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Online Orientation: An Investigation of Its Effect on Graduate Students' First-Course Retention

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Online Orientation: An Investigation of its Effect on Graduate Students' First-course Retention

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College of Education

Lisa S. Fee

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study targeted one semester of 428 graduate-level students in the fall of 2016 who completed, or did not complete the five quizzes in a non-mandatory, online orientation to determine the impact of the orientation from enrollment through first-course retention. From the total population of 428 graduate-level students' contact information, 53 students were not found in any orientation, but were listed as completing their first course, and were removed, resulting in 375 students who received a weekly email over a 5–week period with a link to voluntarily participate in the study. This resulted in a convenience sample of 108 students included those who agreed to participate in the study. As noted in the study, 110 of 375 students completed orientation within the semester, while 265 of 375 students did not complete the orientation, with 71 of 108 non-completers who agreed to participate in the study compared to 37 of 108 completers. Phone interviews were established from 5 of 8 students from the convenience sample who did not complete their online orientation and who failed their first course. Student completion of the orientation was compared to first-course retention rates, and a generalization of Fisher's Exact Chi Square used to evaluate the efficacy of the orientation program on retention with the grade of an A or B at the graduate level. This allowed for an exact analysis of tables with more than two rows or columns, and evaluated whether orientation completers and non-completers differed in their perceptions of the online master's program orientation, academic performance, and subsequent retention from enrollment through the end of their first course. The quantitative data revealed that the generalization of Fisher's Exact chi square analyses showed no statistical significance.

Keywords: online orientation, enrollment, first course, completion, online learning, distance education, retention, student success, attrition

Dedication

First, I dedicate this dissertation to the Lord, who has not only saved my eternal soul, but has also freely loved and forgiven me as no other. You are my Lord, my Rock, and my Salvation, and You make all things possible. I am grateful beyond words for Your gift of everlasting life through Your sacrifice on the cross, as well as the many gifts and talents You have bestowed upon me so that I may be a blessing to others for Your glory. I have accomplished and overcome many things throughout the course of my life, and it is all because of Your generous blessings, loving mercy, and grace!

To my parents, Bill and Jane, who have been the epitome of what it means to be persistent in overcoming life's challenges, thank you. Your support, kindness, generosity, and love have been a model for me throughout my life, and there is no way to repay or explain your paramount role in supporting and guiding me through the incredible experiences in my life. You will always have my utmost love and respect.

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Chapter 1

Introduction to the Problem

Universities have had the challenge of maintaining and improving retention rates in online programs as well as continued enrollment by students involved in online programs over the last two decades (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Nitecki, 2011). The number of students enrolled in online learning programs has greatly expanded within the last twenty years due to the rapid increase in the processing power and speed of digital technologies combined with the dramatic decrease in the overall cost of these technologies (Fullan & Scott, 2009). The effects of these structural changes have not only altered the way higher education and society view learning, but they have also significantly altered the way individuals learn and live (Prensky, 2012). Fullan and Scott (2009) noted that "no longer is the university viewed as the sole . . . repository of leading-edge knowledge" (p. 7). Research, analysis, and learning can occur practically anywhere through the adoption of these technologies, creating new opportunities for higher education through the development and expansion of online courses and degree programs.

However, with the increase in online learning opportunities, there has been growing concern among leaders within higher education over statistically low student completion rates for online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013; He, Xu, & Kruck, 2014; Vaill, 2013). According to their research, learner retention and completion in the online environment is a developing issue, as the number of students enrolled in online classes continues to increase exponentially. Additional concern exists, as there is a significant percentage of online graduate-level students starting programs and dropping out of their programs or the university entirely. These factors greatly affect retention rates within higher education institutions and many leaders are seeking ways to improve retention in online learning. Allen

and Seaman (2016) stated that the overall growth rates in exclusively online learning populations increased from 3.7% total enrollment in 2013 to 3.9% in 2014, with public institutions enrolling the largest number of distance-education students at 48%. Private, non-profit institutions saw increases as well in exclusive online enrollments of 26% from 2012 to 2014. The responsibility of ensuring that students are prepared for their online programs expands concurrently with the large growth rate. In an effort to offset students' lack of preparation and increase online retention, many institutions introduced online orientations. Missing from this research is the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations are effective on first-course retention for graduate-level student populations.

Background, Context, and Conceptual Framework

As online enrollments continued to grow exponentially from 2012 to 2014, concerns over improving statistically low student completion rates for online programs began to take precedence in many higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2016). One way to assist students and to familiarize them with the online environment is through the offering of an online orientation class. Much like a traditional on-campus orientation, the design serves as an introduction to not only the university itself, but also to the structures, processes, and procedures students utilize throughout their online programs. They provide an introduction to the university, its mission and goals, its online library, as well as providing any additional facilities and services that can enhance students' overall online experiences (Beyrer, 2010; Cannady, 2015; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015; Vaill, 2013).

Many institutions develop orientation programs as a way to alleviate the issues students may experience by training them in advance on how to request proper student support and by

promoting a greater amount of self-sufficiency and self-directed learning (Fetzner, 2013; Vaill, 2013). Furthermore, a well-designed orientation program will provide much more than a mechanical presentation of the skills, processes, and network locations needed to complete assignments. Well-designed orientation programs also give insight into the history, culture, and underlying educational philosophy of universities' founders.

The precise nature and existence of these orientations are not standardized, nor are they consistently implemented (Fetzner, 2013). Not all universities have incorporated them, nor have all universities made an orientation an introductory part of their programs (Cho, 2012; Croxton, 2014). Some online orientations are mandatory, while others are offered as an optional program to be utilized how and when the student finds it necessary. Online orientations can be designed to be self-directed or facilitator-led as a means to enhance interaction and communication during the initial, introductory phases of an online program.

While there are many studies related to the importance of online orientations at the community college level, few studies have been conducted at private universities using data related to non-mandatory online orientations. Therefore, this study may provide vital information in the area of non-mandatory online orientations within higher education as well as provide student orientation-related recommendations for higher-education institutions concerned with improving student retention to address retention challenges.

Due to the inherently remote nature of online learning, students cannot easily walk into an office or department building and ask pertinent questions or receive the individualized help they may need to be successful. According to Croxton (2014), advocates for online learning and orientation programs cite a challenge that online learners encounter is not being able to access on-ground services physically, thus they need available online resources to support their success

(Jaggers & Bailey, 2010; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011). Furthermore, online orientations met the challenges these students most often encountered by presenting them a means to explore the specific learning platform prior to their online program to practice ~~s~~kills such as student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as well as understanding the basic navigational features of their user interface (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013).

Universities today are actively seeking additional ways to improve student retention in the formative, most vulnerable portions of students' online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015). Therefore, practicing these skills through an online orientation program can provide needed support for students who require it, as a means to increase their success rates throughout their first course (Beyrer, 2010; Daniel, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013). Online orientations, based on the literature, can provide the support students need to become better prepared for and better engaged in the online learning environment, possibly improving student retention (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013).

The research site was located on one campus of a private, religious-based institution, established in its northwestern-area university located in the United States in 1905. The university's online orientation program, utilizing the Blackboard learning management system, (LMS), began in the fall of 2009 (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). It was instructor-facilitated and contained six learning modules with different assignments to familiarize students with the contextual design features of the LMS, as well as time to experiment with navigation and practice in assignment submission prior to the start of a student's first, fully online course.

This format remained in place until January 2016, at which time the university transitioned to a non-instructor-facilitated, fully online orientation program.

In January 2016, the university added a non-instructor-facilitated, non-mandatory online orientation that provides students with similar opportunities to explore the Blackboard LMS (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). Information is also included relating to specific resources designed to support learning within the university, such as media of student perceptions of the university, the university's mission and values, and a brief history of the university and student expectations while completing their course of study. Additional information within the orientation included program specifics as well as requirements for doctoral, masters, and bachelor's programs, including links to student handbooks and library guides (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). This information remains available to students throughout their programs so that they may refer back to it as needed during their course of study. This study encompassed a period of 7 weeks, from beginning of the 2–week orientation course, which occurred prior to the start of students' first-course, while it also included the 5–week period of the first course in the students' program. The revised orientation does not provide opportunities for students to apply learning to practical application of skills acquired until their first course.

The online orientation program included cumulative sections, which introduced basic skills related to Blackboard navigation, understanding the structure of students' first course in their programs, technological requirements such as recommended browsers, free versions of required Microsoft programs, and where to go online for technical and academic support as needed (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). There was also information about the

university's online writing center, highly recommended as a support structure for students to use freely as needed.

Additional information in the orientation related to updating students' email addresses, as well as inserting an avatar or recent photo of him or herself so that students may better recognize each other in the online forum (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). Also included in this section is information related to discussion boards, online quizzes, and assignment submission. The five quizzes within the orientation allow students to test their knowledge regarding orientation information on the American Psychological Association (APA) manual, library resources and navigation, and Blackboard tutorials. All of these items are used by students as they travel through their programs. There are also links to outside resources such as the OWL/Purdue website and other links provided by the university online library that assist learning APA. However, nothing within the orientation is required since it is non-mandatory, and there is no instructor/facilitator assisting students.

Questions arose from this non-facilitated orientation design, since the university fully endorses transformative learning, as stated by the university president in the welcome section of the orientation (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). However, there is no facilitator available in the newly created orientation to interact with and welcome students, as transformative learning suggests as a best practice (Beaudoin, 2015; Boyd, 2015; Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011; Fifolt, 2014; Glancy & Isenberg, 2013; Hilton, 2013; Mezirow, 1991). Transformative learning is an adult learning theory in which there is a structural change in the way individuals see themselves as a result of learning, how their beliefs can change through reflection of new learning experiences, and how those reflections cause a reevaluation of their relationships with others or in how they view and interact with the world around them (Mezirow, 1978).

Transformative learning encompasses interaction and communicative discourse with peers and facilitators, and this learning format is crucial in introducing students to the process of examining their assumptions regarding their own beliefs in relation to online learning (Fifolt, 2014). When students begin with this structure in their initial experiences in orientation at the university-level, they can put transformative learning practices into action by interacting with the facilitator and their peers, all while fostering a greater sense of online community in which to support future learning and retention (Beaudoin, 2015; Boyd, 2015; Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011; Fifolt, 2014; Glancy & Isenberg, 2013; Hilton, 2013; Mezirow, 1991).

The next section examines the adult, transformative learning theory of Mezirow (1991) and its influences on online education as a means of supporting student relationships and the types of interactions that integrate to provide a solid foundation supporting adult learning. Mezirow's (1991) theory may have an impact on student retention, beginning with an online orientation, to completing a first online course in the students' programs to help improve retention within students' first course.

The documented increase in online enrollment in Allen and Seaman's (2016) report has created rising retention concerns for leaders within higher education. However, Gaytan (2015) found that there is no singular prediction for which factors affect retention in online education. Current research from the field, as well as from Gaytan's (2015) study, suggests that many students must be better prepared for the unique demands online learning presents (Jaggers & Bailey, 2010; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011; Gaytan, 2015). As a result, student orientation programs have historically helped combat lower completion rates while supporting online learning (Beyrer, 2010; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010).

While there are many theoretical frameworks supporting learning and the importance of reflection of that learning in online education, such as concepts found in the learning theories of Tinto (1975), and Knowles (1970), transformative learning theory by Mezirow (1991) framed the research of this study. Many learning theories related to the process of adult student learning and success reveal a variety of factors affecting students' motivation, integration, and interaction within an online course, all of which can significantly affect learning outcomes, student persistence, and successful completion of these courses (Gaytan, 2015; Kelly, 2012; Hilton, 2013; Henschke, 2011; Meyer & Murrell, 2014; Chan, 2010). Likewise, transformative learning is the lens through which this study examined retention and any issues surrounding online learning challenges. Transformative learning describes how students or individuals learn in online programs, grow from their learning experiences because of changes or reflections in their learning schemas, and then reevaluate individualized learning gains within online learning (Logan, 2013).

The concepts of retention relating to students' first course because of completing an online orientation relate to the concepts from Mezirow's (1991) theory, and frame the argumentative structure for this research study based on my views of challenges related to retention during students' first course. When students complete an online orientation, they have the opportunity to transform their learning perspectives of online learning, reflect on those experiences, and either accept them or change their views of the online experience (Willink & Jacobs, 2012). For example, students can be apprehensive or doubtful of their own abilities prior to beginning an online program (Brown, Hughes, & Delaney, 2015; Cho, 2012; Fetzner, 2013; Jones, 2013). This apprehension or anxiety may be the learning experience that causes them to reevaluate their views of themselves as learners within the online learning environment.

Students may then reflect on the online learning experience and then either accept or change their views of what they can accomplish within a new learning platform. This example of transformative learning, although abbreviated, helps explain my educational paradigm for viewing and justifying retention surrounding a non-mandatory online orientation.

Problem Statement and Organization

This section assesses the relationship between retention rates among students who complete an online orientation and those who do not and the possible extent of impact of that relationship to higher student retention rates for first courses in fully online programs. Universities cite growing concerns that must be addressed regarding retention, students who begin programs and then decide to drop, and lower completion rates for online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016). This study may yield positive results and recommendations for higher education institutions seeking further means to remedy retention challenges. Missing from pertinent research, and what is not known on this topic, is the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations are effective on first-course retention for non-traditional student populations.

Searches for this study included online educational databases such as ProQuest, ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, and the Wiley Online Library, revealing relevant literature that informed this study. A fundamental keyword search in many abstracts within the literature included “online learning,” “distance-education,” “retention,” “completion,” “online orientation programs,” “student success,” and “attrition” helped guide relevant as well as revealing research that further validates findings.

Purpose of Study

Missing from the research and literature in the field of online orientations is the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations are effective on first-course retention for non-

traditional student populations. This study examined the extent that non-mandatory online orientations are effective for non-traditional student populations relative to first-course retention. The findings obtained in this study were used to recommend strategies for developing and maintaining online orientation programs addressing student retention in chapter five.

Research Questions

The research questions are the following:

R_1: What impact does completing or not completing a non-mandatory online orientation have on graduate-level students' first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

R_2: Do students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation influence first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

Additional analysis of these questions was needed to validate non-mandatory online orientations' relevancy and effectiveness in adequately preparing online students within higher education.

Rationale, Relevance, and Significance

This study examined the impact of the completion of an online orientation on student retention in relation to grades of an A or B within students' first course, since a grade of an A or B is considered passing at the graduate level. Grades were used to make a correlation between completers and non-completers and students' first-course grades in a graduate-level program. Orientations are both relevant and timely due to the expressed interest in many universities in finding ways of improving low online retention rates (Allen & Seaman, 2016). There must be a continued commitment by university leaders to pursue and implement online revisions and improvements as a way to influence online retention positively.

It must be noted that completion is very different from retention within universities and colleges. Students may complete an orientation; however, this does not mean that they will finish the first course in their scheduled program. Some students may complete the orientation and learn to use and navigate the online material or LMS. However, some may drop out of their first course or the university entirely, thereby affecting their retention and program longevity within the university. Also, if a college or university has a "75 percent overall graduation rate, but only 15 percent of its Native American students graduate, the success of the majority masks problems in specific populations" (Southeastern Oklahoma State University, 2017, para. 6). For this reason, careful attention must be taken to understand the differences between how colleges and universities define completion and retention.

Furthermore, the research site at which this study occurred defines retention in terms of achieving good academic standing, with the grade of an A or a B in each graduate-level course, in order to maintain consecutive enrollment in the students' programs (Northwestern-Area University, 2015). The Northwestern-Area University's (2015) graduate-level handbook states that "students must earn and maintain a B- or better to remain enrolled in their online programs . . . and advance towards program completion" (p. 6). Continued enrollment at the research site, based on these statements, is equivalent to retention. However, this study only focused on graduate-level students from the start of enrollment into the university, through their orientation completion or orientation non-completion, to students' first-course completion with the possible grade of an A or a B.

In reviewing the literature, several researchers cited the importance of online orientations as a way of improving online retention. Glancy and Isenberg (2013) posited that online orientations promote a more secure introductory online learning environment for students in

which to explore and use LMS technologies, providing opportunities for transformative support and communication during introductory phases of online learning. Boyd (2015) also supported this rationale by supporting the significant role that orientation facilitators have in cultivating an atmosphere of transformative learning through questions and discussions. This facilitated approach assists students in examining their beliefs and thoughts in relation to newly gained information encountered in their online orientations by learning from their peers and facilitator. Beyrer's (2010) research suggested that students who expressed an intention to enroll in an online program should be encouraged to complete, not just participate in a non-mandatory online orientation.

McGlynn (2012) and Asdi (2015) confirmed Beyrer's (2010) findings, stating that students who persisted in their online learning programs were better prepared through their orientation with assignments that included computer literacy, time management, information literacy, reading and writing, and computer-based interaction. For these reasons, continued research is needed to understand fully the role that an online orientation may have in supporting online learning.

Definition of Terms

This section reviews the background, context, and significance pertaining to online, non-mandatory orientation programs and the support they offer students who are preparing for online degree programs. A number of terms are important in understanding this study. The explanations for each are defined:

Adult/graduate-level student. Students enrolled into the research site demonstrating completion of a Baccalaureate degree and meeting all enrollment requirements established by the research site (Northwestern-Area University, 2015).

Andragogy. Knowles's (1970) learning theory is learner-focused and based on specific needs of adult learners and why something is important to learn; allows them to build on previous knowledge and experience when relating new information in a self-directed format.

Attrition. The loss in student population from higher education during the normal course of educational events (Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011).

Completion. Students who have completed all five orientation quizzes within the orientation course (Northwestern-Area University, 2016).

First-course retention. Graduate-level students who complete the first course in their program with an A or B grade and who may choose to immediately enroll in the following term (Northwestern-Area University, 2015).

Learning management system (LMS). A software application housing online courses over the internet for meaningful classroom engagement between students, their peers, and instructors (Koehnke, 2013).

Online course. Scheduled classroom activities completed at a distance and managed within an online environment (Koehnke, 2013).

Online learning. Any planned education using electronic content through the internet (Glancy & Isenberg, 2013).

Online orientation. A program offered to students who are new to a university presenting information related to skills, academics, program requirements, key contact personnel, and university background and guidelines important for success (Wheatley-Martinez, 2010).

Retention. The ability of an institution to retain a student from "admission through his-her first course" (Lipe & Waller, 2013, p. 4).

Soft skills. Essential student skills needed for successful online course completion such as time management, interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, computer confidence, and personal organization (Arora, 2015).

Transformative learning. An adult learning theory in which reflections on interactions in courses and relationships spur a structural change in the way in which individuals see themselves (Mezirow, 1978).

Additional definitions must be mentioned in the context of the university in which they are used. Allen and Seaman (2016) defined online education as one in which "80% of the course content is delivered online" (p. 7). Retention definitions can vary, depending on the type of institution, whether it is for-profit, non-profit, public, or private, as well as with setting, background, purpose, or intent. For this study, retention was defined as "the ability of an institution to retain a student" from admission through his/her first course (Lipe & Waller, 2013, p. 4).

Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations

Some of the methodological assumptions relevant to this study were that the adult, graduate-level students submitted honest and accurate data in their surveys. Great care was taken in the survey explanation to properly inform students of their responsibility in being forthcoming in their responses. An additional assumption was that students completing the orientation would have improved student first-course retention. However, as noted within the literature review in the next chapter, orientation programs are not a final solution for retention challenges (Jaggers & Bailey, 2010).

This study was limited to the data of one campus of a private institution, and extending this study to include several different private universities would likely yield more accurate

results. The qualitative information gleaned relied heavily on student survey comments gathered by the university based on students' experiences within the orientation program. Quantitative findings corresponding to retention were based on any correlation to completion in the online orientation and any relationship to first-course retention. Further adjustment may be needed to improve the efficacy of any findings relative to student completion of a non-mandatory online orientation to first-course retention at one campus of a private university.

A delimitation within this study was that it included only graduate-level students in online orientation programs and their orientation experiences at one campus at a private institution. The reason for this delimitation was due to the prevalence of research in the field focused on undergraduate students within community colleges and public institutions (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown, Hughes, & Delaney, 2015; Cannady, 2015; Cho, 2012; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011; Garza-Mitchell, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Johnson, Stewart, & Bachman, 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; McGlynn, 2012; Pittenger & Lounsbery, 2011; Stewart, Bachman, & Johnson, 2010; Talbert, 2012; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010; Wozniak, Pizzica, & Mahony, 2012). Leaders in private institutions may greatly benefit from the results of this study in garnering additional strategies and best practices for improving graduate-level retention rates.

Lastly, the writer's bias toward mandatory online orientations was evident, based on her own professional experiences within the orientation program and directly in response to submitted student survey comments as an employee. McGuire (2014) stated that bias can be a natural part of any researcher's exploration and study of a specific topic and "can include assumptions, interests, preferences, norms, or predispositions" (para. 2). While any amount of

perceived bias can guide and direct one's interests in specific areas or issues within research, it can also affect how data are analyzed or interpreted, leading to highly subjective or even false conclusions (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). Personal interests in the results are to present data and information in a way that does not challenge any procedures or processes used by the northwestern-area university, and neutral committee members took great care to present findings in an unbiased manner.

Summary

Leaders within higher education have grown concerned over online retention rates that have been shown to be consistently lower than face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Online orientations have become one way to help alleviate these challenges, as these programs provide the support students need to be more successful online. By participating in an online orientation, students are given access to the tools and mind-set they will need to be prepared for their online programs. In addition, skills learned can help students become more intrinsically motivated to remain in their programs (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Chan, 2010; He et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Millman, Posey, & Pintz, 2014; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Valosik, 2014; Wozniack et al., 2012).

Orientations have been shown through research to aid student progress through the training they receive at the start of their programs as well as assist with retention problems. The assignments completed give students a feeling of accomplishment, which based on research, can promote a more learner-ready attitude and give students a feeling of preparedness. Daniel's (2013) research revealed that students were more self-directed when they successfully completed orientation assignments, gaining a greater sense of control through the completion of the

orientation, helping to reduce any anxiety or lack of self-confidence. Furthermore, students who completed the orientation program prior to beginning their program had "greater positive perceptions regarding their future academic challenges" (p. 21).

