Gordon (2017) acknowledged that a universally recognized

definition of excellent instruction had not materialized. Consequently, over the years, an array of research strategies have been formulated to determine the accurate definition of teaching excellence.

Kane et al.'s (2004) research attempted to determine the attributes of excellence in education. Kane et al. asked that the university's division of sciences department heads nominate a group of instructors to participate in their research. The group of instructors selected by the university's division of sciences department heads formed Kane et al.'s target pool. The department heads selection criteria was based entirely on the selected instructor's observed teaching performance. The selected instructor's teaching performance documentation was singularly observed and documented by the department heads. Kane et al. acknowledged that the technique of recognizing a group of excellent instructors was less than arduous and lacked student input.

To capture the intricate, multidimensional facets of teaching and learning, Kane et al.'s (2004) adopted a multi-method research design. First, individual interviews were performed. Kane et al.'s interview questions were designed with the intent of soliciting the participants' teaching philosophy and the participants' goals for their individual instructional practice. Following the interviewing process, Kane et al. invited participants in the study to complete repertory grids. The repertory grids were designed to solicit and subsequently examine the ways in which the test pool interpreted university teachers and teaching. Next, Kane et al. conducted stimulated recall interviews with members of the target pool. Stimulated recall interviews required that the members of the target pool were video taped during class room interactions. Studies by Bloom (1953) first used stimulated recall interviews as a source of research data.

From Kane et al.'s (2004) analysis of the data produced through interviews, repertory grids, and stimulated recall interviews, a five-dimensional model of the attributes of excellent science teachers emerged. The five attributes that made up Kane et al.'s five-dimensional model emanated from a hub Kane et al. identified as reflective practice. The five attributes emanating from the reflective practice hub were skills, interpersonal relationships, research/teaching nexus, personality, and subject knowledge. Kane et al. indicated that reflection on their teaching practice was a common thread that was exhibited by members of the research pool. Consequently, Kane et al. selected reflective practice as the hub of the five-dimensional model.

***Complexity facilitated reflection.*** In contrast to Skelton's (2005) and Kane et al.'s (2004) illustrations of excellence in higher education, McMillan and Gordon's (2017) research advanced another excellence in higher education strategy. McMillan and Gordon's research focused on an academic's journey through the academic arena. Through complexity facilitated reflection, McMillan and Gordon used the case study method to capture the enablers and constraints an academic experienced on the journey through their academic career. Complexity facilitated reflection, according to McMillan and Gordon, provided a visual representation of data. The data provided through the complexity facilitated reflection was used by McMillan and Gordon to generate a conceptual map. The conceptual map landscape represented equally all the enablers and constraints the academic experienced on the journey through their academic career.

McMillan and Gordon (2017) indicated that the sole intent of their research was not to generate a conceptual map. The intent of the research was to provide a picture of a specific system at a point in time that allowed the identification of the specific system's component parts and how the component parts inter-related. The landscape that emerged from McMillan and Gordon's conceptual map provided the emerging enablers and constraints experienced by the

academic on the journey through their academic career. The emergent enablers resulting from McMillan and Gordon's case study were communities of practice, academic freedom, position statements, development opportunities, and a supportive environment.

Crawford (2010) and Roxa and Martensson (2009) indicated that formal and particularly informal networks in the academics' arena resulted in the development of positive relationships. The positive relationships development through formal and informal networks resulted in empowering relationships that shaped future academic practice. McMillan and Gordon's (2017) research corroborated Crawford's (2010) and Roxa and Martensson's (2009) research. McMillan and Gordon's (2017) conceptual map coupled with complexity facilitated reflection revealed that the case study subject had several communities of practice. The communities of practice, as indicated previously, provided the case study subject the opportunity to develop and cultivate empowering relationships that could form future academic practice.

According to Crawford (2010) and McKenna and Boughey (2014) the academic's perceptions of independence played an important role in an academics' inclination to engage in developmental opportunities. McMillan and Gordon (2017) posited that academic independence was based on the subject's preconceived ideals of the definition of academic freedom. McMillan and Gordon described their case study subject as Humboldtian. McMillan and Gordon indicated that the case study subject's Humboldtian understanding of academic freedom served as a constraint that governed the subject's perception of academic freedom. Through the process of complexity facilitated reflection and conceptual mapping the subject's landscape emerged. Through discussions, the case study subject recognized the potential of academic freedom beyond the constraints dictated by the Humboldtian model. The case study acknowledged that academic freedom was a balance of rights and equivalent responsibilities.



From McMillan and Gordon's (2017) conceptual map landscape emerged position statements. The complexity facilitated reflection coupled with the conceptual map landscape disclosed that the academic, in concert with other university faculty, created position statements that provided the university educational vision documents. In the context of the case study subject's academic arena, McMillan and Gordon indicated that position statements embodied two components. First, the position statement governed how decisions were made within an organization. Second, the position statement dictated how work was done within an organization. McMillan and Gordon's research suggested that from a quality assurance perspective, for genuine teacher empowerment, organizational position statements must be owned by all that participated in the design, development, and implementation of the document. McMillan and Gordon's case study academic subjects participated in the development of a variety of position statements that included the university's education vision document. McMillan and Gordon's case study subject perceived that when developing the education vision position statement, some colleagues had merely gone through the motions. Conversely, the case study subject observed that other colleagues were fully engaged in the development of the education vision position statement. Consequently McMillan and Gordon's case study subject perceived that the vision for teaching and learning was not shared by all members of the faculty and staff.

*Personal development.* Emerging from McMillan and Gordon's (2017) complexity facilitated reflection and conceptual map landscape were development opportunities. The development opportunities were in two categories. The first category of development opportunities was personal development. Because of the case study subject's appreciation of academic freedom as a balance of rights and equivalent responsibilities, the case study subject

engaged in growth opportunities to augment student learning. The case study subject had participated in a variety of developmental opportunities. The developmental opportunities included post-graduate study, participation in staff development opportunities, teaching and learning research, and conferences. For each opportunity, the case study subject provided insight into the learning experience. The case study subject indicated that participating in development opportunities was empowering for academics. McMillan and Gordon suggested that in some instances academics required support in gaining the confidence to participate in learning experience opportunities.

*Developing others.* The second category of development opportunities was helping to develop others. The case study subject, through complexity facilitated reflection, acknowledged that as the result of a variety of learning experience, the subject now served as a vessel from which others could learn. The case study subject provided little insight about obstacles linked with the transformation into a vessel for others to learn. The case study subject recognized the growing expertise was valued by others and with the recognition followed status. McMillan and Gordon (2017) characterized the term status as that of a champion. Champions, according to McMillan and Gordon, often had little or no institutional authority. Having limited institutional authority, champions were in a precarious position and had to depend on goodwill to facilitate the implementation of change.

*Supportive environment.* McMillan and Gordon's (2017) final emergent enabler was supportive environment. According to Morrison, Brown, and Smit's (2006) research, those in leadership positions can develop and nurture a supportive environment. McMillan and Gordon's (2017) posited that organizational reliance on professional management using top-down planning and administering techniques was detrimental to academic freedom and teacher development.

McMillan and Gordon's case study subject emphasized how a supportive environment was conducive to teacher development. The case study subject indicated in the complexity facilitated reflection interview that a feeling of empowerment was experienced when leadership used a variety of supportive management techniques.

McMillan and Gordon's (2017) case study subject indicated that from a teacher's perspective, constraints were better described as logistical issues. The case study subject elaborated indicating that logistical issues related to perceptions of shared vision, management practices, and role clarification. The case study subject perceived that the vision for teaching and learning was not shared by her colleagues. Furthermore, perceptions of management practices and associated role clarification were expressed by the case study subject as constraints. Consequently, the case study subject maintained that the quality of learning was negatively impacted.

***Learners and continuing learners.*** Li et al.'s (2016) and Li et al.'s (2017) research compared learner satisfaction through the optics of new learners and continuing learners. Rienties' (2014) and Crews and Curtis' (2011) research asserted that the elements that drove new learners satisfaction did not necessarily dovetail with the continuing learners satisfaction drivers. Li et al. (2016) and Li et al. (2017) agreed with Rienties' (2014) and Crews and Curtis' (2011) assertion. The distinction between new learners satisfaction drivers versus continuing learners satisfaction drivers created a conundrum. Li et al. (2016) and Li et al. (2017) acknowledged that the conundrum raised a difficult question.

To address the conundrum, Li et al. (2016) performed an extensive study. The source of Li et al.'s data was The Open University United Kingdom. Li et al.'s research observed The Open University United Kingdom's population for academic years 2012 and 2013. Li et al.

(2016) and Li et al. (2017) indicated that The Open University United Kingdom was the largest provider of online distance education in Europe. At the completion of each course module, The Open University United Kingdom collected learner feedback through the “Student Experience on a Module” questionnaire. The data collected from the “Student Experience on a Module” questionnaires served as the basis of Li et al.’s (2016) and Li et al.’s (2017) exploration of the constructs of new and continuing learner satisfaction. From The Open University United Kingdom population, Li et al. (2016) and Li et al. (2017) defined new learners as those members of the population that had not studied at The Open University United Kingdom. Continuing learners were defined by Li et al. (2016) and Li et al. (2017) as those members of The Open University United Kingdom population that had studied with The Open University United Kingdom previously for at least one module. Using logistical regression modeling techniques, Li et al. (2016) analyzed new and continuing learner feedback from blended and online learners.

Li et al. (2016) suggested that identification of the important factors of the learning experience that were meaningfully related to satisfaction with learning design provided clear implications for a base for action. Conole (2012, p. 121) described learning design as “a methodology for enabling teachers/designers to make more informed decisions in how they go about designing learning activities and interventions, which is pedagogically informed and makes effective use of appropriate resources and technologies.” Rienties et al. (2016) indicated that learning design was fixed on ‘what students do’ as part of learning, as opposed to the ‘teaching’ which was fixed on content delivery. Li et al. (2016) designed the logistical regression model to initially identify the value of the learning experience factors. Next, Li et al. linked the learning experience factor values with overall student expressions of satisfaction. Those learning experience factor values that were recognized as significant, were designated as

contributors to overall student expressions of satisfaction. With the identifications of significant contributors to overall expressions of satisfaction, Li et al.'s research focused on determining which of the following were most significant: new learners and continuing learners satisfaction with learning design or new learners and continuing learners module and learner characteristics.

Li et al.'s (2016) research had several significant findings. First, for both new and continuing learners, the factors for learning design had a strong and significant impact on students overall satisfaction. Second, for both new and continuing learners the linkage of the module to the learner's profession and/or qualification goals was a significant. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research found a similar linkage between academic focus and the learner's profession. The implication of this result indicated that if a module was not adequately linked with the new and continuing learners wider qualification aims, the learners were less likely to have a positive overall learner satisfaction. Finally, for both new and continuing learners, Li et al.'s (2017) research findings indicated that blended and online courses were not necessarily negatively influenced by module and learner characteristics. Wolff, Zdrahal, Herrmannova, Kuzilek, and Hlosta (2014) suggested that throughout the module presentation, learner characteristics or demographic data could increase identification of at risk students when coupled with virtual learning environment data. Accurate at risk student predictions, according to Wolff et al., could be better understood, over time, based on demographic data and virtual learning environment data, given the two data sources were appropriately balanced.

*Replication study.* Expanding on Li et al.'s (2016) research, Li et al. (2017) performed a large-scale replication study. Li et al.'s replication research population was drawn from The Open University United Kingdom. Li et al.'s replication study observed the research population for academic years 2014 and 2015. From The Open University United Kingdom population,

identical to Li et al.'s (2016) research, Li et al.'s (2017) research defined new learners as those members of the population that had not studied at The Open University United Kingdom.

Continuing learners were defined by Li et al. as those members of The Open University United Kingdom population that had studied with The Open University United Kingdom before for at least one module.

At the end of each course module The Open University United Kingdom had collected learner feedback through the "Student Experience on a Module" questionnaire. The data collected from the "Student Experience on a Module" questionnaires served as the basis of Li et al.'s (2017) exploration of the constructs of new and continuing learner satisfaction. Li et al.'s research indicated that the value of most factors that were important to the new and continuing online learner populations remained comparable for 2014 and 2015. Li et al.'s suggested that the factors similarity for 2014 and 2015 validated Li et al.'s (2016) research.

Although the value of most factors that were important to the new and continuing online learner populations remained comparable for 2014 and 2015, Li et al.'s (2017) research found that new online learners had significantly different learning experiences than continuing online learners. For example, Li et al.'s research indicated that new online learners had a preference for face-to-face tutorials while continuing learners preferred online tutorials. To address the implications of this research finding, Li et al. (2016) and Li et al. (2017) suggested that institutions of higher learning consider the implementation of differentiation strategies. Li et al. explained that a differentiation strategy would allow the institutions of higher learning to accommodate the needs of the new online learner and the continuing online learners on different trajectories.

***Quality assurance and supply chain management theory.*** Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research expanded on Skelton's (2005), Kane et al.'s (2004), and McMillan and Gordon's (2017) research on excellence strategies. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research asked the following question: What was excellence in the education field and what are the programs and activities that are included in excellence strategies in education?

The application of quality assurance theory, according to McMillan and Gordon (2017), included the implementation of supply chain management and total quality management techniques. Borden (1964) believed that 12 elements made up the marketing mix. The 12 elements included product planning, branding, pricing, distribution channels, personal selling, advertising, promotions, packaging, display, servicing, physical handling, and fact-finding and analysis. Borden's distribution channels, packaging, and physical handling elements have morphed into the contemporary quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management. Operations management theory was the foundation for both the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management (Taylor & Taylor, 2009). Researchers have recognized the significance of integrating quality assurance theory with marketing theory (Lummus et al., 2003). Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) advanced that a strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning.

McMillan and Gordon (2017) advanced that academic freedom, reinforced and conceived through 'best practice' had the potential to create standards of innovative and effective teaching and learning. Expanding on McMillan and Gordon's research, Karran (2009) indicated that features of managerial quality assurance, such as standardized student and department head

assessments, would improve teaching proficiency. Continuing, Karran added the caveat that teaching proficiency would improve only when instructors had a personal commitment to quality teaching and learning. Vanichchinchai and Igel's (2011) research cautioned that due to the protracted scope that encompassed both internal functions and external business partners a dual implementation of supply chain management and total quality management was not only challenging but also resource intensive.

Kuei, Madu, and Lin (2001) suggested supply chain superiority predicates global competition between organizations. Robinson and Malhorta (2005) indicated that the implementation of supply chain management and total quality management techniques were essential to create a sustainable competitive advantage. Johnson, Leenders, and Flynn's (2014) research indicated that management recognized that the implementation of a systems-based approach to performance improvement created linkage between suppliers and customers. The enhanced upstream and downstream linkage would create leveraged opportunities that would lead to competitive advantages (Johnson et al., 2014). According to Chin, Tummala, Leung, and Xiaoqing (2004) and Robinson and Malhorta (2005), in a vigorous global market, a sustainable competitive advantage required a multi-pronged approach. The multi-pronged approach designed to create a sustainable competitive advantage required quality products at the right time, place, and cost.

***Sustainable competitive advantage.*** Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research focused on strategies in higher education through the optics of the practice of excellence strategies and sustainable competitive advantage. Shobaki and Abu Naser advanced that positive experiences by both internal and external customers was essential for higher education institutions to compete efficiently in the market place. Kahn and Matalay's (2009) research supported Shobaki



and Abu Naser's (2017) research. Kahn and Matalay (2009) advocated that to compete proficiently in the market place, higher education institutions needed to distinguish themselves. Higher education institutions could distinguish themselves, according to Kahn and Matalay (2009), through the delivery of superior customer service for both internal and external customers. The delivery of superior customer service for both internal and external customers, according to Kahn and Matalay (2009), provided the institution of higher education a sustainable competitive advantage.

The premise of Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research was the achievement of a sustainable competitive advantage through the development and implementation of excellence strategies. Using the exploratory method, Shobaki and Abu Naser performed an extensive literature review. The literature review focused on the available literature on the concept of sustainable competitive advantage. According to De Hann and Page (2014), organizational and executive coaching can have positive outcomes for the leaders themselves and the organization. Organizational impacts may include an increase in effectiveness, improvements in morale, and competitive advantages.

As an extension of the exploratory review of the literature Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) conducted a descriptive review. As part of the descriptive review, a number of interviews were held. The interviews were held with relevant departments and managers at Al-Azhar University in Gaza. In addition to the data provided by the relevant departments and managers at Al-Azhar University in Gaza, Shobaki and Abu Naser conducted a case study of Al-Azhar University in Gaza's data. The Al-Azhar University in Gaza's data included both paper and electronic university publications.

Through the exploratory and descriptive methods of research, Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) attempted to isolate variables that were representative of a sustainable competitive advantage and variables that were representative of excellence in education. Following the identification and isolation of the sustainable competitive advantage variables and the excellence in education variables Shobaki and Abu Naser rationalized the variables. Through rationalization of the sustainable competitive advantage variables and the excellence in education variables, Shobaki and Abu Naser investigated potential relationships between the sustainable competitive advantage variables and excellence in education variables.

***Perspective of resources and reputation model.*** Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) exploratory and descriptive research asked, Was there a role for the practice of excellence in education strategies to achieve competitive advantage for higher education institutions? To address this question, Shobaki and Abu Naser discussed three models espoused in Volkwein's (2006) research. Volkwein's first model was the perspective of resources and reputation model. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research discussed the model's characteristics. The perspective of resources and reputation model's overall focus was on the institution's rank among similar institutions. Supporting elements to the institution's rank were academic programs, faculty member's accomplishments, program accreditation, financial and material resources accessibility, student evaluations, students' academic scores, volume of scientific research, and donors' monetary contribution.

***Client central model.*** Volkwein's (2006) second model was the client central model. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research indicated that the client central model was customer focused. The client central model concentrated on the student experience. The client central model insured the student experience included quality teaching, curriculum availability,

graduated teaching fees, readily accessible information availability, and appraisals of graduates and employers. The overall deliverable of the client central model was student satisfaction through academic program offerings, excellent service, and premiere facilities.

***Strategic investment model.*** Volkwein's (2006) third model was the strategic investment model. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research indicated that the strategic investment model focused on two dimensions. The first dimension was the institution's financial stability. Efficient usage of cost-benefit analysis techniques, measure of revenues generated through admission, productivity management, and cost control were the primary mechanisms the institution utilized to maintain financial stability. The second component of the strategic investment model focused on institutional effectiveness. Elements of institutional effectiveness included a keen eye on regulations and compliance, student retention, degree completion duration, and student expenses.

Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research suggested that the singular use of any one of Volkwein's (2006) models was not feasible. Volkwein's research indicated, to address emerging trends, university leadership grappled with which elements of which model to implement. Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) indicated that each model had value. The key, according to Shobaki and Abu Naser, was the aggregation of the three models. Through the aggregations of the three models, according to Shobaki and Abu Naser, institutions of higher education could migrate towards an understanding of how practice of excellence strategies created a sustainable competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning.

***Continuous process improvement.*** Expanding on Volkwein's (2006) research, Ruben's (2007) research suggested that clearly defined integrated paths for assessment, planning, and, continuous improvement were required to achieve excellence. As Plenert's (2012) book's title

*Strategic Continuous Process Improvement* implies, continuous process improvement was a strategy invoked universally by business to improve overall performance. Plenert indicated that continuous process improvement focused on persistent organization wide improvement. The centerpiece for continuous process improvement, both internally and externally, was the organization's strategic plan. The organization's strategic plan acted as a template that outlined a specific direction. According to Plenert, execution of the methodology outlined in the template lead to organizational success on the levels of Toyota and General Electric.

*Lean manufacturing.* Snyder, Ingelsson, and Backstrom's (2016) research indicated full achievement of continuous improvement and quality management goals is the consequence of a culture fully engaging the lean philosophy. Snyder et al. posited that an array of complex factors anchor quality. Included in the array of complex factors was an interdependence of tools, processes, and the organization's culture. Snyder et al. suggested business leaders frequently misunderstand the interdependence of tools, processes, and organizational culture. Business leaders, according to Snyder et al., focused principally on the tools and processes of the lean philosophy. Abolhassani, Layfield, and Gopalakrishnan's (2016) indicated that lean manufacturing was an organizational philosophy grounded in the Toyota Production System. According to Cardon and Bribiescas (2015) the Toyota Production System evolved into what is known as lean manufacturing. Cardon and Bribiescas described lean manufacturing as relentlessly striving to maintain harmony in the flow of materials and information. Lean manufacturing eliminated waste in any form, anywhere and at any time. Using the organization's strategic plan as a template, lean manufacturing continually attempted to attain perfection.

*Toyota production system.* Among continuous improvement and quality management professionals, according to Abolhassani et al. (2016), the Toyota Production System was recognized as one of the major continuous process improvement methodologies. Plenert (2012) recognized lean manufacturing as a subset of the Toyota Production System. Plenert described “lean” as a collection of the right methodologies and tools needed in a particular lean process to achieve the result desired. Plenert suggested that a variety of organizational issues could be resolved through successful implementation of lean practices.

*Planning and development strategy.* The majority of colleges and universities had procedures for academic planning, and development according to Shobaki and Abu Naser’s (2017). Continuing, Shobaki and Abu Naser’s research discovered that institutions of higher learning managed academic planning and development differently. Shobaki and Abu Naser’s research found that academic planning, and development efforts frequently went through a variety of poorly integrated offices. Typically, the linkage was not clear between activities carried out at the program and/or department level and activities carried out at the program and/or department level.

Resnick et al.’s (2016) research presented a similar example in the marketing arena. Resnick et al.’s research found that small and medium-sized enterprises’ implementation of the marketing mix differed from large organizations. Large organizations typically had the financial resources and marketing expertise readily available for planning, marketing research, advertising and the implementation of the marketing mix. Conversely, according to Reijonen (2010), limited resources and the lack of marketing expertise characterize small and medium size enterprises.

Shobaki and Abu Naser’s (2017) research suggested that universities and colleges could benefit from an integrated framework and a common language throughout the institutional level,

program level and department level. The integrated framework would serve as a template to manage the evaluation, planning, development and implementation process at all levels.

Consequently, Shobaki and Abu Naser's found there was a role for the practice of excellence in education strategies to achieve competitive advantage for higher education institutions.

***Commercial and entrepreneurial strategy.*** Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) research on the transition of traditional government supported post-secondary institutions toward commercial enterprises focused on the application of Porter's (1979, 1980) commercial and entrepreneurial strategy principles. Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited that Porter's (1979, 1980) framework was valuable for analyzing, developing and implementing sustainable differentiation strategies and gaining a competitive advantage in the post-secondary sector. Firms that produced close substitutes and the firms' competitive environment had common structures was the basis for Porter's (1980) generic competitive strategy according to Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008). The factors influencing the firm's competitive environment and profits, according to Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008), included the following forces; risk of new entry; passion of rivalry among current competitors; pressure from alternative products; negotiating power of consumers; negotiating power of suppliers. Ormanidhi and Stringa indicated that the aggregate influences of these forces were the determinant of the competitive intensity within the industry. The overall strength of the aggregate influences were negatively correlated with industry profits. That is, higher volatility among industry forces resulted in a decreased rate of return on the capital invested. Emanating from the forces that impact the firm's competitive environment and profits was Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies. Porter's model of generic competitive strategies provided, according to Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008),

firms' insight into positioning or distancing themselves from the industries' volatile competitive forces and realizing a higher rate of return.

**Generic competitive strategy.** Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies had two dimensions. Ormanidhi and Stringa (2008) indicated that the two dimensions were the strategic advantage or competitive advantage and the strategic target or competitive scope. The strategic or competitive advantage focused on the firm's uniqueness as perceived by customers. The two kinds of strategic or competitive advantages were differentiation or lower cost. The strategic target or competitive scope focused on narrow or broad targets within the segment. The strategic target or competitive scope focused on geographic targets, customer segments, and/or variety of products. The aggregation of the competitive advantage and strategic target dimensions created three distinct strategic choices. The three strategic choices were differentiation, cost leadership or lower cost, and focus. The focus strategic choice can be broken down further; cost focus, differentiation focus, and cost and differentiation focus (Porter, 1985).

Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited that Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies was a beneficial tool for analyzing the competitive advantage of post-secondary institutions within the university sector. Furthermore, Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited that viewing, as strategies, the variety of course delivery modes found in the academic arena and placing the strategies on Porter's model of generic competitive strategies, a revealing portrait of a possible future would emerge. Gould-Morven and Power (2015) superimposed the course delivery modes on Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies. The course delivery mode strategies were associated with a justification that would be reconciled with Porter's model of generic competitive strategies. Approaches arising from

Porter's model of generic competitive strategies for post-secondary institutions, according to Gould-Morven and Power (2015), were low-cost leadership, broad differentiation, best-cost provider, focused niching based on low-cost or focused niching based on differentiation.

Understanding post-secondary institutions course design and delivery through the optics of a commercial strategy assisted in clarifying the emerging character of post-secondary institutions and conceivably insight into what the post-secondary sector may look like in the future.

***Technology acceptance model.*** Park (2009) indicated several researchers adopted the technology acceptance model as an explanatory tool for investigating students' contemporary technological learning processes. The technology acceptance model is a derivative of the theory of reasoned action model. The technology acceptance model has gained acceptance among researchers as one of the top models for investigating innovative technologies. The technology acceptance model, according to Legris, Ingham, and Collerette (2003), examined the intervening role of perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness and their relation to external variables or systems characteristics and the probability that the student will use or be satisfied with the system. Since the introduction of the technology acceptance model, researchers in a variety of disciplines and settings have tested and validated the model through both direct and indirect observation (Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijsselaers, 2013).

Researchers use the technology acceptance model to assess student belief-intention-behavior across a variety of computer-related technologies. Teo (2009) argued that in spite of the technology acceptance model's success, the inclusion of several socio-cultural and organizational factors would enhance the technology acceptance model's performance. Edmunds, Thorpe, and Conole (2012) agreed that the technology acceptance model's two constructs (i.e., ease of use and usefulness) may not entirely capture the essential elements that



forecast the students' acceptance of technology. Legris et al. (2003) additionally concluded that the technology acceptance model's usefulness was limited. Legris et al. indicated that a broader more integrated technology acceptance model should include variables related to both human and social change processes and to the adoption of the innovation model.

To investigate the effect of mobile learning on student learning satisfaction and achievement, Shin and Kang (2015) selected the technology acceptance model. Addressing Teo's (2009), Edmund et al.'s (2012), and Legris et al.'s (2003) concerns, Shin and Kang (2015) selected to extend the technology acceptance model beyond the ease of use and usefulness variables. Using the extended technology acceptance model Shin and Kang selected additional external variables. The additional external variables included two individual factors: self-efficacy and personal innovativeness, one social factor: subjective norm, and two system factors: relative advantage and system accessibility.

Shin and Kang (2015) indicated that the self-efficacy was selected as a significant individual factor construct based on the research of Compeau and Higgins (1995). With respect to computers, Compeau and Higgins indicated that greater behavioral intention and use of information technology resulted from greater self-efficacy levels. Personal innovativeness was selected as the second significant individual factor construct based on the research of Lewis, Agarwal, and Sambamurthy (2003). Lewis et al., with respect to computers, examined the effects of self-efficacy and personal innovativeness on perceived ease of use and perceived usefulness. Lewis et al.'s findings indicated that among 161 university staff members personal innovativeness demonstrated a significant effect on ease of use and usefulness.

Regarding social factors, according to Davis (1989), early technology acceptance models did not consider subjective norm significant. According to Venkatesh and Davis (2000),

technology acceptance models were updated as the importance of the subjective norm on the acceptance of technology became grounded. Contemporary researchers, according to Cheon, Lee, Crooks, and Song (2012), accepted subjective norm as a construct due to its validated significant correlation to the intention of students to use mobile learning. Yau and Ho (2015) concluded that subjective norm had an important and affirmative impact on the learners' behavioral intention of using e-learning in higher education.

The two system factors selected by Shin and Kang (2015) were relative advantage and system accessibility. The relative advantage measured the extent an innovation was an improvement over its predecessor. Relative advantage was not important in early technology acceptance models. Venkatesh, Morris, Davis, and Davis (2003) posited that perceived usefulness and relative advantage were different. The differences, according to Venkatesh et al., became obvious during discussions concerning performance expectancy. Consequently, relative advantage was a principal factor that affects technology adoption. Shin and Kang (2015) indicated that system accessibility was a significant factor influencing behavioral intention. System accessibility, according to Park, Nam, and Cha (2012), was a valuable exogenous construct that influenced behavioral intention toward student mobile learning.

***Relevance to research.*** The second research question (**RQ2**) asked participants to share their views on learning satisfaction and persistence through the optics of the customer experience. Researchers have recognized the significance of integrating quality assurance theory with marketing theory (Lummus et al., 2003). Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) advanced that a strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning. The excellence strategies

section provided the researcher insight into a variety of excellence strategies. With an understanding of the variety of excellence strategies, the researcher rationalized the influences quality assurance theory had on the online student's customer experience.

***Potential themes and perceptions.*** Creswell and Poth's (2017) philosophical assumption's ontological perspective, social constructivism philosophical worldview and Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology orientation predicate the themes and perceptions of this research. Creswell (2013) advanced that the elementary purpose of phenomenology was to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. The composite description crafted by the phenomenological research embodied the essence of the experience for all of the participants that experienced the phenomenon. Creswell advanced that phenomenology's philosophical assumptions remain anchored in the study of the individual's lived experiences; the view that these experiences are conscious (van Manen, 1990); and the development of descriptions of the essences of these experiences (Creswell, 2013). The aggregation of the social constructivism philosophical worldview data was through interviews, observation, and text analization.

Addressing blended and online students' perceptions through the optics of the customer experience required merging several disparate streams of literature. Investigation of the behavioral and experiential factors that influence online student retention was through three optics. The first optic will be excellence strategies, derived from quality assurance theory and supply chain management theory. The second optic will be marketing strategies, derived from marketing theory, experiential marketing theory, information technology theory and gamification theory. The third optic will be academic strategies, derived from academic theory and pedagogical theory. The scrutinization of the blended and online students' customer experiences

takes place at the confluence of the disparate streams of literature. Derived from this phenomenological research are several potential themes and perceptions. For example, excellence strategies, derived from supply chain management and quality assurance theory, to improve the blended and online students' customer experience. Next, innovative academic marketing strategies derived from marketing theory, experiential marketing theory, information technology theory and gamification theory, to improve the blended and online students' customer experience.

