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A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON PERSISTENCE IN ONLINE MINDFULNESS PROGRAMS

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by

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Dedication/Acknowledgement

This dissertation is dedicated to my advisor, Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw, for her patience and sense of humor. It is also dedicated to my committee members Susan Nordstrom, Lisa Sosin, and Craig Shepherd, for hanging in there with me.

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to uncover the essence of the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persist in online mindfulness programs. While there are quantitative studies and meta-analyses of what makes online mindfulness programs effective, there has not been an investigation and analysis of the experiences participants have in the programs that result in their persistence. Therefore, this transcendental phenomenological study examined the factors that encourage people to persevere and remain in online mindfulness programs. Ten nontraditional learners were recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, then purposeful sampling. Data were collected using a survey, open-ended interviews with participants, and a focus group to triangulate the findings. A researcher's journal was used to bracket out the researcher's experience and reduce biases in the research. The findings of the research were that a combination of factors supported learner persistence in online mindfulness programs. These factors included academic integration, social integration, external factors, and institutional supports. Participants who felt academically and socially integrated, had values and priorities around their persistence in their programs, and felt supported by the online mindfulness programs felt encouraged to persist in their online mindfulness programs. Program instructors and instructional designers who understand how these factors contribute to learner persistence can rethink and redesign their online mindfulness programs. Their redesigns can enable learners to feel more supported by the online learning community, including the instructor, so that they see that their learning impacts their daily lives, so that their programs have clear learning outcomes and syllabi, and so that learners, ultimately, persist in their programs.

Keywords: mindfulness, mindfulness-based intervention, persistence, online education, online learning, mindfulness online, attrition, retention, qualitative methods

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Mindfulness is a state of awareness of the present moment or "moment-by-moment awareness" (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005, p. 6). It can also be understood as "a state of psychological freedom that occurs when attention remains quiet and limber, without attachment to any particular view" (Martin, 1997, p. 291). Mindfulness as a concept stems from the Buddhist tradition and is seen by Buddhists as a way of gaining insight into the mind and the nature of reality (Epstein, 1995, 2007).

Practicing mindfulness has many documented benefits, and the effects of mindfulness have been well researched among various populations. Benefits include improving one's self-control (Bishop, Lau, Shapiro, Carlson, & Anderson, 2004; Masicampo & Baumeister, 2007), one's objectivity (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Leary & Tate, 2007), one's ability to relate compassionately to others and oneself (Fulton, 2005; Wallace, 2001), one's concentration (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006; Young, 1997), and one's emotional intelligence (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Practicing mindfulness can also help people develop greater awareness of their thoughts and emotions, which can reduce levels of negativity and stress (Follette, Hayes, & Linehan, 2011). Social scientists and educational researchers have shown that practicing mindfulness can help people physically (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004) and emotionally (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011) across various populations (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010). Different populations researched include university students (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003), nontraditional learners (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Chadwick & Abba, 2008), and populations facing mental health challenges (Baer, Smith, & Allen, 2004; Walach, Buchheld, Buttenmuller, Kleinknecht, & Schmidt, 2006). In many western cultures,

mindfulness is often a practice used in counseling and psychotherapy to address stress, anxiety, and depression (Chiesa, 2010).

Given its many documented benefits, mindfulness is an area of interest for many nontraditional learners. Tens of millions of nontraditional learners enroll in online and residential mindfulness programs each year (Mullin, 2018). Many of these programs are measurably effective, with participants experiencing an increase in their sense of well-being, a decrease in stress levels, and a better present-state awareness (Altschuler, Rosenbaum, Gordon, Canales, & Alvins, 2011; Boggs et al., 2014); Dimidjian et al., 2014; Krusche, Cyhlarova, King, & Williams, 2012). Even brief (e.g., 13 days to twelve weeks) online mindfulness programs can be effective as in-person programs across various populations (Simpson, 2004). Gardner-Nix, Backman, Barbati, and Grummitt (2008) demonstrated equivalence between videoconference and face-to-face mindfulness training to manage chronic pain. Researchers have demonstrated that participation in online mindfulness programs can assist nontraditional learners in creating new ways of thinking and increasing attention (Boettcher et al.,2014; Boggs et al., 2014; Cavanagh et al., 2013; Dimidjian et al., 2014; Glück & Maercker, 2011; Krusche et al., 2012). An online program is defined as one "in which at least 80% of the course content is delivered online" (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 7).

Despite the benefits of and widespread interest in online mindfulness programs, a persistence problem exists in these programs. Mak, Chio, Chan, Lui, and Wu (2017) had only 17% of their participants (i.e., working adults and college students) persist in their online mindfulness program. In prominent studies on online mindfulness programs, learner persistence rates vary greatly. Across studies, participants persist at rates of 37% (Boggs et al., 2014) to 85% (Davis & Zautra, 2013). Online mindfulness programs have many benefits (Dimidjian et al.,

2014; Glück and Maercker, 2011); however, some of these programs also face the challenge of encouraging learners to persist. For example, Dimidjian et al. (2014) investigated an online mindfulness cognitive behavior therapy program for 107 recurrently depressed adults and documented that only 42% people completed an entire online program and only 53% of individuals completed half the modules. In general, online learners in formal and informal, degree seeking and non-degree seeking programs persist at a rate lower than those in residential programs (Frankola, 2001; Shapiro et al., 2017; Simpson, 2004). This study examines the persistence of nontraditional learners enrolled in non-degree seeking, online mindfulness programs.

Persistence is defined as "the ability to complete an online course despite obstacles or adverse circumstances" (Hart, 2012, p. 30). Persistence has been considered as a process involving various behaviors, such as attendance, studying, and program completion (Neuville, Frenay, & Bourgeois,2007). In early research, persistence was seen as part of a learner's personality characteristics, and learners were thought to be solely responsible for their persistence (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006; Tinto, 2006). The view of persistence changed in the 1970s because of educational theories that examined the role of the institutional and external factors in learner persistence (Bean, 1985; Tinto, 1975, 1993). According to Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, which is considered to be the foundational theory on learner persistence, persistence is the result of a process of interactions between the learner and the academic and social systems of the institution (Tinto 1975, 1993) as well as external factors and institutional supports (Bean, 1982; Levin & Levin, 1991; Rovai, 1993; Tinto, 1993).

Nontraditional learners are defined as anyone over the age of 24 who may be working while enrolled in a learning program (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Moreover, non-degree seeking online programs are defined as a type of learning that connects to the learner's career or personal life and does not result in a university degree (Livingstone, 2001; Yanchar & Hawkley, 2014). While many of the learners in this study pursued and persisted in the online mindfulness programs in a self-directed manner for personal reasons, the mindfulness programs in which they enrolled have goals and objectives defined by the training department, instructional designer, and program instructor. The programs had a structured format with clearly communicated curricula and learning outcomes. Online programs refer to programs completed on a website or mobile application (Chin, Slutsky, Raye, & Creswell, 2013).

Persistence in online learning programs matters because low learner persistence rates "may indicate student dissatisfaction with the program or institution and suggest the program may be too rigorous" (Byrd, Achilles, Felder-Strauss, Franklin, & Janowich, 2011, p. 128). Program credibility is determined in part by learner retention rates (Stover, 2005). Understanding learner persistence is important for organizations seeking to design programs that support learners' growth and completion. Organizations providing online mindfulness programs need to understand why learners persist. They need to understand the academic (e.g., intellectual and personal development through program work, feeling accomplishment by progressing through the program, enjoying their learning, etc.) and social factors (e.g., positive reinforcement through one's social group, feeling connected to others in a program, enjoying the social aspects of a program, etc.) that encourage learner persistence in online mindfulness programs (Tinto, 1975, 1982). Unfortunately, a dearth of research exists that investigates reasons why nontraditional learners choose to or not to persist in these programs (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009).

This study thus investigated the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persisted in online mindfulness programs.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in persistence and attrition theory. The most prominent theory on understanding learner persistence is Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Departure, which has been continually researched and tested. While developed for a formal, university learning environment, Tinto's theory (1975, 1993) has been applied to almost thirty years of formal and informal, degree and non-degree seeking, learning settings (Chrysikos, Ahmed, & Ward, 2017; Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009; Schreiber, Luescher-Mamashela, & Moja, 2014). Tinto (1975) theorized that learners enter a university or a learning organization with pre-existing experiences and personality attributes (i.e., background). As learners progress in their learning experiences, they begin the process of academically and socially integrating into the learning environment. This process, which is affected by external constructs, affects the learners' goals and commitments, which in turn affects their persistence.

Tinto (1975) purported that the persistence of the learner can be predicted by the degree to which the learner has integrated socially and academically because learning is both a social and intellectual endeavor. According to Tinto (1975), learners decide whether or not to continue their enrollment in a program of study based on the extent to which they have integrated academically and socially. Academic integration occurs when the learner has academic self-esteem, develops intellectually and personally through program assignments, feels accomplished through grades achieved, enjoys the subject and learning, self-identifies as a student, and aligns with academic norms. Social integration occurs when the learner has a group of friends, feels connected to instructors and staff, and enjoys the program from a social standpoint (Tinto,

1975,1982). Academic and social integration support each other, as learners who develop social structures have an increased sense of belonging and motivation, which in turn encourages them to succeed (Croxton, 2014; Frydenberg, 2007). They are the two primary predictors of persistence in online education at any level in any learning environment (Frydenberg, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2005). Tinto's model (1975, 1993) has been validated and applied as a framework for analyzing the nature of learner persistence (Fontana & Manuti, 2016; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980), including persistence for online learners (Croxton, 2014; Sweet, 2011).

Tinto's (1975) Model of Student Departure was originally developed for undergraduate students attending a residential university program; however, his model evolved to include more factors that encourage persistence in different types of learners, such as nontraditional students. The nontraditional students who were examined in this study were learners over the age of 24 who were working while enrolled in a learning program (Metzner & Bean, 1987). In Tinto's original work, based on traditional undergraduate students within a residential university environment, Tinto (1975) purported that five constructs were related to persistence: the learner's background prior to enrollment, the goal commitment, the institutional commitment, the learner's academic integration, and the learner's social integration. In later versions of the model that focused on nontraditional learners, Tinto (1993) explained how "adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations or commitments" interact with the constructs from his earlier model to impact learner persistence (p. 112). In further updates to his theory, Tinto (2017) acknowledged that learners' senses of self-efficacy, feelings of belonging, and learning itself were valuable to persist. These additions to his original model show that not only personal factors, but also external circumstances, such as career and family challenges, affect the initial and continuing commitment to the learner's goals (Aljohani,

2016). Tinto (2004) has also suggested that universities and organizations need to provide learners with advising as well as student support services in order to encourage persistence.

While not yet applied to learners studying mindfulness online, Tinto's work has been widely used to examine online learner persistence (Croxton, 2014; Frydenberg, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Sweet, 2011), making it a viable framework for this study. To frame this inquiry and guide the research questions are Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, revisions from Tinto (2004, 2017), and modifications of his work (e.g., Bean and Metner's [1985] Model of Student Attrition and Rovai's [2003] Composite Persistence Model). Tinto's (1975) original work is significant because it is the basis of persistence and attrition theories, but this study included the modifications that addressed the needs of nontraditional learners, as they were imperative, given the population examined. These models will be discussed in greater depth in Chapter Two.