Although there are many factors that may contribute to students' online success, this study focused primarily on the effects on first-course retention for graduate students who were enrolled in a non-mandatory online orientation. Some of the factors that may complicate students' online success can be, but are not limited to, family pressures, time constraints, lack of organizational skills, or financial restraints (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Asdi, 2015; Croxton, 2014). Based on the review of literature within this study, which includes orientation research and retention challenges to understand the effects of non-mandatory orientation completion, there is sufficient reason for coming to the conclusion that an investigation examining the impact of non-mandatory orientations would yield socially significant findings.

Chapter 2

Introduction to Literature Review

There has been growing concern among leaders within higher education over student retention within online programs. With the increase in concern over student retention, orientation programs have developed with the intention of preparing students for online learning. Numerous studies have been conducted in community colleges and universities as a way of tracking improved retention in colleges and universities (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Cannady, 2015; Chan, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013; Jones, 2013; Millman, Posey, & Pintz, 2014; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, Valosik, 2014; Wozniack et al., 2012). However, missing from this research is the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations are effective on first-course retention for non-traditional student populations.

With the documented increase in online enrollment, leaders within higher education are growing concerned that many students are not prepared for the unique demands of online learning (Jaggers & Bailey, 2010; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011). Furthermore, non-traditional students over the age of 24 years who are entering online learning environments and who have been away from learning may face many technological challenges such as external, internal, and contextual factors. For example, external factors can be, but are not limited to, family pressures, time constraints, lack of organizational skills, or financial restraints (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Asdi, 2015; Croxton, 2014). Internal student factors influencing online first-course success can include motivational issues such as self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Moreover, contextual factors such as course design, technology, lack of student accountability or interaction, and lack of student interactivity can also influence retention and

attrition in an online course. Some of the student-support structures utilized within higher education created to combat these factors consist of writing labs, online tutors, IT advisors, and online help desks that have helped alleviate the burdens and challenges many non-traditional students face when engaging in an online curriculum. Tracking the effects of online learning in relation to improving retention through online orientations must be continually reviewed to seek ways to support continued enrollment and retention.

Context and Significance

Orientations offer additional student support to help overcome external, internal, and contextual challenges students face. Orientations are developed by many institutions as a way to alleviate the issues students may experience by providing guidance in seeking student support services, promoting a greater amount of self-sufficiency, and stimulating self-directed learning (Fetzner, 2013; Vaill, 2013). Online learners simply cannot walk into an on-ground office, ask questions, and receive the help they need to be successful. According to Croxton (2014), advocates for online learning and orientation programs cite that a challenge that online learners encounter is not being able to access on-ground services physically, thus they need available resources to support their success. Furthermore, online orientations met the challenges these students most often encountered by offering them a means to explore the learning platform prior to their online program to practice online skills such as student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as well as understanding the basic navigational features of their user interface (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013). Practicing these skills through an online orientation program can help provide needed support for students who require it, as a means to increase their success rates throughout their first course (Beyrer, 2010; Daniel, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones,

2013; Koehnke, 2013). Online orientations, based on the literature, can help provide the support students need to become better prepared for and better engaged in the online learning environment, possibly improving student retention (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013).

Problem Statement and Organization

This chapter reviews current and relevant literature pertaining to online, non-mandatory orientation programs and the support they offer online students who are preparing for degree programs. Also included in this chapter is a review of the correlation of retention rates between students who complete an online orientation and those who do not and the impact of that relationship to higher student retention rates for first courses in fully online programs. Searches included online educational databases such as ProQuest, ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, and the Wiley Online Library, revealing relevant literature that informed this study.

A fundamental keyword search in many abstracts within the literature included "online learning," "distance-education," "retention," "completion," "online orientation programs," "student success," and "attrition" helped guide relevant as well as revealing research that further validates findings. Next, this chapter examines and considers the adult learning theories influencing online education as a means of supporting student relationships and the types of interactions that integrate to provide a solid foundation that supports online adult learning. These theories also have an impact on student retention and success from an orientation to successfully completing a first online course in the students' programs to help improve retention within the first course.

While there are many studies related to the importance of online orientations at the community college level due to lower retention and program completion rates, few studies have

been conducted at private universities using data related to non-mandatory online orientations. This study will help provide vital information in the area of non-mandatory online orientations within private universities as well as provide student orientation related recommendations for higher-education institutions concerned with improving student retention or attrition challenges.

Conceptual Framework

The role of learning theory within research is critical because it describes how students or individuals learn, and why, in some cases, one theory may work better in guiding online learning (Meyer & Murrell, 2014). Many learning theories related to the process of adult student learning and success reveal a variety of factors affecting students' motivation, integration, and interaction within an online course, all of which can significantly affect learning outcomes, student persistence, and successful completion of these courses (Chan, 2010; Hilton, 2013; Henschke, 2011; Kelly, 2012; Meyer & Murrell, 2014). For example, external factors such as family pressures, time constraints, lack of organizational skills, and even finances can alter student success in online programs, influencing students' completion of their online orientation (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Asdi, 2015; Croxton, 2014). Internal factors influencing online first-course success can include motivational issues such as self-regulation, self-determination, and self-efficacy (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Furthermore, contextual factors such as course design, technology, lack of accountability or interaction, and lack student involvement in the course can also influence a student's decision to drop out of an online course.

Due to the complexity of these issues, a theoretical foundation is crucial in understanding how these factors affect student success and outcomes as well as finding effective solutions and interventions that may assist students in overcoming these potential barriers within an online orientation program. For the purpose of this study, Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformational

learning was used, since it can define many of the transformations related to changes in perspectives that can take place within students in online learning programs (Hodge, 2014).

Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory begins with established meaning structures called meaning schemas. The meaning schemas include skills, concepts, beliefs, and values that may have developed early in learners' lives (Hodge, 2014). These schemas, or meaning perspectives, help "guide the way learners' experience, feel, understand, act, or judge particular situations," and can serve as models for and norms for what is expected (Mezirow, 1991, p. 48). Within online learning, this may include student motivation, past successes, fears of, and interactions with technologies found in online programs, or success in learning new information (Kelly, 2012; Hilton, 2013; Henschke, 2011; Meyer & Murrell, 2014; Chan, 2010). Schemas are where memories are stored and this can be used as a guide in new experiences (Mezirow, 1991), such as those experiences found in students who may be new to online learning.

Moreover, students' worldview, or *weltanschauung*, is a way of making sense of the world around them through their own ideas, beliefs, and schemas that they have experienced and collected throughout their lives (Lichau-Shields, 2011). Students' meaning perspectives gained as a child can, as described in the previous paragraph, strengthen their views of how the world and things around them should be perceived (Mezirow, 1991). However, if students hold views that are distorted, false, or self-deceiving, when of themselves and/or when encountering online learning, they may make faulty presuppositions regarding their ability to remain successful. Therefore, it is crucial to retention that students learn from new, online learning experiences and use reflection to help shape new views of those experiences, helping to transform learning and extend that learning into different meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1991).

Establishing a solid online experience at the beginning of a student's online learning program can create positive precedents and priorities, as well as determine student focus and relevance (Hilton, 2013; Mezirow, 1991). For example, within the online orientation program at one campus at a private northwestern-area university, the inclusion of basic preparatory assignments gives students many opportunities to test their own formative knowledge through online APA and library quizzes, as well as through navigational practice in using the learning platform. Forming positive experiences early in students' programs can positively influence meaning schemas, thus enhancing students' attitudes and experiences toward online learning. Students must validate and justify ideas and presumptions and have time to reflect on their online learning, whether in discussion forums, group projects, or individual submissions within the classroom. By using reflection in the transformative learning process, students can test not only what they are learning, but also how their new learning experiences transform how they feel about and interact with new paradigms that learning new information presents. This can promote a sense of community while also stimulating friendships that can endure throughout students' programs, as well as enhance students' sense of interaction within the learning management system (LMS).

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning and its evolution grew out of Knowles's (1970) theory of six learning characteristics that best applied to adult learning, and in turn, applied those principles within the online learning environment. "Self-directed learning has been proposed as a foundation of transformative learning…so that the practice and theory appear to be connected or overlap, with both working to encourage change" in learners within online learning (Meyer & Murrell, 2014, p. 2). With students more fully engaged, they have a greater sense of personal satisfaction, cultural awareness, and engagement that can help lead to

improved retention within students' programs (Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011; Hilton, 2013). For example, online learning requires that students reflect on new learning experiences they encounter, adjust their views of those situations, and then evaluate what they have learned within online orientations to alter their previously established schemas (Mezirow, 1991). This reflection by students can transform their perspectives toward online learning while continuing to alter their mindset toward online learning, possibly promoting a more positive thought process. This kind of reflection may also improve negative schemas experienced in the past toward continuing within online programs (Mezirow, 1991). Such reflection, particularly toward online learning and classrooms, can establish altered perspectives and views, thus having a positive impact on continuing within online programs.

Meaning schemas or perspectives can be particularly challenging within online education for some students (Beaudoin, 2015; Boyd, 2015; Fifolt, 2014; Glancy & Isenberg, 2013). For example, if students fail to grapple with new realities, such as those presented in online learning through new technologies, browsers, software applications, and media software, it can be a sign that students' existing meaning perspectives may be limited in some way. This could be through a negative childhood experience, or even previous failed adult ventures with technologies similar to those found within online learning (Hodge, 2014). This will not promote a sense of self-direction, which may lead to disorientation and self-questioning as students try to come to terms with challenging experiences (Hodge, 2014). In the process, "the taken-for-granted assumptions that constitute meaning perspectives may be forced into awareness where they can become subject to critical appraisal" (Hodge, 2014, p. 172). Mezirow (1991) explained that a complete transformative cycle means that students reject all or part of an existing meaning perspective and construct new ones. This process, however, can be challenging within online programs, as

students struggle to achieve competence in new ways that do not include face-to-face conversations or brick-and-mortar learning environments.

The self-directed questioning process to change meaning perspectives within the learner's experiences can encourage engagement within the learning process (Chan, 2010; Greener, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Henschke, 2011). As Knowles (1970) noted in his research, online learning is self-directed, autonomous, and allows students to use and write about their own experiences related to topics of discussion or assignments, drawing from them experiences that help promote the learning environment as well as redefine meaning schemas and perspectives (Mezirow, 1991).

Critical dialog plays an important role in discussion in that it establishes an open forum in which individuals may participate, learn, and encourage one another while learning new material, and in some cases, new transformative paradigms (Hilton, 2013). A careful blend of online, facilitated discussions can foster transformative learning experiences that can help construct deeper understanding of orientation course material (Hilton, 2013). This aspect may promote facilitator-led instruction, which can improve student discussions and improved learning reflections related to solving real-world problems within the workplace (Beaudoin, 2015; Boyd, 2015; Fifolt, 2014; Glancy & Isenberg, 2013). This helps to meet the basic characteristics self-directed online learning and discussions, providing students with information that applies directly to skills and knowledge they need within the online environment.

The concepts of retention during students' first course relate to the concepts from Mezirow's (1991) theory and frame the argumentative structure for this research study, based on the challenges related to retention during students' first course. I will focus on viewing online orientations from transformative theoretical concepts such as the importance of perspective changes in how students see themselves as learners, any revision of students' previously held

beliefs, and any changes in students' lifestyles because of changes from their perspectives and beliefs. These theoretical concepts also explain my educational paradigms of how students see themselves as learners, their personal beliefs, and any changes that may have occurred because of learning within the orientation for viewing and justifying retention surrounding a non-mandatory online orientation.

Bridging the cyber gap. Communication plays a crucial role within transformative learning (Boyd, 2015). Boyd (2015) reasoned that as students are introduced to the online learning format through various assignments in different learning modules, facilitator-led discussions, questions, and peer interactions can promote a stronger sense of safety within an online community of learners. Online orientations, through the transformative lens, can foster student learning in deep and meaningful ways (Fifolt, 2014). In fact, it is highly recommended that "faculty, staff, and administrators . . . create situations in which students are compelled" to examine their assumptions regarding their own beliefs in relation to online learning (Fifolt, 2014, p. 64). When students begin with this structure in their initial experiences at the university-level, they can put transformative learning practices into action by interacting with the facilitator and their peers, all while fostering a greater sense of online community in which to support future learning. Furthermore, Fifolt (2014) stated that transformative learning experiences should be designed to prepare students for a more reflective, resilient, and proficient assessment of learning situations. Online orientations prepare students, through communicative interaction with facilitators and peers, for a more reflective learning experience throughout their programs.

Boyd (2015) continued the transformative dialog, stating that orientation facilitators play an important, introductory role in cultivating an atmosphere of transformative learning through questions and discussions. This dialog assists students in examining their beliefs and thoughts in

relation to newly gained information encountered in their online orientations by learning from their peers and facilitator. "It is the facilitator's role to create the conditions for this [kind of learning] to transpire" (Boyd, 2015, p. 67). Online orientation facilitators introduce students to transformative learning precepts by fostering and supporting critical reflection and questioning practices among learners (Glancy & Isenberg, 2013). Many students are apprehensive about online learning and the technologies they must use to complete their degree programs. The feeling of safety promoted through the orientation process further supports a more self-directed and confident online student, which may promote improved program retention (Fifolt, 2014).

Glancy and Isenberg (2013) offered one caveat regarding transformative learning and online learning. While online orientations promote a more secure introductory online learning environment for students in which to use LMS technologies, learner autonomy is situational. Simply because a learner is self-directed in one content area does not imply that "he will be in another . . . further emphasizing the importance of guidance and support" in the beginning of any online learning endeavor (Glancy & Isenberg, 2013, p. 23). Providing opportunities for transformative support and communication must be endorsed at the introductory phases of online learning as students are exposed to various technologies that may not have been previously encountered (Beaudoin, 2015). These efforts may continue to provide the safety and transformative dialog for online students that support a truly reflective and self-directed online learning experience.

Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

This study focused on three areas related to non-mandatory online orientations, which are preparing students for online course demands, improving students' first-course success, and the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations are effective in improving retention rates with

graduate-level students. A review of the literature revealed a body of research related to these three areas that are relevant to online orientation programs within higher-education institutions. Though research supports the positive influence of online orientation programs offered prior to students' first courses, orientation programs are certainly not a panacea for every student enrolled in online programs.

Non-mandatory orientation and students' preparation. Universities and colleges work strategically to improve the online student experience in an effort to lower institutional costs related to student enrollment and continually develop the academic rigor and efficacy of their online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016). According to Schneider and Yin (2011), students dropping out from just one cohort caused universities in 2012 to lose $3.8 billion in lifetime income, and states and the federal government lost $730 million in potential tax revenue. Online orientation programs and the preparation they offer online learners may reduce this substantial loss (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Garza-Mitchell, 2014; Koehnke, 2013). Likewise, Kirp (2014) reiterates that dropout rates, measured in lost student earnings as well as federal tax losses from students' potential jobs, at $4.5 billion. This loss is immeasurable as well in lost opportunities and careers.

Online orientation programs prepare students for their online programs while providing opportunities for them to become more self-directed. This support, in turn, allows them to learn and assimilate new information and reflect on its application to their own lives. In addition, students are able to learn how to use online technologies such as the learning management system (LMS), contacting student services, or the instructional technology (IT) department for help with any challenges with technology that may occur or impede online learning. In fact, research suggested that students who are new to online learning are more likely to be challenged

by the online course format and the technologies than the course content (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010).

Beyrer's (2010) research confirmed the relationship between successful online student performance at a community college, both before and after enrollment in an online orientation program, and student success in the first course after completing an online orientation. Both factors are vitally important to universities, as many are vigorously trying to create optimal learning environments in an effort to attract and retain students (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Cosumnes River College in Sacramento, California commissioned a study regarding the relationship between students' completion of an online orientation and first-course success, defined by academic records. Any student enrolled at the start of the semester was included in the study (Beyrer, 2010). The sampling population consisted of four groups with 15 students each. The research method for data collection involved a combination of student academic records combined with pre-and post-survey data. The study used student demographic information to create a data file for each group based on their academic records and success rates. All students enrolled in the online orientation were given 3 weeks to complete the assignments relating to course navigation, effective online communication, netiquette, and time management. The survey analysis showed that students who completed the orientation course experienced higher success rates in online classes, which supported and confirmed the first hypothesis. The results confirmed the second hypothesis that students who were successful in an online course had a higher online success rate after the orientation than before enrolling.

Beyrer (2010) also recommended that students "who enroll in online programs should be encouraged to take an online orientation due to benefits from preparation for the online learning environment" (para. 52). In conclusion, Beyrer's (2010) research suggested that students who

expressed an intention to enroll in an online program should be encouraged to complete, not just participate in a non-mandatory online orientation.

McGlynn (2012) and Asdi (2015) confirmed Beyrer's (2010) findings, and that students who persisted in their online learning programs were better prepared through their orientation with assignments that included computer literacy, time management, information literacy, reading and writing, and computer-based interaction. These types of assignments and interactions within the online orientation prepare students for challenges faced throughout their online program. For example, students need to understand the importance of an online orientation as more than simply attaching documents in an email or sending their instructor or classmates an email within the LMS. Orientations also provide overviews of college policy, procedures, and curricular offerings. Furthermore, Wheatley-Martinez (2010) revealed in a study at a community college that students must be aware of and "know how to access student support services at the beginning of their first year" (p. 7). In addition, it was recommended that administrators require a pre-semester orientation rather than voluntary due to the positive precedent and academic mindset an orientation program promotes in online students and their overall success (Wheatley-Martinez, 2010).

Brown et al. (2015) continued with the concept of orientations as preparatory tools and reveal findings from their research that "more than 1/3 *[sic]* of online participants were returning to study for the first time since secondary school, after an interval of more than a decade" away from graduate-level learning and distance learning technologies (p. 9). Furthermore, the majority of students "struggled to find effective study techniques to meet the demands of university-level study . . . or how to take advantage of the support services available for first-time distance learners" (p. 9). For this reason, adequately preparing students for the online

classroom must be more than simply providing an optional learning opportunity through an orientation program designed and established to promote student success. In fact, recent research suggested, "institutions should do more to challenge students' self-sufficient conception of what it means to be a distance learner" (Brown et al., 2015, para. 10).

Orientation programs should never be designed and presented as something to browse through casually at one's leisure, picking and choosing which assignments to complete (Fetzner, 2013; Brown et al., 2015). Online orientations have intrinsic value, that when used by students, provide skills needed to be more successful online. Brown et al. (2015) explained that it is not enough "to rely on chance that students will take opportunities to interact with teachers, peers, and academic support staff" within their online orientation (p. 10). Students must understand that the orientation will establish a strong precedent and mindset crucial to their program completion (Brown et al., 2015; Fetzner, 2013; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010).

Orientation programs are designed to familiarize students to skills that will promote a sense of self-direction, application of new knowledge and information, as well as an opportunity to reflect on new material and how this knowledge can be applied to transforming their own thoughts and paradigms about the information. Furthermore, the definition of soft skills, or self-management skills, relates to interpersonal and intrapersonal skills required for successful interaction in the workplace (Arora, 2015). For example, soft skills can be defined as time management, family and work pressures, and personal organization. These essential student skills are needed in order to be successful in the online environment (Brown et al., 2015; Jones, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014).

Fetzner (2013) also supported more focus on online students' soft skills. In her qualitative study at Monroe Community College in Rochester, New York, Fetzner surveyed 438

unsuccessful online students who either failed or dropped out of their programs. She discovered that many students did "not know what to expect in their online course, were unsure of where to go for help, and didn't realize the time commitment and organizational skills needed to succeed in an online course" (p. 15). Many of her findings remained stable throughout the years 2000–2010 that the surveys were administered (Fetzner, 2013). In fact, students who were unsuccessful mentioned three reasons for non-success: "they got behind and it was too hard to catch up; they had personal problems; and they couldn't handle combined study plus work or family responsibilities, accounting for 87% of the unsuccessful students' reasons" (Fetzner, 2013, p. 15). As a result of her work, an online orientation program was created and recommended that students have a 2–week time period in which to participate and determine if online learning was the approach that was right for them.

Stewart, Bachman, and Johnson's (2010) study corroborated the importance of developing students' soft skills through an online orientation to prepare students for the rigors in their online programs. Due to the challenges first-year students face in the online learning environment, online orientation programs can better prepare students for learning, technologies, understanding how to seek support when needed, as well as develop a sense of community crucial to long-term student satisfaction and reduced isolation (Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Stewart et al., 2010). Core online learning principles, such as interaction, engagement, and connecting with other students and faculty whether in cohort groups or not, are also seen as contributing factors of institutional support structures vital to student satisfaction and preparation.

Furthermore, their study revealed that participating in a required online orientation prior to the start of their first course actually increased students' probability for first-course success.

These orientations allow students time to acclimate to the technological requirements and tools as well as the necessary soft skills to persist (Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Koehnke, 2013; Stewart et al., 2010). Improving students' soft skills has the potential to overcome many of the challenges and difficulties students experience in distance learning, and online orientations may prepare and provide students the time they need to acclimate and further understand how these soft skills are vital to their success within the distance-learning environment.

Students also learn how to prepare for working and thriving in their online programs by interacting with their peers and instructors. This can occur by using email, synchronous web meetings, and discussion boards, all of which allow students time to explore a variety of online communications. Cho (2012) disclosed that "many students new to online learning easily feel lost and socially isolated" (p. 1051). Interaction with others "is crucial for success in online learning environments and . . . students need to know how to interact skillfully with others to pursue online activities that require it" (Cho, 2012, p. 1052). The online classroom is very different from a conventional, face-to-face environment. Students must understand how to contact their peers, instructors, and use the technological tools that will help them meet course deadlines, communicate with others, and connect with the online community to deepen learning as well as form friendships crucial to their longevity within their program (Cho, 2012). Croxton (2014) supported Cho (2012) in that greater student satisfaction increases student persistence and retention in online courses through online orientation completion. In fact, when students complete, not merely participate in an orientation prior to the start of their first course, their academic achievement is significantly better than those who do not attend an orientation (Cho, 2012; Beyrer, 2010).