**Summary of the literature review.** Following is an in depth summary of the main points of the literature review as they relate to and support this study. In this research's problem statement, Mayhew (2014) indicated that educators had been slow to recognize that the bastions of education must adopt business strategies to ensure organizational sustainability. The changing marketplace in post-secondary education literature provided the foundation for the researcher's understanding of the obstacles that slowed academics' adoption of strategies to ensure organizational sustainability. Mayhew explained that initially, higher education had been "the only game in town." Following World War II, a three-tier higher education system emerged (Gould-Morven & Power, 2015; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004; Brubacher & Rudy, 1997). With the maturity of the three tier higher education system, rudimentary elements of marketing emerged in the higher education system (Gould-Morven & Power, 2015; Liu, Mirzaei, & Vadoros, 2014; Fillion & Delorme, 2014). Capelli's (2014), Arora and Arora's (2015), Walker's (2014), Glenn's (2011), Faulds and Mangold's (2014), and Prensky's (2001) literature provide further granularization of the impediments to excellence in higher education. Aggregately, the literature contained in the changing marketplace in post-secondary education

literature provided the substance for the researcher's understanding of the obstacles that influenced academies' adoption of strategies to ensure organizational sustainability.

The literature reviewed in the marketing and higher education's paradigm shift section linked to the research's purpose statement. In the research's purpose statement the researcher posited that viewing the online learning experience through the optics of the customer experience, created a distinctive approach to lowering online student retention rates. Halvorsrud et al.'s (2016) research focused on consumer touch points through the analysis of the actual customer journey using the customer journey framework. Halvorsrud et al.'s (2016) research dissected the customer experience at each touch point of the customer journey. Halvorsrud et al.'s dissection of the customer experience provided the mechanism through which the researcher garnered an understanding of the customer journey, touch points, and the customer experience. With an appreciation of the linkage between the customer journey, touch points, and the customer experience, the researcher cognized and applied those concepts to the online students' customer experience.

The higher education's paradigm shift literature additionally provided the researcher insight into addressing and understanding research question one (**RQ1**). Research question one (**RQ1**) asked; What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program? Layne et al.'s (2013) research advanced that future research should focus on non-cognitive variables that influence student retention. The non-cognitive variables, according to Layne et al.'s research, represented challenges that influenced blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended on online program. The marketing and higher education's paradigm shift literature

provided the researcher two affordances. First, a realization of the challenges that confronted online students' learning experience. Second, an understanding of how the challenges influenced the online students' learning experience.

Research question two (**RQ2**) sought to understand the online students' customer experiences. To understand the online students' customer experiences, it was essential the researcher had an appreciation of the emergent technologies available to view, analyze, and adjust the online students' customer experiences. Web analytics, data mining, social media and content marketing were the high order tools purposed to view, analyze, and adjust the online students' customer experience in real time. Rienties and Toetenel (2016) indicated that an appreciation of the trends in learning and teaching from rich data sources was essential to enhance the online students' customer experience. Equally essential was the researcher's appreciation of just how the dynamics of online learning design influenced learner satisfaction, academic performance, and student retention.

Marketers, according to Rucker (2017), had long recognized that behavioral and experiential factors influenced the quality of the customer experience. The study's problem statement advanced that behavioral and experiential factors affecting student online learning and retention had received little attention (Layne et al., 2013). Research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) sought to address the study's problem statement. The experiential marketing section of the literature review served as the reservoir from which the researcher drew an understanding of the influence experiential experiences had on the online students' customer experience.

The second research question (**RQ2**) asked participants to share their views on learning satisfaction and persistence through the optics of the customer experience. Researchers have

recognized the significance of integrating quality assurance theory with marketing theory (Lummus et al., 2003). A strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management, according to Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning. The excellence strategies literature section provided the researcher insight into a variety of excellence strategies. With an understanding of the variety of excellence strategies, the researcher rationalized the influences quality assurance theory had on the online student's customer experience.

### **Transition and Summary of Section 1**

Section 1 served as the vehicle for establishing the basis for research of online student retention and the online student's customer experience. The framework for section one included the following: background of problem, problem statement, purpose statement, nature of the study, research question, definition of terms, assumptions, limitations delimitations, reduction of gaps, biblical integration, relationship to field of study and literature review. Section 1 established the basis for the research of online student retention and the online student's customer experience as a practical research project.

Section 2 serves as the vehicle for establishing the practical information for the research of online student retention and the online student's customer experience. Section 2's framework includes the following: the project purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method, research design, population and sampling, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis technique, reliability and validity. The Section 2 framework will establish the practical information for the study of online student retention and the online student's customer experience.

## **Section 2: The Project**

Subsequent to the discussion of the foundation of the study in Section 1, Section 2 outlined the processes that formed the framework of the project. The roles of the researcher and participants followed the purpose statement. An explanation of the research method, design, and population and sampling structure came next. Data collection, organization, and analysis criteria followed the research method and design explanation. Finally, detailed project reliability and validity criteria were established.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the customer experiences of blended and online students that have completed an online program at a technical college in Southeast Georgia. The technical college's on-line programs are experiencing declining retention levels. The technical college's performance accountability system's trend report indicated that the three-year retention rate (2014-2016) for on-line programs was 60.4%. For academic year 2016, the on-line program retention rate was 50.0%. For the purpose of the study, the use of both face to face and distance learning elements for the delivery of the learning experience describe blended learning. The use of only distance learning elements for the delivery of the learning experience describes online learning. The definition of an online program is the delivery of at least 80% of the content in an online format. Li et al.'s (2016) research indicated that it was essential to retain existing customers and attract new customers in a competitive higher education market. Viewing the online learning experience through the optics of the customer experience, creates a distinctive approach to lowering blended and online student retention rates.



## **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher identified participants. The researcher contacted the participants. The researcher conducted in-depth and follow-up interviews. The researcher analyzed the data. The researcher sought emergent themes from the data. The researcher reported emergent themes.

## **Participants**

The researcher discussion on procedures for gaining access to participants, establishing a working relationship with participants, and measures taken to assure that the ethical protection of participants was adequate.

**Gaining access to participant.** The Technical College System of Georgia governed access to the research location. The Technical College System of Georgia's Accountability and Institutional Effectiveness department administers the procedure for gaining access to the research location. The Technical College System of Georgia's Accountability and Institutional Effectiveness department required the following: request to conduct study document (see Appendix A), and official institutional review board approval from Liberty University (see Appendix B). The documents were completed and submitted to the Technical College System of Georgia's Accountability and Institutional Effectiveness department. The Technical College System of Georgia's Accountability and Institutional Effectiveness department reviewed and approved the documents submitted. After approval, the Technical College System of Georgia provided the researcher an approved data release agreement. The approved data release agreement gave the researcher access the research location (see Appendix C).

**Establishing a working relationship with participants.** The researcher prepared for the interviews by focusing on understanding the mechanics of developing a positive relationship between the researcher and participant (Roulston, DeMarrais, & Lewis, 2003; Creswell & Poth,

2017). An unequal power dynamic, according to Creswell and Poth (2017) and Roulston et al. (2003) created an asymmetrical power dynamic between the researcher and participant. The asymmetrical power dynamic negatively influenced the researcher and participant's work relationship. The researcher's integration of elements of Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) and Nunkoosing's (2005) research eliminated the asymmetrical power dynamic. The elimination of the asymmetrical power dynamic had two effects on the research. The first effect was the positive influence on the researcher and participant relationship. The second effect was the influence on the participant to share stories. Jointly, the two effects of the elimination of the asymmetrical power dynamic allowed the researcher to discover, expand, and acquire fresh insights into the participants lived experiences.

**Measures taken to assure that the ethical protection of participants was adequate.**

Following are the measures that the researcher provided to insure the participants privacy and confidentiality. The researcher held interviews in a private room in which participants could not be overheard. The researcher stored all data for three years on a password-protected computer. Federal regulations required the researcher to destroy the research data after three years. The researcher only had access to the research data. The researcher used pseudonyms and a coding technique to conceal interview participants' identities. The researcher has scribed pseudonyms and a coding technique. The researcher keeps scribed pseudonyms and coding keys in a locked box in the researcher's home. The researcher destroyed withdrawn participant's data. The researcher did not compensate participants. The researcher notified the participant the only risk potentials were the breach of confidentiality or the data were lost or stolen. The researcher notified the participant the research provided no direct benefits. Furthermore, the documents

established the procedural measures that assured research participants, guarantors, and associates ethical protection.

### **Research Method and Design**

Creswell and Poth (2017) laid the groundwork for understanding the roles that philosophical worldviews and interpretive frameworks played in the design of a qualitative study. Creswell and Poth's (2017) book, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, provided the researcher the parameters that govern qualitative research.

**Discussion of method.** The research question asked the following: How are blended and online student retention levels effected by the lived experiences of blended and online student's customer experience. To answer the research question, the researcher selected the qualitative inquiries' ontological perspective, social constructivism philosophical worldview as the research design method. From the philosophical assumption's ontological perspective, each individual had a view of reality (Heidegger, 1962, 1971, 1982). Social constructivism suggests the construction of individual's view of reality is through lived experiences and interactions with others (Husserl, 1960). Qualitative inquiries' ontological perspective, social constructivism philosophical worldview provided the researcher the framework to achieve the goal for this research.

Creswell (2013) advanced that the qualitative research method focused on the participants' perspectives, their meanings, and their multiple subjective views. Supporting Creswell, Stake (2010) described qualitative research as relying principally on human observation and perspective. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), the qualitative method provided the researcher the vehicle to inquire into the meanings that a participant held about the research question. The method provided a holistic, complex picture through the qualitative

ontological perspective, social constructivism philosophical worldview. The holistic, complex picture allowed the researcher to analyze the participant's perspective and identify factors involved in the research question (Creswell, 2013).

**Discussion of design.** The foundation of the ethical, existential, experiential, hermeneutical, and linguistic phenomenological orientations was Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology. According to van Manen (2017), transcendental phenomenology included "intentionality," "eidetic reduction," and "constitution of meaning." In this study, divorcing the researcher's own preconceptions from the study and understanding the phenomenon through the lived experiences of the participants was the goal of the researcher. Therefore, the researcher selected Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology orientation as the qualitative research design vehicle for the selected by the researcher.

**Summary of research method and design.** Understanding the phenomenon of student retention through the optics of blended and online student's customer experience was the goal of this study. Creswell and Poth's (2017) philosophical assumption's ontological perspective, social constructivism philosophical worldview and Husserl's (1960) transcendental phenomenology orientation were the qualitative research method and design techniques that served as the foundation for this study.

### **Population and Sampling**

Site of the population was a host technical college. The sample population was selected from the site using Creswell's (2013) purposeful, maximum variation sampling approach. The sample population size selected from the host site was 20.

**Discussion of population.** The rationale for selecting the population was to understand blended and online student retention through the optics of the blended and online student's

customer experience. Students that had completed blended or on-line programs at the host technical college were included in the population. Excluded from the population were students that had not completed blended or on-line programs at the host technical college. Excluded from the population were students under 18 years of age. The focus population was 18 to 65 years old.

**Discussion of sampling.** Understanding student retention through the optics of the blended and online students' lived customer experience was the research goal. To achieve the goal, the researcher sought to select participants with the experiential capacity to inform the study. Rooted in the participants with the experiential capacity to inform, the researcher sought participants with varied experiences. The selection of both blended and online students fulfilled the variance in students' lived customer experience criteria of the research. Creswell (2013) recognized the approach as purposeful, maximum variation sampling. Creswell explained that the purposeful leg of sampling focused on the selection of participants that had the experiential capacity to inform the study. The maximum variation leg of sampling, according to Creswell, focused on insuring the sample had experienced the phenomenon and the sample had experienced the phenomenon in different ways. Creswell and Poth (2017) indicated that maximum variation among participants produced different perspectives from the sample. The discovery of different perspectives among participants advanced the researcher towards understanding student retention through the optics of the blended and online students' lived customer experience.

Dukes' (1984), Polkinghorne's (1989) and Creswell and Poth's (2017) research provided insight into the appropriate sample size for this phenomenological study. Dukes' (1984) research indicated a phenomenological study could include as few as one participant. On the other end of

the continuum Polkinghorne's (1989) research suggested a phenomenological study could include up to 325 participants. Creswell and Poth's (2017) research provided a balanced approach to a phenomenological study sample size.

Creswell and Poth (2017) stressed the importance of extensive detailed information on each participant in a phenomenological study. Selecting a large sample for a phenomenological study negatively impacted the gathering of extensive detailed information on each participant. Specifically, the large sample pool limited the researcher's ability to gather extensive detailed information on each participant. A smaller sample, according to Creswell and Poth, facilitated the researcher's ability to gather extensive detailed information on each participant.

The researcher selected a maximum sample size of 20 participants. The researcher was confident that 10 interviews were sufficient to reach saturation. Krueger and Casey (2000) described saturation as the juncture at which the researcher was no longer attaining new ideas and the range of information was exhausted. Bowen (2008) described saturation as reaching the point of diminishing returns, the point where nothing new was being added. In the event saturation was not reached with 10 interviews the researcher wanted the flexibility to complete additional interviews. The additional 10 interviews negated revisiting the IRB for research modification approval.

The sample population were students that had completed blended or on-line programs at the host technical college. Creswell's (2013) purposeful, maximum variation sampling approach served as the vehicle to select the sample population. The sample pool consisted of 20 members from the sample population.

## Data Collection

The research's interview matrix (Appendix D) illustrates the linkage between the interview questions, research questions, and the problem statement. The research's interview guide (Appendix E) operationalizes the data collection section of the research. As an instrument of the study, the researcher clarified to the eligible participants the conditions that governed the interview and follow up interview data collection process. Peer-reviewed literature guided the organization of data collected (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013).

**Instruments.** The interview matrix (Appendix D) provided the researcher a systematic approach to linking the research problem statement, research questions, and interview questions (Kallio, Pietila, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016; Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Using the interview matrix (Appendix D), the researcher mapped the linkage between the interview questions, research questions, and the problem statement. The research's interview matrix (Appendix D) illustrates the linkage between the interview questions, research questions, and the problem statement. The research's interview guide (Appendix E) operationalizes the data collection section of the research. The operationalization and standardization of the data collection section of the research improved the research's reliability. The enhanced interview question consistency improved the interview process.

The following describes how the interview matrix (Appendix D), was used by the researcher to map the linkage between the interview questions, research questions, and the problem statement. As illustrated in appendix D, the researcher adopted a modified version of the problem statement as the introductory statement for the interview guide matrix. The interview matrix exhibited in Appendix D included the study's first formal research question (**RQ1**): What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career

and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program? Recorded in columns, adjacent to the research question(s), was an abbreviated form of each research question (Challenges, Customer Experiences, and Experiential Marketing Experiences). Recorded in a row, immediately following the formal research question and abbreviated research questions' columns was a prompt statement. The prompt statement served as a transition point to the next research question. Recorded below the prompt statement were the interview questions that linked to the research question. Research questions two (**RQ2**), and research question three (**RQ3**) followed the preceding design. A closing statement followed the final research question's final interview question.

The researcher mapped the linkage between the interview questions, research questions and problem statement on the interview matrix. The researcher placed an x in the cell(s) if a particular interview question had the potential to elicit information relevant to a particular research question (Neumann, 2008). To illustrate, refer to Appendix D, research question two (**RQ2**); through the optics of a consumer's experience, do/does consumer's customer experience(s) influence blended and online student's learning satisfaction and persistence to complete the blended or online program? Research question two (**RQ2**) was designed to aid the researcher in understanding how and to what extent the consumer experience influenced blended and online student learning satisfaction. To excavate research question two (**RQ2**), interview question 22, asked the participant the following; how would you describe your most memorable customer experience? The researcher mapped interview question 22 to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**). Interview question 22, through the optics of the



researcher, had the potential to elicit information relevant to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**).

**Data collection techniques.** The researcher interviewed the eligible participants. Participants' initial and follow up interviews took place at an easily accessible, secluded, and quiet location. The researcher indicated that the initial and follow up interviews were confidential. The researcher indicated that the study was voluntary. The researcher indicated that participants could skip questions. The researcher indicated that participants could discontinue participation in the interview and/or follow up interview at any time. The researcher indicated that the participant could ask for a break at any time. Using the research's interview guide (Appendix E), the researcher collected data from participants. Interview duration ranged from 60 to 90 minutes.

**Data organization techniques.** Moustakas (1994) modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen's technique was used to organize data. NVivo 12 Plus for Windows (2017) was the software the researcher selected to catalogue the research literature and transcribed interviews. The researcher selected a variety of NVivo 12 Plus for Windows' exploratory tools to ascertain relationships, associations, and assimilate research literature, transcribed interviews, research logs, and reflective journals.

**Summary of data collection.** As an instrument of the study, the researcher clarified to the eligible participants the conditions that governed the interview and follow up interview data collection process. Peer-reviewed literature guided the organization of data collected (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2013). To control the interview process the researcher used the interview guide (Appendix E). The researcher used the research's interview matrix (Appendix D) to document the linkage between the interview questions, research questions, and the problem

statement. To operationalize the data collection section of the research, the researcher used the research's interview guide (Appendix E).

### **Data Analysis**

The researcher selected the qualitative method's phenomenological design approach for the research. Moustakas' (1994) modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen coding process served as the template for Creswell's (2013) data coding and analysis technique. Creswell's (2013) data coding and analysis technique included six phases. Phase one; the researcher described personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. Phase two; the researcher developed a list of significant statements derived from reading the participant interviews. Phase three; the researcher grouped the significant statements into themes. Phase four; the researcher wrote a textual description of what the participants had experienced. Phase five; the researcher wrote a structural description of how the participants experience happened. Phase six; the researcher wrote a composite description of what the participants had experienced and how the participants experience happened (Creswell, 2013).

**Software tools.** To facilitate data coding, analysis and development of themes and perceptions, the researcher selected Qualitative Software Research (QSR) International's NVivo 12 Plus for Windows (2017) software. The researcher translated the eligible participants' transcribed interviews using an MSWord template. The MSWord template contained encoded triggers designed to exploit NVivo 12 Plus's auto coding source style or structure option (Robertson, 2017).

**Coding process used to develop themes.** The researcher imported the study's research literature, transcribed interviews, research logs, and reflective journals into NVivo 12 Plus's document manager. To generate multiple dimension nodes from the study's research literature,

transcribed interviews, research logs, and reflective journals the researcher selected NVivo 12 Plus's "auto coding source style or structure" function. First, the researcher analyzed the study's research literature, transcribed interviews, research logs, and reflective journals for "significant coding patterns." This step was reflective of phase two of Creswell's (2013) data coding and analysis technique. The significant coding patterns selected by the researcher were contained in NVivo 12 Plus's auto coded pattern results node (Robertson, 2017). The researcher reviewed the significant coding pattern list generated by NVivo 12 Plus. The researcher considered and selected the significant coding patterns applicable to the research from the generated list. The researcher created coded higher order category nodes for the selected coding patterns.

Next, using NVivo 12 Plus's auto code's "identify themes" function, the researcher analyzed the study's research literature, transcribed interviews, research logs, and reflective journals for potential themes. This step was reflective of phase three of Creswell's (2013) data coding and analysis technique. NVivo 12 Plus identified a list of potential themes. The identified themes selected by the researcher were contained in NVivo 12 Plus's auto coded themes node (Robertson, 2017). The researcher considered the list of potential themes generated by NVivo 12 Plus. The researcher selected the themes applicable to the research from the generated list. The researcher created higher order category nodes for the selected themes.

Next, using NVivo 12 Plus's auto code's "sentiment analysis" function, the researcher analyzed the study's transcribed interviews, research logs, and reflective journals for the interviewees' feeling and emotions. NVivo 12 Plus's sentiment analysis produced a matrix of interviewees' feeling and emotions. The NVivo 12 Plus's sentiment analysis node contained the interviewees' feeling and emotions data (Robertson, 2017). The researcher considered the

sentiment analysis matrix generated by NVivo 12 Plus. The researcher created coded nodes for the selected sentiments.

Following the generation and analysis of the auto coded pattern results node, auto coded themes node, and auto coded sentiment analysis node, the researcher dove deeper into the data. NVivo 12 Plus provided several tools to analyze the multiple dimension node structure generated from the eligible interviewees' transcripts and the researcher's project files. The researcher selected NVivo 12 Plus coding tools to perform the in-depth analysis of the research's significant coding pattern nodes, theme nodes, and sentiment nodes.

In pursuit of developing potential themes, the researcher compared coded categories and concepts across nodes. The research used NVivo 12 Plus's code stripping function. The code stripping function assisted the researcher's analysis of emergent narrative and generated new lines of inquiry (Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010). NVivo 12 Plus's code stripping function scanned across the coding pattern, emergent theme, and sentiment analysis nodes (Bringer, Johnston, & Brackenridge, 2006). The code stripping function created additional coded nodes. The additional coded nodes represented emergent concepts predicated on relationships NVivo 12 Plus's code stripping function had detected during the scanning process.

The researcher utilized NVivo 12 Plus's coding query function throughout the research. NVivo 12 Plus's coding query function methodically examined concepts, categories and subcategories that emerged from the data analysis. For example, the researcher determined during the coding stripes analysis of the coding pattern, emergent theme, and sentiment analysis nodes that references to student satisfaction were additionally in a concept node identified as experiential marketing. The researcher had identified experiential marketing during initial coding to reference instances in the data where eligible participants interviewed described

different states of emotion. By viewing all of the references coded in the experiential marketing node, the researcher noticed that several of the states of emotion responses coded in the sentiment analysis node. Using NVivo 12 Plus's coding query function; the researcher analyzed the experiential marketing node and the sentiment analysis node.

The coding query generated two data sets. The data sets contained both optimistic and pessimistic sentiments. The researcher saved the data sets generated by the query. Using the data sets generated by the query, the researcher used the coding stripes function to compare the optimistic and pessimistic sentiments. The coding stripes comparison of the two data sets indicated multiple inferences. The first inference was excitement. Further analysis by the researcher indicated that the inferences to excitement were linked to instances that eligible interviewees' experienced enthusiasm and anticipation. The second inference was angst. Further analysis by the researcher indicated that the inferences to angst were linked to instances that eligible interviewees' had experienced fear and apprehensive. Consequently, the coding query assisted the researcher in identifying higher order categories by allowing the researcher to view and examine data relevant to the emergent questions of interest.

The researcher continued using the tools discussed above to identify and exploit higher order category nodes and subset coded nodes that were relevant to the emergent narratives of interest. Conversely, the researcher eliminated higher order category nodes and subset coded nodes deemed not relevant to the emergent narratives of interest. As the higher order category nodes and subset-coded nodes relevant to the emergent narratives of interest became more concentrated, research themes and perspectives crystalized. With the crystallization of the research's themes, the research developed phase four and five of Creswell's (2013) data coding and analysis technique.

**Summary of data analysis.** Moustakas' (1994) modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen coding process served as the template for Creswell's (2013) data coding and analysis technique. The researcher used QSR International's NVivo 12 Plus for Windows software (2017) to facilitate data coding, analysis and development of themes and perceptions. The researcher used NVivo 12 Plus's auto coding source style or structure function to generate nodes from the eligible interviewees' verbatim transcripts. The researcher used NVivo 12 Plus's auto coding source style or structure functions to assist in developing research narratives. NVivo 12 Plus's auto coding source style or structure included functions that identified significant coding patterns, themes, and eligible interviewees' sentiments. The researcher utilized NVivo 12 Plus's coding query function to further exploit nodes, create data sets, and dive deeper into the data.

### **Reliability and Validity**

The researcher established the research's reliability using the research's interview matrix (Appendix D) and interview guide (Appendix E). Aggregately, the research's interview matrix (Appendix D) and interview guide (Appendix E) operationalized the data collection section of the research. Three primary facets established the research's validity. The primary facets were content validity, criterion related validity, and construct validity. The secondary facets were face validity, triangulation, interview guide structure, member checking, field notes, and saturation.

**Reliability.** The interview matrix (Appendix D) provided the researcher a systematic approach to linking the research problem statement, research questions, and interview questions (Kallio et al., 2016; Castillo-Montoya, 2016). Using the interview matrix (Appendix D), the researcher mapped the linkage between the interview questions, research questions, and the problem statement. The researcher developed the interview guide (Appendix E) from the

interview matrix (Appendix D). The research's interview guide (Appendix E) operationalized and standardized the data collection section of the research. The operationalization and standardization of the data collection section of the research improved the research's reliability. The researcher improved the interview process through enhanced interview question consistency.

**Validity.** Through the optics of three primary facets, according to Long and Johnson (2000), validity was established. The primary facets were content validity, criterion related validity, and construct validity. Long and Johnson indicated that the foundation of the research's content validity was grounded in the areas of sampling and data collection. The population and sampling section and the data collection section of the research demonstrated the validation of the research's content.

Further research content validation included face validity. A sub-set of content validity, according to Long and Johnson (2000), was the lesser concept of face validity. According to Long and Johnson, face validity assured that the data collection instrument and research findings appeared thorough and accurate to knowledgeable reviewers. The face validity criteria of the research was satisfied through the rigorous review of each research step by the dissertation chair, dissertation committee members, and final approval by the institutional review board.

Stake (2010) indicated that triangulation was used to increase the reliability and validity of the evidence presented in the research. Supporting Stake, Creswell (2013) advanced that triangulation of data sources established the research's credibility. Long and Johnson (2000) submitted that credibility was enhanced when triangulated data concurred. The achievement of triangulation was through multiple sources. The resources included the interview, member checking, field notes and data analysis using NVivo 12 Plus coding tools.

To address each research question entirely, the researcher meticulously structured the interview guide (Appendix E). The interview matrix (Appendix D) facilitated the researcher's vigilant structuring of the interview questions. The researcher used the interview matrix to map the linkage between the interview questions, research questions, and the problem statement. The researcher developed the interview guide (Appendix E) from the interview matrix (Appendix D). Consequently, the researcher predicated the interview guide's (Appendix E) question structure through interview questions, research questions, and the problem statement linkage established by the interview matrix (Appendix D).

The second source of triangulation was member checking. Long and Johnson (2000) indicated that the terms member checking and respondent validation were synonymous. Brink (1991) and Bloor (1978) recommended member checking as a vehicle to validate participant responses. To validate participant responses the researcher utilized member checking.

The third source of triangulation was field notes. Long and Johnson (2000) posited that field notes represented raw data. The researcher utilized elements of raw data recorded in field notes to assist in the triangulation of the research.

Finally, the researcher demonstrated triangulation in the data analysis section of the research. The researcher used selected NVivo 12 Plus coding tools to identify and exploit higher order category nodes and subset coded nodes that were relevant to the emergent questions of interest. The researcher eliminated higher order category nodes and subset coded nodes deemed not relevant to the emergent questions of interest. Additionally, the researcher eliminated higher order category nodes and subset coded nodes that contained congruent data. As the higher order category nodes and subset coded nodes relevant to the emergent questions of interest became saturated, research themes and perspectives crystalized.



The operationalization of saturation was through the process of constant comparison according to Bowen (2008). Continuing, Bowen asserted that the constant comparison process and related procedures were the embodiment of the saturation process. NVivo 12 Plus coding tools facilitated the researcher's efforts to exhaust the emergence of new ideals. NVivo 12 Plus coding tools did not replace the researcher's cognitive responsibility, but served as an automated tool that assisted the research in achieving data saturation.

In summary, content validity, criterion related validity, and construct validity were the primary aspects that established the research's validity. Face validity, triangulation, interview guide structure, member checking, field notes, and saturation were the secondary aspects that established the research's validity. Aggregately, the research's interview matrix (Appendix D) and interview guide (Appendix E) operationalized the data collection section of the research. The research's interview matrix (Appendix D) and interview guide (Appendix E) established the research's reliability.

### **Transition and Summary of Section 2**

Section 2 served as the vehicle for establishing the practical information for the research of online student retention and the online student's customer experience. Section 2's framework included the following: the project purpose statement, role of the researcher, participants, research method, research design, population and sampling, data collection instruments, data collection technique, data organization technique, data analysis technique, reliability and validity. The Section 2 framework established the practical information for the study of online student retention and the online student's customer experience.

Section 3 will apply the practical information established in section two. Section 3 will relate online student retention and the online student's customer experience to professional

practice and the research's implications for change. Section 3's framework includes the following: the overview of the study, anticipated themes and perceptions, presentation of findings, application to professional practice, recommendation for action, recommendation for further study, reflections, summary, and conclusions. The Section 3 framework will relate online student retention and the online student's customer experience to professional practice and the research's implications for change.

### **Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change**

Section 1 presented the foundation of the study and literature review. Section 2 outlined the processes that formed the framework of the study. Section 3 field study findings included the following:

- The field study findings indicated that blended and online students' computer literacy and navigation skills influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.
- The field study findings indicated that blended and online students' feeling of isolation and loneliness influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.
- The field study findings indicated that challenges designed to intrinsically stimulate blended and online students to feel good influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.
- The field study findings indicated that competitive challenges designed to intrinsically motivate the blended and online students' self-efficacy influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.
- The field study findings indicated that the achievement of a sustainable competitive advantage in education was through the development and implementation of excellence strategies that were predicated on quality assurance and supply chain management concepts.

- The field study findings indicated that loneliness was a factor that influenced the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.
- The field study findings indicated that collectiveness and individualism influenced the blended and online students customer experience and persistence to complete the program.
- The field study findings indicated that simulation games and business simulation exercises influenced students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.
- The field study findings indicated that experiential or practical experiences influenced the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.
- The field study findings indicated that combining two or more academic disciplines into a single module influenced the blended and online student's learner satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program.
- The field study findings indicated that an experiential learning experience that was fun influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.
- The field study findings indicated that an experiential learning experience that required blended and online student creativity influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Section 3 subsections included the following:

- Overview of the study
- Anticipated themes/ perceptions
- Presentation of the findings
- Application to professional practice
- Recommendation for action
- Recommendation for further study
- Reflections

### **Overview of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the behavioral and experiential factors that influenced blended and online student retention. The researcher extrapolated themes that governed student perceptions of their online customer experience from the field study descriptions of the behavioral and experiential factors that influenced blended and online students.