Statement of the Problem

Some online mindfulness education programs have low learner persistence rates (Croxton, 2014; Eysenbach, 2005; Frydenberg, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Sweet, 2011), often lower than in-person programs (Simpson, 2004). For example, Cavanagh et al. (2013) examined 15 of the most influential studies in online mindfulness programs; they documented persistence rates as low as 35%. Tkatch et al. (2017) reported a persistence rate of 55%, which they deemed "high," for their online mindfulness intervention. While many studies have documented benefits of online mindfulness training, researchers often did not publish or disclose their attrition rates (Fish, Brimson, & Lynch, 2016). Based on my review of literature, which is further described in Chapter Two, no research exists that investigates why nontraditional learners persist in online mindfulness programs or what external factors support their persistence. While plentiful research

exists on persistence in online mindfulness programs, no formal academic investigation has been published that examines which the factors contribute to learner persistence in online mindfulness studies.

While Tinto's work has been applied to and used to guide studies on informal, non-degree seeking, and online learning, his theory has not been used to examine online mindfulness programs. Investigation was needed to better understand how academic and social processes, as well as external factors, influence persistence in online mindfulness programs. Understanding these factors related to persistence is vital so program administrators and instructional designers can develop interventions and design instruction that encourage learners to persist in their online mindfulness programs. These interventions could include orientation programs (Castles, 2004; Simpson, 2004), modes of instructor contact that have been proven to encourage persistence in online education (Castles, 2004; Simpson, 2004), and instruction designed to foster learning communities (Rovai, 2002; Wellman, 1999; Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

Research Purpose

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994) was to examine the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persist in online mindfulness programs. The phenomenon of persistence was defined as "the ability to complete an online course despite obstacles or adverse circumstances" (Hart, 2012, p. 30). Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure guided this inquiry and the development of the research questions, as it helped explain the numerous, complex factors that influence nontraditional learners persist in educational settings. As explained above, this Model of Student Departure (Tinto, 1975, 1993) helped me narrow the study focus to the learners' experiences within the programs and external to the programs that encouraged them to persist. Tinto's theory was relevant as it had been

previously applied to online learning environments (Ivankova & Stick, 2005; Sweet, 2011), so it served as the major theoretical perspective for my research. Under Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, academic integration is defined as academic self-esteem, personal development of the learner, the grades the learner achieves, learner enjoyment of the subject and of learning, self-identifying as a student, and alignment of the learner with academic norms (Tinto, 1975, 1993). For the purpose of this study, academic integration was the learner's development of his or her feeling more confident about his or her mindfulness skills, feeling that his or her mindfulness skills were developing, and his or her enjoying the improvement of those mindfulness skills. In Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, social integration is defined as the learner's having a group of friends, feeling connected to instructors and staff, and the learner's enjoyment of the program from a social standpoint. For the purpose of this study, social integration was the learner's feeling connected to other mindfulness practitioners and enjoying connecting with others socially through the online mindfulness program.

I garnered participants through convenience sampling, then purposeful sampling using maximum variation of program type, program duration, gender, ethnicity, and location. All participants met the following criteria: they were (a) non-traditional learners (b) who participated in and completed an online mindfulness program lasting 14 days in the past six months. For the purposes of this inquiry, a non-traditional learner was defined as any individual over the age of 24 who may have been working full-time while participating in an online mindfulness program (Metzner & Bean, 1987). For the purpose of this study, an online mindfulness program was defined as a mindfulness program completed in its entirety on a computer or mobile device via Internet connection. The programs were administered via a website or mobile application. The main objective of the programs was for participants to learn how to practice mindfulness

techniques (Chin, Slutsky, Raye, & Creswell, 2013). The duration of 14 days or more was selected as a focus because previous online mindfulness studies were generally 13 days or longer (Cavanaugh et al., 2013; Glück & Maercker, 2011). While there are many online mindfulness programs that are longer than 14 days (Boettcher et al., 2014; Krusche et al., 2012), an investigation of the experiences of learners who have persisted for more than two weeks helped increase the meaningfulness of the study's findings.

This transcendental phenomenological study was guided by Moustakas' work. Data was gathered through an eligibility survey, interviews, and focus group session. The survey was used to gather background information about the participants, their experiences with online mindfulness programs, and their mindfulness in general. The interviews were semi-structured so that they would yield rich, descriptive information about the phenomenon of persistence in online mindfulness programs. The focus group session was used to triangulate the data, conclusions, and recommendations.

Research Questions

Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure and the literature on online mindfulness training guided the following research questions for this study**:**

Research Question 1. What do nontraditional learners experience as they persist in online mindfulness programs?

Research Question 2. What social and academic (e.g., mindfulness development) factors do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?

Research Question 3. What institutional supports do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness program?

Research Question 4. What factors external to the training program (e.g., personal and external factors) do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?

Significance of the Study

There are numerous qualitative and quantitative studies on the efficacy of various types of content, media used, program durations, and program format for teaching mindfulness online (Boettcher et al., 2014; Boggs et al., 2014; Cavanagh et al., 2013; Dimidjian et al., 2014; Glück & Maercker, 2011; Krusche et al., 2012). While substantial research exists about why nontraditional learners persist in both traditional and online programs, little research has been done about persistence in informal and non-degree seeking learning environments such as online mindfulness programs. Persistence in online mindfulness programs is an important area of study not just because of the rising interest in online mindfulness programs, but also because no one has examined whether persistence and attrition rates apply to this unique learning environment. As online mindfulness programs become more popular, more information about what helps nontraditional learners stay in the programs is needed so that program designers and providers can create an online learning environment that supports learner retention and persistence.

Definitions of Terms

This study used the following definitions for commonly used terms and concepts from the literature:

Academic integration. Academic self-esteem, personal development of the learner, the grades the learner achieves, learner enjoyment of the subject and of learning, self-identifying as a student, and alignment of the learner with academic norms (Tinto, 1975, 1982). For the purpose of this study, academic integration is the learner's development of his or her feeling more

confident about his or her mindfulness skills, feeling that his or her mindfulness skills are developing, and his or her enjoying the improvement of those mindfulness skills.

Attrition. "Withdrawal from an online course" (Hart, 2012, p. 30).

Distance education. Institution-based education program "where the learning group is separated, and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources, and instructors" (Schlosser, & Simonson, 2006).

External factors. Factors that are to the program content, may relate to either the learner or the institution, and may impact learner persistence (Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 1993).

Formal learning. Learning that occurs in a structured, organized manner, where the learning goals and objectives are set forth by the instructor or designer. Learning that often ends in a certification, degree, or validation (Cedefop, 2008).

Informal learning. Learning that occurs in daily life, away from a structured, formal classroom environment. Informal learning is often connected to the learner's personal goals, and the learner sets his or her own goals and objectives. Informal learning often occurs without formally developed curricula and generally does not result in a degree or certificate (Livingstone, 2001; Yanchar & Hawkley, 2014). It can take many forms including watching videos, doing a self-study, reading articles or books, participating in discussion forums, attending coaching sessions, or using mobile apps to improve a behavior.

Institutional factors. The factors that involve class size, student engagement during orientation, and financial aid (Kember, 1989, 1995; Simpson, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Online mindfulness program. Any web-based program administered through a website or mobile application that instructs users on how to practice mindfulness techniques (Chin, Slutsky, Raye, & Creswell, 2013).

Mindfulness. The act of paying attention to the present moment while being curious and open to what it brings (Bishop et al., 2004).

Mobile application. Also known as an *app*. Software program created for specific use (here: online mindfulness training) on a mobile device (Alonso, Casati, Kuno, & Machiraju, 2004).

Needs of nontraditional learners. Access to resources, including the necessary technology, time for learning, flexible scheduling, commitment to learning, working and living in a culture of learning, and access to other learners (Klein & Moore, 2006).

Nontraditional learners. Anyone over the age of 24 who may be working while enrolled in a learning program (Metzner & Bean, 1987).

Online program. A program "in which at least 80% of the course content is delivered online" (Allen & Seaman, 2016, p. 7).

Online mindfulness program. Any entirely web-based program administered through a website or mobile application that instructs users on how to practice mindfulness techniques (Chin, Slutsky, Raye, & Creswell, 2013).

Persistence. "The ability to complete an online course despite obstacles or adverse circumstances" (Hart, 2012, p. 30).

Personal factors. The factors that involve the learners' personalities, demographic background, and prior preparation for the program (Kember, 1989, 1995; Simpson, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Social integration. The learner's having a group of friends, feeling connected to instructors and staff, and the learner's enjoyment of the program from a social standpoint (Tinto, 1975, 1982). For the purpose of this study, social integration is the learner's feeling connected to other mindfulness practitioners and enjoying connecting with others socially through the online mindfulness program.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994) was to reveal the essence of the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persisted in online mindfulness programs. The research questions for this study focused on those lived experiences and helped identify the social, academic, institutional, and external factors that gave rise to persistence in online mindfulness programs. The participants for this study were nontraditional learners who had persisted in one or more online mindfulness programs lasting 14 days or longer in the past six months. The data was collected in three steps: an eligibility survey, interviews, and a focus group session. The purpose of the survey was to gather background information, the purpose of the interviews was to gather information, and the purpose of the focus group session was to triangulate the data and allow participants the opportunity to share the extent to which they felt I captured the essence of their experience.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, I will explain the background information of this inquiry into persistence in online mindfulness programs. To demonstrate the context of my study, I begin the literature review by sharing what is known about the growth of online education programs how they have become more widely available. Then, to share the problem that I seek to address through my study, I explain how online programs have lower rates of learner persistence than traditional, residential programs. To illustrate the types of online mindfulness programs that exist and the persistence problem that exists within them, I share information about nine of the most-cited studies in online mindfulness. I also highlight the characteristics of learners who participate in these programs, demonstrating that the majority of them are nontraditional learners.

Next, I introduce the theoretical framework of the study, which is Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure. I share how it has been revised and expanded, both by Tinto and by other researchers, to consider the needs of nontraditional learners, who often participate in online programs. I then explain how the salient points of Tinto's Model of Student Departure, such as the role of personal factors, institutional factors, and academic and social integration, connect to the literature that exists about online mindfulness programs. This chapter ends with an explanation of the empirical significance of this study.

The Growth in Online Education Programs

To understand the importance of this study on persistence in online mindfulness programs, the growth of online learning and the persistence problem within the larger sector of online education is needed. Online learning has become increasingly mainstream, with online classes being seen as an innovative disruptor to education in all forms (Christensen, Horn,

Caldera, & Soares, 2011). Student enrollment in formal, degree-seeking online programs increased 20% from 2003 to 2009, and the steady rise has continued (Hart, 2012). While traditional college and university enrollment has increased at a rate of 1.2%, enrollment in online classes has increased over tenfold, at a rate of 12.9% annually (Hart, 2012). There was an increase in the proportion of learners studying online compared to learners studying in person between 2012 and 2016 (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Online learners represented 25.9% of overall learners in 2012, 27.1% in 2013, 28.3% in 2014, 29.7% in 2015, and 31.6% in 2016 (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018)

The Persistence Problem in Online Education Programs

Unfortunately, the statistics for persistence in online education programs are not as promising as enrollment, as rates for online program completion, both in formal and informal learning environments in degree and non-degree programs, have remained lower than completion rates in traditional environments (Bawa, 2016). Between 40 and 80 percent of learners do not complete their online classes (Smith, 2010). In informal and non-degree seeking settings, learner persistence rates can be even lower. For example, learners participating in informal or non-degree seeking learning via Massive Open Online Classes (MOOCs) only completed courses at a rate of 4.8% to 7.7% (Jordan, 2015).

The learner persistence problem exists in online mindfulness programs. Within non-degree seeking online mindfulness programs, persistence rates have been reported as low as 29% (Krusche, Cyhlarova, & Williams, 2013), with rates varying greatly. Persistence challenges in online mindfulness programs are explained through the analysis of ten prominent studies in the next section.