Orientation programs establish communication protocols crucial to student success and develop a feeling of community, which are vital to greater student satisfaction and persistence (Cho, 2012; Croxton, 2014). Students must be aware of and know how to access student support services at the beginning of their program so that they have the online tools needed to be more successful without feeling isolated, as any isolation will create frustration and the potential to withdraw from their program (Cho, 2012; Croxton, 2014).

Non-mandatory orientation and students' first-course retention. The explicit importance of orientation programs to prepare and provide vital information directly linked to students' long-term success cannot be understated in this current age of technological ubiquity. While students may have used technology in their daily lives prior to enrolling in an online course, this does not imply that they will easily use technology in an online learning format (Garza-Mitchell, 2014). This is particularly true for underprepared, first-generation students who must receive the tools they need to be successful in their online programs. First-generation students are those who come from low, middle, and high-income families "that have not had family members attend university courses" (The College Board, 2016, para. 1). Furthermore, students who have been away from university-level programs for more than 10 years will also encounter challenges, regardless of their use of technology (Garza-Mitchell, 2014).

Garza-Mitchell's (2014) study at Texas State Technical College, Harlingen, sought to remedy student success and continued retention through the creation of a mandatory online student orientation, as many of their online students were not as successful in the online programs as they were in face-to-face courses. The college sought to reduce this gap with their mandatory online orientation for "students who had not previously taken and successfully completed an online class at Harlingen" (Garza-Mitchell, 2014, p. 90). Students in the

orientation were required to pass with a score of 80% or better but were permitted to retake portions of the orientation until they had achieved a passing score of 80%. Because the course was required, students completed the orientation. In fact, first semester completion rates were 94%, with later semester averages at 75%. The results revealed that prior to implementation of the mandatory orientation, 40–47% of students failed or withdrew from their online courses. The failure and drop rates at Harlingen have continued to drop, due to the required orientation to 36%, leading administrators toward recognizing, through the study data, the value of the orientation and continuing to require it for new students or those who have not successfully completed an online course (Garza-Mitchell, 2014).

Garza-Mitchell's (2014) study revealed that faculty and advisors found the orientation helpful and began referring to it to assist students further, even after their first-course. In addition, many of the faculty and staff "assumed that Harlingen students were tech-savvy" (Garza-Mitchell, 2014, p. 91). However, this was not the case. Assuming that students who use technology and social media will know how to use technologies effectively within online programs was errant, as the study proved (Garza-Mitchell, 2014). The only caveat with the study related to the variety of differences between students' technological skills and levels of student academic preparedness for success in distance learning programs.

Other similar studies asked the question of whether or not an online orientation should be required for all online students or only those who are new to online learning (Beyrer, 2010; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Lipe & Waller, 2013; Valosik, 2014; Wiley Publications, 2013). This varies greatly from university to university. Some universities approach orientation programs for international students by ensuring that orientation is completed. For example, Northern Arizona University (NAU) addressed this issue by "offering an online orientation in the

fall of 2013, but quickly realized the benefits of requiring all international students to complete it" (Valosik, 2014, p. 58). The orientation included many typical examples needed for a successful beginning at any university, including time management, navigational features, as well as basic NAU procedures and protocol important for providing student success without leaving students isolated. These kinds of factors can also improve students' first-course success by giving them the tools and information they need to feel secure, remain positive, and feel more self-directed in their learning.

These positive learning experiences provided within an online orientation go far in reducing orientation budgets as well (Valosik, 2014). For example, Washington State University (WSU) required new international students to complete an online orientation before they enrolled in an online program. WSU has streamlined its international orientation program and combined it with their domestic orientation, allowing them to reduce their overall expenditures and reap greater savings and return on investment. In fact, this has allowed advisors at WSU to feel that their students are much better prepared for the start of their program. Creating their mandatory orientation has greatly improved the online experience for students and the WSU community overall as well as retention (Valosik, 2014).

Properly preparing students for the online environment to improve retention also became an issue that Pace University, New York, overcame through their mandatory online orientation program. Many students who were enrolled in online courses routinely dismissed it then experienced problems in their online classes because they were unfamiliar with how the LMS worked or how to use the online tools (Wiley Publications, 2013). Research conducted at Pace University revealed that only mentioning, through the enrollment process, the helpfulness of a non-mandatory online orientation is not a guarantee students will use the resource. Not

completing the online orientation can impede students' skills needed to become more proficient in the online classroom as well as negatively influence program retention (Wiley Publications, 2013).

Factors in non-mandatory orientation and student retention. Allen and Seaman (2016) pointed out that there was an excess of 2.8 million students taking all of their higher education courses online in the fall of 2014. However, this growth is often juxtaposed against problematic retention and completion rates (Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012). Students enroll in online programs with the best intentions for completion and intent to graduate; however, many never complete this goal (Cannady, 2015). In addition, students often experience a variety of factors that can impede retention in online courses.

Brown et al. (2015) stated that many of the factors that attract students toward online learning can be the same issues that lead to struggling and withdrawing. Some of the external factors can include family pressures, time constraints, lack of organizational skills, finances, and workplace pressure (Croxton, 2014). Internal pressures can be self-regulation, self-efficacy, and self-determination. Furthermore, the contextual factors related to course design can also impede student retention such as a lack of technology skills, feelings of isolation, and lack of instructor presence in the course (Croxton, 2014). While these factors are extensive, they do not apply unilaterally to every student. The myriad issues and reasons for attrition and retention can be as unique and individual as the students themselves.

While online orientation programs do have a strong influence on student retention and have been shown to improve retention rates frequently, these programs are not a magic solution to all university retention challenges (Daniel, 2013). The research of Ellis-O'Quinn (2011)

revealed, “there is no universally accepted definition of retention” that will apply unilaterally for all institutions (p. 17). Ellis-O’Quinn’s (2011) research stated that while orientation programs are integrated into the institution to address attrition and retention, “few orientation programs are appraised objectively to determine whether or not they have achieved the intended outcome of student retention” (p. 3). In addition, her work revealed that the “less integrated and committed students are to their program, the higher the probability of withdrawing” (p. 6). Students are most vulnerable early in their program, with possible dropout rates being the highest within their first semester (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Ellis-O’Quinn, 2011; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015). Students receive training in their orientations on how to find proper online student support, promoting a greater amount of self-sufficiency and self-directed learning (Fetzner, 2013; Hall, 2011; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Vaill, 2013).

However, when orientations are not mandatory, many students do not sign in or complete assignments that are uniquely designed to enhance their overall experience and resolve repetitive issues faced within online programs (Fetzner, 2013). This is an overriding challenge surrounding non-mandatory orientations, since not signing in to a course specifically designed to help optimize students’ online experiences can be detrimental to retention (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Chan, 2010; He et al., 2014; Fetzner, 2013; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Millman, Posey, & Pintz, 2014; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, Valosik, 2014; Wozniack et al., 2012).

Daniel’s research (2013) revealed that students were more self-directed when they successfully completed orientation assignments, gaining a greater sense of control through the completion of the orientation, helping to reduce any anxiety or lack of self-confidence. Furthermore, students who completed the orientation program prior to beginning their program

had “greater positive perceptions regarding their future academic challenges” (p. 21). One caveat with Daniel’s (2013) research is that “high self-efficacy levels did not always equal high academic achievement” (p. 21). Therefore, a higher level of self-efficacy promoted through orientations will not always equate to improved retention.

Review of Methodological Issues

Quantitative. Research challenges and limitations were also discovered within quantitative studies. The Koehnke (2013) study regarding online retention was limited to fully online courses at a small, community college and therefore, could not be generalized to other community colleges. In addition, the same study had a relatively small period from which data were collected, restricting a more complete study of retention. Another quantitative study by Daniel (2013) revealed that challenges occurred when analyzing data due to the influence of orientation results by student support programs intended to assist in meeting students’ needs. Therefore, an identification process was needed to separate orientation information from student-support programs to ensure legitimacy of research findings.

The quantitative study of orientation programs and retention by Vaill (2013) revealed that her sample size was small, and therefore could not be generalized to other online orientation programs. In addition, the study was conducted at a small college, and conducting further research on the topic at a larger institution with a more diverse, non-traditional student population was highly recommended.

Asdi’s (2015) research limitations were due to the strict nature of quantitative research, in which very little qualitative information was available from students who did not complete their first course and dropped out of their university. Improved results from interviews may have

provided additional information as to why the students did not persist in their online courses that may not have been provided by a purely quantitative approach.

Qualitative. The review of literature included twelve qualitative studies on the use of orientation. In those 12 studies, limitations and challenges were reported in gathering student orientation survey responses, as well as in smaller sample sizes, which diminished generalizability (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Wozniack et al., 2012). The smaller sample sizes occurred at community colleges, and recommendations within the studies suggested using larger populations in future research.

An additional qualitative study described challenges related to fully descriptive student survey feedback and comments (Pittenger & Lounsbery, 2011). Online universities cannot correct these challenges unless students share in detail their experiences and explain their specific online challenges.

Furthermore, another qualitative study described limitations with available technological resources needed to accommodate students' learning styles, inhibiting valid student comments in relation to the created online orientation. In this case, further research must be conducted to uncover areas where technological improvements and adaptability could improve or supplement functioning in this area (Greener, 2010).

Fetzner (2013), in her qualitative study, administered phone interviews to unsuccessful online learners in an effort to further understand dropout rates from the student perspective. While conducting phone interviews can identify trends in student frustration and acknowledge that the university values students' opinion through data gleaned to enhance student services support, it was difficult to reach all the unsuccessful students due to out-of-date contact

information. Furthermore, it was very time consuming, and some students may feel embarrassed to participate in the phone survey due to their unsuccessful attempt at online learning.

Mixed methods. Mixed-methods research provided additional challenges relative to online orientation programs. One study examined the effects of a non-mandatory online graduate-level orientation program at a community college on student anxiety levels (Hullinger & Hogan, 2014). The results revealed that while student anxiety dropped considerably after completing the online orientation, it was still optional and students who may have benefited from the experience chose not to take the online orientation. Agreement on conducting further study in comparing online versus on-ground orientations would expand results, perhaps improving validity (Hullinger & Hogan, 2014).

Several studies revealed that the quality of orientation content can greatly enhance or inhibit student success (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Taylor & Dunn). Both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from these studies revealed that more students liked the modules related to technology review and support while also being able to identify easily which sections they most needed for soft-skill review. These studies however were limited due to small colleges as well as small population samples.

Brown et al. (2015) revealed that more than "one third of participants were returning to study for the first time since secondary school after more than a decade" (para. 36). Most notably, many of the non-traditional learners did not know where to go for help as first-time distance learners. In addition, gathering student comments became overwhelming, since they were gathered through video recordings. Managing the data became onerous, and Brown et al. (2015) recommend quickly utilizing data rather than waiting or extending the time elapsed to maintain research integrity.

Synthesis of Research Findings

The research related to non-mandatory online orientation and students' preparation supports findings that students learn how to use a variety of online technologies such as; the learning management system (LMS) and contacting student services or the instructional technology (IT) department for help with any challenges with technology that may occur or impede online learning (Arora, 2015; Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Cho, 2012; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Koehnke, 2013; McGlynn, 2012; Stewart et al., 2010; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010).

Furthermore, research suggested that students who have expressed an intention to enroll in an online program should be encouraged to complete, not just participate, in a non-mandatory online orientation (Beyrer, 2010). In addition to these results, McGlynn (2012) and Asdi (2015) confirmed Beyrer's (2010) findings, which showed that persistent students were adequately prepared through their orientation with assignments that included a variety of different skills, such as computer literacy, time management, information literacy, reading and writing, and computer-based interaction.

Orientation programs have intrinsic value and provide students with skills needed to be successful online. Brown et al.'s research (2015) supported these statements and explained that it is not enough "to rely on chance that students will take opportunities to interact with teachers, peers, and academic support staff" (p. 10). Students must be told that the orientation program is there to support their learning and that they may establish a strong precedent and mindset regarding their online program, from the orientation to their final course. Moreover, the definition of soft skills, or self-management skills, relates to interpersonal and intrapersonal skills required for successful interaction in the workplace (Arora, 2015). The earlier definition of

soft skills in this chapter includes time management, family and work pressures, and personal organization. These essential student skills are needed in order to be successful in the online environment (Brown et al., 2015; Jones, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014).

Other research findings related to online orientation and students' first-course success and retention. Garza-Mitchell (2014) revealed that many students may have used technology in their daily lives prior to enrolling in an online course; however, this does not suggest that they will be able to use technology easily in an online learning format. The assumption for the study was that students, who constantly use social media and other technologies within the workplace such as Windows Office, Facebook, or Twitter and Android or iPhone smartphones, would not necessarily know how to use the variety of technologies in an online program or distance-learning setting (Garza-Mitchell, 2014).

Furthermore, properly preparing students for the online environment to improve retention also became an issue that Pace University overcame through their mandatory online orientation program, as many students enrolled "routinely skipped it, then ran into problems in their online classes because they were unfamiliar with how the LMS worked or how to use the online tools" (Wiley Publications, 2013). These actions can impede students' skills needed to become more proficient in the online classroom and may negatively impact program retention (Wiley Publications, 2013).

Pivotal findings from the research related to non-mandatory online orientation and students' retention cite that exponential online enrollment growth is often contrasted against problematic retention and completion rates (Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012). The myriad factors students experience can impede retention in online

courses. In fact, findings suggested many of the factors that attract students toward online learning can be the same issues that lead to struggling and withdrawing. Some of the external factors can include family pressures, time constraints, lack of organizational skills, finances, and workplace pressure (Brown et al., 2015; Croxton, 2014). Internal pressures can be self-regulation, self-efficacy, and self-determination. Furthermore, findings also suggested that the contextual factors related to course design can also impede student retention, such as a lack of technology skills, feelings of isolation, and lack of instructor presence in the course (Croxton, 2014). While these factors are extensive, they do not apply to every student. The myriad issues and reasons for attrition and retention are unique, and this study investigated whether orientation makes a difference in retention, from enrollment through students' first course, with the grade of an A or B at the graduate level.

Research also suggested that while online orientation programs may have a strong influence on student retention and have been shown to improve retention rates, these programs are not a solution to all university retention challenges (Daniel, 2013). Ellis-O'Quinn (2011) recognized that there is no commonly accepted definition of retention for all institutions, which can affect how universities define and address retention challenges.

Findings from Ellis-O'Quinn's (2011) study also suggested that while orientation programs are integrated into the institution to address attrition and retention, "few orientation programs are appraised objectively to determine whether or not they have achieved the intended outcome of student retention" (pp. 3–4). Students are most vulnerable early in their program, with possible dropout rates being the highest within their first semester (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015). Students receive orientation training on how to find proper online student support, promoting a greater amount of

self-sufficiency and self-directed learning, increasing the possibility of improved retention (Fetzner, 2013; Hall, 2011; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Vaill, 2013).

However, when students do not attend orientations, the benefits from completing the practice assignments uniquely designed to enhance their overall experience and resolve repetitive issues faced within online programs are omitted (Fetzner, 2013). This is a paramount challenge surrounding non-mandatory orientations, since not signing in to a course specifically designed to help optimize students' online experiences can be detrimental to retention (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Chan, 2010; Hughes, & Delaney, 2015; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Posey & Pintz, 2014; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Valosik, 2014; Wozniack et al., 2012).

Daniel's (2013) research revealed that students were more self-directed when they successfully completed orientation assignments, gaining a greater sense of control and competence through the completion of the orientation, and had "greater positive perceptions regarding their future academic challenges" (p. 21). One caveat with Daniel's (2013) research was that "high self-efficacy levels did not always equal high academic achievement" (p. 21). Therefore, a higher level of self-efficacy promoted through orientations will not always equate to improved retention.

Critique of Previous Research

Research suggested that online orientation courses help prepare students for their online programs while providing opportunities for students to become more self-directed (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010). This sense of self-direction allows them to learn and assimilate new information and reflect on its application to their own lives (Chan, 2010; Greener, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Henschke, 2011; Knowles, 1970). In addition, students have the opportunity to learn how to use

online technologies, such as the learning management system (LMS), contacting student services, the help desk, or the instructional technology (IT) department for assistance with any technological challenges that may occur or impede online learning (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010). These findings support the intent of this study, which examined the relationship between completing an online orientation and student retention at the graduate-level.

Beyrer's (2010) research suggested that students who have expressed an intention to enroll in an online program should be encouraged to complete, not just participate, in a non-mandatory online orientation. McGlynn (2012) and Asdi (2015) confirmed Beyrer's (2010) findings, stating that students who persisted in their online learning programs were adequately prepared through their orientation with assignments that included computer literacy, time management, information literacy, reading and writing, and computer-based interaction. These assignments and interactions within the online classroom helped prepare students for challenges faced throughout their online program.

Brown et al. (2015) continued with the importance of orientations as preparatory tools and revealed findings from their research that "more than 1/3 [*sic*] of online participants were returning to study for the first time since secondary school, after an interval of more than a decade" away from graduate-level learning and distance learning technologies (p. 9). Consequently, adequately preparing students for the online classroom must be more than simply providing an optional learning opportunity through an orientation program designed and established to promote student success (Brown et al., 2015). Due to the challenges first-year students face in the online learning environment, online orientation programs can better prepare students for learning, technologies, understanding how to seek support when needed, as well as develop a sense of community crucial to long-term student satisfaction and in reducing isolation

(Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Stewart et al., 2010). Aiding students and preparing an orientation for their success will contribute greatly to overall retention.

The important role of orientation programs better prepares and provides vital information directly linked to students' long-term success. While students may have used technology in their daily lives prior to enrolling in an online course, this does not imply that they will be able to use technology easily in an online learning format (Garza-Mitchell, 2014). This is particularly true for underprepared, first-generation students who are the first in their family to attend college, and students who have been away from university-level programs for more than ten years. These students will also encounter challenges, regardless of their use of technology (Garza-Mitchell, 2014). The assumption Garza-Mitchell (2014) discovered was that students who constantly use social media and other technologies within the workplace should not imply that students would know how to use the variety of technologies in an online program or distance learning setting.

Properly preparing students for the online environment to improve retention also became an issue that Pace University overcame through their mandatory online orientation program, as many students enrolled "routinely skipped it, then ran into problems in their online classes because they were unfamiliar with how the LMS worked or how to use the online tools (Wiley Publications, 2013). Research conducted at Pace University revealed that simply mentioning through the enrollment process how helpful a non-mandatory online orientation can be often resulted in students opting not to take the preparatory course. This kind of action can impede students' skills needed to become more proficient in the online classroom as well as negatively influence program retention (Wiley Publications, 2013). With the importance of retention throughout students' first-semester, universities must begin to take seriously the overall

importance of ensuring that students have the skills they need to be successful in the online environment.

Some of the external factors can include family pressures, time constraints, lack of organizational skills, finances, and workplace pressure (Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Croxton, 2014). Internal pressures can be self-regulation, self-efficacy, and self-determination. Furthermore, the contextual factors related to course design can also impede student retention such as a lack of technology skills, feelings of isolation, and lack of instructor presence in the course (Croxton, 2014). While these factors are extensive, they do not apply unilaterally to every student. The myriad issues and reasons for online retention can be as unique and individual as the students themselves (Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Croxton, 2014). However, this study focuses primarily on the effects on first-course retention for graduate students completing a non-mandatory online orientation and including such a large sample may help to reduce any sampling error that may occur

While online orientation programs do have a strong influence on student retention and have been shown to improve retention rates, these programs are not a magic solution to all university retention challenges (Daniel, 2013). Online orientations are positive forces in a student's introduction to online learning, but they may not work well for all students. This is dependent upon a variety of factors mentioned earlier in this chapter, and it is recommended that these factors continue to be researched for improved retention and student success.

When students do not sign in or complete orientation assignments that are uniquely designed to enhance online experience, they may become frustrated and drop out (Fetzner, 2013). This is a paramount challenge surrounding non-mandatory orientations, since not signing in to a course specifically designed to help optimize students' online experiences can be

detrimental to retention (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Chan, 2010; He et al., 2014; Hughes, & Delaney, 2015; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Posey & Pintz, 2014; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Valosik, 2014; Wozniack et al., 2012).

Summary

With the exponential increase in online enrollments, leaders within higher education have grown concerned over retention rates that have been shown to be consistently lower than face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013; He et al., 2014; Vaill, 2013). One way to help alleviate these challenges is through the creation and implementation of online orientation programs. These programs help provide students with support and the soft-skills needed to be more successful online. By participating in an online orientation, students are given access to the tools and mindset they will need to be prepared for their online programs. In addition, skills learned can help students become more intrinsically motivated to remain in their programs.

Orientations have been shown through research to aid student success through the training they receive at the start of their programs (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013). However, students who constantly use social media and other technologies within the workplace, such as Windows Office, Facebook, or Twitter and Android or iPhone smartphones does not imply that they will know how to use the variety of technologies in an online program or distance-learning setting. Therefore, it is important that students participate in the orientation assignments so that a more positive precedent may be established, perhaps aiding retention and student success in their first courses.

Orientation can also assist with retention problems when students participate in the training. The assignments completed give students a feeling of accomplishment, which based on research, can promote a more learner-ready attitude and give students a feeling of preparedness. Daniel's research (2013) revealed that students were more self-directed when they successfully completed orientation assignments, gaining a greater sense of control through the completion of the orientation, helping to reduce any anxiety or lack of self-confidence. Furthermore, students who completed the orientation program prior to beginning their program had greater positive perceptions regarding their future academic challenges.

Based on the review, which develops a conceptual framework using transformative learning, orientation research, and retention challenges to understand the effects of non-mandatory orientation completion, there is sufficient reason for conducting an investigation examining the impact of non-mandatory orientations would yield socially significant findings. The review of the literature has provided support for pursuing research to determine the effects on retention within students' first course in relation to non-mandatory orientations.

Chapter 3

Introduction to the Methodology

This chapter describes the concurrent transformative research design and methodology, through the framework of Mezirow's (1991) transformative-learning theory, which was used to determine the impact of graduate-level students' completion of a non-mandatory online orientation on first-course retention. During the 2016 fall semester, this mixed-methods study evaluated a semester of graduate-level, non-mandatory online orientation at a northwestern-area university and its effects on students' first-course retention, as well as determining if there was a relationship between the completion of an online orientation and student retention with a grade of an A or B after completing their first course. Additionally, an examination of student experiences through surveys and interviews was conducted to assess any relationship in completing an online orientation and the subsequent first-course retention.