The following outlines the steps in the field study. The researcher identified participants. The researcher gained access to the participants. The researcher established a working relationship with the participants. The researcher selected participants that were qualified to be part of the field study. The researcher confirmed the ethical protection of participants as specified in Section 2. The researcher performed the qualitative research method and phenomenological design described in Section 2. The researcher performed the population and sampling criteria set forth in Section 2. Data collection was through participant interviews using the research's interview guide (Appendix E). Qualitative Software Research (QSR) International's NVivo 12 Plus for Windows (2017) software performed the analysis of the

research data. The researcher developed themes. The researcher established research reliability and validity through content validity, criterion related validity, and construct validity.

The following research questions framed the field study:

**RQ1.** What were the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

**RQ2.** How did the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program?

**RQ3.** How did experiential experiences influence blended and online student's learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program?

Findings that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program included the following:

- Not understanding online assignment expectations and a preoccupation with grades
- Previous online experience.
- Instructor pedagogical and instructional design training.
- Loneliness and feelings of not being a part of a community.
- Students that overcame personal challenges had high self-efficacy.
- Students that had not overcome personal challenges had high low-efficacy.
- Excellence strategies/competitive advantage.
- Positive academic online course customer experience
- Student feedback that was personalized, timely, and thorough.
- Course module design and the students' profession and/or qualification goals.

- Feedback from peers.
- Groups.
- Feedback from groups.
- Collectivism and individualism.
- Combining two or more academic disciplines into a single module.
- Fun.
- Creativity.

Section 3 subsections include the following:

- Overview of the study
- Anticipated themes/ perceptions
- Presentation of the findings
- Application to professional practice
- Recommendation for Action
- Recommendation for further study
- Reflections

### **Presentation of the Findings**

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What were the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**), two narratives emerged. Not understanding online assignment expectations and a preoccupation with grades emerged as themes that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day's (2010) research advanced that principal among students academic concerns were grades. Banfield and Wilkerson (2014) described grades, employment, or tasks as extrinsic motivators. Continuing, Gu et al. (2010) indicated following grades, student's academic concerns included exposure to new teaching pedagogies, feeling embarrassed if unable to answer questions, and understanding assignment expectations. Echoing Gu et al.'s research findings, when asked what elements of memorable academic project experience disappointed him, participant 1 indicated:

There is a lot of, really a couple of parts of it that were more challenging or no, I just didn't understand it until later. Because first of all I do not like to not get the best grade possible. When you know you have studied hard for it and you get in there and you just freak and go completely blank.

Participant 1's response echoed two elements of Gu et al.'s research findings. First, grades were a challenge and second understanding assignment expectations were a challenge.

Relative to grades as a challenge, Gu et al.'s (2010) research was reflective of participant 1's description. In addition to participant 1, participant 8 said, "For me what was most important was the grade" when asked to describe learner satisfaction. Participant 7 described learner satisfaction similarly, "My overall learning through all my courses. My grades, my accomplishments." Participant 2 said, "So I might as well fail this class now and take the F instead of keep trying and not understand anything I am ever doing." Participant 2's description also reflected two elements of Gu et al.'s research. First through the optics of grades, participant 2 described his intention to drop the class if his grade was an F. Participant 2's intention to drop the class due to the F demonstrated the magnitude of the significance blended and online students placed on grades.



The second element of Gu et al.'s (2010) research reflected in participant 2's description relative to grades was understanding assignment expectations. Participant 2 said, "So I might as well fail this class now and take the F instead of keep trying and not understand anything I am ever doing." Parsing participant 2's description, participant 2 indicated he would "keep trying" although "not understand anything I am ever doing." This comment illustrated that understanding assignment expectations was a challenge to blended and online students. Continuing, participant 2 indicated, "There were some academic challenges I did not overcome. I struggled with trying to understand somethings I didn't quite understand."

Participant 6, similar to participant 2, indicated that understanding assignment expectations in online classes was difficult for her also. Participant 6 said, "Sometimes you don't understand. Most people don't comprehend very well when it comes to online." After feeling alone during an academic online course experience, participant 7 described her emotions. Participant 7 said, "I felt great about my instructor who took the time to walk me through the steps I needed to get when I did not understand what I was doing." Participant 7's instructor contacted her, during other than normal working hours, to help participant 7 understand the instructions. When asked, how does a bad online course customer experience influence your desire to complete the online program, participant 10 responded,

Not understanding the question in an assignment, I answered the question incorrectly.

After receiving feedback from the instructor, I reviewed the question to find out where I went wrong. If the question was confusion or not specific, I pointed this out to the instructor. If I misread the question, I focus on understanding what the question was asking and how to address the question in the future.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What were the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) blended and online students' previous online experience emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Expanding on the analysis of students not understanding online assignment expectations and the students' preoccupation with grades, other elements of Gu et al.'s (2010) research findings emerged. The emergent narrative was exposure to new teaching pedagogies. Layne et al.'s (2013) research indicated that computer literacy and navigation skills represented possible barriers to student retention. Institutions gave little attention to students' previous online experience. Consequently, institutions frequently guided students toward learning formats that were not appropriate for the student's level of online expertise. Within online learning classes, according to Layne et al., it was the student's responsibility to initiate the learning process. Without the necessary navigation and technology skills, blended and online students were unable to initiate the online learning experience. Without a rich comprehensive of the online learning environment, blended and online students were inclined to drop the course.

When asked, prior to taking online classes in college, what were your experiences with online learning, the majority of blended and online students described having no or extremely limited experience with online learning. Participant 3's response to the question was "I had no experience with online learning." Participant 4 responded, "I had no experience with online

learning.” Participant 6 indicated that she had some previous online course experience but added, “It didn’t prepare me.” Reflecting on her previous online course experiences with online learning participant 9 said, “It was definitely something new for me.” Participant 10 described his previous online experience as “Prior to attending Coastal Pines, I had no experience with online learning.” Participant 5 indicated, “Previous to college, I didn’t have any online learning experience.” Participant 7 similarly indicated, “I had no experience with online learning.” Participant 2 followed suit with the previous students, “No, all my prior classes were face to face with the teacher.” Only participant 8 and participant 1 described having previous online learning experiences. Consequently, as an emerging narrative, exposure to new teaching pedagogies, specifically online learning, the majority of the blended and online students’ described having no previous exposure to online learning. The emergence of students not understanding online assignment expectations could be a derivative of the institution giving little attention to students’ previous online experience.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students’ learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student’s customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) loneliness and feelings of not being a part of a community emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students’ learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Expanding on Layne et al.’s (2013) research that focused on students’ technology and navigation skills as a predictor of blended and online student persistence, Xu and Jaggars’ (2014)

and Jaggars' (2011) research advanced that social distance or lack of community experienced by the blended and online student created the feeling of isolation and loneliness. Travers (2016) more recent research asked the question, "What type of data was needed to evaluate the effectiveness of online community college instruction?" (p. 59). Travers' question moved the focus, relative to blended and online student persistence, from blended and online student technology and navigation skills to the instructors pedagogical and instructional design skills. Travers' research indicated that instructors pedagogical and instructional design training benefited blended and online students.

Participants' field study accounts of challenges sometimes orbited around elements related to the instructors' pedagogical and instructional design skills. For example, a benefit to students, according to Travers (2016), of instructor pedagogical and instructional design training was creating a sense of student inclusion. The field research suggested that some blended and online students felt isolated when engaged in online learning. For example, participant 2 described his most memorable personal challenge as follows,

Sometimes you felt like you were lonely, and you were just by yourself. You don't have that group, you are not associated with someone that is in the group. I felt like an outsider alone trying to do the class. I didn't have that friend or someone I could go to and we could figure it out together.

When asked had he overcame the personal challenge, participant 2 responded "no."

Participant 4's description of her most memorable challenge was similar to participant 2's. Participant 4 said, "Not having someone available that you can ask questions. We didn't have that, anyone I could go to at the moment." When asked how the experience made her feel,

participant 4 said, “I felt frustrated sometimes. Sometimes I wanted to give up, not go through, not finish the class. It just made me want to give up at times.”

Participant 5 described his most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

My most memorable would be just getting my questions answered from the professor right away. At the time I had Mr. Tang, he answered my questions when he got my emails usually in a timely manner. That made me feel good.

Continuing, if you were alone during the academic online course experience, what were the emotions that you felt? Participant 5 indicated,

I felt good because it means there is somebody actually looking at what I am writing.

Because sometimes you write something and you do not get it answered for two or three days. So it is a good experience when you get that feedback right away. Because you are looking for that feedback and your whole, that problem or that set of series of problems you are trying to accomplish with that person’s class is dependent on you getting it done. So when you do not get that feedback, you don’t get it done in a timely manner. So it is getting that feedback right away to get it done.

Xu and Jaggars’ (2011, 2014) and Jaggars’ (2011) research corroborated that blended and online students’ feelings of not being a part of a community appeared to influence attrition in online courses. From participants 2, 4, and 5’s descriptions, multiple narratives emerged. In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) loneliness and feelings of not being a part of a community, lack of group feedback, and late instructor feedback emerged as challenges that negatively influenced blended and online students’ customer experience. To have a sense of inclusion and negate the feeling of loneliness, the blended and

online students not only needed timely feedback from their instructors, but the blended and online students also needed timely feedback from their peers.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**), research question two (**RQ2**), and research question three (**RQ3**) instructor pedagogical and instructional design training emerged as a theme. The emergent theme influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Layne et al.'s (2013) research focused on blended and online students' computer literacy and navigation skills as possible barriers to student retention. Expanding Layne et al.'s (2013) research, Gu et al. (2010) indicated student's academic challenges included exposure to new teaching pedagogies, and understanding assignment expectations. Recall participant's 2 response when asked to describe his most memorable personal challenge,

Sometimes you felt like you were lonely, you were just by yourself. You don't have that group, you are not associated with someone that is in the group. I felt like an outsider alone trying to do the class. I didn't have that friend or someone I could go to and we could figure it out together.

When asked had he overcome the personal challenge, participant 2 responded "no." Participant 2's inability to understanding online assignment expectations could be a consequence of his limited computer literacy and navigation skills or a derivative of the instructors pedagogical and

instructional design skills. Travers (2016) asked the question, “What type of data was needed to evaluate the effectiveness of online community college instruction?” (p. 59). Travers’ question moved the focus, relative to blended and online student persistence, from blended and online student technology and navigation skills to the instructors pedagogical and instructional design skills. To answer the question Travers’ suggested two sources of data be collected and compared.

Both sources of Travers’ (2016) data focused on results related to student persistence. The first source of student retention data was from online instructors with both pedagogical and instructional design training. The second source of student retention data was from online instructors with technology training only. Travers’ (2016) indicated that the data would provide insight into if pedagogical and instructional design training enhanced learning, and retention of distance learners. The phenomenological research findings did not isolate the rationale for participant 2’s inability to understanding online assignment expectations. The phenomenological research findings did suggest blended and online students’ computer literacy and navigation skills and instructors’ online pedagogical and instructional design skills contributed to the blended and online students’ learning experience, persistence to continue the program, and overall customer experience.

Expanding on instructor pedagogical and instructional design training, in the context of the blended and online students most memorable academic online course customer experiences the participants provided the following descriptions: When asked, how does a bad online course customer experience influence your desire to complete the online program, participant 10 responded,

Not understanding the question in an assignment, I answered the question incorrectly.

After receiving feedback from the instructor, I reviewed the question to find out where I went wrong. If the question was confusion or not specific, I pointed this out to the instructor. If I misread the question, I focus on understanding what the question was asking and how to address the question in the future.

Participant 4 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

Yes, toward the end I just wanted to drop the course and say I cannot do this. I just could not figure it out. Consequently, not being able to figure out things in the course my persistence to complete the course was influenced.

Participant 2 said,

So I love learning about the marketing aspect of business. It was always positive to me. I was able to apply it directly to my job. It was like visual merchandising, that class helped me. I see how we have to put certain things we want to promote out first and then make that more presentable than what doesn't necessarily need to be out. So to me learner satisfaction is being able to apply what I have learned to my job.

Participant 2's comment described a need for activities beyond reading the textbook and answering essay questions. Specifically pedagogical and instructional design modules embodied the blended and online students' profession and/or qualification.

In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**), research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) the emergent narrative linked, loneliness and feelings of not being a part of a community, with course module design. The linkage in the emergent narrative



inferred the instructor's pedagogical and instructional design training influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) blended and online students that overcame personal challenges had high self-efficacy emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Blended and online students that overcame academic challenges expressed positive feelings toward the learning experience. For example, participant 3 said, "Overcoming academic challenges made me feel strong, powerful, and capable of accomplishing my goals in my life." Participant 5 described similar feelings, "with that experience, it made me feel good. It made me realized I can manage my time and manage my day to day activities with a school life, a work life, and a personal life." Participant 9 noted,

It made me feel pretty good. It made me feel that I could do anything and if I saw myself completing that program then I could eventually go on and do more like with the diploma. I went on ahead and eventually started taking classes with the degree side to go on to a higher level.

Participant 1 provide the following description, “The mental made me feel good. Because I am one of those people who really enjoy mentally thinking outside of the box. Thinking a lot further into than I probably should. I truly enjoyed it.”

Miller (2013) explained that the students’ positive feelings could be the result of elements found in gamification. Looyestyn et al. (2017) described gamification or gamifying applications as software that incorporates elements of games. Banfield and Wilkerson’s (2014) research tightly bound intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. Banfield and Wilkerson (2014) indicated that gamification was a branch of experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory, according to Banfield and Wilkerson, was active learning where the learning is student focused. Miller (2013) indicated that researchers had observed an increase in the release of the chemicals norepinephrine, epinephrine, and dopamine in the brain during experiential learning experiences. The release of the chemicals not only brought on “good feelings” but also made students more receptive to learning. According to neuroscientist Gregory Burns, dopamine was the primary element in the human motivational component of reward-motivated behavior. Miller posited that game play experiences and experiential learning experiences resulted in the same reward-motivated behavior in humans.

Expanding on Miller’s (2013) research, Xu (2011) suggested that gamifying could influence the human extrinsic motivation. Continuing, but human extrinsic motivators quickly dissipate and become boring and consequently less engaging to the user. For example, an extrinsic motivation may include rewarding point or badges based on performance. Over a period, after achieving a threshold of points or badges, the user’s interest declines. In contrast to human extrinsic motivation through rewarding of points or badges to online students, Banfield and Wilkerson’s (2014) research focused on human intrinsic motivation. Satisfaction or pleasure

in performing a task was the core around which human intrinsic motivation orbited. Banfield and Wilkerson (2014) suggested, in the context of gamification, human intrinsic motivation encouraged online student success through competition. Banfield and Wilkerson's (2014) research tightly bound intrinsic motivation with self-efficacy.

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy was a concept from social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy was a three-pronged relationship between human behavior, cognitions, and the environment. Self-efficacy referred to "beliefs in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands" (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 408). Self-efficacy served as the lynchpin in the linkage between one's capabilities and performance. Bandura (1986) advanced that one's beliefs in their ability to perform a specific task would define one's subsequent performance relative to that task. The linkage between Banfield and Wilkerson's (2014) intrinsic motivation and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy demonstrated the blended and online students' descriptions of overcoming personal challenges.

Participant 1 said "But having the opportunity to overcome the personal challenge just gave me a sense of pride, I guess, would be the word to use." Continuing to express positive feelings about overcoming the personal challenges participant 6 provided the following observation:

Great, because I got to set my goals and tell myself that I had something to look forward to so that was the main thing with me. I think it has gotten me where I am at today as far as I am.

Participant 8 added:

Well, the personal challenges were mainly to juggle the schedule of working with the schedule of academics. And overcoming the personal challenges was to decide when my limits were reached and my personal life so that I could focus on academics.

From the preceding lived experiences advanced by those blended and online students that overcame personal challenges emerged the third theme. The emergent theme indicated that blended and online students that overcome personal challenges had high self-efficacy and consequently a positive learning experience and greater persistence to complete the blended online program.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) blended and online students that did not overcome personal challenges had low self-efficacy emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

In contrast to a blended and online students' with high self-efficacy, participant 2 described how he felt when he did not overcome an academic challenge,

It makes me feel that I am not focused enough. I prioritize my life wrong. I need to prioritize better because if I do the jobs, I also need to do the school, because I won't get a higher paying job.

Continuing, “By not overcoming the academic challenge I felt frustrated sometimes. Sometimes I wanted to give up, not go through, and not finish the class. It just made me want to give up at times.” Participant 2’s description of not overcoming personal challenges was similar to his feelings when not overcoming academic challenges.

Not overcoming the personal challenge made me feel that I had not chosen the right path or this class could I actually do it. It made me feel that I did not know a lot. Even though reading everything, not having someone there to help me, made me feel more or less that I was not capable of doing online classes and succeeding.

Participant 2’s description of not overcoming academic and personal challenges demonstrated the three-pronged relationship between human behavior, cognitions, and the environment or self-efficacy. Layne et al. (2013) indicated the need for additional research in the areas of impaired self-efficacy and resilience. Through not overcoming the academic and personal challenges, participant 2 had lost his confidence. Participant 2 had lost his belief in mobilizing his capabilities. Participant 2 was unable to garner cognitive resources, and organize the needed actions to motivate himself to overcome the situational demands.

Participant 3’s description of not overcoming the academic challenge was similar to participant 2’s description, “When I did not overcome the academic challenges, it made me feel like a loser. Weak and not myself, wasn’t sure what to do about it.” Participant 4 noted, “Not overcoming the academic challenge, I felt frustrated sometimes. Sometimes I wanted to give up, not go through, and not finish the class. It just made me want to give up at times.” From the preceding lived experiences advanced by those blended and online students that did not overcome academic challenges emerged the second narrative. The emergent theme indicated that blended and online students that did not overcome challenges had low self-efficacy,

consequently a negative learning experience, and less persistence to complete the blended online program.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program?

Research question three (**RQ3**) asked the following: How do experiential experiences influence blended and online students' learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) excellence strategies emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Although there was no linear relationship between excellence strategies and blended and online students' field study descriptions, there were non-linear relationships or implications. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research indicated that a strong correlation existed between the degree of exercise of excellence strategies in education, the achievement of higher education institutions, and sustainable competitive advantage. Supporting Shobaki and Abu Naser's research, Moskal, Stein, and Golding (2015) posited that an understanding of the elements that influenced the blended and online students was essential. The field study produced an assortment of elements that described the blended and online students challenges, customer experiences, and experiential experiences.

For example, participants 2 and 4 described the challenges of isolation, loneliness, and exclusion. Participant 2 said,

Sometimes you felt like you were lonely, you were just by yourself. You don't have that group, you are not associated with someone that is in the group. I felt like an outsider alone trying to do the class. I didn't have that friend or someone I could go to and we could figure it out together.

When asked had he overcome the personal challenge, participant 2 responded "no."

Participant 4's description echoed Participant 2, "Not having someone available that you can ask questions. We didn't have that, anyone I could go to at the moment." When asked how the experience made her feel, participant 4 said, "I felt frustrated sometimes. Sometimes I wanted to give up, not go through, not finish the class. It just made me want to give up at times."

In contrast to participants 2 and 4, participant 6's description of her experience as a member of an online team was positive. Participant 6 communicated, "It made me feel good I had a team behind me I guess. I guess you could say it was like a team. Because, you know, I was not alone in the process."

Through the optics of Moskal et al.'s (2015) research, isolation, loneliness, and exclusion emerged as elements that influenced blended and online students. Through participants 2 and 4's field study descriptions, isolation, loneliness, and exclusion emerged as elements that presented a challenge that negatively influenced the blended and online students' customer experience.

Conversely, participant 6's description of her experience as a member of an online group emerged as an element that had a positive effect on the blended and online students' customer experience.

Through the research literature, coupled with blended and online students' field study descriptions, excellence strategies emerged as a narrative. In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) excellence strategies would have an overarching effect on research question one (**RQ1**) research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**). First, the implementation of excellence strategies would address blended and online students' challenges as recognized in research question one (**RQ1**). Second, the implementation of excellence strategies would influence the blended and online students' customer experience as recognized in research question two (**RQ2**). Third, the implementation of excellence strategies would insure and proceduralize inclusion of experiential or practical practices as recognized in research question three (**RQ3**) for blended and online students' curriculum.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) a positive academic online course customer experience and feedback that was personalized, timely, and thorough emerged as themes that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Focusing on the higher education sector through the optics of a competitive global marketplace, having satisfied customers was imperative according to Moskal et al. (2015). To create and maintain a competitive advantage in the global education market place, the



development and implementation of sustainable strategies was essential according to Moskal et al. The development of teaching and learning practice that are customer centric is essential in the development and implementation of sustainable strategies. For institutions of higher learning to develop and maintain sustainable strategies for a competitive advantage, according to Moskal et al., an understanding of the elements that influence the blended and online students' customer experience was essential.

Participant 7 described her positive academic online course customer experience as follows,

I was traveling out of town for work. I was trying to this one week of assignments. I was having a hard time figuring out how to come up with this number. I asked the instructor for help. The instructor broke it down. She sent me this list of steps I needed to do in order to come up with the correct number. She listed it so well, I simply followed the steps. I was stressed out about traveling getting to work and trying to go about seventeen hours driving. I was still trying to do work and get rest at the same time. The instructor made the process very smooth for me.

Continuing, participant 7 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

The help I received from my instructor was instrumental in my persistence to complete the program. The instructor was so responsive to me; a customer relationship was created between me and the instructor. That customer relationship, the way I was treated by the instructor, was paramount in me completing the program. The relationship made me desire to complete the program more.

Finally, participant 7 described her emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

Desire to complete the assignment. Stress. Fear that I was not going to complete the assignment. But overall, everything came out great. I felt accomplished. I felt great about my instructor who took the time to walk me through the steps I needed to get when I was not understanding what I was doing.

Participant 10 described a second positive academic online course customer experience:

I can recall an English course I took online. The professor was concerned with the quality of my paper. The paper was so good; the professor suspected that I had plagiarized the paper. After running the paper through Safe Assign, the professor realized that I had not plagiarized the paper.

Continuing,

The professor and I discussed the paper and the concern the professor had that I had plagiarized the paper. During the course of the discussion, both the instructor and I developed a positive relationship. The professor, I recall, complimented me on the paper once he realized it was my work.

Finally, participant 10 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows, “Positive feedback from the instructor built my confidence. The confidence pushed me to complete the program. Positive and negative feedback translates into persistence. The key is providing the student constructive feedback in a timely manner.” Participant 10 described his emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows, “That gave me confidence. From that conversation, I really learned to respect that

instructor and realized the professor talking with me really had a positive effect on me as both a student and person.”

Power and Gould-Morven’s (2011) research indicated that a lack of urgency on the part of the instructor coupled with delayed feedback negatively influenced online learner satisfaction and student persistence to complete the online program. Continuing, Power and Gould-Morven indicated that instructors grounded in traditional face to face class room settings often could not adjust to the 24/7 requirements of online learning.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students’ learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program? Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student’s customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) the relationship between course module design and the blended and online students’ profession and/or qualification goals emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students’ learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

This comment from participant 2 described a need for activities beyond reading the textbook and answering essay questions. Previously, when describing learner satisfaction, participant 2 said,

So I love learning about the marketing aspect of business. It was always positive to me. I was able to apply it directly to my job. It was like visual merchandising, that class helped me. I see how we have to put certain things we want to promote out first and then

make that more presentable than what doesn't necessarily need to be out. So to me learner satisfaction is being able to apply what I have learned to my job.

Participant 3's, description of her memorable academic project experiences advanced a similar experience "There were two memorable project experiences. One of them was group research, that was fun. The second was when you came into the store and applied what we learned from the book to the actual place, that was fun."

Li et al.'s (2016) research had two significant findings that supported participant 2 and participant 3's description of their most memorable academic online course customer experience. First, for both new and continuing learners, learning module design had a strong and significant impact on students' overall satisfaction. Second, for both new and continuing learners the linkage of the learning module design to the learner's profession and/or qualification goals had a significant impact on the students' overall satisfaction.

Supporting Li et al.'s research, Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) found a similar linkage between educational emphasis and the learner's profession. The implication of Li et al.'s (2016) and, Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research findings indicated that if a learning module or educational emphasis was not adequately linked with the new and continuing learners' wider qualification aims, the overall learning experience was less likely to have a positive influence on the blended and online students' learning experience.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In

relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) feedback from peers emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Participant 9's response to "If you were networking during the academic online course customer experience, what were the emotions that the group felt?" was similar in context to participant 6's response. Participant 9 described a positive experience with group assignments, "We had discussion board assignments. You would have to post your discussion and respond to one or two other student's posts. I did enjoy it. Reading and getting feedback from others."

Asking participant 6, "If you were networking during the academic online course customer experience, what were the emotions that the group felt?" Participant 6's description supported participant 9's description,

Well, like online classes we had, you the students we would have to give feedback to. So basically if something is not done right they also guide you through things. But the instructor does to, but networking with a group in an online course that is definitely great because you get to be critiqued in so many different ways. You get to see what people thing about your art or your design.

In contrast to participant 6 and participant 9's descriptions, participant 8 felt frustration with feedback from peers. "I expressed my frustration to you over the fact that nobody was responding and people weren't and people were not doing what they needed to do." Participant 9 continued, "I felt like frustrated because other members of the group were putting a lot of the work on me." Participant 10 echoed similarly,

I was concerned everyone might not contribute. My experience with groups has not been always positive. I recall groups where there were those that did very little, but expected

the same grade as those that had contributed a lot more than they had. I felt this was unfair and those that did not contribute appropriately should receive a lower grade.

Blended and online students' unfamiliarity with technology could produce reluctance to participate in online group projects according to Anderson and Elloumi's (2004) research. Consequently, group members' fear of failing in public and being embarrassed, influenced their level of participation in-group projects. Participant 4 described a similar experience.

Toward the end I just wanted to drop the course and say I cannot do this. I just could not figure it out. My reluctance to ask for help and the slow turn around with the answering of questions jointly over whelmed me and made the online experience far from a positive customer experience.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) "groups" emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

A narrative that emerged from the theme, feedback from peers, was groups. Analyzing field study transcripts, the term group or groups appeared in a number of blended and online student's descriptions. Although the reference to groups was present in a number of field study transcripts, the focus on groups was not consistent. For example, participant 10 said,

I can't speak for the group, but from an emotional perspective, I was concerned everyone might not contribute. My experience with groups has not been always positive. I recall groups where there were those that did very little, but expected the same grade as those that had contributed a lot more than they had. I felt this was unfair and those that did not contribute appropriately should receive a lower grade.

Participant 8 echoed a similar response,

I know I felt that personally that I felt frustration and I know that you know my frustration because I expressed my frustration to you over the fact that nobody was responding and people weren't and people were not doing what they needed to do.

Continuing,

A lot of people were like, I don't have time to get this done, because I have this and this to do in my personal life. I felt like frustrated because other members of the group were putting a lot of the work on me.

Supporting participant 8's comments, participant 3 said,

I can sense that frustration sometimes from the group because sometimes you feel nobody responds, that nobody cares which reality is, probably, the reality is people are busy with their lives something happened and could not respond and that creates frustration among other students.

Participant 10, participant 8, and participant 3's experience with groups was not positive.

The common narrative from participants' negative experiences was lack of communications or feedback from peers. In addition to the lack of communications or feedback from peers, the significance of groups emerged as a dynamic that influenced the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.

Research question one (**RQ1**) asked the following: What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) collectivism and individualism emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Bortolotti, Boscari, and Danese's (2015) and Peretz, Levi, and Fried (2015) research focused on group dynamics through the optics of collectiveness and individualism. Bortolotti et al. (2015) research on lean manufacturing advanced that collectivism stimulated teamwork and prompted collaborative relations between group members. Participant 9 described her feelings relative to participating in a group. "I did enjoy it. Reading and getting feedback from others." Participant 6 described a similar positive experience relative to groups, "networking with a group in an online course that is definitely great because you get to be critiqued in so many different ways" (Bortolotti et al., 2015).

Conversely, Peretz et al. (2015) advanced that individualism promoted self-interest and superseded group loyalty. To illustrate, participant 8 said,

I know I felt that personally that I felt frustration and I know that you know my frustration because I expressed my frustration to you over the fact that nobody was responding and people weren't and people were not doing what they needed to do.

Expanding on participant 8 comments on group dynamics, participant 3 said,



I can sense that frustration sometimes from the group because sometimes you feel nobody responds, that nobody cares which reality is, probably, the reality is people are busy with their lives something happened and could not respond and that creates frustration among other students.

Participant 2 communicated, in reference to personal challenges,

Because I let the outside world influences my academic life. For example, me working more jobs. The more jobs I have, because I love money, they become why I don't do my homework, I don't take the class serious enough because I have those extra jobs.

Participant 2 continuing,

Not overcoming the academic challenge makes me feel that I am not focused enough. I prioritize my life wrong. I need to prioritize better because if I do the jobs, I also need to do the school, because I won't get a higher paying job. I don't feel bad, but I also don't feel good about myself. It is like it is not going to hurt me, but it does hurt me. It concerns me.

In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) collectiveness and individualism emerged as narratives that challenged blended and online students and influenced the blended and online students customer experience and persistence to complete the program. To illustrate, participants 9 and 6 demonstrated characteristics of collectiveness, as defined by Bortolotti et al. (2015). For example, participant 9 enjoyed reading the feedback from other group members. Expanding on participant 9's description, participant 6 described how being critiqued by other group members was a positive experience.

Conversely, participants 8 and 2's descriptions reflected characteristics of Peretz et al.'s (2015) individualism. Participant 8's description illustrated her frustration with other members

of her group not responding. Although not conclusive, other members of participants 8's group were possibly demonstrating a preoccupation with their own self-interests, which superseded loyalty to the group and the group's goals. Participant 2's descriptions illustrated a blatant disregard for group dynamics. Clearly participant 2 valued money. Participant 2's focus on money required working multiple jobs. Because of working multiple jobs, in the pursuit of more money, participant 2 demonstrated characteristics of Peretz et al. (2015) individualism. Participant 2's self-interest negatively influenced group dynamics and subsequently superseded group loyalty.

Bortolotti et al.'s (2015) research, in the context of group dynamics, indicated that institutional collectivism, stimulated teamwork and prompted collaborative relations between group members. Conversely, where institutional collectivism was low, individual goals and interests superseded group goals. Emergent from the preceding online and blended student field study transcripts and Bortolotti et al.'s and Peretz et al.'s (2015) research was a potential theme for future research. Specifically, collectivism and individualism influence blended and online student group participation and subsequently the blended and online students' customer experience.