Persistence in Online Mindfulness Programs

Online mindfulness programs vary in duration, time required of participants, media used, and rates of learner persistence. This section examines studies of nine online mindfulness programs, all of which were taught through webpages. The persistence rates of these studies vary from 29% (Krusche et al., 2013) to 85% (Davis & Zautra, 2013); all researchers worked with participants who understood they were expected to complete the program. The duration of the online mindfulness programs ranged from 13 days (Glück & Maercker, 2011) to eight weeks (Boettcher et al., 2014; Boggs et al., 2014; Dimidjian et al., 2014; Reid, 2013) and had 15 (Reid, 2013) to 273 (Krusche et al., 2013) participants. All participants were adults; participant ages averaged from 25 to 56 years old. While several researchers reported persistence rates, the foci of these studies were on efficacy with various media, durations, and participants. No study specifically focusing on persistence in online mindfulness programs has been done yet based on my search of the literature. The search terms used were "online mindfulness," "online" and "mindfulness program," "online mindfulness program," "online" and "mindfulness study," and "online mindfulness study," coupled with "persistence," "attrition," and "retention," all in each combination of terms possible (e.g. "online mindfulness" and "persistence," then "online mindfulness and attrition," etc.).

These nine studies are reviewed here because they have been frequently cited in the literature about online mindfulness programs. These studies are organized alphabetically by first author's last names in Table 1. They are explained and analyzed in depth following the table.

Table 1 - Data from nine mindfulness studies

Nine prominent online mindfulness studies.

Study	Duration	Time	Media used	*N*	Persistence rate	Other persistence information
Boettcher et al., (2014)	8 weeks	2 hours per week (10 minutes twice a day, six days a week)	Online video and audio files, automated e-mails	91	82.3%	
Boggs et al., (2014)	8 weeks	2 hours per week (20 minutes a day, six days a week)	Online Mindful Mood Balance (MMB)	100	37%	
Cavanagh et al., (2013)	14 days	2 hours, 20 minutes (10 minutes a day for 14 days)	Online audio files, written information, and space for participants to journal	104	47.7%	
Davis & Zautra (2013)	6 weeks	12 sessions of 15 minutes each	Online text, animations, and audio files	79	85%	
Dimidjian et al., (2014)	8 weeks	2 hours per week (20 minutes a day, six days a week)	Online Mindful Mood Balance (MMB)	100	42%	53% completed four or more modules.

Table 1 Continued

Glück & Maercker (2011)	13 days	4 hours (20 minutes, 12 times)	Online audio, flash, and written exercises	49	53%	88.8% completed the majority of the program.
Krusche, Cyhlarova, King, & Willians (2012)	6.14 weeks on average	30 minutes per week	Online videos, assignments, and e-mails	100	The first 100 participants who completed the program were measured; the study did not share how many began the program.	Of these 100, 33% engaged most or every day, 55% sometimes engaged, and 12% rarely engaged.
Krusche, Cyhlarova, & Williams (2013)	4-8 weeks	6 hours (10 sessions of 30 minutes each)	Online videos, assignments, and e-mails	273	29% persisted and were included in the 273 for the study	41% engaged most or every day, 52% sometimes engaged, and 7% rarely engaged.
Reid (2013)	8 weeks	Varied; 3 or more sessions per week	Online readings, guided exercises, audio files, and an online journal	15	73%	

Analysis of Major Studies on Online Mindfulness Programs

These nine studies are the foundational studies into online mindfulness programs (Fish, Brimson, & Lynch, 2016; Spijkerman, Pots, & Bohlmeijer, 2016) and examine programs which vary in mindfulness techniques used, program durations, program type and mode, instructional methods, and participant demographics. The review of these studies provides an understanding of what has been studied demonstrating the gap in the literature I sought to fill. Moreover, the review demonstrates the variation in the types of non-degree seeking, online mindfulness programs that exist as well as the diversity of individuals who participate in them. These studies are, in order of explanation, Boettcher et al. (2014), Boggs et al. (2014), Cavanagh et al. (2013), Davis and Zautra (2013), Dimidjian et al. (2014), Glück and Maercker (2011), Krusche et al. (2012), Krusche et al. (2013), and Reid (2013). Correlational studies are discussed first with experimental and group comparison studies discussed next.

The Boggs et al. (2014) study was a correlational study in which 100 participants completed an eight-week program on mindfulness; the purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which practicing mindfulness was associated with a decrease in depressive symptoms. The mean age of the participants was 47. The participants committed six sessions per week to completing the program; their completion of these sessions was not measured. The program used was the Mindful Mood Balance (MMB) program, which used online videos of interactions between facilitators and participants as well as audio files. The mindfulness techniques learned in the program were sitting meditation, body scanning, yoga, mindfulness practices, focusing on breathing. Participants received no reminders to complete the program. Seventy-six percent of participants persisted in completing the program. There was no control group and the effects of the study were not measured. Boggs et al. (2014) found that all participants demonstrated that

they understood what mindfulness was and felt that the program influenced their awareness and emotions. In post-program interviews, some participants said that they noticed that they were more aware of mood changes and were able to use what they had learned from the program to help them manage difficult emotions (Boggs et al., 2014).

The Krusche et al. (2012) study was a correlational study designed to explore the extent to which mindfulness was associated with a decrease in stress-related symptoms. One hundred participants completed a four- to eight-week program on mindfulness; the participants completed the program at their own pace, with the first 100 completers used in the study. The mean age of the participants was 48. The participants committed to completing 30 minutes per week of program work; 33% participated most or every day, 55% participated at least once per week, and 12% rarely completed program activities. The materials used were audio files, instructional videos, and other e-learning strategies. The mindfulness techniques explained were body scanning, mindful movement, and mindfulness techniques. Participants received e-mail reminders to complete the program, but researchers did not report on how many or their frequency. This study did not use a control group. The measure used was the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). One drawback of this study is that because only the data from the first 100 participants to complete the mindfulness program was included in the study, there is no information about how many participants ultimately persisted in the program. Krusche et al. (2012) reported large effects (d=1.20) on stress reduction, but included only participants who had persisted in the program.

The Krusche et al. (2013) study was a correlational study that used the same design as in the 2012 study. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which the findings from the 2012 study could be replicated with different populations. In this study, 273 participants

completed a four- to eight-week self-paced program on mindfulness. The mean age of the participants was 47.7. The participants committed 30 minutes per week to completing program work; 41% participated most or every day, 52% participated at least once per week, and 7% rarely completed program work. The mindfulness techniques learned included body scanning, mindful movement, and mindfulness techniques. Participants received e-mail reminders to complete the program, but researchers did not report on how many or their frequency. There was no control group for this study. The measures used were the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), and the Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD-7) survey. Because the researchers did not share how many participants enrolled in the program, but did not persist, the study yields no learner persistence data. Krusche et al. (2013) again reported large effects (d=1.57) on stress reduction for participants who had persisted in the program.

The Reid (2013) study was a correlational study designed to determine the extent to which mindfulness was associated with an increase in coping skills for occupational therapy students. In this study, 15 participants completed an eight-week program on mindfulness. The mean age of the participants was not provided, but the researcher shared that they were first year master's degree students who were studying occupational therapy. The participants completed three sessions per week of varying times during the program; during the final week, participants were asked to complete three 30-minute sitting meditations. The materials used were audio files, online informational readings, guided exercises, and an online journal. The mindfulness techniques explained were sitting meditation, body scanning, focusing on the breath, mindful movement, loving kindness, and qigong, a Chinese movement meditation. Participants received an e-mail reminder to complete the program during the first week, the seventh week, and at the midpoint of the program. Seventy-three percent of participants persisted in completing the

program. No control group was used. The measure used was the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS). The drawback to this study is that researchers only recruited 15 participants. "The change in MAAS mindfulness scores ($M = –12.09$, $SD = 9.36$) was statistically significant ($t = –4.82$, $p = .002$)" (Reid, 2013, p. 46), which indicates that participants who had low MAAS scores had higher changes in their MAAS scores after completing the program.

The Boettcher et al. (2014) study was an experimental study in which 91 participants completed an eight-week, 16-hour program on mindfulness. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which depressive symptoms could be reduced with mindfulness interventions. The mean age of the participants was 37. The participants committed six days a week, twice a day to completing the program; whether they completed the program activities was not measured. The materials used were introductory videos, audio files, and psychology-based content. The mindfulness techniques explained were practice with still sitting, meditation, mindful movement, body scanning, and breathing exercises. Participants received no reminders to complete the program. Ninety-three percent of participants persisted in completing the program. The control group was comprised of participants on a discussion board. The measures used for the study were the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI-II) and the Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI). The drawback to this study is that the control group was gleaned from self-selecting survey participants located through a discussion board who had not been selected to participate in the study. Boettcher et al. (2014) reported statistically significant reductions in depressive symptoms; the standard deviation of participants scoring in the mild range of depressive symptoms was reduced from 7.0 to 4.8, which categorizes them as having minimal depressive

symptoms. The standard deviation of participants scoring in the mild range of anxiety symptoms was reduced from a standard deviation of 8.6 to 7.8.

The Cavanagh et al. (2013) study was a study in which 104 participants completed a two-week program on mindfulness. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which mindfulness practice could decrease stress-related issues for university students. The mean age of the participants was 25; they were recruited from a population of university students. The participants committed ten minutes per day to completing the program; on average, 61% completed one or more sessions per day, 87% completed one or more sessions per week, and 4% did not complete any sessions. The materials used were audio files, mindfulness education materials, and an online journal. The mindfulness techniques explained were mindfulness of body, breath, thoughts, and feelings. Participants received one reminder e-mail every three days during the program. Forty-seven percent of participants persisted in completing the program. The control group was comprised of participants who had been wait-listed to participate in the study. The mindfulness scales used to measure the study's efficacy were the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) and the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ). Cavanagh et al. (2013) reported moderate effects (d=.62) on stress reduction.

The Davis and Zautra (2013) study was a causational study in which 79 participants completed a six-week program on mindfulness. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which depression- and stress-related symptoms could be alleviated with a mindfulness intervention. The mean age of the participants was 46. The participants committed three hours total towards completing the program; this was broken up into 12 sessions of 15 minutes each. The materials used were visual presentations of text, animations, and audio files. The mindfulness content explained were awareness and acceptance of emotions. Participants received

no reminders to complete the program. Eighty-five percent of participants persisted in completing the program. The control group was comprised of participants in a health training group who did not enroll in the online mindfulness study. The measure of efficacy of this program in teaching online mindfulness were surveys on coping with stress and depression. Davis and Zautra (2013) reported small effects of the program.

The Dimidjian et al. (2014) study was a study in which 100 participants completed an eight-week program on mindfulness. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which anxiety and depressive symptoms could be alleviated through the completion of a mindfulness-based intervention. The mean age of the participants was 47. The participants committed six days a week to completing the program; on average, they completed 11.25 hours of mindfulness practice during the program. The materials used were videos of facilitators and participants interacting and audio files. The mindfulness techniques explained were sitting meditation, body scanning, yoga, mindfulness practices, and focusing on the breath. Researchers did not report whether participants received reminders to complete the program. Thirty-seven percent of participants persisted in completing the program; 53% completed four or more modules. The control group was comprised of participants receiving treatment as usual (TAU) for stress issues. The measures used to determine the study's efficacy were the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9), the Rejection Sensitivity Questionnaire (RSQ), and the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI). Dimidjian et al. (2014) reported statistically significant reductions in depressive symptoms; the standard deviation of participants scoring in the mild range of depressive symptoms was reduced from 3.03 to 2.69.