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning establishes a theoretical foundation in understanding the complexities involved with retention in online learning. Mezirow's theory begins with established meaning structures called meaning schemas which includes skills, concepts, beliefs, and values that may have developed early in learners' lives (Hodge, 2014). These schemas, or meaning perspectives, help "guide the way learners' experience, feel, understand, act, or judge particular situations," and can serve as models for and norms for what is expected (Mezirow, 1991, p. 48). Schemas are stored memories, and this can be used as a guide in new experiences, such as those experiences found in students who may be new to online learning. However, if students hold personal views that are distorted, false, or self-deceiving when encountering online learning, they may make faulty presuppositions regarding their ability to remain successful. Therefore, it is crucial to retention that students learn from new, online

learning experiences and use reflection to help shape new views of those experiences, helping to transform learning and extend that learning into different meaning perspectives. This study examined graduate students' learning experiences through the lens of concurrent transformative design, from enrollment through the completion of their first course, to determine if there was any relationship in completing or not completing the online orientation and first course retention with the grade of an A or B.

The mixed-methods approach to this study was based on the processes of "collecting, analyzing, and interpreting quantitative and qualitative data in a single study to investigate a single phenomenon" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005, p. 474). Both qualitative student responses submitted, after their online orientation experience, and quantitative, Likert-scale data from the survey were used to gain a greater understanding of any potential relationship between students' experiences in the online orientation and first-course retention. Because mixed-methods research can bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative designs due to its logical and intuitive approach, this chapter outlines many of the steps combining both processes to gain greater understanding of potential relationships, which may exist between validating data and interpreting survey comments and graduate-level, first-course retention (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

This mixed-methods research design utilized a concurrent transformative approach with a generalization of Fisher's Exact Chi-Square, allowing exact analysis of tables with more than two rows and/or columns. It also facilitated a deeper understanding of first-course retention for leaders in higher education through mixed research than in using findings from one method alone (Creswell, 2013; Terrell, 2011). Furthermore, this study presented the topic and provided a foundation, in that the research questions and hypotheses guided the methodology and eventual

analysis of the findings. It also provided specific details of the justification for the selected methodology. In addition to research design, this chapter included information related to the population, sample, instrumentation, data collection and analysis, as well as internal and external validity, ethical issues, and expected findings.

Research Design

This mixed-methods study, with a concurrent transformative approach, examined the impact of non-mandatory online orientations at the graduate level and their relation to first-course student retention through Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory at a private, northwestern-area university. There were 428 students enrolled in orientation at the graduate-level for one semester comprised the total population for the study. There were three individual sessions within the single semester, each 5 weeks in length, and the processes for each start were identical to maintain study validity.

Quantitative. From the total population of 428 students, a convenience sample included 108 students who did or did not complete the five orientation quizzes and agreed to participate in the study. Upon completion of the first course for each of the three sessions in the semester, student identification numbers (ID) were used to identify students who have completed or not completed the five orientation quizzes. However, to protect study participants, students' ID numbers were de-identified, for example, G00XXXXXX. Within the survey description, students understood that they were voluntarily providing permission on the informed consent form so that their orientation completion or non-completion may be matched with their first-course grades. The convenience sample included all students from the entire semester who agree to participate in the survey.

An examination of student grades, in comparison with all convenience-sample students within the semester who completed or did not complete the five orientation quizzes, was used to determine any relationship to retention. Exact Pearson Chi-Square, which is a generalization of the Fisher's Exact Chi-Square, was also used to determine the impact that the completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation may have on graduate-level students' first-course retention.

Qualitative. Open-ended questions within the survey related to students' transformative learning experiences, and were gathered from the total population and used to identify any of students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences related to their grade of an A or B in their first course. The grade of either an A or B was used to define passing the first course because they are the only acceptable passing grades at the graduate-level at the Northwestern-Area University (2015).

Because previous research pointed to smaller sample sizes diminishing generalizability, the decision was made to include a full semester into the population (Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Talbert, 2012; Wozniack et al., 2012). One semester in this study included all students who were enrolled in the orientation in one semester, with a total of 30–100 students per enrollment section, increasing the total population to as many as 550 students. The larger population size allows potential for generalizability (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Wozniack et al., 2012).

Additional studies revealed challenges related to students providing fully descriptive feedback or comments (Gaytan, 2015; Pittenger & Lounsbery, 2011). Online universities cannot correct these challenges unless students share, in rich detail, their experiences that explain their

specific online challenges. For this reason, the survey portion of this study included questions with open-ended text boxes as well as Likert-scale questions, including weekly reminder notifications sent to prompt students to complete and participate in the survey. This combination of a mixed-methods approach may provide stronger results using Fisher's Exact Chi-Square, as well as any additional commentary students may have to offer.

This study used a concurrent transformative research design while examining student experiences gleaned from the Likert-scale survey questions, in order to identify any impact or relationship that completing or not completing a non-mandatory orientation may have on first-course retention with the grade of an A or B. Quantitative data and qualitative findings were gathered concurrently through a single survey, as the name of the concurrent transformative research design indicates (Terrell, 2011). Exact Pearson Chi-Square, which is a generalization of the Fisher's Exact Chi-Square, compared the results of completing or not completing the orientation with final grades received in students' first course. Furthermore, using a mixed-methods approach within this study removed any potential manipulation of participants due to the university's presently implemented allotment of time for completing the orientation.

Research Questions

This study focused on the need to track the completion of a non-mandatory online orientation at one campus at a private northwestern-area university to determine its impact on graduate-level students' first-course retention. How will students' transformative learning experiences in the orientation affect first-course retention? Most importantly, what will the data reveal regarding any relationship between completing the orientation and first-course retention? This study sought to track first-course retention of graduate students in a revised online orientation in which, at the time of the study, tracking completion had not been conducted. The

orientation program at one campus at the private, northwestern-area university was newly designed for the 2016 academic year, and no tracking of orientation data has yet been completed.

The following research questions and hypotheses guided this study in relation to completing a non-mandatory online orientation and graduate-level students' first-course retention.

The research questions are the following:

R_1: What impact does completing or not completing a non-mandatory online orientation have on graduate-level students' first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

R_2: Do students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation influence first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

Hypotheses

H_1: There will be a significant difference between students who completed a non-mandatory online orientation and those students who did not complete the online orientation course in the number of students who completed the first course with a grade of an A or B.

H_0: There will be no significant difference between students who completed a non-mandatory online orientation and those students who did not complete the online orientation course in the number of students who completed the first course with a grade of an A or B.

Setting and Sample

The research setting and site were located at one campus of a private, religious-based institution first established in its northwestern-area location in the United States in 1905 as a 4–

year academy for training pastors and parochial school teachers (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). The university currently serves 7,182 students in its on-ground programs, with 5,423 students enrolled in their online master's-level programs (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). The university has a reputation for dedicated service to students and extended communities in preparing teachers for the transformation of society (Northwestern-Area University, 2016).

I selected the graduate online orientation program to determine the impact of completing an online orientation on first-course retention, since the literature review revealed that many orientation studies focused on the community college undergraduate student population (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown, Hughes, & Delaney, 2015; Cannady, 2015; Cho, 2012; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011; Garza-Mitchell, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Johnson, Stewart, & Bachman, 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; McGlynn, 2012; Pittenger & Lounsbery, 2011; Stewart, Bachman, & Johnson, 2010; Talbert, 2012; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010; Wozniak, Pizzica, & Mahony, 2012). Additionally, I disseminated surveys internally from the research site through a mass email from within the Qualtrics survey system to students who both completed and did not complete the five orientation quizzes to determine the extent of students' experiences in relation to first-course retention.

The target population for this research study included 428 graduate-level students of mixed genders, ages, and ethnicities in the online orientation program for one semester, which included three separate sessions. The target population for this research study included students in the graduate-level orientation program for one semester who also demonstrated their completion of a Baccalaureate degree, while meeting all enrollment requirements at the research site (Northwestern-Area University, 2015).

Each semester at the research site is divided into three separate sessions, each 5 weeks in length. This included 350–550 orientation students in the fall of 2016 who completed or did not complete the five quizzes in the orientation program prior to their introductory courses. The convenience sample included 108 students who agreed to participate in the study by completing the agreement statement and submitting the completed survey. All personally identifiable student information was protected to ensure their safety, both during the study and in the data analysis and study results using students' university ID number.

The importance of having large sample sizes relates specifically to the methodological challenges presented in the literature review, namely, small sample size and its limitations regarding generalizability (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Wozniack et al., 2012). Furthermore, larger sample sizes reduce errors between sample statistics and the total university population, reducing sampling error and increasing internal validity (Fowler, 2014). For these reasons, conducting a mixed-methods approach to retention with larger enrollments may yield improved results than studies conducted at universities or community colleges with smaller enrollments.

Moreover, conducting this study from a mixed-methods approach involved how students' completion of orientation can greatly enhance or inhibit student success (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Wiley Publications, 2013). Both quantitative and qualitative data gathered from these studies revealed that more students preferred the modules related to technology review and support while also being able to identify easily which sections they most needed for soft-skill review, as defined in the Chapter 1 introduction (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al.,

2013; Jones, 2013; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Wiley Publications, 2013). These studies, however, were limited due to research conducted at smaller colleges and universities, as well as using smaller population samples (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown, Hughes, & Delaney, 2015; Cannady, 2015; Cho, 2012; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011; Garza-Mitchell, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Johnson, Stewart, & Bachman, 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; McGlynn, 2012; Pittenger & Lounsbery, 2011; Stewart, Bachman, & Johnson, 2010; Talbert, 2012; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010; Wozniak, Pizzica, & Mahony, 2012). This diminishes generalizability (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Wozniack et al., 2012).

This concurrent transformative, mixed-methods research study used a 7–week online orientation program, encompassing a 2–week orientation course prior to students' first-course, through their first 5–week course in their online program. To increase the generalizability and potentially avoid the challenges faced by research studies mentioned in the literature review, a semester–long, 15–week collection period was used for the purpose of this study.

Operationalization of Variables

The variables for this study were the completion of the online orientation, the non-completion of the online orientation, and students' first-course grades. These variables were chosen in order to better understand and examine students' transformative learning experiences, from enrollment through the completion of their first course, through the lens of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory. The study examined graduate students' learning experiences through concurrent transformative design, reviewed students' personal, academic,

and transformative views of their learning experiences, and whether those views were altered or transformed, from enrollment through the completion of their first course.

First-course retention served as the dependent variable, since successful first-course retention was examined as relative to completing the orientation. The operationalization of retention resulted in a grade of an A or B in students' first course using Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, and this was based on the requirements for graduate students at the research site. Because convenience sampling was used, all students receiving an A or B as a grade in their first course, and agreeing to participate in the study, were used to determine if they completed all five quizzes in their orientation course. Participants agreed to volunteer for the study after reading the letter of study intent, and their university identification numbers, or student ID numbers were used to determine their first-course grades. Their personal identification was de-identified, using their G-number, for participant protection and adherence to IRB stipulations. All students enrolled in orientation at the graduate level for the entire semester became the total population for inclusion into this study.

The independent variables were the completion or non-completion of all five-orientation quizzes, which included a Blackboard tutorial quiz, pre-APA and post-APA module quizzes, as well as pre-library and post-library module quizzes. Students completing the five orientation quizzes were used to indicate students who completed orientation.

The convenience-sample students who did not complete the orientation and volunteered for the study were also given a survey. However, their survey had a different set of questions related to their orientation experience. Their orientation non-completion and first-course grade were also tracked, through key, university personnel in the appropriate offices, so that their information could be analyzed in relation to first-course completion of a grade A or B.

It must be mentioned that there are myriad variables related to students' first-course completion. Some of the extraneous variables that may contribute to students' online success, can be, but are not limited to, family pressures, time constraints, lack of organizational skills, or financial restraints (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Asdi, 2015; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013). However, this study focuses primarily on the effects on first-course retention for graduate students completing a non-mandatory online orientation. Furthermore, including such a large sample may help to reduce any sampling error that may occur.

Data Collection and Analysis

Participants, both completers and non-completers in this study, responded to a Likert, 5-point scale survey after the completion of their first course, with non-completers submitting different survey questions from those who completed orientation. The surveys, listed as Appendix A and Appendix B of this study, contained 25 questions for completers that included a 5-scale response, ranging from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. The last six questions for completers were open-ended, textbox responses that gathered any information that may not have been included in the Likert-scale questions.

The specific coding and thematic procedures, with specific coding from the surveys question categories, helped classify students' comments into two groups, orientation completers and orientation non-completers. Subgroups for qualitative student comments were developed based on sections within the students' surveys, such as, students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences with the orientation enrollment process, orientation content for first-course preparation, transformative interaction, and open-ended comments. This helped provide a more systematic organized format for the 108 students' comments from the convenience sample.

Special attention was given in the coding analysis by labeling non-completers' responses as N, followed by the specific question number, labeled Q. For example, question 10 from the non-completers' survey would be coded NQ 10. Likewise, comments from completers followed the same pattern, with a C representing the completer and Q for the question number. For example, question 15 from a completer was labeled CQ 15. This allowed for more effective viewing and organizing of the comments from the 108 students in the convenience sample. Open-ended comments were then placed into their respective, previously mentioned subgroups.

Non-completers also completed a similar survey with 16 Likert-scale questions and four, open-ended questions at the end of their survey. Questions covered a range of students' transformative learning experiences, such as the enrollment process for both completers and non-completers, the orientation material, and open-ended questions related to the length and pacing of the orientation, and any recommendations made to improve the orientation for future students. As stated previously, the survey for completers can be found in Appendix A, and the survey for non-completers can be found in Appendix B.

The surveys were housed in a university-based system that gathered student responses and analyzed quantitative ratings for each survey question. While there is no guarantee of absolute confidentiality, only the principal investigator and key university personnel directly involved in the research had access to the data received. Student survey comments, suggestions, and recommendations for improvement were used to determine any qualitative information related to improving retention practices for first-course preparation. The Exact Pearson Chi-Square is a generalization of the Fisher's Exact Chi-Square, allowing exact analysis of tables with more than two rows and/or columns (McDonald, 2014). The tables analyzed in this study consisted of five rows representing the Likert-type responses (strongly agree, agree, neutral,

disagree, and strongly disagree) and two columns for both non-completers and completers. The table cells contain the frequency, or counts of student responses per question category, and the percent rate per question category. A p-value was given for the tables, and additional p-values for the comparison of each response row with all others combined to determine any impact or relationship that the completion of a non-mandatory online orientation may have on graduate-level students' first-course retention.

Internal and External Validity

Care in establishing internal validity was created through adherence to research and Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, related specifically to properly informing students of the survey, its guidelines, protections to their anonymity, and data collection and processing. Only individuals directly involved in the study had access to review the information and no other individuals were granted permission to view the information from student surveys or findings.

In addition, no personally identifiable student information (PII) was used in this study and the privacy and protection of all participants was maintained at all times through de-identification of their ID numbers, for example, G00XXXXXX. Furthermore, students were in control of participating in the survey, and explanations regarding their protection were clearly defined within the introductory letter to students at the time of survey dissemination. Students self-selected, or volunteered, for this study, and this is an unavoidable part of using surveys within research. Students' names were not used for those who chose to participate in a survey of their orientation experience (Creswell, 2013).

My bias toward mandatory online orientations was evident, based on my own professional experiences within the orientation program and directly in response to submitted student survey comments as an employee. Bias can be a natural part of any researcher's

exploration and study of a specific topic and "can include assumptions, interests, preferences, norms, or predispositions" (McGuire, 2014, para. 2). While any amount of perceived bias can guide and direct one's interests in specific areas or issues within research, it can also affect how data are analyzed or interpreted, leading to highly subjective or even false conclusions (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). Personal interests in the results are to present data and information in a way that does not challenge any procedures or processes by the northwestern-area university, and neutral committee members took great care to present findings in an unbiased manner.

External validity was grounded in previously conducted research studies discussed within the literature review. Methodological issues surrounding previous studies include non-generalizability, small sample sizes, smaller community college sites for study, as well as issues surrounding the attainment of enough student survey comments (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Wozniack et al., 2012). To diminish these issues as much as possible, this study occurred at one campus at a private university instead of a smaller, community college. Because the overall student population will be larger, increased probability of generalizability and transferability may be achieved.

Additionally, avoiding smaller sample sizes, as noted in the literature review, may also improve external validity (Adams & Lawrence, 2015). This study used a diverse, graduate-level convenience sample of 108 students from all backgrounds, cultures, and ethnicities from one semester who do or do not finish all five orientation quizzes and successfully complete their first-course with a grade of an A or B. This larger, more diverse sample size improves the external validity as well, since it also enhances generalizability (Adams & Lawrence, 2015; (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Cannady, 2015; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et

al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Wozniack et al., 2012).

Furthermore, challenges related to gathering student survey comments in this mixed-methods study were also be offset by sending reminders to students who had not already completed the survey to do so at a suitable time (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Wiley Publications, 2013). Graduate students have very busy lives, and reminders may have helped offset the methodological issues found in the literature review regarding a lack of adequate student survey responses.

Expected Findings

Based on the previous research in the literature review, the continued examination and tracking of online orientation programs are strongly suggested as a way to continually improve program relevance and efficacy in higher education (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Cannady, 2015; Chan, 2010; He et al., 2014; Johnson et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Posey & Pintz, 2014; Talbert, 2012; Taylor & Dunn, 2015; Vaill, 2013; Valosik, 2014; Wozniack et al., 2012). Furthermore, orientations offer additional student support to help overcome external, internal, and contextual challenges, as well as alleviating difficulties they may encounter in their online courses. Orientations offer guidance and promote a greater amount of self-sufficiency and stimulating self-directed learning (Fetzner, 2013; Vaill, 2013).

Expected findings for this study supported a positive mindset when students completed an online orientation, which established a positive precedent supporting student perseverance and dedication to academic goals within students' first course, as well as garnering the needed skills to comprehend the navigational and submission processes within online learning (Arora, 2015;

Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Cho, 2012; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013; Jones, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Koehnke, 2013; McGlynn, 2012; Stewart et al., 2013; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010). Moreover, study expectations surrounding greater student preparation and confidence for their first course were also cited or discovered in students' narrative survey comments. In addition, some student survey comments suggested revisions or improvements to the orientation program, and these comments can be crucial to providing the substantive student support needed to effect positive change in first-course retention challenges revealed in this chapter. These findings provided additional support for the value and efficacy of online orientations in remediating problematic attrition or retention issues discussed in chapters 1 and 2 of this study.

Ethical Issues in the Study

This study minimized any potential risk to participants by adhering to research and Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, particularly those related to informing students of the survey, its guidelines, confidentiality of student information, and data collection and analyses. Respect for persons provided students with the option of participating in the survey as well as assuring their dignity and autonomy through the confidentiality of information on submitted surveys regarding their orientation experiences. I recognized the obligation to protect students' privacy and rights as individuals, and students were informed of these protections prior to beginning their participation in the survey. Furthermore, justice to all participants ensured that they were treated fairly and equally within the confines of the research study (Stellefson, Paige, Alber, Barry, & James, 2015). Likewise, additional protections ensured that this research study met all ethical requirements set forth by the IRB. Furthermore, extra caution was taken to avoid misrepresenting the northwestern-area university, its personnel, or its stance on research. This

was accomplished by following university protocols, through discussions and recommendations of the dissertation committee, and in working collaboratively with university personnel.

Summary

This chapter described the mixed-methods, concurrent transformative research design used for this study to determine the impact of non-mandatory online orientations and its effect of first-course retention. Both qualitative student responses submitted after their online orientation experience and quantitative, Likert-scale data from the survey was used to gain a greater understanding of any potential relationship between students' experiences in the online orientation and first-course retention. The inclusion of questions relating to any transformative learning experiences and a reflection of those experiences were used to gauge any change in meaning schemas/perspectives, as well as any reflection that gave students greater insight into their own learning process. I selected the graduate online orientation program to determine the impact of completing an online orientation on first-course retention using one 15-week semester with multiple cohorts of data. Additionally, student surveys were disseminated to determine the extent of students' experiences in relation to first-course retention.

First-course retention served as the dependent variable, since successful first-course retention was examined as relative to completing the orientation. The independent variable was the completion of all five-orientation quizzes, which included a Blackboard tutorial quiz, pre-APA and post-APA module quizzes, as well as pre-library and post-library module quizzes. This study minimized any potential risk to participants by adhering to research and Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols, particularly those related to informing students of the survey, its guidelines, protections to their anonymity, and data collection and analyses. Respect for persons

provided students with the option of participating in the survey as well as assuring their dignity and autonomy through confidentially submitted surveys regarding their orientation experiences.

The results of this study may provide additional insight into retention issues within students' first-course after orientation completion, as well as better inform leaders within higher education of new approaches or best practices to thwart retention challenges in the future.

Chapter 4

Introduction

The purpose of this mixed-method, concurrent transformative research study was to examine the impact that the two variables, completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation, had on graduate-level students' first-course retention. The problem addressed the impact of a graduate-level orientation on retention and if the orientation would increase retention from university enrollment in an online, non-mandatory orientation, through students' first online course with the grade of an A or B. Based on research from the literature review, leaders within higher education have grown concerned over lower online retention rates than the rates found in face-to-face programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013; He et al., 2014; Vaill, 2013). The goal of this study was to determine if student completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation influenced retention rates within students' first course.

Additionally, this study utilized Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning as a lens through which to view students' qualitative experiences within orientation in an effort to further understand any possible connection to first-course retention at the graduate level. The results of this study may provide additional insight as well as serve as an organizational tool for higher education administrators concerned with online retention in students' developmental stages of online learning. Moreover, the researcher's interest in this study centered on personal experience with online orientation in graduate-level programs.

This mixed-methods research design utilized a concurrent transformative approach with a generalization of Fisher's Exact Chi-Square, allowing exact analysis of tables with more than two rows and/or columns. Furthermore, mixed-methods concurrent transformative research

gathered information in an effort to understand a more complete view of students' personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences. For this reason, multiple methods facilitate a deeper understanding of retention within higher education, as well as provide helpful information to leaders within higher education (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008).