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? Research question three (**RQ3**) asked the following: How do experiential experiences influence blended and online students' learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) combining two or more academic disciplines into a single module emerged as a theme

that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Arora and Arora's (2015) research focused on experiential learning through simulation. Wang and Wang's (2011) research focused on multiple skill sets situations. Exploiting the blended and online students' description of a memorable academic project experiences Arora and Arora's (2015) and Wang and Wang's (2011) research aggregately manifested an emergent narrative. Specifically, as it relates to research question three (**RQ3**); Does combining two or more academic disciplines, like electrical and mechanical, into a single module influence the student's learner satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program.

To mine the data gleaned from the blended and online students' field study descriptions, the blended and online students described their most memorable academic online course project experiences. Participant 1 described his most memorable academic online course project experience as follows,

The most memorable academic project I would describe has to be the first time I actually went out onto the locomotive on the Waycross campus. We had done computer work, paper work, all this. We had done this and that, learned how to do it. But we had not physically done it in that respect. The time you ever go out and physically see something like that, it is great, you are pumped up, you are excited. But you get there and open it up and it is nothing like what is on the paper. It is a completely and utterly a different experience. And it is like, most of, almost everybody, myself included, was dear Lord was the only thought that came to mind. What have I got myself into?

Expanding on participant 1's most memorable academic project, Arora and Arora's (2015) research indicated that experiential learning techniques represented alternative

educational and training methods designed to simulate a real-world environment while simultaneously sustaining equilibrium between theory and practice. Wang and Wang (2011) indicated that although graduates were experts in their field of study, the graduates had trouble functioning in interdisciplinary situations that required multiple skill sets. Arora and Arora (2015) indicated that integrating experiential simulations into the business curriculum enriched classroom dialog and enabled students' learning through the involvement of two or more academic disciplines.

Participant 1 validated Wang and Wang's (2011) and Arora and Arora's (2015) assertion that student learning was facilitated through the association of two or more academic disciplines. When participant 1 was asked to describe the most challenging element of the project, participant 1 indicated "Trying to find, follow your, less say, your electrical or mechanical schematic. Following that to the actual physical thing. I mean the electrical, in my opinion was easier to follow. Really, the mechanical was better for the hands on." Describing how the most challenging element of the project made him feel, participant 1 indicated,

The most challenging element of the project made me feel overwhelmed. Because you first see it and it is. Like I said, the first thought in your mind is dear Lord what did I get myself into. But once you get to where you can bounce between on paper and the physical thing to reading your schematic or following the trail you started from. Its, I guess would be, like I said, goes from overwhelming to a sense of enjoyment. The hands on is just wonderful. It is a wonderful feeling.

Miller (2013) indicated that during experiential learning experiences researchers had observed an increase in the release of the chemicals norepinephrine, epinephrine, and dopamine in the brain that not only brought on "good feelings" but also additionally influenced students to

be more open to learning. The experiential experience of learning two or more academic disciplines, electrical or mechanical, had a positive influence on participant 1's learner satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program. Emergent from the exploitation of participant 1's description of his most memorable academic project was a potential narrative. Combining two or more academic disciplines into a single module reflected Wang and Wang's (2011), Arora and Arora's (2015), and Miller's (2013) research and influenced participant 1's learner satisfaction, overall customer experience, and persistence to complete an online program.

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? Research question three (**RQ3**) asked the following: How do experiential experiences influence blended and online students' learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) "fun" emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Deterding et al. (2011) advanced to engage students in more enjoyable and engaging learning experience educators could adopt game elements. The convergence of media and ubiquitous computing are progressively distorting the difference between digital and non-digital. Deterding et al. stressed that while the vast majority of examples of gamification are digital, the word gamification should not be limited to digital technology. Several blended and online students when describing their memorable academic project experiences described the experiences as fun. Deterding et al. (2011) acknowledged that the primary purpose of video games was entertainment and/or fun. Continuing, Deterding et al. indicated that video games

motivated users to engage in gaming experiences with unmatched passion and unlimited time.

Miller (2013) indicated, simply, that playing games was fun.

Miller's (2013) research on the gamification of education provided the researcher insight into understanding the linkage between gamification and student success. In relationship to research question three (**RQ3**) Miller's (2013) research advanced that the game play experience that produced good feelings in game players produced the same good feelings in students engaged in experiential learning experiences. To illustrate from the field research, participant 1, when describing his most memorable academic online course customer experience, provided a description of his principles of management course. "The class was more of something to make you think, not something you memorized off of a paper or out of a book." Participant 1 described how he felt mentally while taking the principles of management course.

The mental memorable academic online course customer experience made me feel good.

Because I am one of those people who really enjoy mentally thinking outside of the box.

Thinking a lot further into it, more than I probably should. I truly enjoyed it.

Miller indicated that the students' positive feelings could be the result of elements found in gamification.

Continuing to exploit the data gleaned from the blended and online student interviews, participant 3 advanced that

There were two memorable academic project experiences. One of them was group research, that was fun. The second was when you came into the store and applied what we learned from the book to the actual place, that was fun.

Participant 3 continuing,

A memorable academic project experience has research and work with others in a group. It is fun. Learn more about other students, how we come together to accomplish our goal of having answers to our research, I enjoyed that experience.

Participant 2 had a similar description of an experience,

Usually memorable academic project experience was with my English professor because he usually made us do group assignments. For the projects that he did and the group work, he gave us free creative range. And there is no limit of what you can do and what you cannot do. So usually every time I am in a group activity with him it is a lot of fun.

Continuing, “So I was in my zone and I came out of the class with a 98. The instructor is a fun guy. He is a good teacher and I tell people to get him.”

An emergent theme from participant 3 and participant 2’s descriptions of the memorable academic project experiences was fun. Participant 3 and participant 2 described experiences that were fun. Deterding et al. acknowledged video games primary purpose were entertainment and/or fun. Furthermore, Deterding et al. acknowledged video games motivate users to engage in gaming experiences with unmatched passion and unlimited time. Miller (2013) supported Deterding et al. indicating, simply, that games are fun to play. According to Deterding et al., the idea of using game design elements in non-game contexts to motivate and increase user activity and retention had rapidly gained traction in interaction design and digital marketing. Consequently, in relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) fun emerged as an experiential or practical experience that influenced blended and online students’ learning satisfaction, customer experience and persistence to complete an online program.

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked the following: How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? Research question three (**RQ3**) asked the following: How do experiential experiences influence blended and online students' learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program? In relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) "creativity" emerged as a theme that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Participant 1, when describing his most memorable academic online course customer experience, provided a description of his principles of management course. "The class was more of something to make you think, not something you memorized off of a paper or out of a book." The researcher asked participant 1 to describe how he felt mentally while taking the principles of management course. Participant 1 responded,

The mental memorable academic online course customer experience made me feel good. Because I am one of those people who really enjoy mentally thinking outside of the box. Thinking a lot further into it, more than I probably should. I truly enjoyed it.

Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) research indicated that consumers were progressively seeking events that created an emotional experience. Adeosun and Ganiyu's (2012) research advanced that designing experiential experiences, that engaged the customer in an intellectual way, resulted in the customer experiencing a creativity event. Participant 1's description illustrated how the event engaged him intellectually, created an emotional experience, and spawned creativity.

To further illustrate participants invoking creativity during experiential experiences, Participant 6's description of her memorable academic project experience included elements of



creativity. Participant 6 never actually used the term creativity, but creativity was the central element of participant 6's memorable academic project experience. Participant 6 described the project as follows,

The purpose of that project was to really understand what is trending in our world today. Especially when it comes to fashion. There are other things included in fashion, so it is not just fashion, but it is pretty much everything that is trending.

The project deliverable was a power point.

Participant 6's description of her thoughts behind creating the power point illustrated her creative experience.

I based my power point on, for example the first picture reminded me of Georgia. The picture had a gorgeous view of the moon in the middle of a field with trees and farmland. Then the color, like I also had to do like pick swatches. I had to do runways that acted like as models and the colors that represented what my story was about. I am good at bringing things together and piecing it together and sell into an experience where people like wow this, I even made up a quote and people were like wow. It really caught their attention. So that was the most memorable experience with an assignment that I have had.

In relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**) creativity emerged as a narrative. Specifically, the challenge of a creative cognitive experience, invoked through the use of experiential techniques, generated the blended and online students' creativity. Consequently creating a customer experience that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 1.** Gu et al.'s (2010) research advanced that principal among students academic concerns were grades. Banfield and Wilkerson (2014) described grades, employment, or tasks as extrinsic motivators. Continuing, Gu et al. (2010) indicated following grades, student's academic concerns included exposure to new teaching pedagogies, feeling embarrassed if unable to answer questions, and understanding assignment expectations. Echoing Gu et al.'s research findings, when asked what elements of memorable academic project experience disappointed him, participant 1 indicated

There is a lot of, really a couple of parts of it that were more challenging or no, I just didn't understand it until later. Because first of all I do not like to not get the best grade possible. When you know you have studied hard for it and you get in there and you just freak and go completely blank.

Participant 1's response echoed two elements of Gu et al.'s research findings. First, grades were a challenge and second understanding assignment expectations were a challenge.

Relative to grades as a challenge, Gu et al.'s (2010) research was reflective of participant 1's description. In addition to participant 1, participant 8 said, "For me what was most important was the grade" when asked to describe learner satisfaction. Participant 7 described learner satisfaction similarly, "My overall learning through all my courses. My grades, my accomplishments." Participant 2 said, "So I might as well fail this class now and take the F instead of keep trying and not understand anything I am ever doing." Participant 2's description also reflected two elements of Gu et al.'s research. First through the optics of grades, participant 2 described his intention to drop the class if his grade was an F. Participant 2's intention to drop the class due to the F demonstrated the magnitude of the significance blended and online students placed on grades.

The second element of Gu et al.'s (2010) research reflected in participant 2's description, relative to grades, was understanding assignment expectations. Participant 2 said, "So I might as well fail this class now and take the F instead of keep trying and not understand anything I am ever doing." Parsing participant 2's description, participant 2 indicated he would "keep trying" although "not understand anything I am ever doing." This comment illustrated that understanding assignment expectations was a challenge to blended and online students. Continuing, participant 2 indicated, "There were some academic challenges I did not overcome. I struggled with trying to understand somethings I didn't quite understand."

Participant 6, similar to participant 2, indicated that understanding assignment expectations in online classes was difficult for her also. Participant 6 said, "Sometimes you don't understand. Most people don't comprehend very well when it comes to online." After feeling alone during an academic online course experience, participant 7 described her emotions. Participant 7 said, "I felt great about my instructor who took the time to walk me through the steps I needed to get when I was not understanding what I was doing." Participant 7's instructor contacted her, during other than normal working hours, to help participant 7 understand the instructions. When asked, how does a bad online course customer experience influence your desire to complete the online program, participant 10 responded,

Not understanding the question in an assignment, I answered the question incorrectly.

After receiving feedback from the instructor, I reviewed the question to find out where I went wrong. If the question was confusion or not specific, I pointed this out to the instructor. If I misread the question, I focus on understanding what the question was asking and how to address the question in the future.

Consequently, not understanding online assignment expectations, in addition to a preoccupation with grades, emerged as themes that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 2.** Expanding on the analysis of students not understanding online assignment expectations and the students' preoccupation with grades, other elements of Gu et al.'s (2010) research findings emerged. The emergent narrative was exposure to new teaching pedagogies. Layne et al.'s (2013) research indicated that computer literacy and navigation skills represented possible barriers to student retention. Institutions gave little attention to students' previous online experience. Consequently, institutions sometimes guided students toward learning formats that were not appropriate for the student's level of online expertise. Within online learning classes, according to Layne et al., it was the student's responsibility to initiate the learning process. Without the necessary navigation and technology skills, blended and online students were unable to initiate the online learning experience. Without a rich comprehensive of the online learning environment, blended and online students were inclined to drop the course.

When asked, prior to taking online classes in college, what were your experiences with online learning, the majority of blended and online students described having no or extremely limited experience with online learning. Participant 3's response to the question was "I had no experience with online learning." Participant 4 responded, "I had no experience with online learning." Participant 6 indicated that she had some previous online course experience but added, "It didn't prepare me." Reflecting on her previous online course experiences with online learning participant 9 said, "It was definitely something new for me." Participant 10 described his previous online experience as "Prior to attending Coastal Pines, I had no experience with

online learning.” Participant 5 indicated, “Previous to college, I didn’t have any online learning experience.” Participant 7 similarly indicated, “I had no experience with online learning.” Participant 2 followed suit with the previous students, “No, all my prior classes were face to face with the teacher.” Only participant 8 and participant 1 described having previous online learning experiences. Consequently, as an emergent narrative, exposure to new teaching pedagogies, specifically online learning, the majority of the blended and online students’ described having no previous exposure to online learning. Consequently, previous online experience emerged as a theme.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 3.** Expanding on instructor pedagogical and instructional design training, in the context of the blended and online students most memorable academic online course customer experiences the participants provided the following descriptions: When asked, how does a bad online course customer experience influence your desire to complete the online program, participant 10 responded,

Not understanding the question in an assignment, I answered the question incorrectly.

After receiving feedback from the instructor, I reviewed the question to find out where I went wrong. If the question was confusion or not specific, I pointed this out to the instructor. If I misread the question, I focus on understanding what the question was asking and how to address the question in the future.

Participant 4 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

Yes, toward the end I just wanted to drop the course and say I cannot do this. I just could not figure it out. Consequently, not being able to figure out things in the course my persistence to complete the course was influenced.

Participant 2 said,

So I love learning about the marketing aspect of business. It was always positive to me.

I was able to apply it directly to my job. It was like visual merchandising, that class helped me. I see how we have to put certain things we want to promote out first and then make that more presentable than what doesn't necessarily need to be out. So to me learner satisfaction is being able to apply what I have learned to my job.

Participant 2's comment described a need for activities beyond reading the textbook and answering essay questions. Specifically pedagogical and instructional design modules embodied the blended and online students' profession and/or qualification.

In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**) the instructor pedagogical and instructional design training emerged as a narrative. In relationship to research question one (**RQ1**), both participant 10, and participant 4 described difficulty interpreting online assignments. The instructor's pedagogical and instructional design training challenged the blended and online students. Therefore, in relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) the blended and online students' customer experience was influenced.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 4.** Xu and Jaggars' (2014) and Jaggars' (2011) research advanced that social distance or lack of community experienced by the blended and online student created the feeling of isolation and loneliness. The feeling of isolation and loneliness, according to Jaggars, influenced attrition among blended and online student. Several blended and online students descriptions of challenges echoed Xu and Jaggars' (2014) and Jaggars' (2011) research. For example, participant 2 described his most memorable personal challenge as follows,

Sometimes you felt like you were lonely, you were just by yourself. You don't have that group, you are not associated with someone that is in the group. I felt like an outsider alone trying to do the class. I didn't have that friend or someone I could go to and we could figure it out together.

When asked had he overcome the personal challenge, participant 2 responded "no."

Participant 4's description of her most memorable challenge was similar to participant 2's. Participant 4 said, "Not having someone available that you can ask questions. We didn't have that, anyone I could go to at the moment." When asked how the experience made her feel, participant 4 said, "I felt frustrated sometimes. Sometimes I wanted to give up, not go through, not finish the class. It just made me want to give up at times." Participant 6 described her experience as a member of an online team. Participant 6 said, "It made me feel good I had a team behind me I guess. I guess you could say it was like a team. Because, you know, I was not alone in the process." Xu and Jaggars' (2011, 2014) and Jaggars' (2011) research corroborated that blended and online students' feelings of not being a part of a community appeared to influence attrition in online courses. Consequently, loneliness and feelings of not being a part of a community emerged as a challenge that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 5.** Blended and online students that overcame academic challenges expressed positive feelings toward the learning experience. For example, participant 3 said, "Overcoming academic challenges made me feel strong, powerful, and capable of accomplishing my goals in my life." Participant 5 described similar feelings, "with that experience, it made me feel good. It made me realized I can manage my time and manage my day to day activities with a school life, a work life, and a personal life." Participant 9 noted,

It made me feel pretty good. It made me feel that I could do anything and if I saw myself completing that program then I could eventually go on and do more like with the diploma. I went on ahead and eventually started taking classes with the degree side to go on to a higher level.

Participant 1 provide the following description, “The mental made me feel good. Because I am one of those people who really enjoy mentally thinking outside of the box. Thinking a lot further into than I probably should. I truly enjoyed it.”

Miller (2013) explained that the students’ positive feelings were the result of elements found in gamification. Looyestyn et al. (2017) described gamification or gamifying applications as software that incorporated elements of games. Banfield and Wilkerson’s (2014) research tightly bound intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy. Banfield and Wilkerson (2014) indicated that gamification was a branch of experiential learning theory. Experiential learning theory, according to Banfield and Wilkerson, was active learning where the learning is student focused. Miller (2013) indicated that researchers had observed an increase in the release of the chemicals norepinephrine, epinephrine, and dopamine in the brain during experiential learning experiences. The release of the chemicals not only brought on “good feelings” but also made students more receptive to learning. According to neuroscientist Gregory Burns, dopamine was the primary element in the human motivational component of reward-motivated behavior. Miller posited that game play experiences and experiential learning experiences resulted in the same reward-motivated behavior in humans.

Expanding on Miller’s (2013) research, Xu (2011) suggested that gamifying could influence the human extrinsic motivation. Continuing, but human extrinsic motivators quickly dissipate and become boring and consequently less engaging to the user. For example, an



extrinsic motivation may include rewarding point or badges based on performance. Over a period, after achieving a threshold of points or badges, the user's interest declined. In contrast to human extrinsic motivation through rewarding of points or badges to online students, Banfield and Wilkerson's (2014) research focused on human intrinsic motivation. Satisfaction or pleasure in performing a task was the core around which human intrinsic motivation orbited. Banfield and Wilkerson (2014) suggested, in the context of gamification, human intrinsic motivation encouraged online student success through competition. Banfield and Wilkerson's (2014) research tightly bound intrinsic motivation with self-efficacy.

According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy was a concept from social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy was a three-pronged relationship between human behavior, cognitions, and the environment. Self-efficacy referred to "beliefs in one's capabilities to mobilize the motivation, cognitive resources, and courses of action needed to meet given situational demands" (Wood & Bandura, 1989, p. 408). Self-efficacy served as the lynchpin in the linkage between one's capabilities and performance. Bandura (1986) advanced that one's beliefs in their ability to perform a specific task would define one's subsequent performance relative to that task. The linkage between Banfield and Wilkerson's (2014) intrinsic motivation and Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy demonstrated the blended and online students' descriptions of overcoming personal challenges.

Participant 1 said "But having the opportunity to overcome the personal challenge just gave me a sense of pride, I guess, would be the word to use." Continuing to express positive feelings about overcoming the personal challenges participant 6 provided the following observation.

Great, because I got to set my goals and tell myself that I had something to look forward to so that was the main thing with me. I think it has gotten me where I am at today as far as I am.

Participant 8 added that

Well, the personal challenges were mainly to juggle the schedule of working with the schedule of academics. And overcoming the personal challenges was to decide when my limits were reached and my personal life so that I could focus on academics.

From the preceding lived experiences advanced by those blended and online students that overcame personal challenges emerged the third theme. The emergent theme indicated that blended and online students that overcome personal challenges had high self-efficacy and consequently a positive learning experience and greater persistence to complete the blended online program.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 6.** In contrast, participant 2 described how he felt when he did not overcome an academic challenge,

It makes me feel that I am not focused enough. I prioritize my life wrong. I need to prioritize better because if I do the jobs, I also need to do the school, because I won't get a higher paying job.

Continuing, "By not overcoming the academic challenge I felt frustrated sometimes. Sometimes I wanted to give up, not go through, and not finish the class. It just made me want to give up at times." Participant 2's description of not overcoming personal challenges was similar to his feelings when not overcoming academic challenges.

Not overcoming the personal challenge made me feel that I had not chosen the right path or this class could I actually do it. It made me feel that I did not know a lot. Even though

reading everything, not having someone there to help me, made me feel more or less that I was not capable of doing online classes and succeeding.

Participant 2's description of not overcoming academic and personal challenges demonstrated the three-pronged relationship between human behavior, cognitions, and the environment or self-efficacy. Layne et al. (2013) suggested additional research in the areas of impaired self-efficacy and resilience. Through not overcoming the academic and personal challenges, participant 2 had lost his confidence. Participant 2 had lost his belief in mobilizing his capabilities. Participant 2 was unable to garner cognitive resources, and organize the needed actions to motivate himself to overcome the situational demands.

Participant 3's description of not overcoming the academic challenge was similar to participant 2's description, "When I did not overcome the academic challenges, it made me feel like a loser. Weak and not myself, wasn't sure what to do about it." Participant 4 noted, "Not overcoming the academic challenge, I felt frustrated sometimes. Sometimes I wanted to give up, not go through, not finish the class. It just made me want to give up at times." Emergent from the preceding field study descriptions was another narrative. The emergent narrative indicated that blended and online students that did not overcome academic challenges had low self-efficacy. Not overcoming the academic challenges influenced the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 7.** Focusing on the higher education sector through the optics of a competitive global marketplace, having satisfied customers was imperative according to Moskal et al. (2015). To create and maintain a competitive advantage in the global education market place, the development and implementation of sustainable strategies was essential according to Moskal et al. The development of teaching and learning practice that are customer

centric was essential in the development and implementation of sustainable strategies. For institutions of higher learning to develop and maintain sustainable strategies for a competitive advantage, according to Moskal et al., an understanding of the elements that influenced the blended and online students' customer experience were essential.

The second research question (**RQ2**) asked participants to share their views on learning satisfaction and persistence through the optics of the customer experience. Thus research question two (**RQ2**) was focused on obtaining descriptions of the students' lived experiential relative to learning satisfaction and persistence through the optics of the customer experience. The foundation for understanding of the phenomena of online student retention through the optics of blended and online students' customer experience was based on Porter's (1979, 1980) framework for analyzing, developing and implementing sustainable differentiation strategies and gaining a competitive advantage. Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited that Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies was a beneficial tool for analyzing the competitive advantage of post-secondary institutions within the university sector.

Furthermore, Gould-Morven and Power (2015) posited, if viewed as strategies and placed on Porter's model of generic competitive strategies, the variety of course delivery modes reveal a portrait of an emergent future. Gould-Morven and Power (2015) superimposed the course delivery modes on Porter's (1980) model of generic competitive strategies. The course delivery mode strategies were associated with a justification that was reconciled with Porter's model of generic competitive strategies. Approaches arising from Porter's model of generic competitive strategies for post-secondary institutions, according to Gould-Morven and Power (2015), were low cost leadership, broad differentiation, best-cost provider, focused niching based on low-cost or focused niching based on differentiation. Understanding post-secondary

institutions course design and delivery through the optics of a commercial strategy assisted in clarifying the emerging character of post-secondary institutions and conceivably insight into what the post-secondary sector might look like in the future. With Porter's (1979, 1980) framework in place, as a foundation for understanding the phenomena of online student retention, the application of McMillan and Gordon (2017) concepts of quality assurance were applied.

McMillan and Gordon's (2017) concepts of quality assurance included the implementation of supply chain management and total quality management techniques. Researchers have recognized the significance of integrating quality assurance theory with marketing theory (Lummus et al., 2003). McMillan and Gordon (2017) advanced that academic freedom, reinforced and conceived through 'best practice' had the potential to create standards of innovative and effective teaching and learning. Supporting McMillan and Gordon, Bruce (2004) described best practices as documented "best in class" strategies and tactics employed by highly respected companies. Robinson and Malhorta (2005) indicated that the implementation of supply chain management and total quality management techniques were essential to create a sustainable competitive advantage.

Johnson et al.'s (2014) research indicated that management recognized that the implementation of a systems-based approach to performance improvement created linkage between suppliers and customers. Karran (2009) advanced that the introduction of quality assurance theory served the dual purpose of enhancing internal organizational functions and external business partner relationships while simultaneously creating a competitive advantage. Johnson et al. (2014) continued the enhanced upstream and downstream linkage created leveraged opportunities that would lead to competitive advantages.

According to Chin et al. (2004) and Robinson and Malhorta (2005), in a vigorous global market, a sustainable competitive advantage required a multi-pronged approach. McKenna and Boughey's (2014) research focused on quality assurance concepts and shared values through the optics of research-intensive universities. The multi-pronged approach designed to create a sustainable competitive advantage required quality products at the right time, place, and cost.

The premise of Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research was the achievement of a sustainable competitive advantage through the development and implementation of excellence strategies. Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research pointed to a strong correlation between the degree of exercise of excellence strategies in education, the achievement of higher education institutions, and sustainable competitive advantage. Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) advanced that a strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning. The combination of Porter's (1979, 1980) research on commercial and entrepreneurial strategy concepts, McMillan and Gordon's (2017) research on concepts of quality assurance, and Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research on excellence strategies in education established the literary foundation for describing the influence of blended and online student learning satisfaction and persistence through the optics of blended and online students' customer experiences.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 8.** To exploit the data gleaned from the blended and online student interviews, the researcher combined the responses of three questions asked each of the blended and online students into a singular node. The singular nodes below contained the blended and online student responses to the following questions: Describe your most memorable academic online course customer experience. Describe the relationship between the most

memorable academic online course customer experience and persistence to complete the online program. Describe emotions experienced as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience. Following are each blended and online students' combined response to the preceding questions.

Participant 1 described his most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

The principles of management course. It was broken down in ways, the way the instructor broke it down was simpler and a lot easier to understand and to use to the point that I didn't have to build my own study guide. Because it was something, really the class was more of something to make you think, not something you memorized off of a paper or out of a book.

Continuing, participant 1 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

The fact is, like I said, there is a lot of instructor support. Support from other students. No we were not like super, super close or anything but really I enjoyed the memorable academic online course customer experience, I enjoyed the other students that were in there with me. Well, like I said, starting with fifteen and ending with five just gives you the sense you can do this and just keep going. My persistence to complete the online program was enhanced.

Finally, participant 1 described his emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

I was networking with other students during the memorable academic online course customer experience, I guess the emotion I felt was relief. It was far from an easy course. Because the other students did not have a problem keeping in touch. I felt accomplished. Because like I said, it was far from an easy course. The course was challenging and it made you think. And the way it was laid out was straight forward.

Participant 2 described his most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

The memorable academic online course customer experience, the ENGL2130 class, made me feel like not doing the work. So now that I know I am not doing that good, why should I keep trying if I know I am about to fail this class. So I might as will fail this class now and take the F instead or keep trying and not understand anything I am ever doing. Consequently the memorable academic online course customer experience had a negative impact on my persistence to complete the program.

Continuing, participant 2 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

The memorable academic online course customer experience, the ENGL2130 class, made me feel like not doing the work. So now that I know I am not doing that good, why should I keep trying if I know I am about to fail this class. So I might as will fail this class now and take the F instead or keep trying and not understand anything I am ever doing. Consequently, the memorable academic online course customer experience had a negative impact on my persistence to complete the program.



Finally, participant 2 described his emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

For the memorable academic online course customer experience, my English 2130 class, my emotions were like, I am like I am over this. I am over English, I am over school. I was like tired of doing all this work for no reason and it is not getting me anywhere.

Participant 3 described her most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows, “My most memorable academic online course customer experience has to be my final math course. I had struggled with this math class. It was the only class I had remaining to complete my marketing management degree.”

Continuing, participant 3 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows: “Actually the memorable academic online course customer experience I had gave me more power or persistence to complete the memorable academic online course customer experience because I felt support that I needed mentally to complete the course.”

Finally, participant 3 described her emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

Completing the memorable academic online course customer experience, I felt the joy when I took the math final. For the first time ever in my life I felt like I had energy, I am excited. I can do this and I am going to do it great and I did.

Participant 4 described her most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

The time limit I experienced with online courses. The time limits you have to do a test and then it, the test closes after thirty minutes. You have only one chance to it. But the

week or two-week availability of the assignments was sufficient. What I mean is that with my online courses, I had, let's say 18 total weeks for the course. The 18 weeks were usually divided into two-week segments. Each of the assignments available in the segment was available to me for two weeks. That was plenty of time. The part that was hard was that sometimes the quizzes or tests were timed. For example, to take a ten question multiple-choice test, I had thirty minutes to complete the test. If I completed the test or not, at the end of the thirty minutes, the test would close and no longer be available to me. So my most memorable experience with online learning was the time limits set on quizzes and tests.

Continuing, participant 4 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

Yes, toward the end I just wanted to drop the course and say I cannot do this. I just could not figure it out. Consequently, not being able to figure out things in the course my persistence to complete the course was influenced. But my desire to finish course was there also. I wanted to finish the course and the program. I like to finish what I have started. I really wanted to get to the end. So I was determined to finish it out. I did not want to stop. I did not want to quit. I did not want to give up.

Finally, participant 4 described her emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

I felt frustrated and pressured. That would be what I felt. For example, as I said above, the time limits coupled with my reluctance to ask for help and the slow turn around with

the answering of questions jointly over whelmed me and made the online experience far from a positive customer experience.

Participant 5 described his most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

My most memorable would be just getting my questions answered from the professor right away. At the time I had Mr. Tang, he answered my questions when he got my emails usually in a timely manner. That made me feel good.

Continuing, participant 5 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

I would say it went well. And I experienced a good experience. Like I said there were only a handful of times where my questions would not be answered in a timely time frame. Most of the time they were. And sometimes you were just too embarrassed to ask the question because you know it is a simple answer you are going to get back and you don't want to be that person. So sometimes I would bring it on myself by not asking the right question to get my questions answered correctly.

Finally, participant 5 described his emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

I felt good because it means there is somebody actually looking at what I am writing. Because sometimes you write something and you do not get it answered for two or three days. So it is a good experience when you get that feedback right away. Because you are looking for that feedback and your whole, that problem or that set of series of problems you are trying to accomplish with that person's class is dependent on you getting it done.

So when you do not get that feedback, you do not get it done in a timely manner. So it is getting that feedback right away to get it done.

Participant 6 described her most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

I had this one instructor. It was actually a photo shop course actually. Photo shop, I had never taken any type of Adobe software course. I had never used Adobe software before this course. I think, for it to begin, to be honest with you, I was failing in the beginning. This instructor was willing to help me by sending those tutorial videos on exactly how to do what. I did not have any experience. Most Art Institute students are familiar with the software. They know how to design, they know how to everything. Whereas, I was coming from a marketing background, not fashion, nothing to do with fashion. So this online instructor gave me the guidance, the tutorial video. Actually, I passed with an 80. Because the instructor was willing to stand behind me and guide me through everything, as opposed to leaving me behind.