In the Glück and Maercker (2011) study, 49 participants completed a 13-day program on mindfulness. The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which a mindfulness-based

intervention could decrease symptoms of depression and stress. The mean age of the participants was 33.7; participants were recruited from a student population. The participants committed four hours and twenty minutes to completing the program; each of the 13 sessions were 20 minutes long. The materials used were written text, audio files, and flash animation exercises. The mindfulness content explained was awareness of bodily sensations, attention to the breath, and acceptance of emotions. Participants received three e-mail reminders during the program; they received one at the start, one at the midpoint, and one at the end of the study. Eighty-eight percent of participants persisted in completing the program. The control group was comprised of student participants who had been wait listed. The measures used in the study were the Perceived Stress Questionnaire (PSQ), the Selbsteinschдtzung emotionaler Kompetenzen (SEK-27), which is an emotional competency scale, two versions of the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (the PANAS-neg and the PANAS-pos), and the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI). Glück and Maercker (2011) discovered that, based on the PSQ, the intervention group was nine times more likely to improve than the wait listed group, based on a standard deviation from the mean of 1.96.

Several trends emerged from more thorough examination of these nine studies. For example, Krusche et al. (2012) and Krusche et al. (2013) found that longer program completion requirements resulted in less participant engagement and persistence. Online mindfulness programs in which participants had more opportunities for engagement overall had greater learner persistence rates than those programs that asked for less engagement (Krusche et al., 2012; Krusche et al., 2013; Dimidjian et al., 2014). Thus, programs that engage learners more regularly by providing them with greater opportunities to try new learning activities, journal online, and receive reminders from the program facilitators may support learner persistence than

programs that offer fewer opportunities for learners to engage. Across studies, results demonstrated a significant reduction in depressive, anxious, and stress-related symptoms. Four of the five studies that measured stress reported a reduction in stress with moderate to large effects (Cavanagh et al., 2013; Glück and Maercker, 2011; Krusche et al., 2012; Krusche et al., 2013).

Persistence studies have suggested that learners who feel that an online program benefits their growth and aligns with their personal goals are more likely to remain in a program than those who do not feel it supported their growth and goals (Aljohani, 2016; Bishop, 2016; Hoskins and Goldberg, 2005). It is thus interesting to note that Glück and Maercker (2011) found that 73.5% of participants reported that the program was beneficial and 77.2% would recommend online mindfulness trainings to others. This study had the second-highest learner persistence rate of the eight that measured all participants rather than just those that persisted, as both Krusche et al. (2012, 2013) studies did.

While these nine studies are considered to be the foundational studies about online mindfulness programs, none of them specifically considered which factors supported learner persistence in their program and none of them asked participants why they left the study. Program time requirements, content taught, resources used, and personal characteristics of the learners varied among studies; there is no clear link between these aspects of the online mindfulness programs and persistence rates. As explained above, no studies yet exist that examine persistence in informal or non-degree seeking online mindfulness programs.

The Importance of Persistence in Online Learning

Persistence in online learning programs matters because low learner persistence rates "may indicate student dissatisfaction with the program or institution and suggest the program may be too rigorous" (Byrd et al., 2011, p. 128). Because program credibility is determined in

part by learner persistence rates (Stover, 2005), encouraging learner persistence is important for organizations.

Persistence Theory

Persistence studies in online education are generally grounded in traditional persistence theory and generally focus on how three aspects of the learner experience affect persistence: personal factors, institutional factors, and external factors (Kember, 1989, 1995; Simpson, 2004; Tinto, 1975, 1993). The personal factors involve the learners' personalities, demographic background, and prior preparation for the program. The institutional factors involve class size, student engagement during orientation, and financial aid. The external factors are factors that are not intrinsic to the learner, but which still affect the learner's persistence; these include work-life balance (Aragon & Johnson, 2008), major life changes (Hart, 2012), and accessibility issues that arise (Bunn, 2004; Stanford-Bowers, 2008). Persistence studies also examine the relationship between academic and social integration and how each affects learner persistence (Frydenberg, 2007). Traditional persistence theory, along with literature on persistence in online learning, also guided this inquiry.

Tinto's Model of Student Departure

The most prominent theory on understanding learner persistence is Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Departure, which has been continually researched, tested, and revised over almost thirty years (Kember, 1989, 1995; Simpson, 2004). Tinto (1975) theorized that learners enter university or a learning organization with pre-existing experiences and personality attributes (i.e., personal factors). As learners progress in their learning experiences, they begin the process of academically and socially integrating into the organization. This process, which is affected by

institutional factors and external factors, affects the learner's goals and commitments, which in turn affects learner retention (Aljohani, 2016).

While the factors that lead to persistence are multifaceted and complex (Picciano, 2002), Tinto (1975, 1993) sought to address them through his ideas on academic and social integration. Many researchers have shown that academic and social integration are the main predictors of learner persistence in any online educational environment (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009). For example, in online learning environments such as continuing education programs, factors such as relationships with peers and instructors are especially important in helping learners persist (McGivney, 2009; Müller, 2008). Learners engaged in formal online learning programs who have high rates of academic achievement and integration are more likely to persist than learners who have lower rates of academic achievement and integration (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Wojciechowski & Bierlein Palmer, 2005). Therefore, Tinto's model has been used as framework for analyzing learner persistence in general (Fontana & Manuti, 2016; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1980) and for online learner persistence (Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Sweet, 2011); it was therefore is appropriate for guiding this study. His model is further reviewed below.

In the original version of Tinto's (1975) Model of Student Departure, Tinto based his conclusions on studies he did with traditional undergraduate students. He concluded that five constructs were related to persistence: the learner's background prior to enrollment, the learner's goal commitment, the institutional commitment, the learner's academic integration, and the learner's social integration. The learner's background prior to enrollment matters because the learner's skills, prior educational experiences, personality and intellectual attributes, and other attributes, are the intrinsic personal factors that help learners succeed; they are the baseline

qualities that have shaped a learner prior to entering a program (Tinto, 1993). Learners' commitment to their goals affect their academic success and social interactions, which in turn helps create their success, which in turn affects their commitment, and so on (Tinto, 1993). Further, learners who have strong commitment to their goals can overcome a lack of social and academic integration (Tinto, 1993). Institutional commitment to learners, as shown through quality of instruction and opportunity for learners, also encourages learners to persist (Bean, 1982; Levin & Levin, 1991; Tinto, 1993). Institutions that are committed to helping students persist will create a culture of belonging, focus on increasing learner satisfaction, and seek to increase learner commitment to the institution (Levin & Levin, 1991). Tinto explained that academic integration refers to academic self-esteem, personal development of the learner, the grades the learner achieves, learner enjoyment of the subject and of learning, self-identifying as a student, and alignment of the learner with academic norms. Social integration is the learner's having a group of friends, feeling connected to instructors and staff, and the learner's enjoyment of the program from a social standpoint (Tinto, 1975, 1982). Academic and social integration encourage learners to persist because learners feel that they are making academic progress and that they belong socially (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

For the purpose of this study, the definitions of academic and social integration have been applied to the context of online mindfulness programs. In this study, academic integration was the learner's development of his or her feeling more confident about his or her mindfulness skills, feeling that his or her mindfulness skills are developing, and his or her enjoying the improvement of those mindfulness skills. In this study, social integration was the learner's feeling connected to other mindfulness practitioners and enjoying connecting with others socially through the online mindfulness program.

The 1993 version of Tinto's Model of Student Departure was more inclusive of nontraditional learners, as his earlier model was based on his studies of traditional undergraduate university students. Bean and Metzner (1985) purported that, for nontraditional learners, external variables are a factor in helping learners determine whether or not to persist. Tinto (1993) explained how "adjustment, difficulty, incongruence, isolation, finances, learning, and external obligations or commitments" interact with the constructs from his earlier model to impact learner persistence (p. 112). He adapted his model because he had learned that different types of students, such as nontraditional learners, are affected differently by the constructs because of external factors. For example, using his model, researchers have found that career and family challenges affect learners' initial and continuing commitments to their goals (Aljohani, 2016).

In Tinto's (1993) most recent version of the Model of Student Departure, external factors are acknowledged as being factors that affect learner persistence (Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 1993). These external factors are external to the program content, may relate to either the learner or the institution, and may impact learner persistence. These external factors can include the learners' work-life balance (Aragon & Johnson, 2008), major life changes (Hart, 2012), accessibility issues (Bunn, 2004; Stanford-Bowers, 2008), and the learners' learning styles (Harrell & Bower, 2011; Ho & Tabata, 2001). These issues were integrated into earlier versions of the model to include the needs of nontraditional learners.

Tinto (2004) also later suggested that organizations need to provide learners with academic advising as well as with student support services in order to reduce attrition, as this helps with learner-program fit. This academic advising can help learners to stay focused on their personal goals and commitments to completing the program. In support of this idea, Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) purported that a factor in learner persistence is the academic match between the

goals of the learner and what the organization or program can provide. Bishop (2016) explained that the matching of learner and institutional values affects persistence. Park and Choi (2009) found that learners who enroll in programs that are well matched to their career and personal goals are more likely to persist in those programs. Further, learners who feel that their programs are aligned with their goals report higher rates of satisfaction, which encourages them to persist (Levy, 2009).

Additional Theory and Research

Although Tinto's (1975, 1993) "model of retention is the most widely acknowledged and useful model in predicting student attrition" (Bishop, 2016, p. 206), also informing this study was Rovai's (2003) Composite Persistence Model, which provided further insights into the factors that lead to persistence in online learners. His model synthesized Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure with Bean and Metzner's (1985) persistence studies on nontraditional learners. Rovai purported that social and academic integration are essential for online learners to persist (2003) and that, similar to what Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) had concluded about academic match, academic fit is an integral factor in learner persistence. The conclusions from the Hoskins and Goldberg (2005) indicate that learners interested in online mindfulness programs would do well to participate in programs that meet their mindfulness goals.

An important expansion on Tinto's Model of Student Departure is Bean and Metzner's (1987) Model of Student Attrition; this Model of Student Attrition (Bean & Metzner, 1987), also informed this research because it provided greater insight into potential external factors. For example, Bean and Metzner (1987) purported that nontraditional learners are more dependent on external factors such as encouragement from family, financial support, having sufficient time to

complete the program, and the perceived usefulness of the program, than they are on social integration within a program. This modification to Tinto's Model of Student Departure (1975, 1993) makes sense for nontraditional learners because many of them already have existing social networks and because they are more likely to persist in programs in which they can see a direct benefit (Grosset, 1991; Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009).

Bean and Metzner's (1987) Model of Student Attrition can be used to understand how these external factors, which can be organized into institutional and personal factors, affect learner persistence in online programs. Under this theory, institutional factors, such as online support, technical support, and online seminars support learner persistence (Müller, 2008). Also under this theory, personal factors, such as learner motivation towards achieving goals, support learner persistence (Meyer, Bruwelheide, & Poulin, 2009). The specific ways in which institutional and personal factors influence learner persistence are explained in detail in the next section. Tinto (1993) expanded on his theory in later versions of the Model of Student Departure, as he sought to identify the factors, such as institutional, personal, and external factors that contribute to nontraditional learners' persistence rates.

Review of Literature on Institutional, Personal, and External Factors Associated with Online Persistence

The theories of persistence and attrition highlight reasons that learners persist in an online program are complex and vary. However, consistent with theory, researchers have found that some external factors consistently influence an online learner's decision to persist. The ways in which external factors, such as institutional and personal factors, affect learner persistence in online programs are explained in this section. The institutional factors, such program support systems, orientation, communication systems, communication procedures, feedback procedures,

technical support, and program format, also influence persistence. This is seen within a review of the literature on online nontraditional learners in both degree and non-degree learning programs as well as informal and formal learning programs. While there is some literature on informal and non-degree seeking programs, the majority of the persistence literature focuses on programs that result in degrees at colleges and universities. While online persistence literature for all types of programs is reviewed, much of the persistence literature pertains to programs that result in degrees at colleges and universities.

Institutional Factors Leading to Persistence in Online Learning

Institutional factors that support learner persistence include implementing support systems, such as program orientations, having clear communication systems, and offering asynchronous content delivery. Each of these three categories of institutional factors is described in this section.