This chapter presents the results of this mixed-methods study and is divided into four sections. The first section describes the sample used and the rationale for utilizing three separate orientation sessions within one semester. The second section describes the research methodology and analysis as well as a third section explaining the summary of results and findings. The fourth section provides a detailed analysis of data and results of the information found on first-course retention relative to orientation completion or non-completion.

Description of Sample

The target population for this research study, as shown in Figure 1, included 428 graduate-level students of mixed genders, ages, and ethnicities in the online orientation program for one semester, which included three separate sessions. This graduate-level population examined orientation students in the fall of 2016 who completed, or did not complete, the five quizzes in the orientation program prior to their first introductory courses. All personally identifiable student information was de-identified using students' university ID numbers, for example, G00XXXXXX, to ensure confidentiality during the study, in the data analysis, and study results.

From a mixed target population of 428 graduate-level students' contact information from a semester of, non-mandatory online orientations at a northwestern-area university, 53 students were not found in any orientation, as seen in Figure 1, but were listed as completing their first course. Reasons related to why these specific students were not enrolled in an orientation in the

fall of 2016 were varied, and may have been the result of repeating a course, which may have meant that they had been in a previous orientation from more than one year prior to the start of this study. Therefore, their names were not found in any orientation relative to this study.

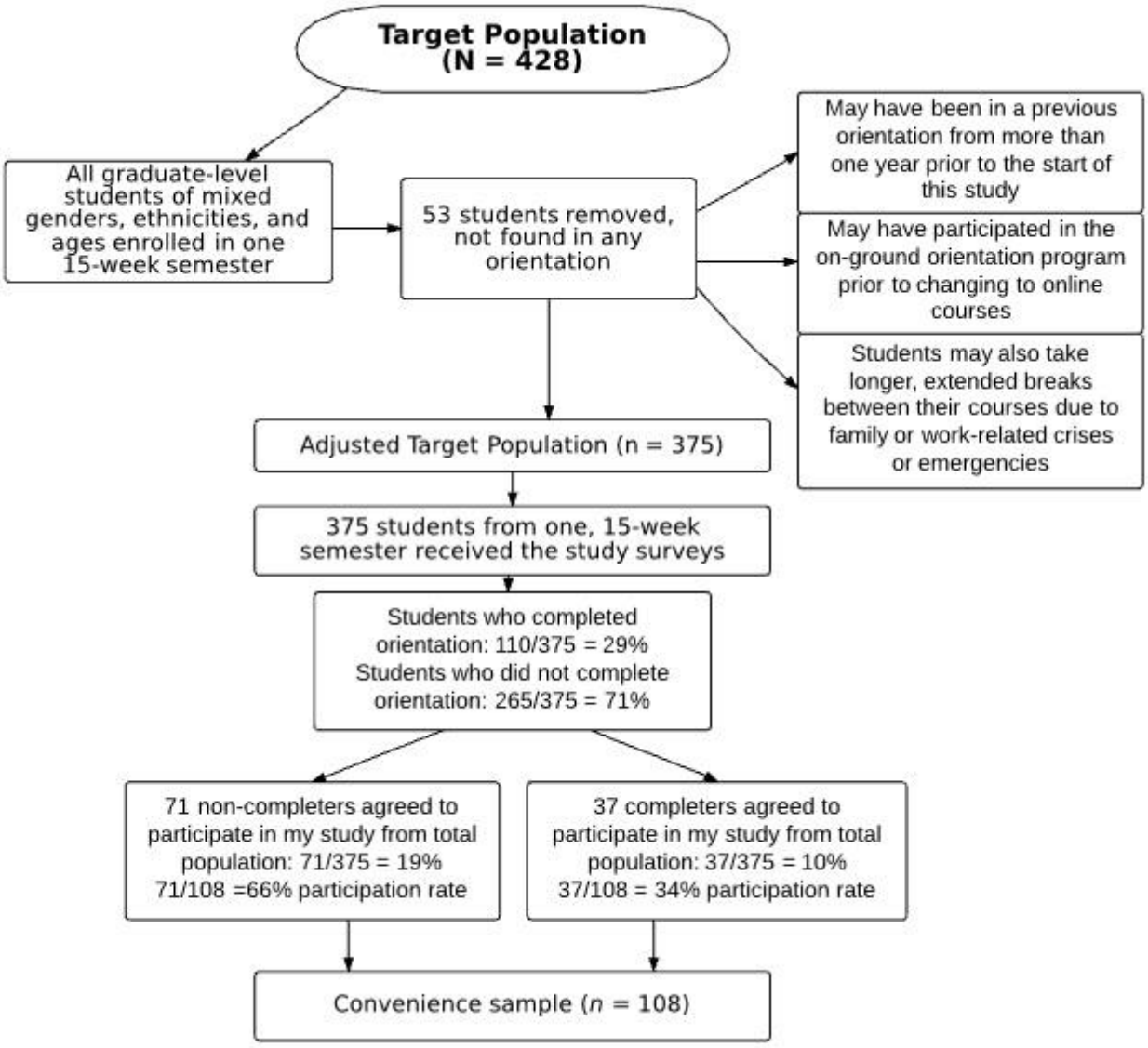

Figure 1. Convenience sample flow and analysis.

A second possible reason these students were not found may have been that they were campus-based at the beginning of their program and decided to opt out of the face-to-face program and enroll in an online course. They may not have been found in any orientation

program observed in this study because they would have had an opportunity to participate in the on-ground orientation program.

Finally, many students may also take longer, extended breaks between their courses due to family or work-related crises or emergencies. The research site fully recognizes that these situations do occur, and student services personnel assist students when needed so that they may continue their program when the emergency has passed. The 53 students who were not found were removed from the study, since their orientation participation was not found and was not pertinent to the study. The removal of these 53 students from the original 428 students resulted in 375 students to whom I sent a weekly email over a 5–week period with a link to voluntarily participate in the study. From the 375 total survey population who received the survey link, the resulting convenience sample of 108 students included those who agreed to participate in the study by completing the agreement statement and then submitting the completed survey. As seen in Figure 1, 110 of 375, or 29% of students completed orientation within the semester, while 265 of 375, or 71%, of students did not complete the orientation.

Figure 1 reveals that 71 non-completers and 37 completers, from the 108-student convenience sample, agreed to participate in the study. From the 108-student convenience sample, 8 of 108, or 7%, failed their first course. From students who failed, 7 of 8, or 88%, did not complete their orientation. Likewise, 1 of 8 students, or 13%, failed their first course even though they completed the online orientation.

Research Methodology and Analysis

Mixed methods. A mixed-methods research methodology, through the lens of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, was used to determine the impact of graduate-level students' completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation on first-

course retention with the grade of an A or B. Furthermore, Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory framed the study, and in the process of completing an online orientation, students had the opportunity to transform their perspectives of online learning, to reflect on those experiences, and either accept or change their views of the online experience (Willinik & Jacobs, 2012). By evaluating students' survey responses and the directionality and quality of their reflections, "researchers can assess and observe evidence of transformative change in students' educational development" (Stanlick, 2015). Moreover, Stanlick (2015) also posited that using data from various approaches is necessary to understand the complexities of potential influences on learners' experiences. This example of transformative learning, while abbreviated, explained my educational paradigm for viewing and justifying retention surrounding a non-mandatory online orientation.

Qualitative student responses submitted after an online orientation experience and quantitative Likert-scale data from the survey were used to gain a greater understanding of any potential relationship between students' online orientation experiences and first-course retention. Exact Pearson Chi-Square analysis was performed on each of the six identically worded survey questions with both completers and non-completers (McDonald, 2014). An exact analysis was performed because many of the cells had an expected value of fewer than 5 counts per category, and if one or more cells has fewer than 5 counts, the chi-square test becomes very sensitive, which may result in making a weak relationship appearing statistically significant if the sample is large enough (Adams & Lawrence, 2014).

The Exact Pearson Chi-Square is a generalization of the Fisher's Exact Chi-Square, allowing exact analysis of tables with more than two rows and/or columns (McDonald, 2014). The tables analyzed in this study consisted of five rows representing the Likert-type responses

(strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree) and two columns for both non-completers and completers. The table cells contain the frequency, or counts of student responses per question category, and the percent rate per question category. A p-value was given for the tables, and additional p-values for the comparison of each response row with all others combined.

Careful review of the literature in using a mixed-methods approach for this study revealed, through research from Chapter 2, that leaders within higher education have grown concerned over lower online retention rates than the rates found in face-to-face programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013; He et al., 2014; Vaill, 2013). Orientation programs have shown through research that the training students received at the initial phases of their online program can assist them throughout their first course in their programs (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013). Likewise, students receiving support through online orientations promoted their sense of accomplishment and a learner-ready attitude that carried through students' first course (Daniel, 2013). Furthermore, a mixed-methods approach may yield a more complete analysis of this problem, since mixed-methods research can bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative designs due to its logical and intuitive approach (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

Quantitative Summary of Results

The steps taken to heighten validity, with respect to the research questions, involved clearly defined and operationalized goals and objectives explained in detail in the previous procedures section beginning on page 74 of this chapter. All students of mixed ages, genders, and ethnicities enrolled in orientation at the graduate level for the entire semester became the

target population for inclusion into this study. The convenience sample included 108 students who volunteered for the study. One quantitative research question addressed the impact of completing or not completing the orientation on students' transformational, personal, and academic experiences of students with the grade of an A or B in their first course so that a greater understanding may be gained regarding their experiential knowledge and then improved upon through study results (Stanlick, 2015).

In addition, operationalized variables involved first-course retention as the dependent variable, since successful first-course retention was examined as relative to completing the orientation. Participants agreed to volunteer for the study after reading the letter of study intent, and their university identification numbers, or student ID numbers were used to determine their first-course grades. Their personal information was de-identified, using their G number, for example, G00XXXXXX as seen in Tables 1 and 2, for participant protection and adherence to IRB stipulations. This method was appropriate due to the nature in which the process measured students' completion or non-completion of their first course with the grade of an A or B at the graduate level.

The independent variables were the completion or non-completion of all five orientation quizzes, which included a Blackboard tutorial quiz, pre-APA and post-APA module quizzes, as well as pre-library and post-library module quizzes. Students completing the five orientation quizzes were used to indicate students who completed orientation. Sustaining identical survey-completion conditions for participants also improved the research questions' validity. Furthermore, steps taken to ensure the study's reliability involved the ease with which another researcher could replicate this study, since the processes involved could easily be used by other researchers to add to this study's findings. Moreover, the use of constant data comparison in

combination with quantitative supporting data in this study further explained the ease of replicability of this study for other researchers. Threats to internal validity were found in omitting phone interviews from this study's methodology section, which would have eliminated any additional information students could have added to enrich the study's findings. The interview data and findings were also used to add depth and consistency to the study.

Qualitative Summary of Findings

Specific coding from the surveys' question categories and thematic procedures, helped classify students' comments into two groups, orientation completers and orientation non-completers. From those two categories, subgroups for qualitative student comments were developed based on sections within the students' surveys, such as, students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences with the orientation enrollment process, orientation content for first-course preparation, transformative interaction, and open-ended comments. This helped provide a more systematic and organized format for the comments from the convenience sample, while also firmly establishing the qualitative parameters for the subgroups needed to assess the second research question.

Subsets from the four categories previously named were created in an effort to continue to document and categorize students' comments further. The subsets are time limitations, making orientation mandatory, transformative learning, technology issues, student services-enrollment specialists, returning to orientation, more practice assignments, satisfaction and language barriers. The findings are summarized according to their respective research questions and hypotheses.

Quantitative Detailed Analysis

One quantitative research question with associated hypotheses guided this section of the

study:

R_1: What impact does completing or not completing a non-mandatory online orientation have on graduate-level students' first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

H_1: There will be a significant difference between students who completed a non-mandatory online orientation and those students who did not complete the online orientation course in the number of students who completed the first course with a grade of an A or B.

$H_{0:}$ There will be no significant difference between students who completed a non-mandatory online orientation and those students who did not complete the online orientation course in the number of students who completed the first course with a grade of an A or B.

Based on the aggregated data from the convenience sample flow and analysis in Figure 1 and summarized in Table 2, 108 of 375 students, or 29% of orientation completers, participated in this study. Of the 108 students in the convenience sample, 37 of 108, or 34% of orientation completers, agreed to participate in this study. Of the 34% who completed all five of the online orientation quizzes, 1 of 37, or 2.7%, failed their first course. In addition, non-completers who failed their first course, 7 of 71, or 9.9%, Failed their first course. As seen in Table 2, orientation completers who agreed to participate in this study and who completed all five orientation quizzes with a passing grade in their first course totaled 36 of 37, or 97% while 64 of 71 or 90% of students who did not complete the orientation has a passing grade ($p = 0.259$). Although the difference in the proportion of students passing the first course between completers (97%) and non-completers (90%) was not significant, more of the completers (97%) passed their first

Table 1

Convenience-Sample Orientation Completion and First-Course Grades

ID	Finish	Grade	ID	Finish	Grade	ID	Finish	Grade
G00XXXXXX	2	B+	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A–
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A–	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	F	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A–	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A–	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	B+
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	F	G00XXXXXX	1	B+
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	F
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	C
G00XXXXXX	2	A–	G00XXXXXX	1	A–	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	1	B+	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A–
G00XXXXXX	2	F	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	D	G00XXXXXX	2	B–
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	1	B	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	2	B+	G00XXXXXX	2	A–	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	C+	G00XXXXXX	2	A–
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	C–	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	B+	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	B
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	1	B–
G00XXXXXX	2	A–	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	2	B+	G00XXXXXX	1	A–	G00XXXXXX	2	A
G00XXXXXX	1	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	1	A
G00XXXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXX	2	A	G00XXXXXX	2	A

course. Students who have a 1 listed under the orientation completion column completed orientation. Those students who did not complete the orientation have a 2 in the same column. Students who did not pass orientation or their first course have an asterisk by their ID number, as seen in Table 1. These students were included in a phone interview, discussed in further detail at the end of this chapter.

Table 2

Cross Tabulation of Completion Status and First-Course Grade/retention

	Non-Completers		Completers		
Pass/Fail	Freq	%	Freq	%	*p*
Fail	7	9.9	1	2.7	0.259
Pass	64	90.1	36	97.3	

Due to the small convenience-sample size for this study, there was not enough power to find significance between completing or not completing the orientation and a grade of an A or B in students' first course at the graduate level. As seen in Table 2, the results for students who completed or did not complete the orientation and their first-course grades of an A or B at the graduate level revealed no significance, $p = 0.259$. Also in Table 2, 97% of orientation completers passed their first course with the grade of an A or b and 90% of orientation non-completers completed their first course with the grade of an A or B. One student who completed the orientation did fail his first course. Furthermore, seven non-completers failed their first course; however, this sample size was too small to indicate any significance. With a *p* value of 0.259, the data reveals that there was no statistical significance, since it was larger than the 0.05 needed to display a significant result.

The orientation completers and non-completers were asked to respond to two different surveys, as noted earlier in this study due to different specific experiences for the two groups of students. The complete surveys for orientation completers and orientation non-completers may be referenced in Appendices A and B. Six survey statements from the completers' and non-completers' surveys were identically worded, but numbered differently within the completers' and non-completers' surveys. To assist with simplicity in data analysis, the questions from the completers' and non-completers' surveys have been renumbered 1 through 6. Each survey statement was examined in further detail accordingly.

Analysis of Question 1.

1. *My enrollment specialist assisted me with my paperwork in each step of the enrollment process.*

Table 3

Cross Tabulation of Completion Status and Enrollment Specialist Assistance

	Non-Completers		Completers		
Question	Freq	%	Freq	%	*p*
q1					0.592
SA	50	70.4	24	66.7	0.825
A	20	28.2	10	27.8	1.000
N	0	0.0	1	2.8	0.336
D	1	1.4	1	2.8	1.000
SD	0	0.0	0	0.0	

Based on the information from the completers' survey responses in Question one, 66.7% strongly agreed and 27.8% agreed that their enrollment specialist assisted with the enrollment paperwork. This means that 95% of completers felt that their enrollment paperwork was handled

efficiently and effectively to promote a smooth transition into the university and the orientation program. However, this does not support the first research question due to no statistical significance of $p = 0.592$. In addition, the results in Table 3 from enrollment specialists assisting with enrollment paperwork and completion or non-completion of the orientation, the data revealed similar percentages between completers at 95% and non-completers at 98.6% who felt that their enrollment paperwork was handled efficiently and effectively to promote a smooth transition into the university, the orientation program, and their first course.

Moreover, all non-completers answered this question, with one orientation completer not answering the question, resulting in 36 rather than 37 responses for this question. However, due to the small convenience-sample size, there was no significance for this result. The *p* value of 0.592 confirms that there was no statistical significance, since it was higher than the 0.05 needed to show a significant result. The data reveals no statistical significance between completing or not completing the orientation and a smooth transition into students' first course due to enrollment specialist assistance during the enrollment process.

Analysis of Question 2.

2. *My enrollment specialist explained the importance of the non-mandatory orientation in preparing me for my first course.*

Table 4

Cross Tabulation of Completion Status and Enrollment Specialist Explanation

	Non-Completers		Completers		
Question	Freq	%	Freq	%	*p*
q2					0.199
SA	35	49.3	21	58.3	0.418
A	25	35.2	8	22.2	0.191
N	6	8.5	2	5.6	0.715
D	5	7.0	3	8.3	1.000
SD	0	0.0	2	5.6	0.111

Question 2 in Table 4 revealed that 80.5% of completers strongly agree-agreed that their enrollment specialist explained the importance of the orientation preparing them for their first course. The completers in other categories responded with 5.6% neutral, and 13.9% responding with disagree/strongly disagree. Once again, 1 of 37 completers did not answer this question, but due to the small sample size, this showed no statistical significance.

Information from the non-completers survey suggested that 84.5% strongly agree-agreed, with 8.5% neutral, and 7% responding with disagree that their enrollment specialist explained the importance of the orientation in preparing them for their first course. In addition, all non-completers answered this question, resulting in all 71 responses for this question. However, while 71 non-completers responded to this question, the *p* value of 0.199 shows that there was no statistical significance, since it was higher than the .05 needed to display a significant result. The data from Table 4 show that there was no statistical significance between completing or not completing the orientation and the enrollment specialist explanation of the importance of

completing the orientation program in preparation for students' completion of their first course with the grade of an A or B.

Analysis of Question 3.

3. *I easily logged in to the orientation with the username and password provided by my enrollment specialist.*

Table 5

Cross Tabulation Completion Status and Logging in to Orientation Course

	Non-Completers		Completers		
Question	Freq	%	Freq	%	*p*
q3					0.700
SA	37	52.9	22	59.5	0.546
A	21	30.0	11	29.7	1.000
N	6	8.6	3	8.1	1.000
D	6	8.6	1	2.7	0.418
SD	0	0.0	0	0.0	

Based on the results for this question from the surveys of completers and non-completers in Table 5, the enrollment specialists' assistance to students in logging in to the orientation, the data revealed similar percentages between completers and non-completers at the strongly agree-agree level, with completers responding to the strongly agree-agree level with 89.2%, 8.1% neutral, and 2.7% responding with disagree-strongly disagree. Non-completers responded with 82.9% in the strongly agree-agree level, with 8.6% neutral, and 8.6% responding with disagree-strongly disagree. In addition, all completers answered this question, resulting in all 37 responses for this question. However, one non-completer did not respond to the question,

resulting in 70 non-completers responding. This still revealed no statistical significance due to a small convenience-sample size. While 70 non-completers and 37 completers responded to this question, the *p* value of 0.700 shows that there is no statistical significance, since it was higher than the 0.05 needed to display a significant result. The data from Table 5 shows that there was no statistical significance in completing or not completing the orientation and enrollment specialist assistance in logging in to the orientation program.

Analysis of Question 4.

4. *The support provided to me by university personnel made the enrollment process less stressful.*

Table 6

Cross Tabulation of Completion Status and Support

	Non-Completers		Completers		
Question	Freq	%	Freq	%	*p*
q4					0.177
SA	45	64.3	25	67.6	0.832
A	21	30.0	9	24.3	0.653
N	3	4.3	0	0.0	0.315
D	1	1.4	3	8.1	0.118
SD	0	0.0	0	0.0	

The results in Table 6 for question 4 from the surveys of completers and non-completers based on their overall support and assistance received from university personnel during the enrollment and orientation experience again revealed similar percentages between completers and non-completers at the strongly agree-agree level, with completers responding with 91.9%, 0% neutral, and 8.1% responding with disagree-strongly disagree.

Non-completers responded with 94.3% in the strongly agree-agree level, with 4.3% neutral, and 1.4% responding with disagree-strongly disagree. In addition, the frequency of completers who answered this question resulted in a 99% response rate, resulting in 70 of 71 non-completers responding. This still revealed no statistical significance due to a small convenience-sample size. While 70 non-completers and 37 completers responded to this question, the *p* value of 0.177 showed that there was no statistical significance, since it was higher than the 0.05 needed to display a significant result. The data from Table 6 showed that there is no statistical significance in students' overall support and assistance received from university personnel during the enrollment process or during the orientation experience.

Analysis of Question 5.

5. *I learn best with interaction from peers or instructors.*

Table 7

Cross Tabulation Completion Status and Interaction

	Non-Completers			Completers		
Question	Freq	%	Question	Freq	%	*p*
q5						0.248
SA	25	36.2	SA	14	38.9	0.833
A	33	47.8	A	13	36.1	0.303
N	5	7.2	N	7	19.4	0.102
D	6	8.7	D	2	5.6	0.712
SD	0	0.0	SD	0	0.0	

Based on the results for Question 5 Table 7, from both completers and non-completers in relation to completion and the interaction and support they received, the data revealed similar percentages between completers and non-completers at the strongly agree-agree level, with

completers responding to the strongly agree-agree level with 75%, 19.4% neutral, and 5.6% responding with disagree-strongly disagree. Non-completers responded with 84% in the strongly agree-agree level, with 7.2% neutral, and 8.7% responding with disagree-strongly disagree. In addition, one completer did not respond to the question, resulting in 36 completers responding to this question. However, two non-completers did not answer this question, resulting in 69 non-completers responding. This still revealed no statistical significance due to a small convenience-sample size. While 69 non-completers and 36 completers responded to this question, the *p* value of 0.248 showed that there was no statistical significance, since it was higher than the 0.05 needed to display a significant result. The data from Table 7 shows that there was no statistical significance in completing or not completing the orientation and students learning best with interaction from peers and an instructor in an orientation program.