Continuing, participant 6 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

It really didn't affect me at all per se, because I am not the type of person to give up. I work super hard to accomplish what needs to be accomplished and to move forward to get past that. Being stuck or behind not knowing what to do and I focused more on learning more than anything to get over it.

Finally, participant 6 described her emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

The emotions, if I was alone, I would have definitely probably quit school because there was no way I was going to get through this course without any type of guidance. The emotion of freaking out and being like how am I going to make it through this course for the next month and a half. Knowing that I cannot design any type of objects on Photo shop was, I felt helpless, I was totally freaking out about it because I was going to fail the course and it was going to mess up everything else that I had worked so hard for.

Participant 7 described her most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

I was traveling out of town for work. I was trying to this one week of assignments. I was having a hard time figuring out how to come up with this number. I asked the instructor for help. The instructor broke it down. She sent me this list of steps I needed to do in order to come up with the correct number. She listed it so well, I simply followed the steps. I was stressed out about traveling getting to work and trying to go about 17 hours driving. I was still trying to do work and get rest at the same time. The instructor made the process very smooth for me.

Continuing, participant 7 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

The help I received from my instructor was instrumental in my persistence to complete the program. The instructor was so responsive to me; a customer relationship was created between me and the instructor. That customer relationship, the way I was treated by the instructor, was paramount in me completing the program. The relationship made me desire to complete the program more.

Finally, participant 7 described her emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

Desire to complete the assignment. Stress. Fear that I was not going to complete the assignment. But overall, everything came out great. I felt accomplished. I felt great about my instructor who took the time to walk me through the steps I needed to get when I was not understanding what I was doing.

Participant 8 described her most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

And then there was another course where the course was almost too much. Actually, it was too much for any one person to do. It was called document production, and that one, that teacher required us to do seven or eight chapters a week, which required us to do five or six a week. It got to the point where I was submitting blank documents with just the title and she would give me an A because I had the title in there. That is true; it got to the point where I got so bored with the material. I was making up essays because I was so bored.

Continuing, participant 8 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows,

Pretty much, if I had a bad experience with a teacher, I would not want to take another online course with that particular teacher. Sadly, there are times where I had a course with that teacher because she was the only teacher instructing that course. The bad computer course experience did not influence me on continuing in the accounting program. I recognize that there are core courses out there and even though I had a bad

experience with the core courses, it did not affect my overall goal of completing the accounting program or marketing program or whatever the specialty was. Unfortunately, I did not complete the marketing specialty because of money and other concerns and at this point, I was just burned out. I would like to come back and complete the marketing, but right now it is not in the cards.

Finally, participant 8 described her emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

I felt the whole range of emotions with the document production class. It was frustration, elation where I got the grades, but then also like total disbelief that this teacher would accept. Oh yes there was agitation, but disbelief that the teacher would completely accept the fact that I would submit blank documents. If I were a teacher in that situation and discovered one of my students was doing that I probably would have not passed the student. I would have had the student retake the course.

Participant 9 described her most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

My memorable academic online course customer experience was that I always felt the support from my advisor to assure me that I can do this and I am capable of doing, I am smart, I come a long way, I can do this.

Continuing, participant 9 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows, “Ah, I would say my experience with it and using that to complete the program. I would say the experience was awesome. Of course I have used that to motivate me to help me.” Participant 9 described her emotions as a result of the most memorable academic

online course customer experience as follows, “But I did enjoy it, I did love it and I learned a lot from it.”

Participant 10 described his most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

It is really difficult, as a student, to view online courses through the lens of a customer experience. But thinking about the question, I can recall an English course I took online. The professor was concerned with the quality of my paper. The paper was so good; the professor suspected that I had plagiarized the paper. After running the paper through Safe Assign, the professor realized that I had not plagiarized the paper.

Continuing,

The professor and I discussed the paper and the concern the professor had that I had plagiarized the paper. During the course of the discussion, both the instructor and I developed a positive relationship. The professor, I recall, complimented me on the paper once he realized it was my work.

Finally, participant 10 described the relationship between the most memorable academic online course customer experience with their persistence to complete the online program as follows, “Positive feedback from the instructor built my confidence. The confidence pushed me to complete the program. Positive and negative feedback translates into persistence. The key is providing the student constructive feedback in a timely manner.” Participant 10 described his emotions as a result of the most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows, “That gave me confidence. From that conversation, I really learned to respect that instructor and realized the professor talking with me really had a positive effect on me as both a student and person.”



The exploitation the data gleaned from the blended and online student's singular nodes above positioned the researcher to analyze each blended and online student node singularly and aggregately. The blended and online students' singular and aggregate nodes were explored through the optics of Porter's (1979, 1980) framework for analyzing, developing and implementing sustainable differentiation strategies and gaining a competitive advantage. Emergent from the analysis of singular nodes the researcher observed a relationship or thread throughout the singular nodes. Specifically, a positive academic online course customer experience noticeably influenced online or blended student persistence to complete the online program. Furthermore, the positive academic online course customer experience and increased level of persistence to complete the program precipitated positive emotions toward the overall learning experience.

To illustrate, participant 10 described his most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

I can recall an English course I took online. The professor was concerned with the quality of my paper. The paper was so good; the professor suspected that I had plagiarized the paper. After running the paper through Safe Assign, the professor realized that I had not plagiarized the paper. The professor and I discussed the paper and the concern the professor had that I had plagiarized the paper. During the course of the discussion, both the instructor and I developed a positive relationship. The professor, I recall, complimented me on the paper once he realized it was my work.

As a consequence of the positive academic online course customer experience, participant 10 described how the academic online course customer experience impacted his persistence to complete the program. "Positive feedback from the instructor built my

confidence. The confidence pushed me to complete the program. Positive and negative feedback translates into persistence. The key is providing the student constructive feedback in a timely manner.” Finally, linked to participant 10’s positive academic online course customer experience were emotions that illustrated positive learner satisfaction, participant 10 described his emotions as follows: “That gave me confidence. From that conversation, I really learned to respect that instructor and realized the professor talking with me really had a positive effect on me as both a student and person.”

Power and Gould-Morven’s (2011) research indicated that a lack of urgency on the part of the instructor coupled with delayed feedback negatively influenced online learner satisfaction and student persistence to complete the online program. Continuing, Power and Gould-Morven indicated that instructors grounded in traditional face to face class room settings often could not adjust to the 24/7 requirements of online learning. From the optics of the student’s customer experience, Shobaki and Abu Naser’s (2017) excellence strategies research addressed the student customer experience through the optics of Volkwein’s (2006) client central model. Volkwein’s client central model focused on the student’s experience as a customer. Through the optics of Volkwein’s client central model, Shobaki and Abu Naser’s (2017) research advanced that excellence strategies be implemented institution wide. The essential excellence strategies, focused on continuous improvement, would include integrated tracks for assessment and planning.

Two narratives emerged from the analysis of participant 10’s node. First, a positive academic online course customer experience resulted in both persistence to complete the program and a positive learning experience. Derived from participant 10’s description of how the positive academic online course customer experience influenced his persistence to complete

the program was the second emergent narrative. Participant 10 said, “Positive and negative feedback translates into persistence. The key is providing the student constructive feedback in a timely manner.” From the preceding narratives emerged a potential theme. The theme orbited around the significance of providing the blended and online students not only feedback, but also feedback that was personalized, timely, and thorough.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 9.** Not all blended and online students had positive academic online course customer experiences. As indicated previously, emergent from the analysis of singular nodes the researcher observed a relationship or thread throughout the node. For example, negative academic online course customer experience resulted in a less positive online or blended student attitude towards persistence to complete the online program. Furthermore, the negative academic online course customer experience coupled with the decreased level of persistence to complete the program created overall negative emotions toward the learning experience.

To illustrate, participant 2 described his most memorable academic online course customer experience as follows,

The ENGL2130 class, made me feel like not doing the work. Because teachers asked for too much, especially because it is an online class. In the online class, you do not have the face to face contact with the teacher.

Continuing,

Because usually, if you do face to face, I understand why you want so much and usually you spread it out across the process. But online is totally different. Especially for somebody that is a kinetic learner, I have to be doing something instead of oh read this chapter. It does not make sense to me, I am not going to read it. But English and stuff, I

am not using that at all unless I am going to a business meeting. Like math, I don't know why they put letters in math because I am not going to be a rocket scientist or an engineer. So where is the money?

Because of the negative academic online course customer experience, participant 2 described how the academic online course customer experience influenced his persistence to complete the program.

I was over the school, the ENGL2130 made me want to quit school. When I say over the school, I mean I was over being a student, I wanted to drop from the program. It made me understand why students drop out.

Finally, linked to participant 2's negative academic online course customer experience were emotions that illustrated negative learner satisfaction. Participant 2 described his emotions as follows:

For the memorable academic online course customer experience, my English 2130 class, my emotions were like, I am like I am over this. I am over English, I am over school. I was like tired of doing all this work for no reason and it is not getting me anywhere.

Continuing, "Drained, annoyed, upset. I felt ENGL2130 was a waste of time, I am not learning nothing because I never retain the information that is being taught to me."

Multiple narratives emerged from the analysis of participant 2's singular node. First, a negative academic online course customer experience resulted in a negative learning experience and diminished the blended and online students' persistence to complete the program. Derived from participant 2's description of the academic online course customer experience was the second narrative. Participant 2 said, "But online is totally different, especially for somebody that is a kinetic learner."

This comment from participant 2 described a need for activities beyond reading the textbook and answering essay questions. Previously, when describing learner satisfaction, participant 2 said,

So I love learning about the marketing aspect of business. It was always positive to me. I was able to apply it directly to my job. It was like visual merchandising, that class helped me. I see how we have to put certain things we want to promote out first and then make that more presentable than what doesn't necessarily need to be out. So to me learner satisfaction is being able to apply what I have learned to my job.

Participant 3's, description of her memorable academic project experiences advanced a similar experience "There were two memorable project experiences. One of them was group research, that was fun. The second was when you came into the store and applied what we learned from the book to the actual place, that was fun."

Li et al.'s (2016) research had two significant findings that supported participant 2 and participant 3's description of their most memorable academic online course customer experience. First, for both new and continuing learners, learning module design had a strong and significant impact on students' overall satisfaction. Second, for both new and continuing learners the linkage of the learning module design to the learner's profession and/or qualification goals had a significant impact on the students' overall satisfaction.

Supporting Li et al.'s research, Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) found a similar linkage between educational emphasis and the learner's profession. The implication of Li et al.'s (2016) and, Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research findings indicated that if a learning module or educational emphasis were not adequately linked with the new and continuing learners' wider qualification aims, the overall learning experience was less likely to have a positive influence on

the blended and online students' learning experience. Coupling participant 2's comment "I was able to apply it directly to my job" and participant 3's assertion that "when you came into the store and applied what we learned from the book to the actual place, that was fun." With Li et al.'s (2016) and Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research, a potential theme for future research emerged. Specifically, the relationship between course module design and the blended and online students' profession and/or qualification goals emerges as a theme that influences the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 10.** After analyzing the singular nodes, the researcher's attention turned towards analyzing all the blended and online students' nodes aggregately. The purpose of the aggregate analysis of all nodes was to determine if the aggregation of all blended and online student nodes resulted in additional emergent narratives. Similar to participant 10's comments on feedback, other blended and online students referenced feedback. For example, when participant 5 was asked, "If you were alone during the academic online course experience, what were the emotions that you felt?"

Participant 5 indicated,

I felt good because it means there is somebody actually looking at what I am writing.

Because sometimes you write something and you do not get it answered for two or three days. So it is a good experience when you get that feedback right away. Because you are looking for that feedback and your whole, that problem or that set of series of problems you are trying to accomplish with that person's class is dependent on you getting it done. So when you do not get that feedback, you don't get it done in a timely manner. So it is getting that feedback right away to get it done.

Asked, if you were networking during the academic online course customer experience, what were the emotions that the group felt? Participant 6 responded,

Well, like online classes we had, you the students we would have to give feedback to. So basically if something is not done right they also guide you through things. But the instructor does to, but networking with a group in an online course that is definitely great because you get to be critiqued in so many different ways. You get to see what people thing about your art or your design.

Although participant 6 addressed feedback, participant 6's feedback focus was not limited to feedback from the instructor, but also feedback from other students in the same course. Participant 9's response to "If you were networking during the academic online course customer experience, what were the emotions that the group felt?" was similar in context to participant 6's response. Participant 9 indicated, "We had discussion board assignments. You would have to post your discussion and respond to one or two other student's posts. I did enjoy it. Reading and getting feedback from others."

When asked, "If you overcame personal challenge, how did the experience make you feel," participant 4 responded,

Sometimes during personal challenges you felt like you were lonely, you were just by yourself. You do not have that group; you are not associated with someone that is in the group. I felt like an outsider alone trying to do the class. I didn't have that friend or someone I could go to and we could figure it out together.

Participant 4's description was not representative of the other blended and online student's descriptions when discussing groups.

Participant 4 described the online group experience as a challenge. Participant 4 described a feeling of abandonment, a feeling of loneliness. Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, and Killion's (2011) research indicated among the emotional factors related to online learning was loneliness. Continuing, Reilly et al. advanced that a lack of connection in an online environment resulted in feelings of loneliness. The feelings of loneliness consequently lead to a negative influence on learner motivation for participant 4.

Conversely, Anderson and Elloumi's (2004) research advanced that an online student could overcome the feelings of loneliness. Anderson and Elloumi's model of online learning focused on online student interactions internal and external to the online environment. Engagement of colleagues in the work place, peers located locally, or family members, according to Anderson and Elloumi, were sources of support and assistance for the blended and online learner. Again, feedback emerged as a potential narrative. However, as opposed to participant 10's singular description of receiving feedback from the instructor in a timely manner, from the aggregated nodes, the desire that blended and online students wanted feedback from their peers represented the emergence of an additional narrative related to feedback.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 11.** A narrative that emerged from the theme, feedback from peers, was groups. Analyzing the node, the term group or groups appeared in a majority of blended and online student's nodes. Although the reference to groups was present in the majority of the nodes, the focus on groups was not consistent. For example, participant 10 said, I can't speak for the group, but from an emotional perspective, I was concerned everyone might not contribute. My experience with groups has not been always positive. I recall groups where there were those that did very little, but expected the same grade as those



that had contributed a lot more than they had. I felt this was unfair and those that did not contribute appropriately should receive a lower grade.

Participant 8 echoed a similar response,

I know I felt that personally that I felt frustration and I know that you know my frustration because I expressed my frustration to you over the fact that nobody was responding and people weren't and people were not doing what they needed to do.

Continuing,

A lot of people were like, I don't have time to get this done, because I have this and this to do in my personal life. I felt like frustrated because other members of the group were putting a lot of the work on me.

Supporting participant 8's comments, participant 3 said,

I can sense that frustration sometimes from the group because sometimes you feel nobody responds that nobody cares which reality is, probably, the reality is people are busy with their lives something happened and could not respond and that creates frustration among other students.

Participant 10, participant 8, and participant 3's experience with groups was not positive.

The common narrative from their negative experience was lack of communications from other members of the group.

Suggestions from Anderson and Elloumi (2004) to precipitate student-to-student communications included e-mail, voice mail, online chat, and discussion boards. But participants 3, 8, and 10's field study descriptions were not the lack of a communication vehicles, but lack of communications from other blended and online students. Gu et al.'s (2010) research indicated that feeling embarrassed if unable to answer questions, or not understanding

assignment expectations influenced student participation in blended and online courses. Layne et al.'s (2013) research indicated that computer literacy and navigation skills represented possible barriers to student retention. Consequently, emergent from the analysis of the nodes was the theme of group communications or feedback from groups. Drilling down, specifically the lack of group communications among group members.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 12.** Following the discussion of the blended and online students' negative group experiences, the phenomenological study focused on descriptions of the blended and online students' positive experiences with groups or group activities. Participant 9 described her feelings relative to participating in a group. "I did enjoy it. Reading and getting feedback from others." Bortolotti et al.'s (2015) research, discussed institutional collectivism in the context of group dynamics. Bortolotti et al. indicated that a groups desire to work together nurtured teamwork and prompted collaborative relations between group members.

Participant 6 described a similar positive experience relative to groups, "networking with a group in an online course that is definitely great because you get to be critiqued in so many different ways." Describing his group experience, expanding on participant 6's positive description relative to groups, participant 5 explained,

Unique to me was my interpretation of what the question at hand had to be answered to. And then when we all came together as a group and seeing everybody else's individual performance and what they could do with the power point. I think the biggest thing I remember out of that group was everybody put music on their power point on that first slide. I remember that. It didn't even occur in my head to put music on the slide. But it just creates that connection with that person that to connect to this song because it is all personal technique. But then it builds on something cool.

Participant 3, in comparison to her description of group feedback, described her experiences with groups. “It is fun. Learn more about other students, how we come together to accomplish our goal of having answers to our research, I enjoy that experience.” Tinto (1975) indicated that learner-to-learner communications influenced social and academic integration. As a consequence of the enhanced social and academic integration, blended and online students had a greater degree of interaction and collaboration with peers.

Therefore, in contrast to the negative group experiences described by participant 10, participant 8, and participant 3, the group experience described by participant 9, participant 6, participant 5, and participant 3 were positive experiences. The common theme from participant 9, participant 6, participant 5, and participant 3’s experience was learning from other members of the group.

Emergent from the analysis of the nodes was the theme of learning through group participation and communications. Drilling down, learning through group participation and communications emerged as a factor that influenced online student retention. Consequently, inclusion of group activities in the blended and online students’ experiences could potentially influence the blended and online students’ learner satisfaction, online student retention and customer experience.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 13.** Bortolotti et al.’s (2015) research on lean manufacturing focused on group dynamics through the optics of institutional collectivism. Expanding on Bortolotti et al.’s lean manufacturing research, Peretz et al. (2015) described the inter-related dimensions of collectiveness and individualism. Peretz et al. indicated that cultures with high institutional collectivism promoted collective actions and distribution of resources. Conversely, cultures high in individualism stressed individual uniqueness and rights. Individual

uniqueness and rights superseded group loyalty. Continuing, pride, loyalty and commitment to the group characterizes collectivism. In contrast, emphasis on the importance of personal needs and attitudes as determinants of social behavior characterizes individualism.

Bortolotti et al. (2015) research on lean manufacturing advanced that collectivism stimulated teamwork and prompted collaborative relations between group members. Participant 9 described her feelings relative to participating in a group. “I did enjoy it. Reading and getting feedback from others.” Participant 6 described a similar positive experience relative to groups, “networking with a group in an online course that is definitely great because you get to be critiqued in so many different ways.”

Conversely, Peretz et al. (2015) advanced that individualism promoted self-interest and superseded group loyalty. To illustrate, participant 8 said,

I know I felt that personally that I felt frustration and I know that you know my frustration because I expressed my frustration to you over the fact that nobody was responding and people weren't and people were not doing what they needed to do.

Expanding on participant 8's comments on group dynamics, participant 3 said:

I can sense that frustration sometimes from the group because sometimes you feel nobody responds, that nobody cares which reality is, probably, the reality is people are busy with their lives something happened and could not respond and that creates frustration among other students.

Participant 2 communicated, in reference to personal challenges:

Because I let the outside world influences my academic life. For example, me working more jobs. The more jobs I have, because I love money, they become why I don't do my homework, I don't take the class serious enough because I have those extra jobs.

Participant 2 continuing:

Not overcoming the academic challenge makes me feel that I am not focused enough. I prioritize my life wrong. I need to prioritize better because if I do the jobs, I also need to do the school, because I won't get a higher paying job. I don't feel bad, but I also don't feel good about myself. It is like it is not going to hurt me, but it does hurt me. It concerns me.

Collectiveness and individualism emerged as narratives that challenged blended and online students and influenced the blended and online students customer experience and persistence to complete the program. To illustrate, participants 9 and 6 demonstrated characteristics of collectiveness, as defined by Bortolotti et al. (2015). For example, participant 9 enjoyed reading the feedback from other group members. Expanding on participant 9's description, participant 6 described how being critiqued by other group members was a positive experience.

Conversely, participants 8 and 2's descriptions reflected characteristics of Peretz et al.'s (2015) individualism. Participant 8's description illustrated her frustration with other members of her group not responding. Although not conclusive, other members of participant 8's group were possibly demonstrating a preoccupation with their own self-interests, which superseded loyalty to the group and the group's goals. Participant 2's descriptions illustrated a blatant disregard for group dynamics. Clearly participant 2 valued money. Participant 2's focus on money required working multiple jobs. As a consequence of working multiple jobs, in the pursuit of more money, participant 2 demonstrated characteristics of Peretz et al. (2015) individualism. Participant 2's self-interest negatively influenced group dynamics and subsequently superseded group loyalty.

Bortolotti et al.'s (2015) research, in the context of group dynamics, indicated that institutional collectivism, stimulated teamwork and prompted collaborative relations between group members. Conversely, where institutional collectivism was low, individual goals and interests superseded group goals. Emergent from the preceding blended and online student field study transcripts and Bortolotti et al.'s and Peretz et al.'s (2015) research was a potential narrative. Specifically, how does collectivism and individualism influence blended and online student group participation and subsequently the blended and online students' customer experience?

**Theme/pattern/relationship 14.** Jackson and Ahuja (2016) advanced that the emergent information technology evolution required marketers to examine the application of classical marketing techniques through the optics of 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0.' Through the optics of Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0,' Arora and Arora (2015) advanced that experiential learning techniques that utilized gamification and game mechanics in the marketing arena could also be used to improve student engagement and learning in education.

Arora and Arora's (2015) research suggested that something was missing from the business educators approach to student learning. What was missing from the business educators approach was experiential learning techniques used in the marketing arena. Arora and Arora indicated that experiential learning techniques such as business simulation games and business simulation exercises were tools designed to improve student engagement and learning in marketing education. Continuing, Arora and Arora indicated that business simulation games and business simulation exercises offered business educators alternative educational and training techniques. The alternative educational and training techniques would mirror or simulate a real-

world environment. Consequently, business educators could offer an academic balance between theory and practice.

An alternative training method to business simulation games and business simulation exercises was gamification. Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) defined gamification as a vehicle to engage users and solve problems through the process of game-thinking and game mechanics. Nisbett and Ross's (1980) research was a precursor to Jakubowski's (2014) research. Nisbett and Ross's (1980) research described Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) notion of engaging users and solve problems as vividness in message. Vividness in message, according to Nisbett and Ross (1980) referred to information's ability to "attract and hold attention to excite imagination." Information was vivid, according to Nisbett and Ross, if it contained a degree of "emotionally interesting, concrete and imagery-provoking, and/or proximate in a sensory, temporal, spatial way" (p. 45).

Jakubowski (2014) indicated that proper game design had the potential to increase individual productivity through the modification of human behavior. An element of the game that Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) described as essential was game mechanics. Game mechanics was the vehicle used by Zichermann and Cunningham to provoke game participation. Game mechanics provided game participants rewards through game mechanics. Game mechanics rewards included, but were not limited to, points, badges, levels, challenges, and rewards. Zichermann and Cunningham indicated that the goal of gamification was long-term customer engagement and customer loyalty.

Expanding on Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) research, Jakubowski (2014) focused on gamification in the context of business and education. According to Jakubowski (2014), Deterding et al. (2011) and Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) stressed that making a

game was not the goal of gamification. To the contrary, the goal of gamification was to take a routine activity and incorporate the elements of games. Through the incorporation of the elements of games, the routine activity became engaging. Jakubowski's (2014) framework design outcomes included improved student activity during lectures, gamification mechanics implemented into the grade system, and immersion of the students by proper narrative layering of the course.

Jakubowski indicated that the proper use of narrative elements increased engagement of the student by the immersive influence of the situation that was taking place in the classroom. Blascovich (2002) and Blascovich and Beall (2010) expanded on Jakubowski's (2014) immersive influence. Blascovich (2002) and Blascovich and Beall (2010) described immersive influence in the context of digital immersive virtual environment technology. Digital immersive virtual environment technology was media-based. The technology transported the users via sensory interfaces to a synthetic environment. The synthetic environment provided enumerable blended and online student scenarios.

Porter's (1979, 1980), McMillan and Gordon's (2017), Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017), Jackson and Ahuja's (2016), Arora and Arora's (2015), Zichermann and Cunningham (2011), Jakubowski (2014), Blascovich (2002), and Blascovich and Beall (2010) literary concepts served as the aggregated foundation for describing the phenomena of blended and online student learning satisfaction and retention through the optics of blended and online student's experiential or practical experience.

To exploit the data gleaned from the blended and online student interviews, the blended and online students described their most memorable academic online course project experiences.



Participant 1 described his most memorable academic online course project experience as follows,

The most memorable academic project I would describe has to be the first time I actually went out onto the locomotive on the Waycross campus. We had done computer work, paper work, all this. We had done this and that, learned how to do it. But we had not physically done it in that respect. The time you ever go out and physically see something like that, it is great, you are pumped up, you are excited. But you get there and open it up and it is nothing like what is on the paper. It is a completely and utterly a different experience. And it is like, most of, almost everybody, myself included, was dear Lord was the only thought that came to mind. What have I got myself into?

Expanding on participant 1's most memorable academic project, Arora and Arora's (2015) research indicated that experiential learning techniques represented alternative educational and training methods designed to simulate a real-world environment while simultaneously sustaining equilibrium between theory and practice. Wang and Wang (2011) indicated that although graduates were experts in their field of study, the graduates had trouble functioning in interdisciplinary situations that required multiple skill sets. Arora and Arora (2015) indicated that the integration of experiential simulations into the business curriculum enriched classroom dialog and enabled students' learning through the involvement of two or more academic disciplines.

When participant 1 was asked to describe the most challenging element of the project, participant 1 validated Wang and Wang's (2011) and Arora and Arora's (2015) assertion that student learning was facilitated through the association of two or more academic disciplines. Participant 1 indicated "Trying to find, follow your, less say, your electrical or mechanical

schematic. Following that to the actual physical thing. I mean the electrical, in my opinion was easier to follow. Really, the mechanical was better for the hands on.” Describing how the most challenging element of the project made him feel, participant 1 indicated,

The most challenging element of the project made me feel overwhelmed. Because you first see it and it is. Like I said, the first thought in your mind is dear Lord what did I get myself into. But once you get to where you can bounce between on paper and the physical thing to reading your schematic or following the trail you started from. Its, I guess would be, like I said, goes from overwhelming to a sense of enjoyment. The hands on is just wonderful. It is a wonderful feeling.

During experiential learning experiences, Miller (2013) indicated that researchers had observed an increase in the release of the chemicals norepinephrine, epinephrine, and dopamine in the brain that not only brought on “good feelings” but also made students more receptive to learning. The experiential experience of learning two or more academic disciplines, electrical or mechanical, had a positive influence on participant 1’s learner satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program. Emergent from the exploitation of participant 1’s description of his most memorable academic project was a potential theme. Combining two or more academic disciplines into a single module reflected Wang and Wang’s (2011), Arora and Arora’s (2015), and Miller’s (2013) research and influenced participant 1’s learner satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 15.** Continuing to exploit the data gleaned from the blended and online student interviews, participant 3 advanced that:

There were two memorable academic project experiences. One of them was group research, that was fun. The second was when you came into the store and applied what we learned from the book to the actual place, that was fun.

Participant 3 continuing:

A memorable academic project experience has research and work with others in a group. It is fun. Learn more about other students, how we come together to accomplish our goal of having answers to our research, I enjoyed that experience.

Participant 2 had a similar description of an experience:

Usually memorable academic project experience was with my English professor because he usually made us do group assignments. For the projects that he did and the group work, he gave us free creative range. And there is no limit of what you can do and what you cannot do. So usually every time I am in a group activity with him it is a lot of fun.

Continuing, “So I was in my zone and I came out of the class with a 98. The instructor is a fun guy. He is a good teacher and I tell people to get him.”

An emergent theme from participant 3 and participant 2’s descriptions of the memorable academic project experiences was fun. Deterding et al. (2011) indicated that there had been little research on gamification and gamification represented a new and distinct phenomenon. The idea of using game design elements in non-game contexts to motivate and increase user activity and retention had rapidly gained traction in interaction design and digital marketing. According to Deterding et al., the idea of using game design elements in non-game contexts to motivate and increase user activity and retention had rapidly gained traction in interaction design and digital marketing. Continuing, Deterding et al. indicated that video games motivated users to engage in

gaming experiences with unmatched passion and unlimited time. Miller (2013) supported Deterding et al. indicating, simply, that games are fun to play.

Deterding et al. (2011) advanced educators could adopt advanced game elements to engage students in more enjoyable and engaging learning experience. The convergence of media and ubiquitous computing are progressively distorting the difference between digital and non-digital. Deterding et al. stressed that while the vast majority of examples of gamification were digital, the word gamification should not be limited to digital technology. Consequently, the theme “fun” emerged as an experiential or practical experience that influenced blended and online students’ learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program.

**Theme/pattern/relationship 16.** Another emergent narrative was creativity. Previously, when participant 2 was describing a memorable academic project experience with his English professor, participant 2 eluded to creativity. Participant 2 indicated, “For the projects that he did and the group work, he gave us free creative range. And there is no limit of what you can do and what you can’t do.” Continuing, “So I was in my zone and I came out of the class with a 98.” Jackson and Ahuja’s (2016) research indicated that consumers were progressively seeking experiences that created an emotional experience. Participant 10 described a similar experience. Participant 10 indicated that creativity was an essential element of a memorable academic project experience. Participant 10 advanced that “Creativity is an element of a memorable consumer experience. As far as memorable project experiences that required creativity, I would have to say written assignments often require a large degree of creativity.”

Participant 6 described her feelings with her memorable academic project experience as “Joy because I completed the project and actually made a ninety on it. It was definitely one of my final grades and it was a great experience to learn about fashion trending.” As with

participant 2 and participant 10's descriptions of their memorable academic project experience, participant 6's description of her memorable academic project experience included elements of creativity. Participant 6 never actually used the term creativity, but creativity was the central element of participant 6's memorable academic project experience. Participant 6 described the project as follows:

The purpose of that project was to really understand what is trending in our world today. Especially when it comes to fashion. There are other things included in fashion, so it is not just fashion, but it is pretty much everything that is trending.

The project deliverable was a power point. Participant 6's description of her thoughts behind creating the power point illustrated her creative experience.