Institutional factors, such as orientation and ongoing systems of support for learners, support learner persistence in online environments (Castles, 2004; Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016;). Online classes where instructors take initiative in communication and meeting student needs also encourage learners to persist (MacKinnon-Slaney,1994). Institutions with strong online support systems that include program orientation and stay constant during program work also encourage persistence (Byrd et al., 2011; Stover, 2005). Learners who felt that they had the technical support required to help them overcome barriers were more likely to persist (Bunn, 2004; Ojokheta, 2011). However, learners who lack support when they encounter technical challenges are less likely to persist (Bunn, 2004). Lack of contact support services or who lack online or computer access is correlated with lower rates of

learner persistence in online programs, both degree and non-degree seeking learners (Bunn, 2004; Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Researchers have shown that institutions with strong communication systems in place helped learners to persist (Bunn, 2004; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Ojokheta, 2011). For example, online doctoral learners who reported that instructors or facilitators responded promptly were more likely to persist in online studies than learners who reported that they did not feel they received adequate or encouraging communication (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). In fact, learners who felt they had unresponsive instructors or facilitators were less likely to persist in an online program than learners who felt their instructors were responsive (Aragon & Johnson, 2008).

Instructor feedback has been shown to have a direct impact on learner persistence (Ojokheta, 2011). Individualized instructor feedback increases student persistence (Bocchi, Eastman, & Swift, 2004). Instructors who give late feedback, who are nonresponsive or under-responsive to learner communication, or who limit their communication with learners, contribute to attrition rates (Bunn, 2004). Ineffective communication hinders learners from persisting in online programs (Aragon & Johnson, 2008). Learners who receive support in overcoming communication difficulties are more likely to persist in online programs than students who were unsupported in and unable to solve their communication challenges with instructors (Brown, 1996; Frew & Weber, 1995).

The format of online programs can also support learner persistence. Online, asynchronous classes are often better than traditional learning formats for meeting the needs of nontraditional learners who are in the workforce (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Online programs, especially asynchronous ones, allowed learners to manage their schedules, thus completing both work and program assignment requirements (Nash, 2005). “Persistent students tend to have

better study habits and complete work in a timely manner" (Hart, 2012, p. 32); asynchronous programs allow students to achieve their goals while keeping their other commitments. Being able to complete online program requirements in a way that meets personal needs and schedules has been important to learners so that they can persist (Sullivan, 2001).

Personal Factors Leading to Persistence in Online Learning

Personal factors also affect whether learners persist in online programs. These personal factors fall into the categories of prior experience and existing characteristics (Tinto, 1993). Characteristics include traits such as having time-management skills, high levels of self-efficacy and confidence, and being highly motivated to complete the online program in which they have matriculated.

Learners who had previous related education experience and prior online education experiences had lower persistence rates than those without (Aljohani, 2016). Learners who were comfortable with searching for information online, saving files and navigating the basics of a computer system, and using websites were more likely to persist in online programs (Dupin-Bryant, 2004). Researchers have also demonstrated that participants who were computer literate, confident in their use of technology, had strong literacy skills, and possessed time- and self-management skills were more likely to persist in online programs (Conway, & Ross, 1990; Miller, Rainer, & Corely, 2003; Osborn, 2001; Powell & Rovai, 2003).

Learners who persisted in online learning programs had three main characteristics: they had strong time-management skills, were high in self-efficacy and resilience, and were intrinsically motivated (Bunn, 2004; Glück & Maercker, 2011; Holder, 2007). These three characteristics and how they affect learner persistence are explained in the subsequent paragraphs.

Regarding time management skills, learners who arranged their schedules and lives in a way that allowed them to complete their program assignments were more likely to persist through their programs (Bunn, 2004). Learners who managed their time wisely, met weekly program goals, and spent adequate time on task were also more likely to persist (Holder, 2007). Both program facilitators as well as learners have recognized the role of time management in online program completion (Stanford-Bowers, 2008).

Another learner characteristic that affects online persistence is resilience and the belief that they can complete the program. Persistent learners demonstrate self-efficacy, have higher levels of confidence, and expect that they will complete the program successfully (Holder, 2007). Learner determination to finish the program or class contributed to persistence in online programs (Bunn, 2003). Learners who had a strong internal locus of control and felt that they determined what happens to them persisted in online programs (Parker, 2001). Learner resilience, the ability to keep going despite setbacks and challenges, and self-efficacy both contributed to persistence in online programs (Kemp, 2002). Learners who demonstrated resilience felt an increased sense of self-worth that helped them persist in their online studies (Müller, 2008).

Motivation is the third characteristic of persistent online learners (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). The more motivated the learner, the more likely he or she was to persist and complete the program (Park & Choi, 2009). Learners who entered an online mindfulness program with specific goals were more likely to complete it (Glück & Maercker, 2011). Learners' commitment to and focus on their goals helped them persist through completing online classes, even when the program expectations or personal issues made that challenging. Those who persisted were the most motivated to meet their goals (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Students who persisted understood

that in order to achieve their goals, they needed the program in which they had enrolled (Müller, 2008). Additionally, learners who took more than one online program at a time were more likely to persist, suggesting that they may have been more focused on meeting life goals through their program work (Aragon & Johnson, 2008).

Visual learners are more likely to persist with online learning programs than auditory learners (Harrell & Bower, 2011). The learning style needs to match the learning environment or the learner may find that the program does not meet his or her needs and then withdraw. Instructional designers can find out about the learning styles of students through tracking their online usage, including how much time learners spend on different sections of an online program (Ho & Tabata, 2001). Additionally, learners who lack computer skills or access to the required resources are less likely to persist than learners who have the required skills and are able to access what they need, as these are a pre-entry requirement for learning online.

External Factors Leading to Persistence in Online Learning

External factors, such as family support, are also salient to persistence on online learners. Learners who have strong support networks, not just with their online communities, but with their in-person network of family, friends, and colleagues or classmates, are more likely to persist than learners who lack strong social networks outside of their online program (Holder, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Kemp, 2002; Park & Choi, 2009).

External factors that may also inhibit persistence include learners' ability to balance program and personal life demands, learners' feeling socially isolated in and out of the program, preexisting characteristics of the learners such as their learning styles, and accessibility to online tools (Rovai, 2003).

Online learners often find that balancing career, family, school, and other life demands is demanding; many who do not persist reporting that their lack of persistence is due to time constraints and other priorities (Aragon & Johnson, 2008; Hoskins and Goldberg, 2005). Challenges that may arise include illness and bereavement, financial issues, family responsibilities, and career challenges including changing jobs (Hart, 2012; Super & Ukot, 2016). Learners report that they are more likely to persist in asynchronous online programs than in programs that require them to block off specific times and days in order to complete assignments; they report that completing asynchronous course work allows them to fit their learning into the rest of their schedule (Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

Integration and Online Persistence

According to Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, social integration and academic integration affect learner persistence (Castles, 2004; Tennant & Pogson, 1995). Social integration with facilitators and through consistent communication positively affect persistence rates in online learning (Byrd et al., 2011; MacKinnon-Slaney, 1994; Milheim, 2017; Super & Ukot, 2016). Academic integration, often expressed as learners feeling that they can measure their progress and learning, positively affects persistence in online learning (Levy, 2009; Müller, 2008). Researchers have found that institutional, personal, and external factors, as well as social integration and academic integration, affect online learner persistence.

Social integration can be measured in terms of learner relationships with their online community and interactions with others in their program (Holder, 2007; Kemp, 2002). Social integration can be achieved through building relationships with others in their program, interacting with others in their program, and the feeling of connected to the learning community

in the program. The ways in which organizations can achieve these three approaches to social integration are discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

Learners who have strong relationships with the other learners in their online programs are more likely to persist in staying in the program. Persistent online learners seeking graduate degrees are more likely to engage with others and with the program content (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Successful online learning involves creating a virtual community through which learners, both degree and non-degree seeking, collaborate and engage. Engaged learners tend to persist in online programs (McKinley & Champagne, 2013) because they feel a stronger sense of social connectedness than less engaged learners (Milheim, 2017; Soper & Ukot, 2016).

Learners who have positive interactions with other learners in their online classes and who develop relationships with their online community are more likely to persist (Holder, 2007; Müller, 2008). Having an online community that learners feel a part of positively influences learner persistence (Ivankova & Stick, 2007), as a supportive community helps learners persist despite hardships (Müller, 2008). Learners who demonstrate social engagement through program discussion boards and with the online community are more likely to persist than learners who engage less frequently (Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009). Online and in-person social networking with other learners builds learners' self-esteem and satisfaction (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Tian, Yu, Vogel, & Kwok, 2011). Learners' peer attitudes and interactions affect their commitment to learning institutions (Tinto, 1987) and help them integrate into academic life (Tian et al., 2011).

Community and the associated social integration that comes from feeling connected to that community is an important factor in online learner persistence across different types of programs at various types of institutions (Boston et al., 2014; Moore, 1993; Müller, 2008;

Picciano, 2002). Greater social integration within an online program at a community college is correlated to higher rates of persistence (Johnson, Mejia, & Cook, 2015). On the other hand, lower rates of social presence in online program at a university are correlated with lower rates of persistence (Herbert, 2006). Learners, within general education courses, who spend more time online participating in discussions and connecting with other learners are more likely to persist (Morris, Wu, & Finnegan, 2005). Online programs that encourage learners to develop as a community through completing assignments together are associated with higher rates of social cohesiveness and learner persistence (Rimmershaw, 1999).

Academic integration is also a predictor of online learner persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1993). As learners progress through a program, they feel more satisfied in the program and their learning progress, key aspects of academic integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993). In Ivankova and Stick's (2007) study, 92.3% of online learners who graduated from a doctoral program felt satisfied with their progress, but only 20% of learners who did not persist felt satisfied with their progress. Satisfaction is a predictor of learner persistence, with the more satisfied students learning more and staying in online programs (Levy, 2009). The more satisfied the learner, the more likely he or she is to complete the online program, whether it be for a degree or pleasure (Müller, 2008). Higher rates of learner satisfaction in an online program are correlated to greater learner persistence rates (Park & Choi, 2009). Park and Choi (2009) discovered that nontraditional learners enrolled in degree seeking programs are more likely to persist when they feel satisfied that an online program benefits them personally or in their career. Learner satisfaction comes from feeling that a program provides them with knowledge they can use in their lives and work and when it connects to their learning goals (Park & Choi, 2009). This match or mismatch between what the learner would like from a program and what the program is

able to give the learner is important in determining whether learners persist. An academic mismatch between the learner and the program can contribute to the decision not to persist (Hoskins& Golgberg, 2005; Rovai, 2003).

Conclusion

While there has been a tenfold increase in online learning over residential learning in recent years (Hart, 2012), rates of learner persistence in online education are lower than those in traditional environments (Bawa, 2016). Persistence rates in online mindfulness programs vary widely and are underreported in the data that these programs make available to the public (Mullin, 2018). Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure has been used to examine how learners persist in various online learning environments (Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2005; Levy, 2009), but research has been limited on non-degree seeking programs in favor of research conducted on degree-seeking online programs. His theory has not yet been applied to understanding learner persistence in online mindfulness programs, which are non-degree seeking.

This study filled in that gap in the research, providing instructional designers, content developers, and researchers with information about why learners persist in online mindfulness programs. It shares information about the lived experiences of online mindfulness program participants, what the essence of their experience is, and what factors helped them persist in their programs. It provides information about the extent to which Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure applies to this unique online learning environment.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The focus of this qualitative inquiry was to examine the experiences of nontraditional learners as they persist in online mindfulness programs. In completing this investigation, I gave voice to nontraditional learners who sought to improve themselves and their lives through participating in these programs. This chapter is organized into sections explaining the research process and the transcendental phenomenological approach, which was used. Information is provided about the participants, setting, instrumentation, data collection procedures, data analysis, limitations, and ethical considerations of the study.