The transformative learning question for completers, Question 5 in Table 7, revealed that 38.9% strongly agreed and 36.1% agreed, or 75%, learned best with interaction from peers or instructors. The other percentages with Question 5 revealed that 26.6% of students surveyed were neutral regarding learning or practicing on their own. The transformative learning questions for non-completers, Question 5 revealed that 36.2% strongly agreed and 47.8% agreed, or 84%, that they learned best with interaction from peers or instructors. Additionally, 18% of aggregated student comments, from the following qualitative section, showed that students preferred more interaction and support from an instructor in the online orientation.

Analysis of Question 6.

6. *I learn best when I can read and practice on my own.*

Table 8

Cross Tabulation Completion Status and Learning Best On My Own

	Non-Completers		Completers		
Question	Freq	%	Freq	%	*p*
q6					0.150
SA	12	17.4	11	30.6	0.141
A	22	31.9	15	41.7	0.391
N	24	34.8	5	13.9	***0.037**
D	10	14.5	4	11.1	0.767
SD	1	1.4	1	2.8	1.000

The results from Table 8 regarding students learning best when they can read and practice online course material on their own, revealed similar percentages once again with completers at the strongly agree-agree level at 72.3%, with 13.9% neutral, and 13.9% responding with disagree-strongly disagree. Again, one orientation completer did not answer this question for 36 out of 37 students, but due to the small sample size, this also revealed no statistical significance, since it was not possible to force a response. Non-completers responded with 49.3% in the strongly agree-agree level, and 34.8% neutral, and 15.9% responding with disagree-strongly disagree. However, while 69 of 71 non-completers and 36 of 37 completers responded to this question, the *p* value of .037 in the neutral category and boldfaced with an asterisk in Table 8 did show that a statistical significance, since it was smaller than the 0.05. However, this should be interpreted carefully since the overall differences in the table were not statistically significant. More non-completers than completers were neutral regarding this question, perhaps signifying

more ambivalence and indecisiveness toward learning best on their own or even that they needed additional transformative support during the orientation or their first course.

Qualitative Presentation of Data and Results

One qualitative research question guided this study:

R_2: Do students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation influence first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

Students' open-ended comments were categorized according to the sections within the surveys which measured their personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences, and are based upon the subgroups detailed in this chapter. These subgroups were created as a means to further understand students' transformative learning experiences as noted in their open-ended survey comments. This structure aligned with Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory as well as the concurrent transformative research design, since transformative learning occurs as a result of changes in learner's experiences. The focus of this study was based on viewing online orientations from transformative theoretical concepts, such as the importance of perspective changes in how students see themselves as learners, any revision of students' previously held beliefs, and any changes in students' lifestyles because of changes from their perspectives and beliefs.

Forming positive experiences early in students' programs can positively influence meaning schemas, which can enhance students' attitudes and experiences toward online learning. Students must validate and justify ideas and presumptions and have time to reflect on their online learning, whether in discussion forums, group projects, or individual submissions within the classroom. By using reflection in the transformative learning process, students can test not only

what they are learning, but also how their new learning experiences transform how they feel about and interact with new paradigms that learning new information presents. Comments reviewed and discussed were assessed through Mezirow's theoretical lens, as well as in relation to the second research question, to better understand students' experiences involving transformative learning within the parameters of this study.

Students who did not complete the orientation, based on comments retrieved from the survey, had the largest number of open-ended suggestions to offer in how to best prepare graduate-level students in the future, simply because 66% of orientation non-completers agreed to participate in this study over the 29% of completers. The qualitative comments revealed that students did not have positive experiences, such as feeling rushed, enrolled into the orientation days prior to the start of their first program, and had 1 or 2 days to complete the orientation.

Students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences with the orientation enrollment process. The first category from the student survey, students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences with the orientation enrollment process, elicited many student comments, ranging from not knowing about the orientation to not having time to complete it due to late orientation enrollment prior to the start date of their first online course. Based on students' qualitative and Likert-scale responses, students who completed the orientation enjoyed the experience, were grateful for the opportunity to prepare, and felt satisfied with their learning experiences. Regarding students' enrollment advisor experience from the student services-enrollment category in Table 2, 95% of completers and 98% of non-completers from the convenience sample stated that their enrollment advisors adequately assisted with their enrollment paperwork, and student comments such as, "I was very satisfied with the assistance I was given prior to my first course" (Student 1), were reflective of

the comments in this category as a whole. This created a positive meaning scheme regarding the enrollment process into the research site. For example, one student remarked that "the way the enrollment processes were handled, everything was excellent" (Student 2). Still another student stated that the "enrollment was an amazingly easy and smooth process" (Student 3), while another commented that "I really appreciated my enrollment specialist, and the help they provided…resources were easy to access and understand" (Student 4). This high percentage, 95% and 98%, is complementary to the enrollment center in providing support in the early, formative stages of students' online enrollment, which is crucial is establishing a solid online experience at the beginning of a student's online learning program, creating positive precedents and priorities, as well as determining student focus and relevance (Hilton, 2013; Mezirow, 1991).

However, the caveat with the enrollment process and enrollment advisors, as noted from students' Likert-scale responses, revealed that 23 of 108 students, or 22%, in the convenience sample were not informed of the importance of completing the non-mandatory orientation in preparation for their first course. For example, nine students, or 22%, commented similarly that orientation was not stressed as something crucial to establishing a foundational level of skill for an online program. For example, Student 5 stated that "it was not impressed upon me as important enough to complete," and that "the material was not relevant to my first course" (Student 6).

Meaning schemas can "guide the way learners' experience, feel, understand, act, or judge particular situations," and can serve as models for and norms for what is expected (Mezirow, 1991, p. 48). Within online learning, this can be used as a guide in new experiences (Mezirow, 1991), such as those experiences found in students who may be new to online learning. In this case, the students' meaning schemas were their introductory experiences with the research site

that helped establish a positive mental precedent regarding online learning (Stanlick, 2015). With such a high percentage of students overwhelmingly supporting a positive experience and based on meaning schemas influencing new student experiences such as online learning, these qualitative comments support the second research question, that students' personal and transformative learning experiences during enrollment influenced the completion of their first course with a grade of an A or B. This high percentage of positive comments fully corroborates the quantitative analysis discussed in Table 2, with completers at 95% and non-completers at 98.6% who felt that their enrollment paperwork was handled efficiently and effectively to promote a smooth transition into the university, the orientation program, and their first course.

While eight students stated that they did not know that the orientation existed, they felt they would have completed it if they had known it was there to provide support for their first course. For example, Student 7 stated that " . . . [orientation] was not required, just highly recommended" by the enrollment specialist. Another student stated that had his "enrollment specialist told him that there was an orientation that would have provided basic skills for his first course, he would have completed it" (Student 8), which was also reiterated by another student who stated, "had I known that there was an orientation created to help me, I would have used it to give me the basics for my first course" (Student 9). Another commented that, "I did not participate because it wasn't impressed upon me that it [orientation] could be important" (Student 10). Still, an additional student remarked that "I was unaware of orientation" (Student 11), while another commented that "orientation was not talked about with my advisor…it would have been beneficial to have knowledge of it before it started" (Student 12). These comments from students, while not a positive replication of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, still reveal a level of reflection from students that shows their understanding of what they

needed to be self-directed and more prepared for online learning. Furthermore, this reveals students reflecting on and drawing from their experiences to help redefine meaning schemas and perspectives regarding their online learning experiences (Mezirow, 1991).

Moreover, six students, or 6% of the convenience sample, stated that they wanted more feedback from their enrollment specialists, and that providing key information related to important phone numbers of department contacts within the university would have helped them feel more connected during their enrollment process. Based on research within the literature review from Chapter 2, a blend of online, facilitated discussions can foster transformative learning experiences that can help construct deeper understanding of orientation course material (Hilton, 2013). Students were able to reflect on their transformative learning experiences, as well as what they felt would have facilitated their experience, in a way that allowed them to suggest additional interactive means to support learning for future, graduate-level students.

Furthermore, Student 13 commented that "I would have appreciated a list of important student related phone numbers specific to students, such as financial aid, bookstore, student services, etc." In addition, another student stated that he wanted "more defined answers on financial aid, and better explanations in emails on the forms needed to be filled out at enrollment" (Student 14). Furthermore, Student 15 remarked that enrollment should "ensure that tuition statements are accurate…as an international student, there are large fees associated with payment, and to have to pay twice is unacceptable when someone on the university's end inadvertently makes an error." Again, these examples from students personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences during the enrollment process, supported the second research question, and provided the reflection they needed during their pre-enrollment views of online learning and create new paradigms post first-course completion or non-completion.

Students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences with orientation content for first-course preparation. The third category from the student survey, students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences with orientation content for first-course preparation, garnered the most student comments, 50 of 108, or 46% of students in the convenience sample. Of the convenience sample participants, 22 of 108, or 20% of students, stated that they completed the entire orientation course and found it very helpful, and that had they "not completed it, would have been very lost in their first class" (Student 16), with other comments related to "being thankful for completing it" (Student 17), and that once they were in their first course, that they "had the basic knowledge needed to be successful in their first course" (Student 18). These comments show a level of reflection consistent with the concept that transformative learning experiences should be designed to prepare students for a more reflective, resilient, and proficient assessment of learning situations (Fifolt, 2014). An additional three students stated that since it [orientation] was not required, they did not complete the course. For example, Student 19 stated that since "the orientation was not mandatory, I did not take the time to complete the reading material or the five quizzes."

Other comments from students relative to the orientation and first-course preparation related to schedule conflicts. For example, 20 students remarked that they did not complete the orientation due to work schedules. One student stated that "I was too busy with work and didn't get a chance to do it" (Student 21), while another remarked that "I participated in the orientation, but I just did not give myself enough time to really understand some of the requirements" (Student 22). Still, Student 23 stated that "due to time restraints with my work schedule, I was not able to finish before my first course." While these comments are validated within the lives of busy adult students, adult-learning theory within research indicates that a solid online experience

at the beginning of their online learning program can create positive precedents and priorities, as well as determine student focus and relevance (Hilton, 2013; Mezirow, 1991).

Comments from those students who completed or did not complete the orientation also related to APA preparation in the orientation were generally positive. For example, Student 24 remarked that the "APA was extremely helpful." Student 25 also stated the "navigational portion of the orientation helped me feel more prepared for my first course." Comments also revealed that completing the orientation gave them a basic skill set needed for successfully completing their first course with the grade of an A or B. This kind of reflection by students can transform their meaning perspectives while continuing to alter their mindset toward online learning, possibly promoting a more positive thought process (Enger & Lajimodiere, 2011; Hilton, 2013; Mezirow). As a result, they felt more prepared for completing their first course, as stated in their survey comments.

An additional 19 of 108 student comments, or 18%, were gathered that specifically related to more application with APA through practice assignments in the orientation. Those who did complete their first course had experienced moments of frustration with APA citations and references; however, they were able to work through any challenges to their schemas related to APA through practice, patience, and assistance from their first-course instructor.

Nevertheless, student comments, such as those from Student 26, revealed that "APA needs more applied practice versus testing through quizzes," and desiring more practical application of skills learned within the orientation. Likewise, Student 27 stated that "reading through material related to APA and then completing a quiz does not allow for practical application," and hence, suggested more assignments that provided time to practice the skills learned in the orientation prior to the first course. For example, online learning requires that

students reflect on new academic or personal transformative learning experiences they encounter, adjust their views of those situations, and then evaluate what they have learned within online orientations to alter their previously established schemas (Mezirow, 1991). This revealed a level of student reflection consistent with transformative learning as well as transformative research design, both of which seek a deeper level of reflection within students that alters their meaning perspectives within the learning process (Stanlick, 2015).

Other important student comments suggested providing more time for the orientation program, "since it forms the basis for the entire course" (Student 28). Over 30 students, or 28% of students in the convenience sample, commented that providing more time for the orientation, more time to become accustomed to Blackboard, and more time to practice using APA and the online library, would have helped create a better introduction to online learning. For example, Student 29 remarked that the "APA was extremely helpful." Student 30 also stated the "navigational portion of the orientation helped me feel more prepared for my first course." Of the 30 students making these statements, 10 of 108 students, or 9%, stated that they would have preferred more time to review the orientation material prior to their first course. For example, Student 31 added that "enrollment into the orientation 2–3 days prior to their first course was not an optimal beginning for their program," and did not "give me the time I needed to become more experienced with the online material needed in my first course" (Student 32). Moreover, four students from the 28% remarked that the orientation program should be required, instead of merely mentioning its existence. For instance, Student 33 stated that it "should be mandatory . . . since it provides the framework and grounding needed to be successful in my first course" at the graduate level. These comments reveal the importance in establishing a solid online experience at the beginning of students' online learning program can create positive precedents and

priorities (Hilton, 2013; Mezirow, 1991). This provides the opportunity for students to test not only what they are learning, but also how their new, online learning experiences transform how they feel about and interact with new paradigms that learning new information presents (Mezirow, 1991).

Five students, or 5% of the convenience sample, commented that they revisited the orientation program after their first course began in an effort to find answers to unanswered questions relative to navigation issues, as well as assignment submission directions. For example, Student 34 commented that, "I went back because I had unanswered questions," and Student 35 remarked that "I returned to the orientation to finish the part I omitted." Additionally, five students remarked that they, for example, "had specific challenges signing in to the orientation" (Student 36), and that the "valuable time needed to review orientation was consumed through contacting the online help desk, gaining further instruction on how to use my university credentials to gain access" (Student 37) to their online program. Forming positive experiences early in students' programs can positively influence meaning schemas, thus enhancing students' attitudes and experiences toward online learning (Mezirow, 1991). Furthermore, these examples from students' personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences during with orientation content, supported the second research question, and provided the reflection they needed to transform their meaning schemas of online learning and created new paradigms of their post first-course completion or non-completion.

Students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences with transformative interaction. Based on students' comments, many completers and non-completers alike felt that an instructor would have helped them in the orientation. From comments provided in this chapter, others felt that there was too much information to

comprehend in the orientation with too little time to preview and retain it or take the orientation quizzes. While 97% of completers and 90% of non-completers in this study did complete their first course with the grade of an A or B, their transformative, personal, and academic experiences, as reflected in their open-ended survey comments, could have been more positive. From these comments, many would have struggled less in their first course had they received appropriate, pre-program support that was reflected in their survey comments.

Student commentary regarding transformative interaction was comprised of 18% of the 108-student convenience sample, in which Student 38 commented that she "would have enjoyed a live chat room in the orientation," and Student 39 stated that "a web-based meeting would have been helpful" (Student 40). Still, 6 students, or 6%, remarked that the "orientation was not interactive in terms of meeting new students" (Student 41). In addition, 4 students, or 4%, within the 18% of the 108-student convenience sample commented that they would have enjoyed the opportunity to interact with their peers before the start of their program. Student 42 commented that "meeting new students before their first course would have been beneficial," and that it "would have provided more of a sense of community and support" (Student 43). These comments substantiate transformative learning theories, in that as students are introduced to the online learning format through various assignments in different learning modules, facilitator-led discussions, questions, and peer interactions can promote a stronger sense of safety within an online community of learners (Boyd, 2015; Mezirow, 1991).

Furthermore, 5 students, or 5%, also stated that an instructor was needed in the orientation. Student 44 stated that "they needed an instructor working with them," and that "the instructor's presence was greatly needed through interaction and feedback within the orientation" (Student 45). Student 46 commented that, "there must be an instructor communicating with me,"

and Student 47 remarked that "within the orientation, there should be more interaction between students." The three other students' comments related to more instructor communication in the orientation were very similar to these two, previously stated remarks. Providing opportunities for transformative support and communication must be endorsed at the introductory phases of online learning as students are exposed to various technologies that may not have been previously encountered (Beaudoin, 2015).

A final student comment, related to transformative interaction in the online environment, drew attention to international language barriers. Student 48 remarked that "the university should remember that not all of its students are native English-speakers," and therefore, need more time to adjust to online learning, both verbal and written communications, as well as any information received by the university. While the research site does have a writing lab students may use, many students are unaware of its existence until their first course, as it is not mentioned in the online orientation (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). However, online course instructors within students' programs do have the ability to suggest or recommend that students in their courses further investigate the writing lab in order to improve their graduate-level writing abilities (Northwestern-Area University, 2016). Moreover, these examples from students' personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences with transformative course interaction, supported the second research question, and provided the opportunities students needed to transform their meaning schemas of online learning and created new paradigms of what they seek within online learning.

Phone interviews. Information in Figure 1, as well as phone interviews in Table 9, revealed that 64 of 71 orientation non-completers, or 90%, completed their first course with the letter grade of an A or B. A detailed description follows each of the five students interviewed

from the 108-student convenience sample who failed their first course, and the addition of one student who completed her orientation, passed her first course, and agreed to the interview, as seen in Table 9. Furthermore, student comments from orientation non-completers who failed their first course but did not agree to an interview were available, but were not included in this study.

Table 9

Phone Interview Results

Student	ID	Orientation Completion	Orientation Non-completion	First-course Grade	Still Enrolled	Interviewed
1	G00XXXXXX		X	F	N	Y
2	G00XXXXXX		X	F	N	N
3	G00XXXXXX		X	F	Y	Y
4	G00XXXXXX	X		A	Y	Y
5	G00XXXXXX		X	D	Y	Y
6	G00XXXXXX		X	C+	Y	N
7	G00XXXXXX	X		C–	Y	N
8	G00XXXXXX		X	F	N	Y
9	G00XXXXXX		X	C	Y	N

As shown in Table 9, students 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9 did not complete the five quizzes within their orientation, while students 4 and 7 did complete the five orientation quizzes. Furthermore, of those students listed in Table 9, 7 of 9, or 78%, did not complete the non-mandatory online orientation. This means that 7 of 7 students who did not complete their orientation, or 100%, did not complete their first course with the grade of an A or B at the graduate level, reaffirming and supporting the validity of the qualitative comments from this study regarding students needing more time with orientation material and more practical

application of skills learned. For example, Students 1, 3, 5, and 8 in Table 9 stated that they were enrolled late into the orientation and had problems logging in to the orientation and their first course. This validates the open-ended comments from the surveys in which other students were also enrolled late into the orientation and that late enrollment affected their entry into their first course. Furthermore, students 1, 3, 5, and 8 also stated collectively that they wanted more practical application of skills learned in the orientation through a variety of assignments rather than simply through a quiz. They stated that it would have helped them feel more prepared for their first course.

Of the students who failed their first course in Table 9, 6 of 9 students, or 67%, retook their first course. Non-completer students 1, 2, and 8 did not retake their first course, but instead, dropped from the university entirely. These students collectively and similarly reiterated the need for connection with peers and instructors as extremely important to their success. For example, Student 8 from Table 9 stated that "interaction with an instructor in the orientation was the missing element that would have helped me feel connected to the university and others in the program." For example, online learning requires that students reflect on new learning experiences they encounter, adjust their views of those situations, and then evaluate what they have learned within online orientations to alter their previously established schemas (Mezirow, 1991). Student 8 stated that his learning transformation because of his experience was that he did not learn, felt overwhelmed, and rushed in the orientation, as well as being rushed in his first course. He desired and needed interaction to deepen the learning experience within the online learning platform. As stated previously, 18% of the 108-student convenience sample desired more interaction with peers and an instructor in the orientation. This further validates the qualitative comments from students who responded that having a connection with an instructor

would have helped them through stressful moments, helped answer questions, as well as eased anxiety regarding online learning. From this transformative learning category, student comments revealed a different significance than the quantitative segment of this study.

Based on the information in Table 9, 3 of 5 students interviewed, or 60%, retook their first course and are still enrolled with the university. However, the exceptions are Students 1 and 8, or 2 of 5 (40%), who were both interviewed and withdrew from the university altogether after failing their first course, corroborating some of the open-ended comments in this study in which students felt rushed with only a few days to preview the orientation material and frustration at the lack of communication with an instructor in the orientation. Student 2, who also dropped from the university, did not participate in an interview, but cited challenges in the survey with internet connectivity and time management. For example, Student 1 from Table 9 also reported that due to technological difficulties in connecting to the internet in his country, he was "always behind and never felt caught up with his studies."

Student 1 continued in the phone interview that "it was too difficult to coordinate scheduling due to internet connectivity challenges in the student's country." This also confirms statements by Student 36 in the qualitative section, in that they "had specific challenges signing in to the orientation," and Student 37 in the same section that that stated "valuable time needed to review orientation was consumed through contacting the online help desk, and gaining further instruction on how to use their university credentials to gain access" to their online program. This delayed or completely impeded their ability to enter orientation in a timely manner to better understand the orientation materials prior to their first course. Circumstances for these students were further exasperated by late enrollment into the orientation prior to their first course. Overall, of the seven students who failed their first course and did not complete the orientation, 3

of 7, or 43% are no longer enrolled in the university. While there was no statistical significance, 43% is a large number for students who did not complete the orientation or were retained after their first course.

Student 3 in Table 9 felt that the orientation experience did not prepare her for her first course due to only having 2 days prior to her first course in which to review the orientation material. This caused incredible stress and made "me feel rushed, increasing my anxiety." Due to her late enrollment, her text was 2 weeks late for her first course, impeding her ability to submit assignments. While her first-course instructor did work with her, she felt too far behind to remain current with her assignments. She stated that she "would have wanted more time to review the orientation material in order to properly prepare for her first course." This confirms open-ended statements from the Qualitative Presentation of Data and Results, in which Students 28, and 29 desired more time to review the orientation material.