I based my power point on, for example the first picture reminded me of Georgia. The picture had a gorgeous view of the moon in the middle of a field with trees and farmland. Then the color, like I also had to do like pick swatches. I had to do runways that acted like as models and the colors that represented what my story was about. I am good at bringing things together and piecing it together and sell into an experience where people like wow this, I even made up a quote and people were like wow. It really caught their attention. So that was the most memorable experience with an assignment that I have had.

Participant 2, participant 10, and participant 6 have described three creative experiences that engaged them in an intellectual way. Adeosun and Ganiyu's (2012) researched advanced that designing experiential experiences, that engaged the customer in an intellectual way, resulted in the customer experiencing a creativity event. The customer's creativity experience, according to Adeosun and Ganiyu, was a marketing technique designed to attract and maintain

profitable customers. Arora and Arora's (2015) research indicated that experiential marketing techniques represented alternative educational and training methods designed to simulate a real-world environment while simultaneously sustaining equilibrium between theory and practice. Continuing, Arora and Arora indicated that integrating experiential simulations into the business curriculum enriched classroom dialog and stimulated student learning. From the blended and online students' narratives emerged the theme "creativity" and the influence creative experiential experiences had on blended and online student learner satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program.

**Relationship of themes/patterns to research questions.** Research question one (**RQ1**) asked participants to share their views on the challenges experienced as online students. Thus, the question was concerned with gaining an understanding of online students' learning experience and persistence to continue an online program through the optics of the challenges the online student faced. Emergent themes/patterns/relationships related to research question one (**RQ1**) included the following: students not understanding online assignment expectations, institution giving little attention to students' previous online experience, loneliness and feelings of not being a part of a community, students that overcome personal challenges had high self-efficacy, students that did not overcome challenges had low self-efficacy.

Research question two (**RQ2**) asked participants to share their views on learning satisfaction and persistence through the optics of the customer experience. Research question two (**RQ2**) was focused on obtaining descriptions of the students' lived experiential relative to learning satisfaction and persistence to complete the program through the optics of the customer experience. Emergent themes/patterns/relationships related to research question two (**RQ2**) include the following: providing the blended and online students feedback that was personalized,

timely, and thorough, relationship between course module design and the blended and online students' profession and/or qualification goals, blended and online students feedback from peers, lack of group communications among group members, collectivism and individualism influence.

Research question three (**RQ3**) asked blended and online students to describe learner satisfaction and persistence to complete the online or blended program through the optics of experiential or practical experiences. Research question three (**RQ3**) was focused first on obtaining descriptions of the blended and online students' lived experiential experiences. Second, a description of the influences that the lived experiential experiences had on the blended and online students satisfaction as a learner and persistence to complete the program. Emergent themes/patterns/relationships related to research question three (**RQ3**) include the following: experiential experiences that are fun, experiential experiences that require creativity.

**Summary of the findings.** Gu et al.'s (2010), Banfield and Wilkerson (2014), and Layne et al.'s (2013) research focused on blended and online students' computer literacy and navigation skills as possible barriers to student retention. From the preceding research, in relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**), the findings indicated that blended and online students' computer literacy and navigation skills represented a challenge and could influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Travers' (2016) research focused on instructors' online course design and pedagogy skills. Xu and Jaggars' (2011, 2014) and Jaggars' (2011) research corroborated that blended and online students' feelings of not being a part of a community appeared to influence attrition in online courses. From the preceding research, in relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**), the findings indicated that blended and online students' feeling of

isolation and loneliness were a challenge and could influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Miller's (2013), Looyestyn et al.'s (2017), Banfield and Wilkerson's (2014), and Miller's (2013) research on the gamification of education provided the researcher insight into understanding the linkage between gamification, experiential experiences, and student success. From the preceding research, in relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question three (**RQ3**), challenges and experiential experiences designed to intrinsically stimulate the blended and online students to feel good influenced the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Xu's (2011), Banfield and Wilkerson's (2014), and Bandura's (1997) research suggested that gamifying influenced the human extrinsic motivation. From the preceding research, in relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**), competitive challenges designed to intrinsically motivate the blended and online students self-efficacy could influence blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

According to Moskal et al. (2015), for institutions of higher learning to develop and maintain sustainable strategies for a competitive advantage, an understanding of the elements that influence the blended and online students' customer experience was essential. Porter's (1979, 1980) and Gould-Morven and Power's (2015) research served as the framework for analyzing, developing and implementing sustainable differentiation strategies and gaining a competitive advantage and the foundation for understanding the phenomena of online student retention through the optics of the blended and online students' customer experience.



McMillan and Gordon's (2017), Robinson and Malhorta (2005), Johnson et al.'s (2014), Chin et al. (2004), McKenna and Boughey's (2014), and Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research advanced a range of quality assurance and supply chain management concepts that served as the nucleus of excellence strategies.

Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017), McMillan and Gordon's (2017), Power and Gould-Morven's (2011), Volkwein's (2006), Li et al.'s (2016), and Porter's (1979, 1980) research formed the foundation for the achievement of a sustainable competitive advantage in education through the development and implementation of excellence strategies. From the preceding research, in relationship to research question two (**RQ2**), blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program was influenced by the relationship between course module design and the blended and online students' profession and/or qualification goals.

Reilly et al.'s (2011) and Anderson and Elloumi's (2004) research indicated among the emotional factors related to online learning was loneliness and feelings of not being a part of a community. From the preceding research, in relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**), limited peer and group communications presented a challenge and could influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.

Bortolotti et al.'s (2015) and Peretz et al.'s (2015) research focused on group dynamics through the optics of collectiveness and individualism. From the preceding research, in relationship to research question one (**RQ1**) and research question two (**RQ2**), collectiveness and individualism presented a challenge that could influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.

Jackson and Ahuja (2016) and Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) advanced that the emergent information technology evolution required marketers to examine the application of classical marketing techniques through the optics of 'Read-Write Web' or 'Web 2.0.' Arora and Arora (2015) indicated that experiential learning techniques such as business simulation games and business simulation exercises were tools designed to improve student engagement and learning in marketing education.

Porter's (1979, 1980), McMillan and Gordon's (2017), Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017), Jackson and Ahuja's (2016), Arora and Arora's (2015), Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011), Jakubowski's (2014), Blascovich's (2002), and Blascovich and Beall's (2010) literary concepts served as the aggregated foundation for describing the phenomena of blended and online student learning satisfaction and retention through the optics of blended and online student's experiential or practical experience.

Arora and Arora's (2015) research focused on experiential learning through simulation. Wang and Wang's (2011) research focused on multiple skill sets situations. Exploiting the blended and online students' description of a memorable academic project experiences Arora and Arora's (2015) and Wang and Wang's (2011) research aggregately manifested an emergent narrative. From the preceding research, in relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**), combining two or more academic disciplines into a single module could influence the blended and online student's customer experience and persistence to complete an online program.

Deterding et al.'s (2011) and Miller's (2013) acknowledged video game designers' focus was primarily on creating entertaining and/or fun video games. Deterding et al. indicated that video games motivated users to engage in gaming experiences with unmatched passion and

unlimited time. In relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**), an experiential learning experience that was fun could influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

Adeosun and Ganiyu's (2012) and Arora and Arora (2015) research advanced that designing experiential experiences, that engaged the customer in an intellectual way, resulted in the customer experiencing a creative event. In relationship to research question two (**RQ2**) and research question three (**RQ3**), an experiential learning experiences that required blended and online student creativity could influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

Through the optics of the students' perceptions as an online customer, a diversity of behavioral and experiential factors that influenced online student retention emerged. The emergent behavioral and experiential factors, if applied to professional business practices, would influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program while simultaneously creating a competitive advantage for the business or institution of higher learning.

**Application 1.** Layne et al.'s (2013) research focused on blended and online students' computer literacy and navigation skills as possible barriers to student retention. The research interviews illustrated that many of the blended and online students did not have previous experience with online courses. Furthermore, some blended and online students described having limited computer skills. Participant 2 was a blended and online student that did not have previous experience with online courses. Participant 2 said, "So I might as well fail this class now and take the F instead of keep trying and not understand anything I am ever doing." Parsing

participant 2's description, participant 2 indicated he would "keep trying" although "not understand anything I am ever doing."

Expanding Layne et al.'s (2013) research, Gu et al. (2010) indicated student's academic challenges included exposure to new teaching pedagogies, and understanding assignment expectations. Participant 2's inability to understanding online assignment expectations could be a consequence of his limited computer literacy and navigation skills or derivative of the instructors pedagogical and instructional design skills. Travers (2016) asked the question, "What type of data was needed to evaluate the effectiveness of online community college instruction?" (p. 59). Travers' question moved the focus, relative to blended and online student persistence, from blended and online student technology and navigation skills to the instructors pedagogical and instructional design skills. To answer the question Travers' suggested two sources of data be collected and compared.

Both sources of data focused on results related to student persistence. The first source of student retention data would be from online instructors with both pedagogical and instructional design training. The second source of student retention data would be from online instructors with technology training only. Travers' (2016) indicated that the data would provide insight into if pedagogical and instructional design training enhanced learning, and retention of distance learners. The phenomenological research findings did not isolate the rational for participant 2's inability to understanding online assignment expectations. The phenomenological research findings did suggest blended and online students' computer literacy and navigation skills and instructors' online pedagogical and instructional design skills contributed to the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to continue the program, and overall customer experience.

The relevance of the preceding phenomenological research findings were applicable to the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to continue the program, and overall customer experience. Consequently, business and academic professionals should establish standards that address both phenomenological research findings. Specifically, business and academic professionals establish computer literacy and navigation skills' threshold for blended and online students. The institution grants blended and online students admission to the blended or online program upon demonstrating the required computer literacy and navigation skills. Simultaneously, blended and online instructors should, in addition to technology training, receive both pedagogical and instructional design training. The implementation of both phenomenological research findings in the organizational model would influence the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to complete the program, and overall customer experience.

**Application 2.** Expanding on Gu et al. (2010) research on blended and online student exposure to new teaching pedagogies, Li et al.'s (2016) research suggested that identification of the important factors of the blended and online student's learning experience that were meaningfully related to blended and online student satisfaction laid the foundation for pedagogical and instructional design. Among Li et al.'s research findings was a strong correlation between blended and online students' overall satisfaction and pedagogical and instructional design modules that linked to blended and online students' profession and/or qualification goals. Supporting Li et al.'s research, Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research found a similar linkage between academic focus and the learner's profession. When assignments related to the blended and online students' profession and/or qualification goals are included in

the program, the phenomenological research interviewees described blended and online student satisfaction and an enhanced customer experience.

For example, this comment from participant 2 described a need for activities beyond reading the textbook and answering essay questions. Previously, when describing learner satisfaction, participant 2 said:

So I love learning about the marketing aspect of business. It was always positive to me.

I was able to apply it directly to my job. It was like visual merchandising, that class helped me. I see how we have to put certain things we want to promote out first and then make that more presentable than what doesn't necessarily need to be out. So to me learner satisfaction is being able to apply what I have learned to my job.

Participant 3's description of her memorable academic project experiences advanced a similar description "There were two memorable project experiences. One of them was group research, that was fun. The second was when you came into the store and applied what we learned from the book to the actual place that was fun."

The implication of Li et al.'s (2016) and, Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research findings coupled with participant 2 and participant 3's descriptions indicated that if a learning module or educational emphasis was not adequately linked with the new and continuing learners' wider qualification aims, the overall learning experience was less likely to have a positive influence on the blended and online students' learning experience. Coupling participant 2's comment "I was able to apply it directly to my job" and participant 3's assertion that "when you came into the store and applied what we learned from the book to the actual place, that was fun." With Li et al.'s (2016) and Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research, suggested the inclusion of new and continuing learners' wider qualification aims into pedagogical and instructional design

would enhance the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to complete the program, and overall customer experience. Consequently, the application of the phenomenological research finding by business and academic professionals to the organizational model would influence the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to complete the program, and overall customer experience.

**Application 3.** Embodied in the previous discussion on the research findings application to professional business practices, participant 3's description of her memorable academic project experiences illustrated another important factor that influenced the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to complete the program, and overall customer experience. Participant 3 described two memorable project experiences. "One of them was group research, that was fun. The second was when you came into the store and applied what we learned from the book to the actual place that was fun." Emergent from the phenomenological research field study description was the term fun. Participant 3 described both memorable project experiences as fun.

Participant 2 had a similar description of an experience:

Usually memorable academic project experience was with my English professor because he usually made us do group assignments. For the projects that he did and the group work, he gave us free creative range. And there is no limit of what you can do and what you cannot do. So usually every time I am in a group activity with him it is a lot of fun.

Continuing, "So I was in my zone and I came out of the class with a 98. The instructor is a fun guy. He is a good teacher and I tell people to get him."

Participant 4, when asked to describe her most memorable academic project experience provide the following description:

This was a very positive assignment. I really enjoyed it. I didn't know that colors affected peoples moods like that. I wanted to learn more about it. I didn't know color could have an effect on my mood and I wanted to learn more about that. Color can affect your mood and your thinking. The more I read about it and went out and applied, I realized that color really does have an effect on my mood.

Participant 1, when describing his most memorable academic online course customer experience, provided a description of his principles of management course. "The class was more of something to make you think, not something you memorized off of a paper or out of a book." Asked to describe how he felt mentally while taking the principles of management course, participant 1 responded:

The mental memorable academic online course customer experience made me feel good. Because I am one of those people who really enjoy mentally thinking outside of the box. Thinking a lot further into it, more than I probably should. I truly enjoyed it.

Consequently, terms synonymous with "fun" emerged as derivatives of experiential or practical experiences that influenced blended and online students' learning satisfaction, persistence to complete an online program, and overall customer experience.

Supporting the concept of the adoption of embedded gamification or game design techniques in education, Deterding et al. (2011) encouraged educators to implement game design techniques into pedagogical and instructional design. Supporting Deterding et al., Arora and Arora (2015) advanced that experiential learning techniques that utilized gamification and game mechanics in the marketing arena could also be used to improve student engagement and learning in education. Deterding et al. acknowledged video games primary purpose were entertainment and/or fun. Miller (2013), supporting Deterding et al. (2011), indicated, simply,



that games were played to have fun. Continuing, Miller indicated that the students' positive feelings could be the result of elements found in gamification.

Deterding et al. (2011) posited that to engage students in more enjoyable and engaging learning experiences, the implementation of game design techniques into pedagogical and instructional design was essential. Deterding et al. stressed that while the vast majority of examples of gamification were digital, game design techniques should not be limited to digital technology. Arora and Arora (2015) indicated that gamification and game mechanics offered business educators alternative educational and training methodologies. The alternative educational and training methodologies, according to Arora and Arora, mirrored or simulated a real-world environment. In summation, gamification or game mechanics techniques influenced the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to complete the program, and overall customer experience. The phenomenological research finding communicates to business and academic professionals that blended and online students are seeking experiential experiences or assignments that are enjoyable, fun, entertaining, and pleasurable.

**Application 4.** Jackson and Ahuja's (2016) research indicated that consumers were progressively seeking events that created an emotional experience. Adeosun and Ganiyu's (2012) researched advanced that designing experiential experiences, that engaged the customer in an intellectual way, resulted in the customer experiencing a creativity event. Participant 1, when describing his most memorable academic online course customer experience, provided a description of his principles of management course. "The class was more of something to make you think, not something you memorized off of a paper or out of a book." When asked to describe how he felt mentally while taking the principles of management course, participant 1 responded:

The mental memorable academic online course customer experience made me feel good. Because I am one of those people who really enjoy mentally thinking outside of the box. Thinking a lot further into it, more than I probably should. I truly enjoyed it.

Participant 1's description of his most memorable academic online course customer experience mirrored Jackson and Ahuja (2016), and Adeosun and Ganiyu (2012) assertions. Specifically, participant 1's description illustrated how the event engaged him intellectually, created an emotional experience, and spawned creativity. Adeosun and Ganiyu's and Arora and Arora's (2015) research advanced that designing experiential experiences, that engaged the customer in an intellectual way, resulted in the customer experiencing a creativity event. The creative cognitive experience, according to Kazancoglua (2014), connected imaginative cognition with experiential marketing by creating experiences that spoke to the customer intellectually. Both the design of the problem-solving experience and the solving of the problem demanded creativity, be it experiential marketing or experiential learning.

Participant 2's description of his memorable academic project experience with his English professor further illustrated the significance of creativity as a factor that influences the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program. Participant 2 indicated, "For the projects that he did and the group work, he gave us free creative range. And there is no limit of what you can do and what you can't do." Continuing, "So I was in my zone and I came out of the class with a 98." Participant 10 described a similar experience. Participant 10 indicated that creativity was an essential element of a memorable academic project experience. Participant 10 advanced that "Creativity is an element of a memorable consumer experience. As far as memorable project experiences that required creativity, I would have to say written assignments often require a large degree of creativity."

Participant 6 described her feelings with her memorable academic project experience as “Joy because I completed the project and actually made a ninety on it. It was definitely one of my final grades and it was a great experience to learn about fashion trending.” Participant 6’s description of her memorable academic project experience included elements of creativity. Participant 6 never actually used the term creativity, but creativity was the central element of participant 6’s memorable academic project experience. Participant 6 described the project as follows:

The purpose of that project was to really understand what is trending in our world today. Especially when it comes to fashion. There are other things included in fashion, so it is not just fashion, but it is pretty much everything that is trending.

The project deliverable was a power point.

Participant 6’s description of her thoughts behind creating the power point illustrated her creative experience:

I based my power point on, for example the first picture reminded me of Georgia. The picture had a gorgeous view of the moon in the middle of a field with trees and farmland. Then the color, like I also had to do like pick swatches. I had to do runways that acted like as models and the colors that represented what my story was about. I am good at bringing things together and piecing it together and sell into an experience where people like wow this, I even made up a quote and people were like wow. It really caught their attention. So that was the most memorable experience with an assignment that I have had.

Participant 8, when asked to describe her most memorable academic project experience provided the following description. “Well the one that stands out in my mine was when I took a

class and the teacher asked us to do a final project in a literature class and I chose the works of Dr. Suez.” When asked what made the project experience unique, participant 8 said, “What made it unique was the fact that I got to choose the subject matter. Yes, basically I got to pick the subject matter.” Continuing, “I had to do the research, I had to compile the evidence then I had to formulate my research based on what I had found and formulate my hypothesis and conclusion based on what I found.” When asked to describe her feelings during the project participant 8 said, “It was elation, I was excited to have the project and I want to do my best.”

A thread ran through participant 1, participant 2, participant 10, participant 6, and participant 8’s descriptions. Each described events that engaged them in an intellectual way. Emanating from their intellectual engagement were the elements of creativity. The elements of creativity included originality, imagination, inspiration, ingenuity, and inventiveness. Derived from the creative elements was enthusiasm, eagerness, and passion. This phenomenological research finding expands the previous phenomenological research finding. The previous phenomenological research finding indicated that blended and online students were seeking experiential experiences or assignments that were enjoyable, fun, entertaining, and pleasurable. This phenomenological research finding works in concert with the previous phenomenological research finding. Specifically, the phenomenological research finding communicates to business and academic professionals that blended and online students are seeking enjoyable, fun, entertaining, or pleasurable experiences that induced the blended and online students’ creativity.

**Application 5.** Lummus et al. (2003) indicated that researchers have recognized the significance of integrating quality assurance theory with marketing theory. Operations management theory was the foundation for both the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management (Taylor & Taylor, 2009). Shobaki and Abu Naser

(2017) advanced that a strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning. The application of quality assurance theory, according to McMillan and Gordon (2017), included the implementation of supply chain management and total quality management techniques. McMillan and Gordon (2017) advanced that academic freedom, reinforced and conceived through organizational 'best practices' had the potential to create standards of innovative that impacted teaching and learning.

The majority of colleges and universities had procedures for academic planning, and development according to Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research. Continuing, Shobaki and Abu Naser's research discovered that institutions of higher learning managed academic planning and development differently. Frequently, academic planning, and development efforts went through a variety of poorly integrated offices according to Shobaki and Abu Naser. Typically, linkage was not clear between assessment and planning activities that occurred at the institutional level and activities carried out at the program and/or department level.

Shobaki and Abu Naser's research suggested that universities and colleges could benefit from an integrated framework and a common language throughout the institutional level, program level and department level. The integrated framework would serve as a template to manage the evaluation, planning, development and implementation process at all levels. Consequently, Shobaki and Abu Naser's found there was a role for the inclusion of quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management in the execution of institutional or higher education strategies to achieve competitive advantage for higher education institutions.

Johnson et al.'s (2014) research indicated that management recognized that the implementation of a systems-based approach to performance improvement created linkage between suppliers and customers. Karran (2009) advanced that the introduction of quality assurance theory would serve the dual purpose of enhancing internal organizational functions and external business partner relationships while simultaneously creating a competitive advantage. Johnson et al. (2014) indicated that enhanced upstream and downstream linkage would create leveraged opportunities that would lead to competitive advantages.

This phenomenological research has provided academic and business professionals a range of findings focused on enhancing the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program. The implementation of quality assurance techniques within the business or institution of higher learning expands the goal of influencing the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program to include creating a competitive advantage for the business or institution of higher learning. Specifically, it is the role of academic and business professionals to influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program while simultaneously creating and maintaining a competitive advantage for their business or institution of higher learning.

**Religious implications.** The blended and online students' have described their learning experiences and how the learning experiences effected their persistence to complete the program. The researcher condensed the blended and online students' descriptions through the foci of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory and academic theory. The researcher combined marketing theory techniques, derived from gamification theory, with quality assurance theory and academic theory. In relationship to the biblical framework and the

marketing cognate, through reduction, factors that influenced the blended and online students' overall customer experiences emerged.

The aggregation of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory and academic theory manifested into the findings of this phenomenological research. The findings suggested that the creation and inclusion of experiential experiences into curriculum or instructor pedagogy influenced blended and online students' overall engagement and subsequent customer experience. Grieve and Campbell's (2014) research suggested that the inclusion of marketing theory techniques, derived from gamification theory techniques, into belief or faith-based applications represented the emergence of a new field of study.

***Religion in digital gaming.*** Grieve and Campbell (2014) described the emergent field of study as religion in digital gaming. Grieve and Campbell's research suggested the creation and inclusion of experiential experiences into belief or faith based digital applications influenced members of the religious communities' level of engagement. In recent research, according to Grieve and Campbell, researchers have documented the increase in the use of digital media to recreate religious practices. For example, belief or faith based applications transport members of the religious community to virtual online shrines and/or cognitively engage and project members of the religious community into virtual pilgrimages (Smotucha, 2017). In the first quarter of the 21st century, members of the religious community have been encouraged to practice spiritual routines through social media and the Internet.

***Prayer.*** Prayer is a spiritual routine practiced by believers throughout the religious spectra. Both the old and new testaments not only encouraged but also directed Christians to pray. The first reference to prayer, according to biblical scholars, was found in Genesis 4:26 (ESV). With the birth of Enoch, the son of Seth, the men began to call upon the name of the

Lord. In the New Testament, Psalm 50:15 (ESV) directed believers to call upon the Lord in their day of trouble. The Lord said He would deliver the believer and the believers' deliverance would glorify the Lord. Continuing in the New Testament, Psalm 141:2 (ESV) David beseeched God, consider prayers as incense before Him, and may the lifting up of hands be like the evening sacrifice.

Mobile-enabled prayer applications have proliferated in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Smotucha, 2017). The proliferation of mobile-enabled prayer applications has been validated through the volume of downloads and installations on users' mobile devices. A Google search found several prayer applications. The first prayer application was Echo Exists To Help You Pray (2018). The web sites' first page quoted I Thessalonians 5:16-18, "PRAY WITHOUT CEASING. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." The Echo's mobile-enabled prayer applications allowed the believer to maintain a complete list of their prayers. Echo's mobile-enabled prayer applications functionality included the categorization of prayers using tags, deletion of old prayers, and distinguishing or marking of answered prayers.

The mark answered prayers feature prompted the believer to visualize how God was working in their lives. The mark answered prayers function reflected elements of gamification or game mechanics. The second element of Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) gamification research adopted by Lester (2012) was rewards. Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) research indicated that game mechanics rewards included, but were not limited to, points, badges, levels, challenges, and rewards. Lester (2012) introduced the rewards element of gamification through competition. The distinguishing or marking of believers' prayers answered by God represented the game mechanics element of competition. The competition element invoked the reward



element of Zichermann and Cunningham's (2011) games mechanics. Similar to gamification or game mechanics techniques designed to influence the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to complete the program, and overall customer experience, gamification or game mechanics techniques were invoked to influence the believers prayer experience, persistence to continue praying, and the believer's overall praying experience.

***Read and reflect on scriptures.*** Romans 10:17 (ESV) "So faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ." Expanding on Romans 10:17 (ESV), Joshua 1:8 (ESV) stated:

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; but you shall meditate therein day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall have good success.

In addition to mobile-enabled prayer applications, the first quarter of the 21st century, mobile-enabled applications designed to encourage believers to read and reflect on scriptures proliferated (Smotucha, 2017). YouVersion's 2018 21-day challenge: Get your bible going (2018) challenged believers to read and reflect on scriptures.

YouVersion's 2018 21-day challenge (2018) awarded believers badges as they progressed through the challenge. Believers who obtained all of the challenge badges qualified for a grand prize drawing. Both Echo and YouVersion offer mobile-enabled application that encourage believers to read and reflect on scriptures. Both Echo's mobile-enabled prayer applications and YouVersion's mobile-enabled application employed game mechanics techniques. According to Jakubowski (2014), Deterding et al. (2011), and Zichermann and Cunningham (2011) making a game was not the goal of gamification.

To the contrary, the goal of gamification was to take a routine activity, like prayer or reading the bible, and incorporate the elements of games. Through the incorporation of the non-cognitive variables of games, like points, badges, levels, challenges, and rewards the routine activity of prayer or reading the bible became pleasurable (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011). The inclusion of non-cognitive variables, according to Layne et al.'s research, represented challenges that influenced blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended on online program. Superimposing Layne et al.'s research findings over faith based digital applications, challenges that influenced blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the blended on online program could similarly influence believers' prayer and reflections on scriptures experience and persistence to continue praying and reflecting on scriptures. Consequently, creating a pleasurable and memorable customer experience for believers.

***Confessions.*** James 5:16 and John 20:23 is the Catholic Church's biblical basis for the sacrament according to Scott (2016). James 5:16 (NIV) stated, "Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective." John 20:23 (NIV) stated, "If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." Made available in 2011 was Confession: A Roman Catholic App. Confession App. promised to prepare the parishioner 'in a gentle and comforting way for the Catholic Sacrament of Confession" (Scott, 2016, p. 259).

On Confession App.'s initial launch, according to Scott (2016). Frederico Lombardi, the Vatican's director of the Holy See press office encouraged Catholics to embrace Confession App. The Vatican's support for Confession App. was controversial. Given the controversy, the Vatican's director of the Holy See press office clarified their position. Lombardi, according to

Mesia and Gilgoff (2011), indicated that penitents could not talk in any way about a ‘confession via iPhone. Continuing, Lombardi stressed for absolution, dialogue was required between the penitent and the priest.

Contrary to Lombardi’s admonishment, the Catholic users of Confession App., according to Scott’s (2016) research, reported themselves as doing just that. Specifically, the Catholic users of the confession application were using the iPhone compatible mobile-enabled application for confession. As with the prayer and scripture mobile-enabled applications, game mechanics was the heart beat of Confession App.

Embedded in Confession App. was code. The code was used to develop algorithms. The data provided by the confessor was filtered through algorithms that were created using a variety coding techniques. Kraemer, Overveld, and Peterson (2011) argued that some algorithms, as those in religious applications, were value-laden. According to Kraemer et al., algorithms were designed differently. The design difference emanated from the inner tenets unique to the systems’ analyst who designed the application and the programmer who coded the algorithm.

Embedded in the term value-laden, emerged the question of ethics according to Kraemer et al.’s (2011) research. Specifically, the design differences that emanated from the inner tenets unique to the system analyst who designed the application and the programmer who coded the algorithm. Courtney’s (2001) organizational research focused on the relationship between knowledge and ethics. Courtney advanced that wisdom was the consequence of incorporating knowledge with moral concerns. Courtney posited that “wisdom guides knowledgeable actions on the basis of moral and ethical values” (p. 23). Courtney’s research, although not focused on game mechanics and the development of algorithms, linked the algorithms, a factor in game

mechanics, with the inner tenets unique to the systems' analyst who designed the application and the programmer who coded the algorithm.

I John 4:1 (ESV) warned the believer, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world." Matthew 7:15 (ESV) tells the believer, "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves." Finally, I John 4:1 chastens the believer: "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world."

The phenomenological research findings demonstrated the linkage of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory and academic theory. The examination of faith based digital applications demonstrated the linkage between marketing theory and gamification theory. Roman 12:2 (ESV) instructed believers to not be conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. With the introduction of marketing theory and gamification theory into faith based mobile-enabled application believers' discernment will be tested.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The results of the study may influence both business and academic professionals. The results of the study will be disseminated through the journal article and/or conference presentations to business and academic professionals.

**Action 1.** The first phenomenological study findings suggested that blended and online students' computer literacy and navigation skills and instructors' online pedagogical and instructional design skills contributed to the blended and online students' learning experience,

persistence to continue the program, and overall customer experience. Assuming executive leadership support, business and academic professionals should establish, implement, and monitor standards that address the phenomenological study finding. Specifically, business and academic professionals establish a threshold for online students' computer literacy and navigation skills. The institution grants admission when the student meets or exceeds the computer literacy and navigation skills' threshold.

Business and academic professionals establish blended and online instructors' technology training and pedagogical and instructional design expertise threshold. The institution grants permission to design or instruct online courses when the instructor meets or exceeds the technology training and pedagogical and instructional design expertise threshold. Blended and online instructors should receive not only technology training, but additionally pedagogical and learning design training. Conole (2012, p. 121) described learning design as "a methodology for enabling teachers/designers to make more informed decisions in how they go about designing learning activities and interventions, which is pedagogically informed and makes effective use of appropriate resources and technologies." Upon successfully meeting or exceeding the predefined threshold, blended and online instructors would be qualified to design and instruct online courses. The implementation of both phenomenological study findings in the organizational model would influence the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to complete the program, and overall customer experience.