Research Method and Design

A transcendental phenomenological research design was used in this investigation as I sought to examine the lived experiences of individuals journeying through an online mindfulness program unto completion. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the focus of the inquiry was on understanding the voices and experiences of participants (Creswell, 1998). The transcendental phenomenological research design was appropriate because I sought to understand the essence of what and how nontraditional learners experienced as they persisted in an online mindfulness program (Moustakas, 1994). As an instructional designer, I sought to understand the lived experiences of the online mindfulness learners to inform the design of programs that support learner persistence. In alignment with the research design chosen, I sought to set aside all preconceived ideas (epoche) to see phenomena through unclouded glasses, thereby allowing the true meaning of phenomena to naturally emerge (Moustakas, 1994).

As I began to carry out my inquiry, acknowledging my role as a human instrument was an essential component of my research and the design chosen (Patton, 2002). I examined my

own personal interest in online mindfulness studies and the experience of what it means to learn about mindfulness. This personal reflection on behalf was consistent with transcendental phenomenology, as the research should be of both a social interest and personal interest to me (Moustakas, 1994). Relevant to the examination of my perspective is potential bias; thus, "epoche" is central to the design (Moustakas, 1994, p. 22). "Epoche" is the process through which researchers notice and subdue their biases while completing the research, thus helping them to approach the information gathered from beginners' minds (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Epoche, which is also known as bracketing, takes place throughout the research. In this case, I journaled about my previous online mindfulness experiences and about the research process in the hopes of better detecting my own bias (Moustakas, 1994). I disclosed any bias and its implications on my research with my research mentors. Epoche is a controversial topic, as it is impossible to remove all bias (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), but my researcher's journal and my acknowledgement of my own role in the research was a step in the direction or minimizing that bias. Bracketing is an important part of setting aside prejudgments and opening the research interview with an unbiased, receptive presence (Moustakas, 1994).

Steps of Phenomenological Research

I followed Moustakas' (1994) seven systematic steps for conducting phenomenological research. The seven steps are aligned with the dissertation process, so they were a natural fit for this inquiry. These steps began with finding a topic and research questions that had significance for both the researcher and for society, a process that happens when a dissertation researcher selects an inquiry for a study (step 1). This step required me to discover a topic and question rooted in autobiographical meanings and values, as well as involving social meaning and

significance. Because I have completed numerous online mindfulness programs, I was interested in the experiences of other mindfulness practitioners.

The next step was to complete a comprehensive literature review to determine what information about the topic and questions already exists as I had done for chapter two (step 2). I then created a set of criteria to identify potential research partners; here, those partners were the participants (step 3). Next, I identified the purpose of the inquiry and planned the methodology, which involved participants (step 4). This step is explained in further detail in the participant and procedures sections and includes information about the nature and purpose of the investigation. This step also included an agreement that involved obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality, and delineating the responsibilities of the primary researcher and research participants, consistent with ethical principles of research and the requirements of the supporting institution's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Once I had IRB approval, data collection (step 5) began. I collected data through the use of a screening survey, lengthy open-ended interviews, and conclusion-checking through a focus group after the interviews had been completed and coded. As a semi-structured interview protocol was used, my questions and the participants' ideas guided the conversation (steps 5 and 6). I organized and analyzed "the data to facilitate development of individual textural and structural descriptions, a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104), which is step 6. This organization and analysis occured during the coding process.

After organizing and analyzing what I had discovered, I then explained my findings, including how the findings varied from what else is in the literature, how the findings translated into social and personal meanings, and what the next steps for future researchers are (Moustakas,

1994). This process was akin to writing and defending a dissertation (step 7); this step also included organizing and analyzing the data to facilitate development of individual textural and structural descriptions, a composite textural description, a composite structural description, and a synthesis of textural and structural meanings and essences.

All seven steps of transcendental phenomenological research were completed through this research process. The four principles of transcendental phenomenological research were also applied during planning, data collection, and data analysis: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). The validity of phenomenological research was within the reporting of participants' lived experiences. Thus, epoche, the freedom from suppositions through reflection prior to data collection, as previously explained, was vital. The essence is the condition or quality without which a phenomenon would not be what it is (Moustakas, 1994).

Epoche is explained above. Phenomenological reduction refers to the process that I will describe my experiences to identify bias. This process consisted of my giving equal value to each coded word or phrase, deleting themes and ideas which repeatedly appear, thus horizonalizing, or giving each idea that occurs the same weight, rather than giving the most attention to the ideas that appear the most frequently (Moustakas, 1994). This process was essential as I coded interviews and focus group data, and was important in the creation of the textural-structural description (Moustakas, 1994).

The next step in the research process was imaginative variation, which is the "systematic varying of the possible structural meanings that underlie the textual meanings" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 99); the purpose of imaginative variation is to recognize different ideas and frameworks that give rise to the phenomenon, the consideration of the varying perceptions that arise because

of the phenomenon, and an inquiry into how to describe the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). To achieve this step, I ensured that my researcher journal included opportunities to play with the data so that I could uncover that which the conscious mind could not perceive. The journal was purely imaginative, not empirical, and vital to deriving structural themes.

The final principle that I applied in this phenomenological research was the synthesis of meanings and essences. Synthesis occured when I gained sufficient knowledge of the meaning and essence of the phenomenon so that I could write about it. A full understanding will never be complete, but an understanding of the essence is possible (Moustakas, 1994). Synthesis involves many components, including phenomenological reduction, horizonalizing, identifying delimited horizons or meanings, identifying invariant qualities and themes, individual textural description, and composite textural description; each of these terms is defined below. Horizonalizing is part of the coding process; the rest of the synthesis processes was part of the analysis aspect of my research.

Phenomenological reduction includes bracketing the topic or question. Horizonalizing means that each coded word or phrase is coded only once in the final coding so that every statement has equal value; words or phrases that appear more than others are not given more value than those that appear less. Identifying delimited horizons or meanings means considering ideas and horizons that stand out as invariant qualities of the experience. Identifying invariant qualities and themes means noticing nonrepetitive, nonoverlapping ideas clustered into themes. Individual textural descriptions involve the integration, descriptively, of the invariant textural constituents and themes of each research participant. Composite textural description is the integration of all the individual textural descriptions into a group or universal textural description (Moustakas, 1994).

The synthesis of individual and composite textural and structural descriptions allows for a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Synthesis also involves imaginative variation through which I will consider the phenomenon from different vantage points, such as opposite meanings, varying themes, structural themes, individual structural descriptions, universal structures. Universal structures include time, space, relationship to self and to others, bodily concerns, and causal or intentional structures (Moustakas, 1994).

Once I had achieved the understanding of the essence of the phenomenon based on those ways of considering the data, I wrote and shared my findings.

Researcher's Interest

In line with the principals of phenomenological research, my personal interest is central to this inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). I am a nontraditional learner who has completed online mindfulness programs that are often delivered through apps and videos. I found that academic and social integration played a role in my persistence. For example, I found that connecting with others who were learning about mindfulness encouraged me to keep learning when I first began learning about mindfulness online over nine years ago; this is akin to Tinto's ideas about social integration (1993). I also found that I could see the results of the mindfulness programs in my thoughts, words, and actions, which encouraged me to continue; this is aligned with the importance of academic integration, as explained by Tinto (1993). In phenomenology, "subject and object are integrated – what I see is interwoven with how I see it, with whom I see it, and with whom I am" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59); thus, I am an integral part of in this study.

Participants

Participant Characteristics

Participants, as noted in Chapter One, were (a) non-traditional learners (b) who have participated in and completed an online mindfulness program lasting 14 days or more in the past six months. The participants were ten nontraditional learners who had completed an online mindfulness program (Creswell, 1998; Morse, 1994). Creswell (1998) recommended at least five participants, and Morse (1996) recommended at least six, as both are considered a sufficient number to understand the essence of a specific phenomenon.

Sampling

Participants were garnered via convenience sampling and snowball sampling. Invitation to participate in an online survey was posted on Facebook and other social media groups where I interact with individuals who are interested in mindfulness and who may have completed an online mindfulness training. I also e-mail edpotential participants who may not have seen the Facebook posting, but who I knew have completed online mindfulness programs. The invitation stated that I was studying the lived experiences of learners who persist in online mindfulness programs and invite individuals who meet the criteria for the study. Recipients of the e-mail or people who see the posting were encouraged to send the invitation to others in their networks who met the criteria.

Potential participants who were interested in the study took the online survey; they were initially recruited through convenience and snowball sampling. The online survey, which is located in Appendix B and which was created using Google Forms, was used to collect information about participants' online mindfulness learning experiences and demographics. The survey information was used for purposeful sampling and to determine eligibility to participate

in the next part of the study. Participants needed to answer affirmatively (e.g., "yes") to the screening questions outlined in order to be included for consideration in the study. The participants needed to be willing to (b) explain how they persisted in their program, (c) explain their experiences of being in an online mindfulness program, and (d) complete both an individual interview and a focus group session. Their information was used for data analysis.

From this sampling frame, a purposeful sample of participants was identified based on those who met the study criteria. I was going to consider maximum variation for program type, program duration, gender, ethnicity, location, and persistence rate, but since only ten people who met the criteria applied to participate, I used all of them.

Setting

Introductory data about participants' backgrounds was collected via an online survey created on Google Forms. Following that, data was collected from participants via virtual interviews for which a videoconferencing system (e.g., Zoom) will be used; as no participants lived in the same city as I did, I conducted all interviews through a videoconferencing system. The focus group setting took place through a videoconferencing system that allowed participants to see each other and the interviewer.

Online Mindfulness Programs

Salient to this study were the online learning environment in which participants completed their mindfulness training. Mindfulness programs can be completed online through apps, through listening to recordings e-mailed through a subscription program, and through websites. Participants sometimes receive feedback in the form of stickers or badges when they complete a certain number of meditations to encourage them to persist, but often no feedback or encouragement is provided. An online mindfulness program is any web-based program

administered through a website or mobile application that instructs users on how to practice mindfulness techniques (Chin, Slutsky, Raye, & Creswell, 2013).

The online programs in which participants persisted included yoga and mindfulness programs, mindfulness programs for educators, and Zen mindfulness programs. The shortest program completed was a one-week program, but that participant's insights were included because the participant had also completed a three-month and a six-month program. The longest program completed was a year-long program. Three participants enrolled in three-month online modules with the same instructor, enrolling in the next module as soon as the current one ended, resulting in two or more years in an ongoing program. Half of the programs were delivered through a website, 70% used some kind of video conferencing or call, 10% involved video streaming, and 10% used other media.

Data Collection Methods

Participant data were collected through the survey, open-ended interviews, and the focus group; the researchers journal was also a source of data. This transcendental phenomenological study used an eligibility survey and semi-structured interviews to gather information; a focus group session was used to triangulate the data. The purpose of the survey was to yield information about the participants' life histories as they related to the phenomenon studied. The purpose of the interviews was to uncover information that will be used to determine the essence of the phenomenon. Each of these data collection steps is explained in further detail in the next paragraph.

The initial data collection was in the form of a survey, followed by a semi-structured interview, and then a focus group; each component had its own purpose. The purpose of the survey was to collect data from participants about their demographics as well as the nature and

duration of the online mindfulness programs in which they have participated. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about the participants' lived experiences, give them a voice in the process, and begin identifying the factors that led to their persistence. The focus group's purpose was to share my findings with the participants to find out their initial reactions and if my conclusions resonated with their experiences. Data triangulation, the corroboration of three data sources, was used to increase trustworthiness and ensure a rich understanding of the phenomenon, thereby increasing the reliability of my findings (Creswell, 2015).