Student 4 from Table 9 completed the five orientation quizzes and passed her first course with the grade of an A or B, and therefore retained good standing with the university and continued in the graduate program. Her comments revealed that she had 1 week in which to peruse the orientation material, which is longer than the 2 or 3 days other non-completers who were interviewed had to review material. She also stated that the orientation did help her in her first course and that the APA material informed her of how to reference and cite properly. However, she did reveal a strategy that she found helpful, which was to copy and paste much of the orientation APA material into documents of her own to refer back to as needed in her first course. Overall, she had a very positive experience with Blackboard navigation and in learning how to submit her papers into her first course, although she states that she did go back into the

orientation to revisit the information, corroborating the open-ended survey comments where other students also revisited the orientation.

Student 4 also stated that her transformative learning experience from orientation and her first course was based upon how she thought about and used online learning. She commented that "I realized I was having new thoughts related to technology and its use in my classroom," and that "this changed the way I helped my own students with their learning to transform them into digital learners." She also noted that she felt "more prepared to help my own students with their technological struggles, since I could empathize with their frustrations."

Moreover, in spite of these positive comments, Student 4 did have some suggestions for improvement. She commented that she "would have liked to have had a chat room or one-on-one talk with an instructor to help make me feel more at ease with online learning." She also wanted more communication with her peers in orientation so that "they could connect prior to their first course, building more camaraderie." These comments also corroborate and validate statements earlier in this study by Students 35 through 44, in which all remarked that having more interaction would have been beneficial in their learning experience.

Student 5 from Table 9 had a very pleasant experience with enrollment, and during the interview stated that his enrollment specialist was very helpful, validating the 95% of students surveyed who rated their enrollment experience as very helpful. He did, however, have difficulties with technology and internet connection, which impeded his progress in his first course and he was not able to remain current in his assignments. He felt that this facilitated his failing the first course. He did retake the first course, and is still enrolled at the university. He also admitted that APA was a struggle for him, and that accessing the online library was challenging as well when trying to learn more about APA, which validates the open-ended

comments of Students 23 and 24 in the Qualitative Presentation of Data and Results section of this study.

Student 5 stated that he "felt his learning was transformed regarding technology," and that he now uses that information to help his students in his classroom overcome their frustrations with technology. Furthermore, he felt that his view of what learning was for him "changed, based on his introduction to technology from the orientation." These comments confirmed those by Students 35 through 44, in which interaction with peers or an instructor would have been supportive within the learning process.

Student 7 from Table 9 did complete the orientation quizzes, but did not complete his first course with a grade of an A or B. He did retake his first course and is still enrolled in the university. Even though he was not interviewed, his comments from his survey reveal that his issues related to feeling rushed, as well as having issues mastering time limitations. He also stated in his survey that the orientation, due to no interaction with peers or an instructor, did not make him feel connected to the university or other students. This comment further validates those stated earlier by Students 35 through 44, in which more transformative discourse with peers and an instructor would have aided the process from orientation to their first course. A final comment from Student 7 revealed that he wanted more information in the orientation as to the frequency in which assignments are due to further clarify first-course expectations.

Student 8 from Table 9 was also interviewed, and is no longer enrolled with the university due to challenges he encountered. He stated that something that would have helped him in orientation to better prepare for his first course was "to have an instructor there, because there was no one to communicate with right away." He also "there wasn't anyone available at the time I had the question." These comments confirm those by Students 35 through 44 in the

Qualitative Presentation of Data and Results section of this study.

When Student 8 was asked about his library and APA experiences, he stated that "APA was very overwhelming, and I would have liked to have interacted with someone about it." He felt he wanted and needed to do well online, but felt that practice assignments would have helped him through this portion of the orientation and in his first course. These comments validated those by Students 23 and 24, as well as the other 18% of the convenience sample who wanted more practical application of APA prior to their first course. Moreover, this student also struggled with managing time in the online course, since "I felt rushed in orientation and in my first course." This confirmed open-ended statements from Student 25 in the Qualitative Presentation of Data who also desired more time to review the orientation material.

When asked about whether an instructor or opportunities to respond to peers within the orientation would have helped him feel more connected and less alone, Student 8 also stated that an "instructor in the orientation was the missing element that would have helped me feel connected to others." These comments validated those by Students 35 through 44, in which interaction with peers or an instructor would have been supportive within an online learning process.

When asked about what Student 8 felt was a transformative learning experience, he remarked that "I felt I wasn't learning by simply reading course material and writing papers." He felt that his transformation involved the realization that "as a learner, I needed to have focus on something, not have it crammed down my throat in three seconds, which I'm not going to remember a week from then." This is a new comment in the interview process, and one that was not gathered from the open-ended survey comments.

The phone interviews substantiated the need for continued transformative interaction and

online dialog. This kind of discourse, which allows students the opportunity to explore and learn in the early stages of their online programs, plays an important, introductory role in cultivating an atmosphere of transformative learning through questions and discussions (Boyd, 2015). This kind of dialog also assists students in examining their beliefs and thoughts in relation to newly gained information encountered in their online orientations and within their first course by learning from their peers and course facilitator. Providing opportunities for transformative support and communication must be endorsed at the introductory phases of online learning as students are exposed to various technologies that may not have been previously encountered (Beaudoin, 2015). These efforts may continue to provide the safety and transformative dialog for online students that support a truly reflective and self-directed online learning experience.

Summary

The quantitative data did not reveal any significance related to the four survey questions regarding enrollment specialists' assistance with students' paperwork in the enrollment process, explaining the importance of the non-mandatory orientation in preparing students for their first course, logging in to the orientation, or in the support provided by university personnel in making the enrollment process less stressful. Furthermore, no statistical significance was also found with students who felt that they learned best with interaction from peers or instructors or learning on their own.

Chapter 5 will evaluate these findings as well as summarize recommendations for future research. Implications of student retention at the graduate level at one campus of a private university will also be shared, based on the results from the data analysis.

Chapter 5

Introduction

This study examined the impact that the two variables, completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation, had on graduate-level students' first-course retention with the grade of an A or B. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between completing or not completing a non-mandatory online orientation and first-course retention with the grade of an A or B at the graduate level, utilizing a mixed-method, concurrent transformative research design. Continued study and its respective research regarding retention challenges has shown that the training students received at the initial phases of their online programs through orientations can assist them throughout their first course and continue well into their programs (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013). Similarly, students receiving support through online orientations promoted their sense of accomplishment and persistence that carried through students' first course (Daniel, 2013).

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning and concurrent transformative research design established a theoretical foundation for understanding the complexities involved with retention in online learning, which begins with established structures called meaning schemas. These include skills, concepts, beliefs, and values that may have developed early in learners' lives (Hodge, 2014). These schemas, or meaning perspectives, help "guide the way learners' experience, feel, understand, act, or judge particular situations," and can serve as models for and norms for what is expected (Mezirow, 1991, p. 48). Therefore, it is crucial to retention that students learn from new, online learning experiences and use reflection to help shape new views of those experiences, helping to transform learning and extend that learning

into different meaning perspectives to determine if there was any relationship in completing or not completing the online orientation and first course retention with the grade of an A or B.

The previous chapter detailed the data and findings from two research questions, as well as the alternate and null hypotheses. In this chapter, I will address the results in relation to the literature, limitations, and implications of the results for practice, policy, and theory. I will conclude the chapter with recommendations for further research based on the analysis provided in Chapter 4.

Summary of Results

Improving and maintaining retention at the graduate level in online programs has been a challenge in many universities from 1995 through 2017 due to the complex lives of adult students (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Nitecki, 2011). As a result, leaders within higher education have grown concerned over statistically low student completion rates for online programs (Allen & Seaman, 2016; Croxton, 2014; Fetzner, 2013; He, Xu, & Kruck, 2014; Vaill, 2013). According to their research in the field of online orientations, learner retention and completion in the online environment continue to concern academic leaders as they search for ways to improve student retention rates.

Missing from research, as detailed in Chapter 1 of this dissertation, was the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations were effective for first-course retention for graduate-level student populations. A prevalence of research in the field, discussed in Chapter 2, revealed that there was a concerted focus on undergraduate students within community colleges and public institutions (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown, Hughes, & Delaney, 2015; Cannady, 2015; Cho, 2012; Ellis-O'Quinn, 2011; Garza-Mitchell, 2014; Gaytan, 2015; Gilmore & Lyons, 2012; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Hullinger & Hogan, 2014; Johnson, Stewart, & Bachman, 2013; Jones,

2013; Koehnke, 2013; McGlynn, 2012; Pittenger & Lounsbery, 2011; Stewart, Bachman, & Johnson, 2010; Talbert, 2012; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010; Wozniak, Pizzica, & Mahony, 2012). This substantiated the need for more research at the graduate level. Additional concerns existed, as there was a significant percentage of online graduate-level students starting programs and dropping out of their programs or the university entirely, and this challenge greatly affects graduate-level retention rates within online programs in higher-education institutions (Schneider & Yin, 2011). Furthermore, the American Institute for Research estimated $4.5 billion in lost earnings and taxes because of college dropouts (Kirp, 2014).

This research study sought to build on related studies at the graduate level, and addressed a gap in the educational literature using a mixed-method, concurrent transformative research design to examine students' completing or not completing an online orientation and its impact and relationship on first-course retention with the grade of an A or B. In an effort to frame that focus, Chapter 2 provided a review of current research literature, highlighting the significance of graduate-level retention and the need for continued research. Relevant research was discussed, through the lens of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning framework, as well as through concurrent transformative research design, in an effort to provide a more contemporary view of this issue within higher education.

This study investigated the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations were effective on first-course retention, with the grade of an A or B, for graduate-level student populations. Descriptive statistics and a concurrent transformative approach with a generalization of Fisher's Exact Chi-square provided exact analysis of tables with more than two rows and/or columns addressed the research questions:

R_1: What impact does completing or not completing a non-mandatory online orientation have on graduate-level students' first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

The results presented in Chapter 4 (Table 2) indicated that there was no significant difference between completers (97%) and non-completers (90%) of the online orientation course in the number of participants completing the first course with a grade of an A or B ($p = 0.529$).

R_2: Do students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation influence first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

A qualitative summary revealed significance in students' personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences during the enrollment process, orientation, and during their first course supported the second research question. This result, based on their experiences, provided the transformative reflection they needed to review their pre-enrollment views of their transformative online learning experiences in a comparison of their post, first-course views. This fully supported the second research question, that students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation do influence first-course retention with a grade of an A or B.

Discussion of Results

This study investigated the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations were effective on first-course retention, with the grade of an A or B, for graduate-level student populations, and examined the impact that the two variables, completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation, had on graduate-level students' first-course retention. Concurrent transformative research design with Exact Pearson Chi-square, is a generalization of

the Fisher's Exact Chi-square, and was conducted to address the following research questions and hypotheses:

Quantitative.

R_1: What impact does completing or not completing a non-mandatory online orientation have on graduate-level students' first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

H_1: There will be a significant difference between students who completed a non-mandatory online orientation and those students who did not complete the online orientation course in the number of students who completed the first course with a grade of an A or B.

$H_{0:}$ There will be no significant difference between students who completed a non-mandatory online orientation and those students who did not complete the online orientation course in the number of students who completed the first course with a grade of an A or B.

The analysis resulted in a *p* value of 0.259; consequently, the null hypothesis was not rejected. Two possible reasons for no significant difference were first, that the study lacked statistical power to detect a significant difference. Of the 37 students completing the online orientation course, 36 (97%) completed the first course with an A or B while 64 of 71 (90%) of students that did not complete the online orientation also completed the first course with an A or B. The small sample size for this study combined with the small difference between both groups of completers and non-completers resulted in a low power, 0.211, or low probability to detect a significant difference given the data. The study results would have needed a total convenience-sample size of 429 to achieve 80% power, which is beyond the scope of this study.

The second reason that the null hypothesis was not rejected was due to contamination. In this case, non-completers of the online orientation course received the same information given to the completers of the online orientation course as part of their first course. The assistance students received from their first-course instructors included, but was not limited to, directions for navigating their first course, an assignment in which students log in to the online library to familiarize themselves with retrieving APA instructional documents, as well as a review in how to submit their online assignments. Furthermore, strong student services support during students' first course enabled the non-completers to do almost as well as the completers in the first course. Therefore, Research Question One was not supported.

A quantitative summary of the statistical results and findings from this study did not show any significant results for the overall tables of the six identical survey questions for orientation completers and non-completers, as shown in Tables 2 through 8. Consequently, this study failed to accept the Alternate hypothesis, since no significant difference was revealed between students who completed a non-mandatory online orientation and those students who did not complete the online orientation course in the number of students who completed the first-course with a grade of an A or B.

However, the data in Chapter 4 (Table 8) showed a statistical significance in the neutral survey category between completing or not completing the orientation and students learning best when they can read and practice on their own in the orientation program. Data gleaned from this question revealed that 34.8% of non-completers felt that they were neutral regarding reading and practicing on their own, while 13.9% of completers felt neutral toward reading and practicing on their own. The overall table was not significant, indicating that there was no association.

Therefore, this result should be interpreted with caution because the multiple comparisons increased the probability of falsely rejecting a null hypothesis (Type I error).

Qualitative.

R_2: Do students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation influence first-course retention with a grade of an A or B?

Based on students' qualitative and Likert-scale responses, students who completed the orientation enjoyed the experience, were grateful for the opportunity to prepare, and felt satisfied with their learning experiences. Regarding students' enrollment advisor experience from the student services-enrollment category in Table 2, 95% of completers and 98% of non-completers from the convenience sample stated that their enrollment advisors adequately assisted with their enrollment paperwork. This high percentage of positive comments fully corroborates the quantitative analysis discussed in Chapter 4 (Table 2), with completers at 95% and non-completers at 98.6% who felt that their enrollment paperwork was handled efficiently and effectively to promote a smooth transition into the university, the orientation program, and their first course.

Students' comments in Chapter 4, such as, not being aware the orientation existed, enrollments specialists did not mention the orientation, or that the orientation was not stressed as important to students' overall success were not a positive replication of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory, however, they still reveal a level of reflection from students that showed their understanding of what they needed to be self-directed and more prepared for online learning. Additionally, five students remarked that they had specific challenges signing in to the orientation, and that the valuable time needed to review orientation was consumed through

contacting the online help desk, gaining further instruction on how to use their university credentials to gain access to their online program, and delayed or completely impeded their ability to enter orientation. This caused pronounced frustration, and research supports how challenges in this area can impede students' online retention (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, Croxton, 2014; 2010; Garza-Mitchell, 2014). While students may have used technology in their daily lives prior to enrolling in an online course, this does not imply that they will easily use technology in an online learning format (Garza-Mitchell, 2014).

Furthermore, students' comments revealed their reflection on as well as drawing from their experiences to help redefine meaning schemas and perspectives regarding their online learning experiences (Mezirow, 1991). Students were able, through transformative reflection, to identify those areas in which more interaction was needed in order to be more successful within their first course. Again, these examples supported the second research question, that from students' personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences during the enrollment process provided the reflection they needed to review their pre-enrollment views of online learning and create new paradigms post first-course completion or non-completion.

The third category from the student survey, students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences with orientation content for first-course preparation, garnered the most student comments, 50 of 108, or 46% of students in the convenience sample. Of the convenience sample participants, 22 of 108, or 20% of students, stated that they completed the entire orientation course and found it very helpful. Comments from Students 16 through 24 in Chapter 4 revealed that they were grateful for the orientation and the helpful knowledge it provided in preparing them for their first course. These comments showed a level of reflection consistent with the concept that transformative learning experiences should be designed to prepare students

for a more reflective, resilient, and proficient assessment of learning situations (Fifolt, 2014). An additional 19 of 108 student comments were gathered that specifically related to more application with APA through practice assignments in the orientation. Interestingly enough, this was something that was a past practice in the orientation program prior to its revision in 2016, in which students completed an assignment, using APA, posted the assignment in the assignment room, so that they and their peers could discuss it and interact while expanding the conversation.

This revealed a level of student reflection consistent with transformative learning, as well as transformative research design, both of which seek a deeper level of reflection within students that alters their meaning perspectives within the learning process (Stanlick, 2015). Furthermore, these examples from students' personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences during with orientation content, supported students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation and first-course retention with a grade of an A or B, and provided the reflection they needed to transform their meaning schemas of online learning and created new paradigms of their post first-course completion or non-completion.

Based on students' comments, many completers and non-completers alike felt that an instructor would have helped them in the orientation. Student commentary regarding transformative interaction was comprised of 18% of the 108-student convenience sample, in which Students' 35 through 44 desired more interaction with peers and an instructor through various technology tools, such as a web-based meeting and a live chat room that would have helped them interact with their peers prior to their first course. These comments substantiated transformative learning theories, in that as students are introduced to the online learning format through various assignments in different learning modules, facilitator-led discussions, questions,

and peer interactions can promote a stronger sense of safety within an online community of learners (Boyd, 2015, Mezirow, 1991). These examples from students' personal, academic, and transformative learning experiences with transformative course interaction, supported the second research question, and provided the opportunities students needed to transform their meaning schemas of online learning and created new paradigms of what they seek within online learning. While the quantitative analyses for the six survey questions showed no statistical significance, the proportions of the responses in Chapter 4 (Tables 3-8) reveal that regardless of completing or not completing the online orientation, the six questions fell in line with the open-ended student comments.

Phone interviews. The phone interview transcripts are listed in the appendices section of this dissertation, and the numerical listing of students in each specific appendix was based on their ranking from Table 9 in Chapter 4. This provided an ease in referencing as well as an organizational structure needed to remain consistent with their specific number from Table 9.

As revealed in Chapter 4 (Table 9), 7 of 7 students who did not complete their orientation, or 100%, also did not complete their first course with the grade of an A or B at the graduate level. This reaffirmed and supported the validity of the qualitative comments from this study, regarding students needing more time with orientation material and more practical application of skills learned. Students 1, 3, 5, and 8 stated collectively that they wanted more practical application of skills learned in the orientation through a variety of assignments rather than simply through a quiz, since practice through application would have helped them feel more prepared for their first course. All phone interview transcripts can be found in Appendices F through J, and are based on the specific student's number from Table 9 of Chapter 4.

As mentioned in chapter 4, of the students who failed their first course (Table 9), 6 of 9 students, or 67%, retook their first course. Non-completer students 1, 2, and 8 did not retake their first course, instead, dropped from the university entirely. These students collectively and similarly reiterated the need for connection with peers and instructors as extremely important to their success. Student 7, however, completed the orientation but failed his first course. One of the reasons for the student's failure was due to time management issues, as stated in the open-ended portion of this student's survey. While students stated that the orientation was helpful and that they completed the assignments, the challenges they experienced were related to time management of work and family. Based on this perspective, completing the non-mandatory online orientation did not affect a passing score for this specific student and his personal circumstances. Due to one student, or 3%, failing the first course but completing the online orientation, it is unlikely that any direct correlation to completing the orientation affected this student's first-course grade.

Of the students who failed their first course in Chapter 4 (Table 9), 6 of 9 students, or 67%, retook their first course. Non-completer students 1, 2, and 8 did not retake their first course, but dropped from the university entirely. These students collectively and similarly reiterated the need for connection with peers and instructors as extremely important to their success. Student 8 stated that his learning transformation because of his experience was that he did not learn, felt overwhelmed, and rushed in the orientation, as well as being rushed in his first course. He desired and needed interaction to deepen the learning experience within the online learning platform. As stated previously, 18% of the 108-student convenience sample desired more interaction with peers and an instructor in the orientation. This further validates the qualitative comments from students who responded that having a connection with an instructor

would have helped them through stressful moments, helped answer questions, as well as eased anxiety regarding online learning. These comments also substantiated and confirmed students' reflection within their learning process, supporting students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation and first-course retention with a grade of an A or B.

Discussion of Results in Relation to the Literature

The importance of online orientations is paramount, in that they introduce students to the university, its staff and faculty, and can establish a positive mindset that can assist students throughout their online programs. Orientations are developed by many higher education institutions by providing guidance for students who need additional support online in seeking student support services, promoting a greater amount of self-sufficiency, and stimulating self-directed learning (Fetzner, 2013; Vaill, 2013). According to Croxton (2014), advocates for online learning and orientation programs cite that a challenge that online learners encounter is not being able to access on-ground services physically, thus they need available resources to support their success.

Furthermore, online orientations, based on the research as well as in this study, met the challenges online students most often encountered by offering them a means to explore the learning platform prior to their online program to practice online skills such as student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as well as understanding the basic navigational features of their user interface (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013). Practicing these skills through an online orientation program can help provide needed support for students who require it, as a means to increase their success rates throughout their first course (Beyrer, 2010; Daniel, 2013;

Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013). Online orientations, based on the literature, can help provide the support students need to become better prepared for and better engaged in the online learning environment, possibly improving student retention (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013).

In addition, new research and findings in literature since this study began have shown that orientation programs continue to be analyzed and improved upon as a way to increase retention within online learning (Banjong, 2015; Hughes, 2013; McDonald, 2014; Milman, 2016; Stanlick, 2015). Millman (2016) posits that orientation programs must continually clarify program goals. Graduate-level students are adults, and this places them in a group that experiences many retention complications due to families, professions, work schedules, as well as those who may have been out of a university environment for many decades. As cited from the literature review, mature students need additional support based on their supplementary responsibilities (Asdi, 2015; Beyrer, 2010; Brown et al., 2015; Fetzner, 2013; Wheatley-Martinez, 2010).

Furthermore, as online programs continue to expand, international students and potential language or acculturation barriers can occur (Banjong, 2015; Hughes, 2013). Student 1 from the phone interviews cited such difficulties. He stated that there were challenges with many of the technologies, as well as interconnectivity in the online environment. These students experience many complications when enrolled in online programs, and cultural differences can impede their progress. Many universities, such as this study's research site, have an office for international students, as well as a writing lab in which students may receive additional support during their programs. Students are also contacted by university personnel, in addition to Student Services

advisors, to assist in any challenges. These strategies not only provide students with the support they need, but can also help guide the student with acculturation issues.