**Action 2.** The second phenomenological study findings suggested that inclusion of new and continuing learners' wider qualification aims into pedagogical and instructional design would enhance the blended and online students' learning experience, persistence to complete the program, and overall customer experience. Capelli (2014) indicated that all occupational sectors

had reported that education related skills among recent graduates that entered the U.S. labor force were lacking. Graduates' shared a common shortcoming according to Arora and Arora (2015). Manifestation of the common shortcoming is through a graduate's inability to understand the connections and interrelationships between and across functional and interdisciplinary areas of business.

McMillan and Gordon's (2017) case study discussed the obstacles of change implementation. McMillan and Gordon described champions as individuals that were highly respected by their peers, but had limited institutional authority. Champions cannot drive the implementation of this finding. Business and academic implementation of this finding requires executive leadership support. The implementation of this finding must be through the optics of the organizations strategic plan. The centerpiece for continuous process improvement, both internally and externally, was the organization's strategic plan according to Plenert (2012). The organization's strategic plan acted as a template that outlined a specific direction. Consequently, the application of the phenomenological study finding by business and academic professionals must be through the optics of the organizations strategic plan and firmly supported by the organization's executive leadership team.

**Action 3.** The third phenomenological study findings suggested that blended and online students were seeking experiential experiences or assignments that were enjoyable, fun, entertaining, and pleasurable. Deterding et al. acknowledged video games primary purpose were entertainment and/or fun. To engage students in more enjoyable and engaging learning experience, Deterding et al. advanced that game elements adopted by educators. Miller (2013), supporting Deterding et al. (2011), indicated, simply, that games were played to have fun. Arora and Arora (2015) indicated that gamification and game mechanics offered business educators

alternative educational and training methodologies. The alternative educational and training methodologies, according to Arora and Arora, mirrored or simulated a real-world environment. Deterding et al. (2011) pointed out the convergence of media and ubiquitous computing are progressively distorting the difference between digital and non-digital. To improve student engagement and learning in education, Arora (2015) recommended the implementation of experiential learning techniques that utilized gamification and game mechanics.

The third recommendation's premise is the implementation of game mechanics into pedagogical and instructional design. As with the second phenomenological study finding, executive leadership support was essential for successful implementation. The implementation of the third finding must be through the optics of the organization's strategic plan. The centerpiece for continuous process improvement, both internally and externally, was the organization's strategic plan according to Plenert (2012). Continuing, Plenert posited the organization's strategic plan acted as a template that outlined a specific direction.

The majority of colleges and universities had procedures for academic planning, and development according to Shobaki and Abu Naser's (2017) research. Continuing, Shobaki and Abu Naser's research discovered that institutions of higher learning managed academic planning and development differently. Frequently, academic planning, and development efforts went through a variety of poorly integrated offices according to Shobaki and Abu Naser. Typically, linkage was not clear between assessment and planning activities that occurred at the institutional level and activities carried out at the program and/or department level. Johnson et al. (2014) indicated that enhanced upstream and downstream linkage would create leveraged opportunities that would lead to competitive advantages.

McMillan and Gordon (2017) advanced that academic freedom, reinforced and conceived through organizational 'best practices' had the potential to create standards of innovative that impacted teaching and learning. Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) advanced that a strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning. Therefore, business and academic professionals' implementation of research finding three must be through the optics of quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management.

**Action 4.** The fourth phenomenological study finding suggested that blended and online students were seeking enjoyable, fun, entertaining, or pleasurable experiences that induced the blended and online students' creativity. A thread ran through the interviewee's descriptions. Each described events that engaged them in an intellectual way. Emanating from their intellectual engagement were the elements of creativity. The elements of creativity included originality, imagination, inspiration, ingenuity, and inventiveness. Derived from the creative elements was enthusiasm, eagerness, and passion. Phenomenological research finding four expanded phenomenological research finding three. Phenomenological research finding three indicated that blended and online students were seeking experiential experiences or assignments that were enjoyable, fun, entertaining, and pleasurable. Phenomenological research finding four was an extension of phenomenological research finding three. Specifically, phenomenological research finding four communicates to business and academic professionals that blended and online students were seeking enjoyable, fun, entertaining, or pleasurable experiences that induced the blended and online students' creativity.



Business and academic professionals' implementation of the fourth phenomenological study finding must follow the same track as the third phenomenological study finding. Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) advanced that a strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning. Karran (2009) advanced that the introduction of quality assurance theory would serve the dual purpose of enhancing internal organizational functions and external business partner relationships while simultaneously creating a competitive advantage. Therefore, assuming executive leadership support, business and academic professionals' implementation of research finding four must be through the optics of quality assurance techniques that embody supply chain management and total quality management practices.

**Action 5.** The fifth phenomenological study finding suggested that implementation of quality assurance techniques within the business or institution of higher learning strengthened the goal of influencing the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program to include creating a competitive advantage for the business or institution of higher learning. The quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management serve as the framework supporting the implementation of the second, third, and fourth phenomenological study findings. Karran (2009) indicated that features of managerial quality assurance would improve teaching proficiency. Vanichchinchai and Igel's (2011) research cautioned that due to the protracted scope that encompassed both internal functions and external business partners a dual implementation of supply chain management and total quality management was not only challenging but also resource intensive. To enable business and academic professionals to incorporate the second, third, and fourth

phenomenological study findings, as stated previously, executive leadership must first implement the overarching principles of quality assurance techniques that embody supply chain management and total quality management practices. With the overarching principles of quality assurance techniques that embody supply chain management and total quality management practices in place, business and academic professionals' have the vehicle for implementation of the phenomenological study's findings.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

While developing the phenomenological study findings, both practical application and future research topics emerged. For example, the research frequently referred to the implementation of quality assurance techniques that embodied supply chain management and total quality management methods. Researchers have recognized the significance of integrating quality assurance theory with marketing theory (Lummus et al., 2003). Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) advanced that a strategy grounded in marketing theory that included the quality assurance techniques of supply chain management and total quality management would enhance the student learning experience and create a competitive advantage for institutions of higher learning. Although Shobaki and Abu Naser (2017) encouraged the implementation of quality assurance techniques that embodied supply chain management and total quality management methods into institutions of higher learning, this researcher could not locate literature that focused on or detailed the specifics. A gap in the research emerged. The application of quality assurance techniques that embodied supply chain management and total quality management methods into institutions of higher learning need closer examination. Closer examination may spawn a different round of questions.

Another practical application and future research topic emerged while developing the phenomenological study findings. As with implementation of quality assurance techniques that embodied supply chain management and total quality management methods into institutions of higher learning, research on the implementation of game mechanics into pedagogical and instructional design was shallow. Miller's (2013) research advanced that the game play experience that produced good feelings in game players produced the same good feelings in students engaged in experiential learning experiences. Arora and Arora (2015) advanced that experiential learning techniques that utilized gamification and game mechanics in the marketing arena could be also be used to improve student engagement and learning in education. Machajewski's (2017) conference paper provided recommendations for faculty seeking to adopt gamification. Although Miller's (2013), Arora and Arora's (2015), and Machajewski's (2017) research encouraged the implementation of game mechanics into pedagogical and instructional design, this researcher could not locate literature that focused on or detailed the specifics. Again, a gap in the research literature emerged. The application of game mechanics into pedagogical and instructional design needs closer examination. Closer examination may spawn a different round of questions.

### **Reflections**

In comparison to customary experiential or quantitative science research, the phenomenological researcher's view must be broader. Creswell and Poth (2017) suggested that the paradigms and theories held by the researcher influenced the researcher's philosophical assumptions. According to van Manen (2017) transcendental phenomenology's basic themes of transcendental phenomenology were "intentionality," "eidetic reduction," and "constitution of meaning." In this phenomenological study, the goal was to explore and describe a phenomenon

through the lived experiences of the participants and divorcing one's own preconceptions from the study.

Reflecting on three specific questions of the interview guide (Appendix E), the researcher ponders the possible effects on the participants' descriptions of situations. The researcher sought the participants' descriptions of their most memorable customer experience, their most memorable online customer experience, and their most memorable online academic customer experience. Periodically, when asked, participants were unable to describe their most memorable customer experience. Consequently, the researcher periodically prompted the participant. Through the researcher's periodic prompting of research participants unable to describe their most memorable customer experience, the researcher's personal biases or preconceived ideas and values possibly influenced the research participants' descriptions.

Emergent from the phenomenological research were findings that improved the researcher's understanding of the factors that influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the online program. The phenomenological research findings included fun and creativity. The narrative "fun" emerged as an experiential or practical experience that influenced blended and online students learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program. The narrative "creativity" emerged as an experiential or practical experience that influenced blended and online students learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program. Both findings influenced the researcher's understanding of the factors that influenced the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the online program.

From gamification theory, emerged techniques used by marketers to engage consumers. According to Miller's (2013) research, at the core of gamification theory or game mechanics

were reward-motivated stimulants that intrinsically influenced human behavior. The reward-motivated stimulants that intrinsically influenced behaviors in humans were two emergent narratives from this phenomenological research. Those two emergent narratives were fun and creativity. Deterding et al. acknowledged video games primary purpose were entertainment and/or fun. Miller (2013), supporting Deterding et al. (2011), indicated, simply, that games were played to have fun. Adeosun and Ganiyu's (2012) research advanced that designing experiential experiences, that engaged the customer in an intellectual way, resulted in the customer experiencing a creativity event. Consequently, fun and creativity are the nucleus of game mechanics that provoke consumer engagement.

The inclusion of marketing theory techniques, derived from game mechanics, into belief or faith-based applications represented the emergence of a new field of study according to Grieve and Campbell's (2014) research. Reflecting on this phenomenological research, the researcher had no preconceived ideas or notions that interconnected game mechanics with biblical principles. Yet to the contrary, the phenomenological research clearly demonstrated that a relationship between game mechanics and biblical principles existed. As Grieve and Campbell's research suggested, game mechanics and belief or faith-based applications represented the emergence of a new field of study.

### **Summary and Study Conclusions**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the customer experiences of students that have completed an online program at a technical college in Southeast Georgia. The technical college's on-line programs are experiencing declining retention levels. Li et al.'s (2016) research indicated that it was essential to retain existing customers and attract new customers in a competitive higher education market. Viewing the online learning experience

through the optics of the customer experience, created a distinctive approach to lowering online student retention rates.

The first phenomenological study finding indicated that blended and online students' computer literacy and navigation skills could influence the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

The second phenomenological study finding indicated that blended and online students' feeling of isolation and loneliness could influence the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

The third phenomenological study finding indicated that challenges designed to intrinsically stimulate the blended and online students to feel good could influence the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

The fourth phenomenological study finding indicated that competitive challenges designed to intrinsically motivate the blended and online students' self-efficacy could influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

The fifth phenomenological study finding indicated the relationship between course module design and the blended and online students' profession and/or qualification goals influenced blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.

The sixth phenomenological study finding indicated that limited group communications could influence the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.

The seventh phenomenological study finding indicated that collectiveness and individualism could influence the blended and online students customer experience and persistence to complete the program.

The eighth phenomenological study finding indicated that combining two or more academic disciplines into a single module could influence the blended and online student's learner satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program.

The ninth phenomenological study finding indicated that an experiential learning experience that is fun could influence the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

The tenth phenomenological study finding indicated that an experiential learning experience that required blended and online student creativity could influence the blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program.

The researcher reconciled the elements that embody marketing theory into emergent themes. The emergent themes of the online student's lived experiences, through the optics of marketing, bridged the gap between marketing theory and online student retention. Through narrowing the gulf between marketing theory and online student retention, researchers and practitioners alike benefited. The researchers benefited as the result of new avenues for future research. The practitioners benefited as the consequence of the emergence of innovative applications of marketing theory to address the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program.

To illustrate, researchers have recognized the significance of integrating quality assurance theory with marketing theory (Lummus et al., 2003). This phenomenological study expanded Lummus et al.'s research. This phenomenological study included the integration of

marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory and academic theory. In closing, the integration of marketing theory, gamification theory, quality assurance theory and academic theory represented the emergence of a different approach to understanding the blended and online students' customer experience and persistence to complete the program. Consequently, both researchers and practitioners benefit from the findings of this phenomenological study.



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## Appendix A: Request to Conduct Study

### Application for the use of Human Research Participants

IRB APPLICATION #: 3323 (*To be assigned by the IRB*)

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#### **I. APPLICATION INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Complete each section of this form, using the gray form fields (use the tab key).
2. If you have questions, hover over the blue (?), or refer to the [IRB Application Instructions](#) for additional clarification.
3. Review the [IRB Application Checklist](#).
4. Email the completed application, with the following supporting documents (as separate word documents) to [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu):
  - a. Consent Forms, Permission Letters, Recruitment Materials
  - b. Surveys, Questionnaires, Interview Questions, Focus Group Questions
5. If you plan to use a specific Liberty University department or population for your study, you will need to obtain permission from the appropriate department chair/dean. Submit documentation of permission (email or letter) to the IRB along with this application and check the indicated box below verifying that you have done so.
6. **Submit one signed copy of the signature page (available on the [IRB website](#)) to any of the following:**
  - a. Email: As a scanned document to [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)
  - b. Fax: 434-522-0506
  - c. Mail: IRB 1971 University Blvd. Lynchburg, VA 24515
  - d. In Person: Green Hall, Suite 1887
7. Once received, applications are processed on a first-come, first-served basis.
8. Preliminary review may take up to 3 weeks.
9. Most applications will require 3 sets of revisions.
10. The entire process may take between 1 and 2 months.
11. *We cannot accept applications in formats other than Microsoft Word. Please do not send us One Drive files, Pdfs, Google Docs, or Html applications.*

**Note: Applications and supporting documents with the following problems will be returned immediately for revisions:**

1. Grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors
2. Lack of professionalism
3. Lack of consistency or clarity
4. Incomplete applications

*\*\*Failure to minimize these errors **will** cause delays in your processing time\*\**

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#### **II. BASIC PROTOCOL INFORMATION**

##### **1. STUDY/THESIS/DISSERTATION TITLE (?)**

**Title:** STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE ONLINE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE: A

PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE BEHAVIORAL  
AND EXPERIENTIAL FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE  
ONLINE STUDENT RETENTION

**2. PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR & PROTOCOL INFORMATION (?)**

**Principal Investigator** (*person conducting the research*): William P. Delaney

Professional Title (*Student, Professor, etc.*): Student

School/Department (*School of Education, LUCOM, etc.*): School of Business

Phone: 912-294-4240

LU Email: wdelaney1@liberty.edu

**Check all that apply:**

Faculty

Online Graduate Student

Staff

Residential Undergraduate Student

Residential Graduate Student

Online Undergraduate Student

**This research is for:**

Class Project

Master's Thesis

Scholarly Project (DNP Program)

Doctoral Dissertation

Faculty Research

Other:

**If applicable, indicate whether you have defended and passed your dissertation proposal:**

N/A

No (*Provide your defense date*):

Yes ([Proceed to Associated Personnel Information](#))

**3. ASSOCIATED PERSONNEL INFORMATION (?)**

<b>Co-Researcher(s):</b>	
School/Department:	
Phone:	LU/Other Email:
<b>Faculty Chair/Mentor(s):</b> Dr. Janis McFaul	
School/Department: School of Business	
Phone: 352-596-2088	LU/Other Email: jlmcfaul@liberty.edu
<b>Non-Key Personnel</b> ( <i>Reader, Assistant, etc.</i> ): Dr. Gene Sullivan	
School/Department: School of Business	
Phone: 434-656-3289	LU/Other Email: grsulliv@liberty.edu
<b>Consultant(s)</b> ( <i>required for Ed.D Candidates</i> ):	
School/Department:	
Phone:	LU/Other Email:

<b>4. USE OF LIBERTY UNIVERSITY PARTICIPANTS</b> <a href="#">(?)</a>	
<p><b>Do you intend to use LU students, staff, or faculty as participants <i>OR</i> LU students, staff, or faculty data in your study?</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No (<a href="#">Proceed to Funding Source</a>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes (<i>Complete the section below</i>)</p>	
<b># of Participants/Data Sets:</b>	<b>Department:</b>
<b>Class(es)/Year(s):</b>	<b>Department Chair:</b>
<b>Obtaining permission to utilize LU participants</b> ( <i>check the appropriate box below</i> ):	

**SINGLE DEPARTMENT/GROUP:** If you are including faculty, students, or staff from a single department or group, you must obtain permission from the appropriate Dean, Department Chair, or Coach and submit a signed letter or date/time stamped email to the IRB indicating approval to use students from that department or group. **You may submit your application without having obtained this permission;** however, the IRB will not approve your study until proof of permission has been received.

I have obtained permission from the appropriate Dean/Department Chair/Coach, and attached the necessary documentation to this application.

I have sought permission and will submit documentation to the IRB once it has been provided to me by the appropriate Dean/Department Chair/Coach.

**MULTIPLE DEPARTMENTS/GROUPS:** If you are including faculty, students, or staff from multiple departments or groups (i.e., all sophomores or LU Online), **the IRB will need to seek administrative approval on your behalf.**

I am requesting that the IRB seek administrative approval on my behalf.

#### 5. FUNDING SOURCE (?)

**Is your research funded?**

No ([Proceed to Study Dates](#))

Yes (*Complete the section below*)

**Grant Name/Funding Source/Number:**

**Funding Period (Month & Year):**

#### 6. STUDY DATES (?)

**When will you perform your study?** (*Approximate dates for collection/analysis*):

**Start (Month/Year):** May 2018    **Finish (Month/Year):** August 2018

### 7. COMPLETION OF REQUIRED CITI RESEARCH ETHICS TRAINING (?)

**List Course Name(s)** (*Social and Behavioral Researchers, etc.*):

Belmont Report

The National Bioethics Advisory Committee

History and Ethical Principles

Defining Research with Human Subjects

The Federal Regulations

Assessing Risks

Informed Consent

Privacy and Confidentiality

Unanticipated Problems

Prision Research

**Date(s) of Completion:** 6/5/17 through 6/12/17

### III. OTHER STUDY MATERIALS AND CONSIDERATIONS

#### 8. STUDY MATERIALS LIST (?)

**Please indicate whether your proposed study will include any of the following:**

Recording/photography of participants ( <i>voice, video, or images</i> )?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Participant compensation ( <i>gift cards, meals, extra credit, etc.</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Advertising for participants ( <i>flyers, TV/Radio advertisements</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
More than minimal psychological stress?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Confidential data collection ( <i>participant identities known but not revealed</i> )?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No
Anonymous data collection ( <i>participant identities not known</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Extra costs to the participants ( <i>tests, hospitalization, etc.</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
The inclusion of pregnant women ( <i>for medical studies</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
More than minimal risk?*	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Alcohol consumption?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Protected Health Information ( <i>from health practitioners/institutions</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
VO <sub>2</sub> Max Exercise?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Pilot study procedures ( <i>which will be published/included in data analysis</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
<b>Please indicate whether your proposed study will include the use of blood:</b>	

Use of blood?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Total amount of blood:	
Blood draws over time period ( <i>days</i> ):	
<b>Please indicate whether your proposed study will include any of the following materials:</b>	
The use of rDNA or biohazardous material?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
The use of human tissue or cell lines?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Fluids that could mask the presence of blood ( <i>including urine/feces</i> )?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Use of radiation or radioisotopes?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
<p><i>*Note: Minimal risk is defined as “the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater in and of themselves than those ordinarily encountered in everyday life or during the performance of routine physical or physiological examinations or tests. [45 CFR 46.102(i)]. If you are unsure if your study qualifies as minimal risk, contact the IRB.</i></p>	

<b>9. INVESTIGATIONAL METHODS (?)</b>
<b>Please indicate whether your proposed study will include any of the following:</b>
<p>The use of an Investigational New Drug (IND) or an Approved Drug for an Unapproved Use?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p>



Yes (Provide the drug name, IND number, and company):

The use of an Investigational Medical Device or an Approved Medical Device for an Unapproved Use?

No

Yes (Provide the device name, IDE number, and company):

#### **IV. PURPOSE**

##### **10. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH (?)**

**Write an original, brief, non-technical description of the purpose of your research.** Include in your description your research hypothesis/question, a narrative that explains the major constructs of your study, and how the data will advance your research hypothesis or question. This section should be easy to read for someone not familiar with your academic discipline:

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to describe the customer experiences of students that have completed an online program at a technical college in Southeast Georgia. The technical college's on-line programs are experiencing declining retention levels. Understanding the student's online learning experience through the optics of the customer experience, creates a distinctive approach to understanding online student retention rates.

RQ1. What are the challenges blended and online students faced during their academic career and did the challenges influence blended and online students' learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

RQ2. How does the online student's customer experience(s) influence learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program?

RQ3. How do experiential experiences influence blended and online student's learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program?

## **V. PARTICIPANT INCLUSION/EXCLUSION CRITERIA**

### **11. STUDY POPULATION (?)**

**Provide the inclusion criteria for the participant population** (*gender, age range, ethnic background, health status, occupation, employer, etc.*):

Students that have completed blended or on-line programs at the host technical college are included in the population. The focus population is 18 to 65 years old.

**Provide a rationale for selecting the above population:** The rationale for selecting the population is to understand blended and online student retention through the optics of the blended and online student's customer experience.

**Are you related to any of your participants?**

No

Yes (*Explain*):

**Indicate who will be excluded from your study population** (*e.g., persons under 18 years of age*): Excluded from the population were students under 18 years of age. Additionally excluded from the population are students that have not completed blended or on-line programs at the host technical college.

**If applicable, provide rationale for involving any special populations** (*e.g., children, ethnic groups, mentally disabled, low socio-economic status, prisoners*):

**Provide the maximum number of participants you plan to enroll for each participant population and justify the sample size** (*You will not be approved to enroll a number greater than the number listed. If at a later time it becomes apparent that you need to increase your sample size, submit a [Change in Protocol Form](#) and wait for approval to proceed*): The maximum number of participants, or sample size, for the research is 20. The sample size was predicated on previous research of noted researchers in the field of phenomenological study. The noted phenomenological researchers included Dukes (1984), Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell and Poth (2017).

**ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION ONLY IF YOU ARE  
CONDUCTING A PROTOCOL WITH NIH, FEDERAL, OR STATE FUNDING:**

Researchers sometimes believe their particular project is not appropriate for certain types of participants. These may include, for example, women, minorities, and children. If you believe your project should not include one or more of these groups, please provide your justification for their exclusion. Your justification will be reviewed according to the applicable NIH, federal, or state guidelines:

**12. TYPES OF PARTICIPANTS (?)**

**Who will be the focus of your study?** (*Check all that apply*)

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Normal Participants (Age 18-65)	<input type="checkbox"/> Pregnant Women
<input type="checkbox"/> Minors (Under Age 18)	<input type="checkbox"/> Fetuses
<input type="checkbox"/> Over Age 65	<input type="checkbox"/> Cognitively Disabled

<input type="checkbox"/> University Students	<input type="checkbox"/> Physically Disabled
<input type="checkbox"/> Active-Duty Military Personnel	<input type="checkbox"/> Participants Incapable of Giving Consent
<input type="checkbox"/> Discharged/Retired Military Personnel	<input type="checkbox"/> Prisoners or Institutional Individuals
<input type="checkbox"/> Inpatients	<input type="checkbox"/> Specific Ethnic/Racial Group(s)
<input type="checkbox"/> Outpatients	<input type="checkbox"/> Other potentially elevated risk populations
<input type="checkbox"/> Patient Controls	<input type="checkbox"/> Participant(s) related to the researcher
<p><i>Note: Only check the boxes if the participants will be the <u>focus</u> (for example, ONLY military or ONLY students). If they just happen to be a part of the broad group you are studying, you only need to check “Normal Participants.” Some studies may require that you check multiple boxes (e.g., Korean males, aged 65+).</i></p>	

## **VI. RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS**

### **13. CONTACTING PARTICIPANTS (?)**

**Describe in detail how you will contact participants regarding this study (include the method(s) used—email, phone call, social media, snowball sampling, etc.):** The TCSG’s Accountability & Institutional Effectiveness Department will insure the official holder of the records initiates the first email contact of subjects identified through the records search.

### **14. SUBMISSION OF RECRUITMENT MATERIALS (?)**

**Submit a copy of all recruitment letters, scripts, emails, flyers, advertisements, or social media posts** you plan to use to recruit participants for your study as separate Word documents with your application. [Recruitment templates](#) are available on the IRB website.

**Check the appropriate box:**

All of the necessary recruitment materials will be submitted with my application.

My study strictly uses **archival** data, so recruitment materials are not required.

**15. LOCATION OF RECRUITMENT (?)**

**Describe the location, setting, and timing of recruitment:** The host college is a technical college in Southeast Georgia. Recruitment of potential participants from the host college will not commence until IRB approval for the research study has been granted. Upon IRB approval, potential participants will be recruited from the host college's active and inactive student database.

**16. SCREENING PROCEDURES (?)**

**Describe any screening procedures you will use when recruiting your participants** (*i.e., screening survey, database query, verbal confirmation, etc.*): A member of the TCSG's Accountability & Institutional Effectiveness Department, who is not part of the research project, will have a query executed against the TCSG's Coastal Pines Technical College's student database (Banner). The TCSG's Accountability & Institutional Effectiveness Department's query parameters will select past and present Coastal Pines Technical College students that meet the research criteria. The TCSG's Accountability & Institutional Effectiveness Department will direct, for the researcher, the initial communications of recruitment information to those past and present Coastal Pines Technical College students that meet the research criteria.

**17. RELATIONSHIPS (?)**

**Does the researcher have a position of grading or professional authority over the participants** (e.g., is the researcher the participants' teacher or principal)?

No ([Proceed to Procedures](#))

Yes (Explain what safeguards are in place to reduce the likelihood of compromising the integrity of the research, e.g., addressing the conflicts in the consent process and/or emphasizing the pre-existing relationship will not be impacted by participation in the research.):

## **VII. RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

### **18. PROCEDURES (?)**

**Write an original, non-technical, step by step, description of what your participants will be asked to do during your study and data collection process.** If you have multiple participant groups, (ex: *parents, teachers, and students*) or control groups and experimental groups, please specify which group you are asking to complete which task(s).

**You do not need to list signing/reading consent as a step:**

<b>Step/Task/Procedure</b>	<b>Time (Approx.)</b>	<b>Participant Group(s) (All, Group A, Group B, Control Group, Experimental Group, etc.)</b>
1. Participants will be interviewed and asked to respond to questions found on the research's interview guide	60 - 90 minutes	All

2. Participants will review/clarify/expand on transcribed research's interview guide question responses.	30 minutes	All
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		
7.		
8.		

### 19. SUBMISSION OF DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS/MATERIALS (?)

**Submit a copy of all instruments, surveys, interviews questions, outlines, observation checklists, prompts, etc.** that you plan to use to collect data for your study as separate Word documents with your application. Pdfs are **ONLY** acceptable for proprietary instruments.

#### Check the appropriate box:

All of the necessary data collection instruments will be submitted with my application.

My study strictly uses **archival** data, so data collection instruments are not required.

### 20. STUDY LOCATION (?)

**Please describe the location(s)/site(s) in which the study will be conducted.** Be specific (*include city, state, school/district, clinic, etc.*): The researcher will hold interviews in

a private room in which participants can not be overheard. The interviews will take place at 3700 Glynco Parkway, Brunswick Georgia 31525

*Note: For School of Education research, investigators must submit documentation of permission from each research site to the IRB prior to receiving approval. If your study involves K-12 schools, district-level approval is acceptable. If your study involves colleges or universities, you may also need to seek IRB approval from those institutions. You may seek permission prior to submitting your IRB application, however, **do not** begin recruiting participants. If you find that you need a conditional approval letter from the IRB in order to obtain permission, one can be provided to you once all revisions have been received and are accepted.*

## **VIII. DATA ANALYSIS**

### **21. NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS/DATA SETS (?)**

**Estimate the number of participants to be enrolled or data sets to be collected: 20**

### **22. ANALYSIS METHODS (?)**

**Describe *how* the data will be analyzed and what will be done with the data and the resulting analysis, including any plans for future publication or presentation:**

Qualitative Software Research (QSR) International's NVivo 12 Plus for Windows software will be used to facilitate data coding, analysis and development of themes and perceptions. An MSWord template will be used to capture the eligible participants transcribed interviews. The MSWord template contained encoded triggers designed to exploit NVivo 12 Plus's auto coding source style or structure option.

The data and the resulting analysis will be used to develop themes for the research.

No plans for future publications or presentations.



**IX. PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT****23. PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT REQUIREMENTS (?)**

**Does your study require parental/guardian consent?** *(If your participants are under 18, parental/guardian consent is required in most cases.)*

- No ([Proceed to Child Assent](#))
- Yes (*Answer the following question*)

**Does your study entail greater than minimal risk without the potential for benefits to the participant?**

- No
- Yes (*Consent of both parents is required*)

**X. ASSENT FROM CHILDREN****24. CHILD ASSENT (?)**

**Is assent required for your study?** *(Assent is required unless the child is not capable due to age, psychological state, or sedation OR the research holds out the prospect of a direct benefit that is only available within the context of the research.)*

- No ([Proceed to Consent Procedures](#))
- Yes

*Note: If the parental consent process (full or part) is waived (See XIII below) assent may be also. See the IRB's [informed consent](#) page for more information.*

**XI. PROCESS OF OBTAINING INFORMED CONSENT****25. CONSENT PROCEDURES (?)**

**Describe in detail *how and when* you will provide consent information** *(If applicable, include how you will obtain consent from participants and/or parents/guardians and/or child assent.):* Prior to beginning any interviews, the researcher will send the informed

consent document and the recruitment letter via email to the candidate. If the candidate chooses to participate, the researcher will ask that the candidate email the signed consent document back to the researcher.

## **XII. USE OF DECEPTION**

### **26. DECEPTION (?)**

**Are there any aspects of the study kept secret from the participants (e.g., the full purpose of the study)?**

No

Yes (describe the deception involved and the debriefing procedures):

**Is deception used in the study procedures?**

No

Yes (describe the deception involved and the debriefing procedures):

*Note: Submit a post-experiment debriefing statement and consent form offering participants the option of having their data destroyed. A debriefing template is available on our [website](#).*

## **XIII. WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT OR MODIFICATION OF REQUIRED ELEMENTS IN THE INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS**

### **27. WAIVER OF INFORMED CONSENT ELEMENTS (?)**

N/A

**Please indicate why you are requesting a waiver of consent (If your reason does not appear as an option, please check N/A. If your reason appears in the drop-down list, complete the below questions in this section):** Click to select an option.