The First Step in Data Collection: Survey

For this study, participants completed a survey about their background and demographics as well as their self-reported online mindfulness experiences. The survey also included the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) so that I could learn more about the lived experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). In the first interview of this series, participants shared the relevant parts of their life histories. The survey and Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) helped yield information about the participants' basic background information and experiences with aspects of the phenomenon. The survey was also going to be used to select participants with maximum variation of program type, program duration, gender, ethnicity, location, and persistence rate, but since only ten qualifying people applied, all were selected to participate. Potential participants who indicated that they had not completed an online mindfulness program of 14 days or longer in the past six months did not progress to the rest of the survey.

The Second Step in Data Collection: Interviews

Because I wanted to learn about the lived experiences of learners who persist in online mindfulness programs, I used semi-structured interviews to help me understand the participants'

points of view, conscious experiences, and what helped them persist in their programs (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Creswell, 1998). According to Morse and Richards (2002), semi-structured interviews are the most effective way to generate qualitative information; this type of interview involved my asking open-ended questions that I have prepared in advance. While I prepared set of questions for the interviews, I also had the flexibility to ask probing follow-up questions that arise from participant comments (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Smith & Osborn, 2003). Further, I ensured that the questions were not leading questions by sharing them with my dissertation chair in advance; I listen carefully and attentively to the participants while maintaining my curiosity (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

The interview questions focused on the textual (i.e., what did the participants experience?) and contextual (i.e., how did they persist?) information about the experience of persisting in an online mindfulness program. Because the research questions for this study were about the essence of the lived experiences of participants in online mindfulness programs and how those experiences helped them to persist, semi-structured interviews were the best suited to helping me understand the essence of those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The research and interview questions were focused around determining what nontraditional learners experienced in online mindfulness programs and what social factors, academic factors, institutional supports, and external factors helped them persist.

The interview questions and rationales for each were based on the literature and connected to each research questions (see Appendix D). The questions and sub-questions were submitted in advance to my committee. Additionally, if during a conversation, a participant shared a concept or idea not covered by the list of questions and sub-questions, I allowed the participant to speak about it.

The interviews ranged from 32 minutes to one hour and 19 minutes; they were audio recorded and transcribed. Each participant was interviewed once. They were conducted via the video conferencing software Zoom except for in one case where the participant preferred another software (Google Hangouts).

The Third Step in Data Collection: Focus Group Session

I shared the first draft of Chapter Four with participants, then invited them to several proposed days and times for a focus group session. The focus group included two participants, as only two were able to attend any of the proposed days and times. I created a Google Form based verbatim on the focus group script I used with the focus group participants so that all participants would have the opportunity to give feedback on my findings. The focus group session lasted 32 minutes.

The focus group served as a method through which the data and conclusions could be triangulated. During the focus group process, participants reflected on their experiences, listened to others, and provided feedback about my findings (member checking in), which helped me triangulate my findings and answer each research question (see Appendix E).

Researcher Journal

Also integral to the data collection process is the researcher journal, as my personal interest in the research is a key component of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

For my researcher journal, I used words, drawings, and tables to describe the experience of completing an online mindfulness program, my reflections on the interviews, and my thoughts during coding. It was used for bracketing out my experience and was updated at least once a week throughout the research experience. I began recording in my researcher journal as soon as this inquiry had IRB approval.

In my researcher journal, I also wrote about the ways in which I protected my research from bias. Since I had recruited the study's participants through Facebook and used convenience sampling, then snowball sampling, I knew four of the participants before they participated in my study. I had met these four participants through various mindfulness programs over the past decade. To reduce my bias, I recorded the participants' data using names like "Participant A" and "Participant B," which allowed me to focus on their ideas and the essence of those ideas rather than on my relationships with the participants. As I focused on the participants' experiences to determine the essence of those experiences, I lost track of who said what when I synthesized the data. I was truly focused on their words and did not remember who had shared what information. When I needed to find quotations to support my findings, I returned to the original transcripts.

The end product of this research is thick description about the lived experiences of people who persist in online mindfulness programs. Those descriptions helped me determine the essence of the experience of persisting in an online mindfulness program.

Data Collection Procedures

The procedures for obtaining the data for this study began with applying for and receiving IRB approval from the University of Memphis. Following approval, I elicited participation for the study as described above. I solicited participants on Facebook using the social media post or e-mail template (Appendix A), requesting potential participants complete and sign an online informed consent form and survey (Appendix B). Eligibility for participation was based on the set of criteria described in the participant section and participant availability to participate in the interview and focus group. I then contacted the participants, sending them the consent form (Appendix C) and inviting them for the interview. Eligible participants were

contacted one by one until ten participants were confirmed to participate in the survey, interview, and focus group. Each eligible participant was contacted through the e-mail they provided in the survey. The e-mail invited participants to complete the interview and focus group.

Participants used pseudonyms when they completed the survey, interview, and focus group session. Four of the participants used pseudonyms like "Hello Kitty" and "Stormy Daniels," so I assigned each participant a letter code, ranging from "Participant A" to Participant J" so that I could focus on their words rather than their pseudonym. When I shared the participants' ideas in Chapters Four and Five, I converted all their pseudonyms from names like "Participant A" to more personal names so that the narrative would make more sense for readers. My dissertation committee made this suggestion during my defense.

I want to share that I had met four of my ten participants prior to recruiting them for this study. As I used convenience sampling, then snowball sampling, and as I recruited participants through a Facebook post, I knew four of the participants. None were close friends, but four were people I had met in person during mindfulness retreats. I bracketed out my experiences in my researcher journal, which I explained in the Researcher Journal section above. I reduced my bias with these four participants by recording their data by a letter that was randomly assigned to their pseudonym. The pseudonyms went from "Participant A" to "Participant J," one letter for each of the ten participants. The result was that I did not know which participant had shared which information, meaning that I could focus on their lived experiences and getting to the essence of those experiences, rather than thinking about my relationship with them.

Each interview was audio recorded and was guided by the interview questions outlined in Appendix D. I transcribed each interview within seven days afterwards, which allowed me to code and notice patterns as they emerged through the ongoing research. After each interview's

transcription, I proofread the transcripts while listening to the interview recordings. I used Dedoose to code throughout this process (Dedoose, N.D.).

I only included data in the coding process that met the study requirements. The one example of data that did not meet the study requirements was that one participant, Cate, had completed a one-week online mindfulness program and a six-month online mindfulness program. I transcribed all her words, but only used the information she shared about the six-month online mindfulness program, as the one-week online mindfulness program did not meet my study's requirements.

Once I had a written draft of my interview findings, I sent it to the interview participants and invited them to join the focus group together. I invited them to join the focus group after I finished all interviews, transcriptions, coding, and the first draft of my conclusions. The focus group was audio recorded on my phone and took place through Zoom, the platform we used for nine of the ten interviews. In the focus group, I used the guide in Appendix E to facilitate a conversation about the accuracy of my findings. I synthesized their comments into the final draft of my work.

For my research journal, I recorded my thoughts and feelings about my research and what I learned during this whole process. I began recording in my research journal once I had IRB approval and continued until the final draft of the dissertation. This use of my own journal is consistent with phenomenology in which "the data of experience, my own thinking, intuiting, reflecting, and judging are regarded as the primary evidences of scientific investigation" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59). No participant identifying information was recoded in my research journal or my mindfulness journal; the journal was completed online, although some drawing occurred on paper and was scanned in afterwards, and are password-protected through Google

Drive. The purpose of the research journal was to help me epoche (or bracket out) my thoughts and feelings to reduce bias

Data Analysis

Moustakas's (1994) transcendental phenomenological procedures for data analysis were employed. After each interview and after the focus group session, I completed an initial code of the transcript reviewing each for "textual meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). The initial coding involved identifying single words and phrases descriptive of and relevant to the experiences of the participants as they completed the online mindfulness program. This was "lumper" coding, as it focused on the main ideas of each rather than "splitter" coding, which breaks down textual information line-by-line according to sub-ideas (Saldaña, 2013, p. 22).

In the second stage of coding, which took place once the surveys and interviews finished, I identified ideas that may have been missed in the initial coding. During the second coding, I reviewed the transcripts again line by line for "textual meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). This second coding allowed me to further develop a list of the highlighted words and phrases relevant to the phenomenon. I completed this second coding after the first coding. It guided my writing of Chapters Four and Five.

In line with Moustakas' (1994) approach to transcendental phenomenology, I allowed the themes to emerge rather than do themed coding. Those categories and sub-categories included topics such as personal factors, institutional factors, and experiences, as these are aligned with Tinto's (1993) Model of Student Departure. From analyzing the categories, I determined the ideas that were shared by participants, including me, as they relate to persistence in online mindfulness programs. The second coding allowed the data from these sources to determine the

themes that explain how "the experience of the phenomenon came to be what it is" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). Those categories of themes were developed into structural descriptions of the contexts and conditions that led the learners to persist (Moustakas, 1994). At this stage, the structural and textural descriptions were synthesized to determine the essence of the phenomenon of the study (s, 1994).

After the open-ended interviews and my initial analysis, I checked my findings with the participants themselves through the focus group to improve the trustworthiness of my findings. Throughout data analysis, I kept a research journal which served as a space where I could continue to explore my perceptions and biases. The research journal was a space through I could think through my process as well as the patterns and themes that emerged.

During data analysis, I integrated the four additional steps intrinsic to a transcendental phenomenological study: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). These four steps occurred prior to my writing my drafts of Chapters Four and Five as well as during the writing process. During the writing process, I discovered gaps in my understanding, so returned to the original transcripts, my journal, and the coding, to employ imaginative variation and synthesis. These four steps have been previously described.

Limitations

The two main limitations to this study were my subjectivity and the study's impact. Because this transcendental phenomenological study requires the researcher to select a topic and research questions that are of personal interest, the study is inherently biased. While I bracketed out my experience throughout the process with the aim of recognizing my biases so that I could have an unbiased mind when considering the data, eliminating bias still presented a challenge.

Additionally, because transcendental phenomenology relies on my interpretation and intuition to make meaning of the data, I relied on my committee chair to help make sure my synthesis and discussion are on track.

A second limitation of the study is its limited impact. While much research has been completed on persistence in formal learning, both online and in-person, environments, there is no research on persistence in online mindfulness programs. Because the monks, nuns, CEOs, and instructors behind these programs are often not academics, they might not read this study.

Ethical Considerations

The participants signed consent forms before participating in the study (see Appendix C); the consent forms explained the overall purpose of the study as well as the risks and benefits of participating. Participants were provided with a copy of the final research project. The study was approved in advance by the IRB Committee.

Subject Confidentiality

Allowing participants to select a pseudonym protected participant confidentiality. Coding, audio transcripts, and the dissertation only contain pseudonyms.

I informed the subjects prior to joining the study that a possibility exists that they might know someone in the focus group, so they should only participate in the study if they are comfortable with this possibility. They also learned that, even though they will only be identified by pseudonym, someone they know could read the study and guess that she or he is the person who made a certain statement.

Data Confidentiality

The participants' identifying data, as well as audio and video recordings, is kept confidential and stored online through Google Drive, which is password-protected; only I know the password. The researcher journal is password-protected and saved onto Google Drive. Dedoose, the coding software, offers security and privacy protection.

Potential Research Risks

Potential risks, such as emotional distress that could arise during the interviews, was identified so that they can be minimized. Participating in an interview or focus group could have yielded a minimal emotional or psychological risk relating to sharing their experiences with mindfulness. I explained these risks to participants; I also explained that participants could stop the interview or focus group at any time for any reason. If a participant had had an emotional reaction during either process, I would have stopped the interview or focus group session and only resumed if all participants present would like to restart.