The results of this study corroborated the importance of orientations within the literature and their role in preparing students for their online programs and their role in assisting with retention challenges (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013). While the results showed no statistical significance in relation to the six identical survey questions as well as the first research question in Chapter 4 (Tables 3 through 8), students provided sufficient qualitative, open-ended comments, as well as phone interview comments that reaffirmed and supported this study's findings relative to students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation and first-course retention with a grade of an A or B. From this transformative learning category, student comments revealed a different significance from the quantitative segment of this study. The reliability of the qualitative comments from this study supported students needing more time with orientation material, more practical application of skills learned, and that having more interaction from peers and an instructor may have been beneficial in their learning experience. This supports the crucial role that deliberative discourse provides, in which more transformative discourse with peers and an instructor would have aided the process from orientation to their first course (Beaudoin, 2015; Boyd, 2015; Chan, 2010; Fifolt, 2014; Glancy & Isenberg, 2013; Greener, 2010; Kelly, 2012; Henschke, 2011; Hilton, 2013; Mezirow, 1991).

New literature and published findings revealed that orientation programs continue to be scrutinized and enhanced as a way to improve retention within online learning (Banjong, 2015; Hughes, 2013; McDonald, 2014; Milman, 2016; Stanlick, 2015). While these studies continue to

support the benefits of online orientations and their impact on retention at the graduate level, this mixed-method research study added to the current literature in the field of retention with a more complete view of the challenges graduate-level students face in online programs.

Limitations

One limitation from this study was the small convenience-sample size of 108 graduate-level students. This created no statistical significance in the results of the six identical questions from the survey, as there was not enough power to find significance between completing or not completing the orientation with the grade of an A or B in Table 2 ($p = 0.259$). While the study does involve three individual graduate-level sessions within one semester, the small convenience-sample size limited significant findings.

A second limitation of this study was that the data was gathered from one campus of a private institution, and extending this study to include several different private universities would likely yield more significant results, as well as a larger sample size, as well as improve the generalizability of the results. A one–semester, 15–week period for gathering students' comments was used, which may not have been enough time to collect a sufficient convenience-sample size. Further adjustment in the length of time needed to collect a larger sample may be needed to improve the efficacy of any findings relative to student completion of a non-mandatory online orientation to first-course retention.

An additional limitation was researcher bias. My bias toward mandatory online orientations was evident, based on my own professional experiences within the orientation program and directly in response to years of experience with submitted, student-survey comments as an employee. While any amount of perceived bias can guide and direct one's interests in specific areas or issues within research, it can also affect how data are analyzed or

interpreted, leading to highly subjective or even false conclusions (Machi & McEvoy, 2012). Personal interests in the results to present data and information accurately and without bias have been a challenge, and any bias was heavily scrutinized and corrected through neutral committee members, who took great care to present findings in an unbiased manner.

Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory

Online enrollments continued to grow exponentially from 2012 to 2014, and concerns over improving statistically low student completion rates within online programs began to take precedence in many higher education institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Online orientations provide students with experience in the online environment, and the design serves as an introduction to the structures, processes, and procedures students will utilize throughout their online programs. Based on the literature review, online orientations also provide an introduction to the university, its mission and goals, its online library, as well as providing any additional facilities and services that can enhance students' overall online experiences (Beyrer, 2010; Cannady, 2015; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015; Vaill, 2013).

The precise nature and existence of these orientations are not standardized within higher education, nor are they consistently implemented (Fetzner, 2013). As previously mentioned within the literature review, not all universities have incorporated them, nor have all universities made an orientation an introductory part of their programs (Cho, 2012; Croxton, 2014). Some online orientations are mandatory, while others are offered as an optional program to be utilized how and when the student finds it necessary. Online orientations can be designed to be self-directed or facilitator-led as a means to enhance interaction and communication during the initial, introductory phases of an online program. Furthermore, online orientations met the challenges

these students most often encountered by presenting them a means to explore the specific learning platform prior to their online program to practice ~~s~~kills such as student-to-student and teacher-to-student interaction as well as understanding the basic navigational features of their user interface (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013).

Online orientations, based on the literature, can provide the support students need to become better prepared for and better engaged in the online learning environment, possibly improving student retention (Beyrer, 2010; Cho, 2012; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013). Therefore, this study supports the use of online orientations in preparing students for their first course in an online learning platform with a 97%, first-course completion rate for orientation completers and a 90% first-course completion rate for orientation non-completers. This study also supports the concepts of retention relating to students' first course, in that completing an online orientation supports the concepts from Mezirow's (1991) theory as well as the results of numerous studies within the literature review from Chapter 2. When students complete an online orientation, they have the opportunity to transform their learning perspectives of online learning, reflect on those experiences, and either accept them or change their views of the online experience (Willink & Jacobs, 2012). Any apprehension or anxiety students experience may be that the learning experience causes them to reevaluate their views of themselves as learners within the online learning environment. Furthermore, students' open-ended survey comments fully supported the second research question, that students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation influenced first-course retention with a grade of an A or B. Students were able to evaluate and reflect upon their

online learning experiences and make adjustments to their own best practices, enabling them to move forward in their online programs.

While the quantitative portion of this study revealed no statistical significance due to a small convenience sample, the following recommendations for practice may improve significance in any future replication of this study. First, students need more time, prior to the start of their first course, to review and practice the skills within the orientation. Student comments overwhelmingly stated that they felt rushed with orientation material, and that being enrolled into the orientation a few days prior to the start of their first course did not provide them with an optimal start to their program. Based on the literature from Chapter 2, online orientations met the challenges students most often encountered by offering time to explore the learning platform prior to their online program (Beyrer, 2010; Croxton, 2014; Daniel, 2013; Fetzner, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013; Vaill, 2013). Practicing these skills through an online orientation program, when ample time to explore them has been provided, can help provide needed support for students who require it to increase their retention rates throughout their first course (Beyrer, 2010; Daniel, 2013; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Jones, 2013; Koehnke, 2013). Students must have enough time, more than the 2 or 3 days mentioned in the open-ended survey comments, to explore the orientation.

The second recommendation is that clear and consistent communication protocols, from enrollment specialists to students, should include the value-added importance of the orientation in providing the necessary skills needed throughout students' online program, as well as to the location of important contact information students will need in the event that challenges may occur. Based on students' survey comments, many were completely unaware of the orientation's existence. Strengthening enrollment specialists' communication protocols regarding the

importance of the orientation may improve retention, as well as students' skills required for their first course.

The third recommendation involves specific information within the orientation, namely, the online library and utilizing APA. Students remarked, through their survey comments, that they did not feel that reading material and taking a quiz on it helped them apply their knowledge in preparation for their first course. Students wanted assignments with which they could practice writing APA references or citations, helping them feel more prepared for what they would use throughout their program. In addition, these same practice skills are needed in relation to understanding and using the online library prior to the start of their first course. Students' comments stated that the online library was very overwhelming, and many did not use it at the start of their first course for this reason. Providing practice assignments, in which students can locate an article, cite the author in that assignment, and then create an APA reference would give students the confidence they need to further explore the online library, thus improving their ability to be a more self-sufficient learner in their online programs.

The final recommendation is that students' comments recommended more transformative interaction with their peers and an instructor prior to the start of their first course. This was substantiated not only through literature, but also in the 57% of students who stated that they learned better with interaction from peers and instructors (Beaudoin, 2015; Boyd, 2015; Fifolt, 2014; Glancy & Isenberg, 2013). This helps establish a sense of community while allowing students to practice communicating within an online course. This will also support a grounded, transformative learning experience (Mezirow, 1991).

One caveat related to making the orientation mandatory at the research site is that while the literature review supports and corroborates mandatory orientation and their positive effects

on online retention program (Beyrer, 2010; Fetzner, 2013; Garza-Mitchell, 2014; Glazer & Murphy, 2015; McGlynn, 2012; Posey & Pintz, 2014; Taylor, Dunn, & Winn, 2015), this study's results do not substantiate a mandatory orientation at the research site. Since there were only 4% of students stating that the orientation should be mandatory, there is no significance from this study supporting the recommendation that the orientation should be mandatory.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study investigated the extent to which non-mandatory online orientations were effective on first-course retention for graduate-level student populations with the grade of an A or B. It also examined the impact of two variables, the completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation and graduate-level students' first-course completion in relation to first-course retention. The results of this study revealed no statistical significance regarding students' survey responses from six identical survey comments, and qualitative open-ended comments supported the qualitative frequencies in Chapter 4 (Tables 3-8). However, there was a significant result in the neutral category ($p = 0.037$) regarding students' views of whether they learn best independently and on their own. This must be interpreted carefully, since the overall p value was 0.150 in Table 8, because the multiple comparisons increased the probability of falsely rejecting a null hypothesis (Type I error). More non-completers responded to this question in the neutral category, signifying that they were unsure of their ability to learn online, or may have been indecisive regarding fully online learning. Overall, the study revealed no statistical significance regarding the completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation and completion of a first course with the grade of an A or B at the graduate level.

The transformative concurrent, mixed-methods research design contributed to scholarly research, with a focus on providing a more complete picture, through mixed-methods research,

thanof a graduate-level orientation program and their efficacy in providing skills students most need to be successful in their online programs. Furthermore, the limitations identified within this study may help expand future research with guidelines, as well as greater insight into retention challenges at the graduate level.

The first recommendation for future study replicability would be to repeat the study by including more than one campus of an online, private university with graduate-level students. By including several campuses, researchers may improve their convenience-sample size. Because this study only included one campus of an online university over a 15–week semester, the result was a reduced sample size. Increasing the number of private campuses within one online university may yield more significant results.

The second recommendation for future study may also compare perceptions of orientations between graduates who completed an orientation with an instructor and graduates who did not complete an orientation with an instructor and compare their first-course grades of an A or B. Further study would corroborate any ambivalence, as seen in Table 8, regarding students' uncertainty in learning on their own rather than with an instructor or peers. Conducting the study in this manner may yield important information regarding students' transformative comments, as well as producing any possible improvement in statistical significance.

The third recommendation for future study is to interview first-course instructors to reveal the depth of support provided within students' first course, and any relevancy to first-course completion with the grade of an A or B. This practice may also provide additional detail into the assistance and transformative interaction first-course instructors provide and its effects on first-course retention. This study did not include this crucial aspect of online retention, but by

interviewing first-course instructors, the study results could provide greater impact on students' first-course retention challenges.

A fourth recommendation regarding study replicability would be to survey students immediately following orientation to avoid contamination, possibly at students' midpoint in their first course. This would change the study design to test for knowledge regarding only the online orientation prior to their first course. This would allow students to not answer orientation-related questions based on their experiences from their first course.

The final recommendation would be to conduct a similar study using two semesters of data and compare the results with the one semester used in this study. This may provide greater convenience-sample size, thereby altering no statistical difference in the results of this study. Furthermore, continued research into expanding the time of data collection may also provide improved qualitative comments, gathering a larger number for additional insight into students' retention challenges. These recommendations for future study may also provide additional insight into this retention challenge at the graduate level, as well as offer further support to improve graduate students' retention through the completion of their first course.

Conclusion

The purpose of this mixed-method, concurrent transformative study was twofold:

1. To determine the impact of completing or not completing a non-mandatory online orientation has on graduate-level students' first-course retention with a grade of an A or B.
2. To further understand students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation influence first-course retention with a grade of an A or B.

The results of this study revealed no statistical significance regarding students' survey responses from six identical survey comments, and qualitative open-ended comments supported the qualitative frequencies in Chapter 4 (Tables 3-8). Overall, the study revealed no statistical significance regarding the completion or non-completion of a non-mandatory online orientation and completion of a first course with the grade of an A or B at the graduate level, thereby failing to accept the alternate hypothesis and also failing to reject the null hypothesis.

Additionally, Research Question One also was not supported, since there was no significant difference between completers (97%) and non-completers (90%) in completing or not completing a non-mandatory online orientation and students' first-course retention with a grade of an A or B. Several recommendations have been made in this chapter as suggestions for both improvements to study replicability and within the implications section as well.

Research Question Two was supported through students' open-ended survey comments, and corroborated students' transformative growth in their personal and academic experiences. From this study's six, identical survey questions, the first four relating to the enrollment services was high, with 95% of completers and 98% of non-completers from the convenience sample stated that their enrollment advisors adequately assisted with their enrollment paperwork and processes. Furthermore, students' comments revealed their reflection on as well as drawing from their experiences to help redefine meaning schemas and perspectives regarding their online learning experiences (Mezirow, 1991). Students were able, through transformative reflection, to identify those areas in which more interaction was needed in order to be more successful within their first course, as well as adjust to and grow from experiencing challenges within the online learning environment.

As stated previously, 18% of the 108-student convenience sample desired more interaction with peers and an instructor in the orientation. This corroborated the qualitative comments from students who replied that having a connection with an instructor would have helped them through stressful moments in the early stages of their online programs, as well as easing anxiety regarding online learning. These comments also substantiated and confirmed students' reflection within their learning process, supporting students' transformative learning, personal, and academic experiences in completing or not completing the online orientation and first-course retention with a grade of an A or B.

The findings of this study suggest that there must be a continued commitment by university leaders to pursue and implement online revisions and improvements as a way to influence first-course, online retention positively. This must also include consistent and clear communication from all personnel within universities so that students have the assistance and support they need to successfully complete their first course at the most vulnerable stages of their online program. Students must also be provided ample time to review orientation material so that they have the skills needed to prepare for their programs and set a positive mental precedent for program longevity. As previously suggested, continued research and analysis should be conducted to improve upon this study to better prepare students for the rigor of their online programs, as well as provide additional support for retention within online programs with graduate-level student populations.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Student Survey for Completers

The Orientation Enrollment process

1. My enrollment specialist assisted me with my paperwork in each step of the enrollment process.
2. My enrollment specialist explained the importance of the non-mandatory orientation in preparing me for my first course.
3. I easily logged in to the orientation with the username and password provided by my enrollment specialist.
4. The support provided to me by university personnel made the enrollment process less stressful.

Orientation Course Content for First-Course Preparation

8. After viewing the home page video welcome presented by several students in the orientation, I felt motivated to continue navigating through the next orientation sections.
9. The orientation program presented degree-specific information related to the doctorate, masters, and bachelor programs that were helpful.
10. I felt prepared for my online program after reading the degree-specific material in orientation related to my course of study.
11. The Blackboard orientation explanation of discussion boards prepared me for posting to my peers and instructors in my first course.
12. The orientation prepared me adequately for understanding where to submit my first-course assignments.

13. The orientation instructions related to completing and submitting an online quiz in orientation prepared me for quizzes in my first course.
14. The orientation helped me understand where to go for online help if I have a technology-related issue in my first course.
15. The orientation informed me of how to contact student services with questions I may have about my textbooks or program.
16. The orientation prepared me to use the email system in my first course to send questions to my first-course instructor.
19. The APA reference material and quizzes in the orientation prepared me to correctly cite and reference in APA for my first course.
20. The library material in orientation prepared me to access the library and contact personnel with my first-course research questions.
21. After completing the library modules in orientation, I was able to successfully use and navigate the online library in my first course.
22. The library material in orientation prepared me to access the library and contact personnel with my first-course research questions.
23. The orientation program helped me feel connected with the university and other students in the orientation.
24. The orientation would have been more effective if it included interaction with peers.

Transformative Interaction

25. I learn best with interaction from peers or instructors.
26. I learn best when I can read and practice on my own.

27. The orientation made me feel like I belonged to a community of learners that transferred to my first course.

First-Course Preparation (Open-ended)

30. What ideas do you have regarding changes to the enrollment process that would have provided a smoother transition into the orientation?
31. Did you acquire adequate skill from the orientation to be successful in your first course?
32. If you did not find the skills learned in orientation helpful, what recommendations would you make to improve the orientation to better prepare graduate students for their first, online course?
33. What would you like the university to know about your orientation experience?

Thank you for completing this survey. You may now click submit.

Appendix B

Student Survey for Non-completers

The Orientation Enrollment process

2. My enrollment specialist assisted me with my paperwork in each step of the enrollment process.
3. My enrollment specialist explained the importance of the non-mandatory orientation in preparing me for my first course.
4. I easily logged in to the orientation with the username and password provided by my enrollment specialist.
5. The support provided to me by university personnel made the enrollment process less stressful.

Orientation Course Content for First-Course Preparation

7. I felt prepared for my online program without completing the orientation.
8. I knew where to go for technology-related issues in my first course.
9. I knew how to contact student services with questions I may have had about my textbooks or program.
10. I knew how to email questions to my first-course instructor.
11. I knew how to use APA style in my first course.
12. I did not realize that there was an APA pre- and post-assessment quiz in the orientation that would have helped me understand areas of needed improvement to continue focusing on in my first course.

13. Even though I did not complete the orientation, I revisited it during my first course to review the library material in orientation on how to successfully use and navigate the online library in my first course.
14. After completing my first course, I believe it would have been beneficial for me to have completed the student orientation.
15. I did not need the orientation to successfully prepare for my first course.

Transformative Interaction

17. I learn best with interaction from peers or instructors.
18. I learn best when I can read and practice on my own.
19. After reflecting on the learning experiences in my first course, I feel that if I had completed the orientation, I would have felt as if I belonged to a community of learners that transferred over to my first course.

First-course Preparation

21. If you did not log in or participate in the orientation, why not, and/or what prompted you to not do so?
22. What would you like to see improved regarding the enrollment process that would have provided a smoother transition into the orientation and your first course?
23. What recommendations would you make to improve the orientation program in order to better prepare graduate student for their first, online course?
24. What would you like to see improved regarding the enrollment process that would have provided a smoother transition into the orientation?

Thank you for completing this survey. You may now click submit.

Appendix C

Student Phone Interview Request

Dear XXXX,

A month or two ago you participated in my doctoral study survey, which included questions pertaining to a critical examination of the design, structure, and content of the orientation program at XXXXXXX. The information you provided was highly valuable and helpful to my study, and the information gleaned may be used to improve the orientation program for future XXXXXXX students.

I would like to know if you would agree to participate in a phone interview regarding any relationship to your orientation experience and your first-course experience. The phone call would only take approximately seven to ten minutes, in which I would ask you questions in an effort to gain any additional insight you may have that will be used to improve our orientation program for future XXXXXXX graduate students.

For participating in the phone interview, a $25.00 Starbuck's gift card, sent to your email directly from Starbucks, will be issued to you in recognition and appreciation of your time and valuable feedback.

If you would like to participate and provide your highly valuable insight to improve XXXXXXX orientation program, please respond to this email by copying and pasting following information into your response and then complete with the required information prior to sending it to me.

Copy and paste below three statements into your email reply:

1. I, (Your Name)_____, agree to participate in the doctoral phone interview, and understand that my insight will aid future graduate students at XXXXXXX.

2. Please respond by letting me know two days, times you are available, and time zone in which you live for a 10-minute phone interview **between Monday, May 1 and Friday, May 12, 2017.**

   First choice: Day_____Time_____Time Zone_____

   Second Choice: Day_____Time_____Time Zone_____

3. A phone number where I can be reached at the scheduled time is: _____.

Once you have placed your first choice in time for a call, I will call you and honor your first choice. I will also email you a list of questions so that you can review them prior to the phone interview for easier response.

Thank you in advance for your participation and kind assistance in improving the orientation experience for XXXXXXX future online students.

Professor Lisa Weikel-Fee,

Adjunct Faculty/Orientation Lead

Appendix D

Student Phone Interview Email Confirmation

Hello XXXX,

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me about your orientation experience, and for the opportunity to provide additional information that will help future XXXXXXX students be more successful in their online courses. Your first choice for our phone call is _____, at _____ Time Zone_____. I will call you at that time and do my best to keep the phone call to no more than 10 minutes. I will also send you a reminder email the morning of our interview regarding the time of our call. Please take a few moments to review the questions so that you may consider your responses to each one.

You will find the interview questions attached.

Thank you again, and I look forward to speaking with you.

Kindest regards,

Lisa Weikel-Fee

Adjunct Faculty/Orientation Lead

Appendix E

Student Phone Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. What about your orientation experience would have helped you feel more prepared for your first course to make the experience more meaningful for you?
2. On the survey, you responded to a question about APA usage. How and what did you learn about that aspect of research?
3. During orientation, you were introduced to the online library. How did the resource help you prepare for your first, and other courses?
4. Which exercises in orientation, if any, helped you feel more prepared for your first course?
5. Would an instructor or opportunities to connect with peers in the orientation have helped you feel more connected in your first course? Why or why not?
6. Overall, during the orientation experience, do you feel your learning was transformed, and you believe you were well prepared for your master's degree program of study?

*Please feel free to add any additional information you might find helpful.

Appendix F

CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
-PORTLAND, OREGON-

DATE: October 5, 2016
TO: Lisa Weikel-Fee, Ed.D
FROM: Concordia University - Portland IRB (CU IRB)
PROJECT TITLE: [946271-1] Lisa Weikel-Fee: IRB Application ONLINE ORIENTATION: AN INVESTIGATION OF ITS EFFECT ON GRADUATE STUDENTS' FIRST-COURSE RETENTION
REFERENCE #: EDD-20160913-Weschke-Weikel
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
ACTION: APPROVED
APPROVAL DATE: October 5, 2016
EXPIRATION DATE: October 5, 2017
REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Concordia University -Portland IRB (CU IRB) has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on the applicable federal regulations. You are responsible for contacting and following the procedures and policies of Concordia University and any other institution where you conduct research.
Attached is a stamped copy of the approved consent form. You must use this stamped consent form.
Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. The form needed to request a revision is called a Modification Request Form, which is available at www.cu-portland.edu/IRB/Forms.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. Please email the CU IRB Director directly, at obranch@cu-portland.edu, if you have an unanticipated problem or other such urgent question or report.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

This project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of October 5, 2017.

You must submit a close-out report at the expiration of your project or upon completion of your project. The Close-out Report Form is available at www.cu-portland.edu/IRB/Forms. Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Dr. OraLee Branch at 503-493-6390 or irb@cu-portland.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Concordia University - Portland IRB (CU IRB)'s records. October 5, 2016

Appendix G

Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does "fraudulent" mean?

"Fraudulent" work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one's own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate's final work without full and complete documentation.

What is "unauthorized" assistance?

"Unauthorized assistance" refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

· Use of unauthorized notes or another's work during an online test

· Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting

· Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project

· Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

X

Lisa S. Fee

Lisa S. Fee

Name (Typed)

October 12, 2017

Date