**Does the research pose no more than minimal risk to participants (i.e., no more risk than that of everyday activities)?**

No, the study is greater than minimal risk.

<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, the study is minimal risk.
<b>Will the waiver have no adverse effects on participant rights and welfare?</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> No, the waiver <u>will</u> have adverse effects on participant rights and welfare.
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, the waiver <u>will not</u> adversely affect participant rights and welfare.
<b>Would the research be impracticable without the waiver?</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> No, there are other ways of performing the research without the waiver.
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, not having a waiver would make the study unrealistic. (Explain):
<b>Will participant debriefing occur (i.e., will the true purpose and/or deceptive procedures used in the study be reported to participants at a later date)?</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> No, participants will not be debriefed.
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, participants will be debriefed.
<i>Note: A waiver or modification of some or all of the required elements of informed consent is sometimes used in research involving deception, archival data, or specific minimal risk procedures.</i>

#### **XIV. WAIVER OF THE REQUIREMENT FOR PARTICIPANTS TO SIGN THE INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT**

<b>28. WAIVER OF SIGNED CONSENT (?)</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A
<b>Please indicate why you are requesting a waiver of signatures (If your reason does not appear as an option, please check N/A. If your reason appears in the drop-down list, complete the below questions in this section):</b> Click to select an option.
<b>Would a signed consent form be the only record linking the participant to the research?</b>
<input type="checkbox"/> No, there are other records/study questions linking the participants to the study.
<input type="checkbox"/> Yes, only the signed form would link the participant to the study.

<p><b>Does a breach of confidentiality constitute the principal risk to participants?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, <i>there are other risks involved greater than a breach of confidentiality.</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, <i>the main risk is a breach of confidentiality.</i></p>
<p><b>Does the research pose no more than minimal risk to participants (i.e., no more risk than that of everyday activities)?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, <i>the study is greater than minimal risk.</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, <i>the study is minimal risk.</i></p>
<p><b>Does the research include any activities that would require signed consent in a non-research context (e.g., liability waivers)?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, <i>there <u>are not</u> any study related activities that would normally require signed consent</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, <i>there <u>are</u> study related activities that would normally require signed consent</i></p>
<p><b>Will you provide the participants with a written statement about the research (i.e., an information sheet that contains all of the elements of an informed consent form but without the signature lines)?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No, <i>participants <u>will not</u> receive written information about the research.</i></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes, <i>participants <u>will</u> receive written information about the research.</i></p>
<p><i><b>Note:</b> A waiver of signed consent is sometimes used in anonymous surveys or research involving secondary data. This does not eliminate the need for a consent document, but it eliminates the need to obtain participant signatures.</i></p>

## **XV. CHECKLIST OF INFORMED CONSENT/ASSENT**

### **29. STATEMENT (?)**

**Submit a copy of all informed consent/assent documents as separate Word documents with your application.** [Informed consent/assent templates](#) are available on our website. Additional information regarding [consent](#) is also available on our website.

**Check the appropriate box:**

All of the necessary consent/assent documents will be submitted with my application.

My study strictly uses **archival** data, so consent documents are not required.

**XVI. PARTICIPANT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY**

**30. PRIVACY (?)**

**Describe what steps you will take to protect the privacy of your participants** (*e.g., If you plan to interview participants, will you conduct your interviews in a setting where others cannot easily overhear?*):

The researcher will hold interviews in a private room in which participants cannot be overheard.

The researcher will store all data for three years on a password-protected computer.

The researcher only, will have access to the research data.

The researcher will use pseudonyms and a coding technique to conceal interview participants' identities.

The researcher will scribe pseudonyms and a coding technique.

The researcher will keep scribed pseudonyms and coding keys in a locked box in the researcher's home.

*Note: Privacy refers to persons and their interest in controlling access to their information.*

### 31. CONFIDENTIALITY (?)

**How will you keep your data secure (i.e., password-locked computer, locked desk, locked filing cabinet, etc.)?:**

The researcher will store all data for three years on a password-protected computer.

The researcher will keep scribed pseudonyms and coding keys in a locked box in the researcher's home.

**Who will have access to the data (i.e., the researcher and faculty mentor/chair, only the researcher, etc.)?:**

The researcher only, will have access to the research data.

**Will you destroy the data once the three-year retention period required by federal regulations expires?**

No

Yes (*Explain how the data will be destroyed*): Research data will be deleted from password protected computer as per federal regulations..

*Note: All research-related data must be stored for a minimum of three years after the end date of the study, as required by federal regulations.*

### 32. ARCHIVAL DATA (SECONDARY DATA) (?)

<p><b>Is all or part of the data archival</b> (<i>i.e., previously collected for another purpose</i>)?</p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No (<a href="#">Proceed to Non-Archival Data</a>)</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes (<i>Answer the questions below</i>)</p>
<p><b>Is the archival data publicly accessible?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No (<i>Explain how you will obtain access to this data</i>):</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes (<i>Indicate where the data is accessible from, i.e., a website, etc.</i>):</p>
<p><b>Will you receive the raw data stripped of identifying information</b> (<i>e.g., names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, social security numbers, medical records, birth dates, etc.</i>)?:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No (<i>Describe what data will remain identifiable and why this information will not be removed</i>):</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes (<i>Describe who will link and/or strip the data—this person should have regular access to the data and should be a neutral party not involved in the study</i>):</p>
<p><b>Can the names or identities of the participants be deduced from the raw data?</b></p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> No (<i>Place your initials in the box: I will not attempt to deduce the identity of the participants in this study</i>):</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Yes (<i>Describe</i>):</p>
<p><b>Please provide the list of data fields you intend to use for your analysis and/or provide the original instruments used in the study:</b></p>

*Note: If the archival data is not publicly available, submit proof of permission to access the data (i.e., school district letter or email). If you will receive data stripped of identifiers, this should be stated in the proof of permission.*

### 33. NON-ARCHIVAL DATA (PRIMARY DATA) (?)

**If you are using non-archival data, will the data be anonymous to you (i.e., raw data does not contain identifying information and cannot be linked to an individual/organization by use of pseudonyms, codes, or other means)?** **Note:** For studies involving audio/video recording or photography, select “No”

- N/A: I will not use non-archival data (data was previously collected, [skip to Media](#))
- No ([Complete the “No” section below](#))
- Yes ([Complete the “Yes” section below](#))

**\*\*COMPLETE THIS SECTION IF YOU ANSWERED “NO” TO QUESTION**

**31\*\***

**Can participant names or identities be deduced from the raw data?**

- No
- Yes (*Describe*):

**Will a person be able to identify a subject based on other information in the raw data (i.e., title, position, sex, etc.)?**

- No
- Yes (*Describe*):

**Describe the process you will use to ensure the confidentiality of the participants during data collection and in any publication(s) (i.e., you may be able to link**



*individuals/organizations to identifiable data; however, you will use pseudonyms or a coding system to conceal their identities):*

The researcher will use pseudonyms and a coding technique to conceal interview participants' identities.

**Do you plan to maintain a list or codebook linking pseudonyms or codes to participant identities?**

No

Yes (*Please describe where this list/codebook will be stored and who will have access to the list/codebook. It should not be stored with the data.*): .

The researcher will keep scribed pseudonyms and coding keys in a locked box in the researcher's home.

Only the researcher will have access to the pseudonyms and coding keys.

**\*\*COMPLETE THIS SECTION IF YOU ANSWERED "YES" TO QUESTION**

**31\*\***

**Describe the process you will use to collect the data to ensure that it is anonymous:**

<p><b>Place your initials in the box:</b> I will not attempt to deduce the identity of the participants in this study:</p>
<p><i>Note: If you plan to use participant data (i.e., photos, recordings, videos, drawings) for presentations beyond data analysis for the research study (e.g., classroom presentations, library archive, or conference presentations) you will need to provide a materials release form to the participant.</i></p>

<b>34. MEDIA USE (?)</b>	
<b>Will your participants be audio recorded?</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes
<b>Will your participants be video recorded?</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<b>Will your participants be photographed?</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes
<b>**COMPLETE THIS SECTION IF YOU ANSWERED "YES" TO ANY MEDIA USE**</b>	
<p><b>Include information regarding how participant data will be withdrawn if he or she chooses to leave the study*:</b></p> <p>Recorded audio will be destroyed if the participant withdraws.</p> <p>Data will be destroyed if the participant withdraws.</p>	
<p><b>Will your participants be audio recorded, video recorded, or photographed without their knowledge?*</b></p> <p><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No</p>	

Yes (*Describe the deception and debriefing procedures*):

*\*Note on Withdrawal: Add the heading "How to Withdraw from the Study" on the consent document and include a description of the procedures a participant must perform to be withdrawn.*

*\*\*Note on Deception: Attach a post-experiment debriefing statement and a post-deception consent form, offering the participants the option of having their recording/photograph destroyed and removed from the study.*

## **XVII. PARTICIPANT COMPENSATION**

### **35. COMPENSATION (?)**

**Will participants be compensated (e.g., gift cards, raffle entry, reimbursement)?**

No ([Proceed to Risks](#))

Yes (*Describe*):

**Will compensation be pro-rated if the participant does not complete all aspects of the study?**

No

Yes (*Describe*):

*Note: Certain states outlaw the use of lotteries, raffles, or drawings as a means to compensate or recruit research participants. Research compensation exceeding \$600 per participant within a one-year period is considered income and will need to be filed on the participant's income tax returns. If your study is grant funded, Liberty University's Business Office policies might affect how you compensate participants. Contact the IRB for additional information.*

## **XVIII. PARTICIPANT RISKS AND BENEFITS**

### **36. RISKS (?)**

**Describe the risks to participants and any steps that will be taken to minimize those risks.** (*Risks can be physical, psychological, economic, social, or legal. If the only potential risk is a breach in confidentiality if the data is lost or stolen, state that here*):

The only potential risk is a breach in confidentiality if the data is lost or stolen.

**Will alternative procedures or treatments that might be advantageous to the participants be made available?**

No

Yes (*Describe*):

**ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION ONLY IF YOUR STUDY IS  
CONSIDERED GREATER THAN MINIMAL RISK:**

**Describe provisions for ensuring necessary medical or professional intervention in the event of adverse effects to the participants** (*e.g., proximity of the research location to medical facilities, or your ability to provide counseling referrals in the event of emotional distress*):

### **37. BENEFITS (?)**

**Describe the possible direct benefits to the participants.** (*If participants are not expected to receive direct benefits, please state "No direct benefits." Completing a survey or participating in an interview will not typically result in direct benefits to the participant.*):

No direct benefits.

**Describe any possible benefits to society:** From a societal perspective, positive engagement of students is instrumental in providing students' the initiative to complete their

education. With the onslaught of blended and online program offerings, positive engagement of online students is equally important. If the inclusion of techniques found in experiential marketing enhances the student experience, and student's complete their educational program, all of society will benefit..

**Evaluate the risk-benefit ratio.** (*Explain why you believe this study is worth doing, even with any identified risks.*):

The risk of the research is minimal. Given the minimal risk, the research's benefits are twofold. First, understanding the experiences of blended and online students, practitioners' can apply concepts derived from this research to reduce attrition. Second, this research provides researchers new avenues for future research on blended and online students retention.

## Appendix B: Institutional Review Board Approval

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 27, 2018

William P. Delaney

IRB Approval 3323.072718: Student Perceptions of the Online Customer Experience: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Behavioral and Experiential Factors That Influence Online Student Retention

Dear William P. Delaney,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
The Graduate School

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY  
*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

## Appendix C: Data Release Agreement



Nathan Deal  
Governor

Matt Arthur  
Commissioner

July 23, 2018

Mr. William P. Delaney  
120 Linkside Drive  
Saint Simons Island, Georgia 31522

Dear Mr. Delaney:

The Technical College System of Georgia (TCSG) has received the forms and documentation related to your intended dissertation research of students enrolled in online courses at Coastal Pines Technical College in your doctoral research study "*Student Perceptions of the Online Customer Experience: A Phenomenological Investigation of the Behavioral and Experiential Factors that Influence Online Student Retention.*" We have reviewed the summary of your research, as well as the IRB approval issued to you by Liberty University.

In accordance with the IRB approval, as well as the documents you submitted to TCSG with regard to the parameters and intent of your study, we authorize you to continue with the research project with the stipulations that you do not obtain the list of online students by using Banner from Coastal Pines Technical College nor use class time for the surveys. TCSG personnel and resources may not be used to aid in your research. You can obtain directory information on students and contact them and their parents directly for consent to participate in your study.

Please make it clear to participants that the study is a personal venture associated with your doctoral studies independent of TCSG, and that **participation in the study is strictly voluntary.**

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me. I may be reached at (404) 679-1614 or [mkuezi-nke@tcsge.edu](mailto:mkuezi-nke@tcsge.edu).

Sincerely,

  
Marjorie Kuezi-Nke, Ph.D.  
Executive Director, Accountability and Institutional Effectiveness

cc: Dr. Kathryn R. Hornsby  
Mr. Richard Young  
Ms. Roray Smith  
Mr. Vince Jackson

### Appendix D: Interview Matrix

<p>The problem to be addressed is retention of online students. According to Mayhew (2014) educators have been slow to recognize that the bastions of education must adopt business strategies to ensure organizational sustainability. Predominate among the areas of sustainability was student retention. To explain student online retention, Layne et al. (2013) posited that many researchers focused exclusively on student demographic data. Marketers, according to Rucker (2017), had long recognized that behavioral and experiential factors influenced the quality of the customer experience.</p> <p>Layne et al. (2013) indicated that little attention had been given to behavioral and experiential factors that impacted student online retention. Rucker's (2017) research advanced that experiential marketing and creative thinking were linked. Continuing, Rucker posited that creative thinking, driven by experiential marketing, provoked a problem-solving experience. Rucker maintained that the problem-solving experience, solicited through the application of experiential marketing techniques could be applied to online student's learning experience. The specific problem to be addressed is retention of online students at a technical college in Southeast Georgia.</p>			
<p><b>Research Question 1.</b> What are the challenges blended and online student's students faced during their academic career and do the challenges influence blended and online student's learning experience and persistence to complete the blended on online program?</p> <p>How and to what extent do student challenges about online learning experiences indicate:</p>	<p><b><u>Challenges</u></b> that online classes/programs present students that influences the online students learning experience.</p>	<p><b><u>Customer Experiences</u></b> that influences the online students learning experience.</p>	<p><b><u>Experiential Marketing Experiences</u></b> that influences the online students learning experience.</p>
<p><b>Student's response to pressure.</b> <i>To begin this interview, I would like to ask you some questions about previous online course experience.</i></p>			
<p>Q1. Based on the information from the Technical College of Georgia you graduated from a program that had online classes.</p> <p>Prior to taking online classes in college, what were your experiences with online learning?</p>		X	X



Q2. How well did those previous experiences prepare you to take online classes in college?		X	X
Q3. Taking online classes presents both academic and personal challenges.  What were the academic challenges that you remember?	X	X	X
Q4. What were the personal challenges that you remember?	X		
Q5. Was the academic or personal challenge more difficult? How?	X		
Q6. Did you over come the academic challenging experience? How?	X		
Q7. If you overcame the academic challenge, how did the experience make you feel?	X		
Q8. If you did not overcame the academic challenge, how did the experience make you feel?	X		
Q9. If you overcame the personal challenge, how did the experience make you feel?	X		
Q10. If you did not overcame the personal challenge, how did the experience make you feel?	X		
Q11. What good customer experiences have you had with online courses?	X	X	X
Q12. How does a good online course customer experience make you feel?	X	X	X

Q13. What bad customer experiences have you had with online courses?	X	X	
Q14. How does a bad online course customer experience make you feel?	X	X	
Q15. How does a good online course customer experience influence your desire to complete the online program?	X	X	
Q16. How does a bad online course customer experience influence your desire to complete the online program?	X	X	
Q17. How would you describe learner satisfaction?	X	X	X
Q18. How would you compare your experience as an online learner with your experience as an online customer?	X	X	
Q19. What experience as an online customer would you like to see implemented into your online learning experience?	X	X	
Q20. How would you describe your experience as an online learner?	X	X	
Q21. What experience as an online learner would you like to see implemented into your online customer experience?	X	X	

<b>Research Question 2.</b> Through the optics of a consumer's experience, does	<b><u>Challenges</u></b> that online classes/programs present students that influences	<b><u>Customer Experiences</u></b> that influences the	<b><u>Experiential Marketing Experiences</u></b>
--	--	--	--

consumer's customer experience(s) influence blended and online student's learning satisfaction and persistence to complete the blended or online program?  How and to what extent do consumer experiences indicate:	the online students learning experience.	online students learning experience.	that influences the online students learning experience.
<p><b>Learner satisfaction.</b>  <i>Thank you. Next, I would like to ask you a few questions about your experience as an online customer.</i></p>			
Q22. How would you describe your most memorable customer experience?		X	X
Q23. If you were alone during the experience what were the emotions that you felt?	X	X	
Q24. If you were not alone during the experience what were the emotions that you felt?	X	X	
Q25. If the experience was physical (running, jumping, climbing) describe what your role was in the experience?	X	X	X
Q26. How did the experience make you feel?	X	X	X
Q27. If the experience was mental (thinking, solving, building, and calculating), what was your role in the experience?	X	X	X
Q28. How did the experience make you feel?	X	X	X
Q29. If the experience was both physical and mental, what was your role in the experience?	X	X	X
Q30. How did the experience make you feel?	X	X	X
Q31. What are some of your most memorable online customer experiences?		X	X
Q32. How would you describe your most memorable online customer experience?		X	X

Q33. If you were alone during the online experience what were the emotions that you felt?	x	x	
Q34. If you were not alone during the online experience what were the emotions that you felt?	x	x	
Q35. If the online experience was physical (running, jumping, climbing) describe what your role was in the experience?	x	x	x
Q36. How did the online physical experience make you feel?	x	x	x
Q37. If the online experience was mental (thinking, solving, building, and calculating), what was your role in the experience?	x	x	x
Q38. How did the online mental experience make you feel?	x	x	x
Q39. If the online experience was both physical and mental, what was your role in the experience?	x	x	x
Q40. How did the physical and mental experience make you feel?	x	x	x
Q41. What are some of your most memorable online customer experiences?		x	x
Q42. How would you describe your most memorable academic online course customer experience?		x	x
Q43. If you were alone during the academic online course experience, what were the emotions that you felt?	x	x	
Q44. If you were networking during the academic online course customer experience,	x	x	

what were the emotions that the group felt?			
Q45. If the academic online course customer experience was physical (running, jumping, climbing) describe what your role was in the experience?	x	x	x
Q46. How did the physical academic online course customer experiences make you feel?	x	x	x
Q47. If the academic online course customer experience was mental (thinking, solving, building, and calculating), what was your role in the experience?	x	x	x
Q48. How did the academic online course customer mental experience make you feel?	x	x	x
Q49. If the academic online course customer experience was both physical and mental, what was your role in the experience?	x	x	x
Q50. How did the physical and mental online course experience make you feel?	x	x	x
Q51. How would you describe the relationship between the academic online course customer experience and your persistence to complete the online program?		x	x
Q52. What experience as an online learner would you like to see implemented into your online customer experience?		x	x
<b>Research Question 3.</b> Through the lens of consumer's experiential experience(s), do experiential projects influence blended and online student's learning	<b>Challenges</b> that online classes/programs present students that influences the online students learning experience.	<b>Customer Experiences</b> that influences the online students learning experience.	<b>Experiential Marketing Experiences</b> that influences the online students

satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program?  How and to what extent do consumer experiential events indicate:			learning experience.
<b>Student engagement and persistence.</b> <i>Thank you. Next, I would like to ask you a few questions about your consumer experiential events.</i>			
Q53. Marketers focus on creating events that provide customers unique and memorable experiences.  What do you consider the foundational elements of a unique and memorable consumer experience?		X	X
Q54. What do you consider the essential elements of a unique and memorable consumer experience?		X	X
Q55. How would you describe a unique or memorable event you have participated as a consumer?		X	X
Q56. How would you describe the purpose of the consumer event in which you participated?		X	X
Q57. Why did you participate in the consumer event?		X	X
Q58. How did the consumer event you were at include the essential elements of a unique and memorable consumer experience you described previously?		X	X
Q59. How did the consumer event you were at include the elements of a unique and memorable consumer experience you described previously?		X	X
Q60. What would you have done to improve the consumer	X	X	X

experience you described previously?			
Q61. What was your role as a participant in the consumer event?		X	X
Q62. What would you have done to make your role in the consumer experience more enjoyable?	X	X	X
Q63. If you had the opportunity, would you participate in the consumer event again?  If answer no go to Q64, otherwise continue.  What are the reasons you would attend the event again?		X	X
Q64. What are the reasons you would not attend the event again?		X	X
Q65. What features of the consumer event motivated you?		X	X
Q66. How did the features of the consumer event motivate you?	X	X	X
Q67. When did the features of the consumer event motivate you?	X	X	X
Q68. Where were you when the consumer event motivated you?	X	X	X
Q.69 What features of the consumer event challenged you?	X	X	X
Q70. How did the features of the consumer event challenge you?	X	X	X
Q71. When did the features of the consumer event challenge you?		X	X
Q72. Where were you when the consumer event challenged you?	X	X	X

Q73. What elements of the consumer event disappointed you?		X	X
Q74. When you felt disappointment, what were the feelings you experienced?		X	X
Q75. Would you recommend others participate in the consumer event?  If answer no go to Q76, otherwise continue.  What are the reasons you would recommend others to attend?		X	X
Q77. What are the reasons you would not recommend others to attend?		X	X
Q78. Instructors create unique projects that provide students firsthand experiences.  How would you, as a blended or online student, describe a memorable project experience?		X	X
Q79. As a blended or online student, how would you describe your most memorable academic project experience?		X	X
Q80. What elements of the project stand out as challenging?	X	X	X
Q81. How would you describe the most challenging element of the project?	X	X	X
Q82. How did the most challenging element of the assignment make you feel?	X	X	X
Q83. Did you over come the challenging element of the project?  If answer no go to Q84, otherwise continue.	X	X	X



How did you over come the challenging element of the project?			
Q84. What techniques (mental, physical, both) did you use to over come the challenging element(s) of the project?	X	X	X
Q85. What were your feeling when you overcame the challenging element of the assignment?	X	X	X
Q86. What are the reasons you did not over come the challenge(s) the project presented?	X	X	X
Q87. What were your feeling when you did not over come the challenging element(s) of the project?	X	X	X
Q88. What was the project's purpose?		X	X
Q89. What made the experience of the project unique?		X	X
Q90. What did you do as a blended or online student in the project?	X	X	X
Q91. What elements of the project excited you?	X	X	X
Q92. If you felt excitement, what were the feelings you experienced?	X	X	X
Q93. What elements of the project disappointed you?	X	X	X
Q94. If you felt disappointment, what were the feelings you experienced?	X	X	X
<p><b>End of survey.</b>  <i>Thank you. This is the end of the survey. Is there anything else you would like to add or clarify?</i>  <i>If not, once again, thank you for participating in this research..</i></p>			

## Appendix E: Interview Guide

### Opening Comments:

Retention among online college students is less than retention among college students that attend a classroom with face-to-face interactions with an instructor. Your experiences as an online program graduate are vital to this research. The findings of this research, applied to professional practice, could hold the key to improving retention among college students that participate in online programs.

Do you have any questions before we get started?

*If you do not have any questions, I would like to ask you a few questions about the challenges you experienced as an online student.*

### Research Question 1.

What are the challenges blended and online student's students faced during their academic career and do the challenges influence blended and online student's learning experience and persistence to complete the blended online program?

Q1. Based on the information from the Technical College of Georgia you graduated from a program that had online classes. Prior to taking online classes in college, what were your experiences with online learning?

Q2. How well did those previous experiences prepare you to take online classes in college?

Q3. Taking online classes presents both academic and personal challenges. What were the academic challenges that you remember?

Q4. What were the personal challenges that you remember?

Q5. Was the academic or personal challenge more difficult?

How?

Q6. Did you overcome the academic challenging experience?

How?

Q7. If you overcame the academic challenge, how did the experience make you feel?

Q8. If you did not overcome the academic challenge, how did the experience make you feel?

Q9. If you overcame the personal challenge, how did the experience make you feel?
Q10. If you did not overcome the personal challenge, how did the experience make you feel?
Q11. What good customer experiences have you had with online courses?
Q12. How does a good online course customer experience make you feel?
Q13. What bad customer experiences have you had with online courses?
Q14. How does a bad online course customer experience make you feel?
Q15. How does a good online course customer experience influence your desire to complete the online program?
Q16. How does a bad online course customer experience influence your desire to complete the online program?
Q17. How would you describe learner satisfaction?
Q18. How would you compare your experience as an online learner with your experience as an online customer?
Q19. What experience as an online customer would you like to see implemented into your online learning experience?
Q20. How would you describe your experience as an online learner?
Q21. What experience as an online learner would you like to see implemented into your online customer experience?
<i>Thank you. Next, I would like to ask you a few questions about your online program experience as an online customer.</i>
<b>Research Question 2.</b> Through the optics of a consumer's experience, does consumer's customer experience(s) influence blended and online student's learning satisfaction and persistence to complete the blended or online program?
Q22. How would you describe your most memorable customer experience?
Q23. If you were alone during the experience what were the emotions that you felt?

Q24. If you were not alone during the experience what were the emotions that you felt?
Q25. If the experience was physical (running, jumping, climbing) describe what your role was in the experience?
Q26. How did the experience make you feel?
Q27. If the experience was mental (thinking, solving, building, and calculating), what was your role in the experience?
Q28. How did the experience make you feel?
Q29. If the experience was both physical and mental, what was your role in the experience?
Q30. How did the experience make you feel?
Q31. What are some of your most memorable online customer experiences?
Q32. How would you describe your most memorable online customer experience?
Q33. If you were alone during the online experience what were the emotions that you felt?
Q34. If you were not alone during the online experience what were the emotions that you felt?
Q35. If the online experience was physical (running, jumping, climbing) describe what your role was in the experience?
Q36. How did the online physical experience make you feel?
Q37. If the online experience was mental (thinking, solving, building, and calculating), what was your role in the experience?
Q38. How did the online mental experience make you feel?
Q39. If the online experience was both physical and mental, what was your role in the experience?
Q40. How did the physical and mental experience make you feel?
Q41. What are some of your most memorable online customer experiences?
Q42. How would you describe your most memorable academic online course customer experience?

Q43. If you were alone during the academic online course experience, what were the emotions that you felt?

Q44. If you were networking during the academic online course customer experience, what were the emotions that the group felt?

Q45. If the academic online course customer experience was physical (running, jumping, climbing) describe what your role was in the experience?

Q46. How did the physical academic online course customer experiences make you feel?

Q47. If the academic online course customer experience was mental (thinking, solving, building, and calculating), what was your role in the experience?

Q48. How did the academic online course customer mental experience make you feel?

Q49. If the academic online course customer experience was both physical and mental, what was your role in the experience?

Q50. How did the physical and mental online course experience make you feel?

Q51. How would you describe the relationship between the academic online course customer experience and your persistence to complete the online program?

Q52. What experience as an online learner would you like to see implemented into your online customer experience?

*Thank you. Next, I would like to ask you a few questions about your online program experiential experiences.*

*Experiential Experiences are characterized as a problem solving experience that requires creative thinking.*

**Research Question 3.**

Through the lens of consumer's experiential experience(s), do experiential projects influence blended and online student's learning satisfaction and persistence to complete an online program?

Q53. Marketers focus on creating events that provide customers unique and memorable experiences.

What do you consider the foundational elements of a unique and memorable consumer experience?

Q54. What do you consider the essential elements of a unique and memorable consumer experience?
Q55. How would you describe a unique or memorable event you have participated as a consumer?
Q56. How would you describe the purpose of the consumer event in which you participated?
Q57. Why did you participate in the consumer event?
Q58. How did the consumer event you were at include the essential elements of a unique and memorable consumer experience you described previously?
Q59. How did the consumer event you were at include the elements of a unique and memorable consumer experience you described previously?
Q60. What would you have done to improve the consumer experience you described previously?
Q61. What was your role as a participant in the consumer event?
Q62. What would you have done to make your role in the consumer experience more enjoyable?
Q63. If you had the opportunity, would you participate in the consumer event again?  If answer no go to Q64, otherwise continue.  What are the reasons you would attend the event again?
Q64. What are the reasons you would not attend the event again?
Q65. What features of the consumer event motivated you?
Q66. How did the features of the consumer event motivate you?
Q67. When did the features of the consumer event motivate you?
Q68. Where were you when the consumer event motivated you?
Q.69 What features of the consumer event challenged you?
Q70. How did the features of the consumer event challenge you?
Q71. When did the features of the consumer event challenge you?

Q72. Where were you when the consumer event challenged you?
Q73. What elements of the consumer event disappointed you?
Q74. When you felt disappointment, what were the feelings you experienced?
Q75. Would you recommend others participate in the consumer event?  If answer no go to Q76, otherwise continue.  What are the reasons you would recommend others to attend?
Q77. What are the reasons you would not recommend others to attend?
Q78. Instructors create unique projects that provide students firsthand experiences.  How would you, as a blended or online student, describe a memorable project experience?
Q79. As a blended or online student, how would you describe your most memorable academic project experience?
Q80. What elements of the project stand out as challenging?
Q81. How would you describe the most challenging element of the project?
Q82. How did the most challenging element of the assignment make you feel?
Q83. Did you overcome the challenging element of the project?  If answer no go to Q84, otherwise continue.  How did you overcome the challenging element of the project?
Q84. What techniques (mental, physical, both) did you use to overcome the challenging element(s) of the project?
Q85. What were your feeling when you overcame the challenging element of the assignment?
Q86. What are the reasons you did not overcome the challenge(s) the project presented?
Q87. What were your feeling when you did not overcome the challenging element(s) of the project?
Q88. What was the project's purpose?
Q89. What made the experience of the project unique?

Q90. What did you do as a blended or online student in the project?
Q91. What elements of the project excited you?
Q92. If you felt excitement, what were the feelings you experienced?
Q93. What elements of the project disappointed you?
Q94. If you felt disappointment, what were the feelings you experienced?
<p><i>Thank you. This is the end of the survey. Is there anything else you would like to add or clarify?</i></p> <p><i>Do you have any questions?</i></p> <p><i>If not, once again, thank you for participating in this research..</i></p>