Benefits of the Research

The participants may have enjoyed sharing their experiences and finding out about the experiences of others. They may have had an increased awareness of how they persisted in an online mindfulness program after being asked to think and answer questions about this phenomenon. The findings from the research could help online mindfulness programs better support their participants.

Conclusion

Through this qualitative inquiry, I examined the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persisted in online mindfulness programs. The purpose of this study was to give voice to nontraditional learners who to find out what they experienced while they persisted in

online mindfulness programs and what academic, social, institutional, and external factors influenced their persistence. I investigated these aspects of their experiences through the transcendental phenomenological approach.

There are seven systematic steps for conducting phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). Those seven steps are as follows: finding a topic and research questions that have significance for both me and for society (step 1), completing a literature review (step 2), creating a set of criteria to identify potential participants and research partners (step 3), identifying the purpose of the inquiry and planning the methodology (step 4), collecting data (step 5), organizing and analyzing the data (step 6), and presenting my findings through a report (step 7).

In addition to these seven steps, I also used the four principles of transcendental phenomenological research during my planning, data collection, and data analysis. These four principles are epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis (Moustakas, 1994). The purposes of these four principles are to reduce researcher bias and distill the participants' experiences to their essence (Moustakas, 1994).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persisted in online mindfulness programs. The phenomenon of persistence was defined as "the ability to complete an online course despite obstacles or adverse circumstances" (Hart, 2012, p. 30). My interest in this research topic began before enrolling in my Doctorate in Education program at the University of Memphis. For six years prior and the three years during, I participated in online mindfulness programs. I noticed that many of my fellow participants did not persist in these programs. Thus, I started to wonder about the factors that encouraged the persistence of the few learners in online mindfulness programs.

Searching the literature, I found that there were no qualitative or quantitative studies that examined the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persist in online mindfulness programs. Thus, for my dissertation, I created a study focused on uncovering the essence of the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persisted in online mindfulness programs in order to determine the factors that contributed to their persistence. This chapter presents the findings and describes the phenomenon of nontraditional learners persisting in online mindfulness programs using the participants' voices to provide an understanding of the essence of their experiences.

Research Questions

I used four research questions to investigate the lived experiences of nontraditional learners who persisted in online mindfulness programs. The four questions were informed by the theoretical framework provided Tinto's Model of Student Departure (1975, 1993) and the

research approach of Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology (1994). Additional qualitative research assisted in the development of the questions (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 1993) related to learner motivation and learner-program fit. The four research questions were:

Research Question 1. What do nontraditional learners experience as they persist in online mindfulness programs?

Research Question 2. What social and academic (e.g., mindfulness development) factors do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?

Research Question 3. What institutional supports do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness program?

Research Question 4. What factors external to the training program (e.g., personal and external factors) do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?

Participants

Ten nontraditional learners who persisted in online mindfulness programs participated in the study. Each participant (a) was a nontraditional learner, who had (b) participated in at least one online mindfulness program lasting 14 days or more. These participant characteristics were required for participant inclusion in the study. Because this study focused solely on persistence in online mindfulness programs, only participants who had persisted in and completed an online mindfulness program were included in the study.

The ten participants reported their professions as: instructor, account executive, innovation consultant, yoga instructor, leadership development consultant, online marketing director, school counselor, and pedagogical coordinator and classroom instructor. Seven males

and three females participated in this study, and seven were Americans, two were Canadians, and one was British. The age range of the participants was 26 to 53 years old.

Of the ten participants, four had completed one online mindfulness program, two had completed two online mindfulness programs, one had completed three online mindfulness programs, and three had completed four or more online mindfulness programs. Nine of the participants had also completed in-person mindfulness programs or trainings prior in addition to the online trainings completed. While the participants had a variety of experiences, they were asked to focus on their most recent online mindfulness program experiences. Eight participants cited that learning was their primary reason for enrolling in an online mindfulness program, and one stated that vocational advancement was the primary reason for the completion of the program. The final participant noted that the motivation to participate in and complete the online mindfulness program was to fulfill a personal goal. Interestingly, participants also reported that the facilitator of the online mindfulness also provided motivation to participate in and complete the program. Some participants had a personal or professional relationship with the instructor prior to the program, other participants desired to learn from well-known experts in the field. All participants shared that they had a desire to implement their learning in their lives and workplaces. Below, I describe each participant.

Amy was a 43-year-old white, British female who was living in the United Kingdom while she completed the online *Yoga for Kids* mindfulness program through Yoga International, which was two months in duration. In her eligibility survey answers, she shared that the primary factor that influenced her choice to persist in this program was personal determination and reaching a goal. In the survey, she also shared that vocational advancement was her primary reason for pursuing this program.

Beth was a 48-year old white, American female who was living in Germany while she completed a six-month online *Zen Study and Practice Program* with Diane Hamilton through Two Arrows Zen Center. In her eligibility survey answers, she shared that the primary factor that influenced her choice to persist in this program was personal determination and reaching a goal. In the survey, she also shared that learning was her primary reason for pursuing this program.

Cate was a 39-year old Eurasian American female who was living in Vietnam while she completed three consecutive online mindfulness programs (i.e., *Open Heart Project, Body = Brain, and Weightlessness*), which ranged from one week to six months long. In her eligibility survey answers, she shared that the primary factor that influenced her choice to persist in this program was continuing her practice from different perspectives of mindfulness. In the survey, she also shared that learning was her primary reason for pursuing this program.

Dave was a 26-year-old white American male who completed a six-month online *Zen Study and Practice Program* with Diane Hamilton through Two Arrows Zen Center while living in the United States. In his eligibility survey answers, he shared that the primary factor that influenced his choice to persist in this program was personal determination and reaching a goal. In the survey, he also shared that learning was his primary reason for pursuing the program.

Ellie was a 42-year-old Latina and white American female living in Switzerland while she completed the six-week online *Mindfulness Foundations* program through Mindful Schools. In her eligibility survey answers, she shared that the primary factor that influenced her choice to persist in this program was personal determination and reaching a goal. In the survey, she also shared that meeting a personal goal was her primary reason for pursuing this program.

Frank was a 53-year-old white American male who completed two ten-week online *Zen Study and Practice Programs* with Diane Hamilton through Two Arrows Zen Center. He was

living in the United States while completing the programs. In his eligibility survey answers, he shared that the primary factor that influenced his choice to persist in this program was personal determination and reaching a goal. In the survey, he also shared that learning was his primary reason for pursuing the program.

Georgina was a 35-year-old white American female who completed a two-month online *Mindfulness Foundations* program through Mindful Schools while living in the United States. In her eligibility survey answers, she shared that the primary factor that influenced her choice to persist in this program was personal determination and reaching a goal. In the survey, she also shared that learning was her primary reason for pursuing this program.

Hillary was a 47-year-old white Canadian female who was living in Thailand while she completed the *Mindfulness Foundations, Mindful Educator Essentials*, and the *Mindful Instructor Certification* programs through Mindful Schools; her total time in this certification program was 300 hours over the course of one year. In the eligibility survey, she shared that learning was her primary reason for pursuing these programs.

Ian was a 36-year-old white American male who was living in China while he completed an online three-month *Meditation Mind and Body* program with Jivan. In his eligibility survey answers, he shared that the primary factor that influenced his choice to persist in this program was personal determination and reaching a goal. In the survey, he also shared that learning was his primary reason for pursuing the program.

Joanna was a 44-year-old white American female living in Saudi Arabia while she completed the six-week online *Mindfulness Foundations* program through Mindful Schools. In her eligibility survey answers, she shared that the primary factor that influenced her choice to

persist in this program was personal determination and reaching a goal. In the survey, she also shared that learning was her primary reason for pursuing this program.

The demographics of the participants are summarized in Table 2.

Table 3 - Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Citizenship	Residency	Program(s) length	Purpose of study
Amy	Female	43	British	UK	2 months	Vocational advancement
Beth	Female	48	American	Germany	6 months	Personal determination and meeting a goal
Cate	Female	39	American	Vietnam	1 week to 6 months	Learning
Dave	Male	26	American	USA	6 months	Learning
Ellie	Female	42	American	Switzerland	6 weeks	Meeting a goal
Frank	Male	53	American	USA	10 weeks	Learning
Georgina	Female	35	American	USA	2 months	Learning
Hillary	Female	47	Canadian	Thailand	1 year	Learning
Ian	Male	36	American	China	3 months	Learning
Joanna	Female	44	American	Saudi Arabia	6 weeks	Learning

Description of the Survey and Results

Participants completed the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006) as part of the eligibility survey (Appendix B); they were asked to rate their mindfulness after participating in the most recent online mindfulness program completed. The Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) yielded information about the participants' experiences in their online mindfulness programs revealing the degree to which they have learned aspects of mindfulness. The degree to which participants have learned aspects of mindfulness is important because it helps demonstrate the level of academic integration

achieved (Tinto, 1975, 1993). The FFMQ is a five-point Likert scale assessment in which participants rate items using responses ranging from "Never or very rarely true" (1) to "Very often or always true" (5).

Through the FFMQ, participants shared their perceptions of their mindfulness levels in the areas of observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudging of inner experience, and nonreactivity to inner experience. Using the numeric values below, the scores revealed that the participants overall assess themselves positively in observing, describing, acting with awareness, nonjudging of inner experience, and nonreactivity to inner experience. Throughout the online mindfulness program, the participants learned mindfulness, which was confirmed during the individual interviews and emerged as a theme as participants described what they experienced salient to their persistence.

Composite Structural Descriptions

Table 3 summarizes the percentage of participant responses for each item.

Table 4 – Response Frequencies for Survey Items

Item	1	2	3	4	5
Observing Skills:					
1. When I'm walking, I deliberately notice the sensations of my body moving.	0%	10%	20%	40%	30%
2. I'm good at finding words to describe my feelings.	0%	0%	10%	70%	20%
3. I criticize myself for having irrational or inappropriate emotions.	30%	50%	20%	0%	0%
4. I perceive my feelings and emotions without having to react to them.	0%	0%	40%	50%	10%
5. When I do things, my mind wanders off and I'm easily distracted.	20%	40%	40%	0%	0%
6. When I take a shower or bath, I stay alert to the sensations of water on my body.	0%	0%	30%	50%	20%

7. I can easily put my opinions, beliefs, and expectations into words.	0%	10%	20%	40%	30%
8. I don't pay attention to what I'm doing because I'm daydreaming, worrying, or otherwise distracted.	20%	40%	20%	20%	0%
9. I watch my feelings without getting lost in them.	0%	20%	20%	50%	10%
10. I tell myself I shouldn't be feeling the way I'm feeling.	30%	50%	10%	10%	0%
11. I notice how foods and drinks affect my thoughts, bodily sensations, and emotions.	0%	0%	30%	10%	60%
12. It's hard for me to find the words to describe what I'm thinking.	30%	50%	10%	10%	0%
13. I am easily distracted.	20%	50%	30%	0%	0%
14. I believe that some of my thoughts are abnormal or bad and I shouldn't think that way.	60%	10%	30%	0%	0%
15. I pay attention to sensations, such as the wind on my hair or sun on my face.	0%	0%	10%	50%	40%
16. I have trouble thinking of the right words to express how I feel about things.	30%	50%	20%	0%	0%
17. I make judgments about whether my thoughts are good or bad.	20%	40%	20%	20%	0%
18. I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present.	20%	50%	30%	0%	0%
19. When I have distressing thoughts or images, I "step back" and am aware of the thought or image without getting taken over by it.	0%	0%	30%	60%	10%
20. I pay attention to sounds, such as clocks ticking, birds chirping, or cars passing.	0%	0%	10%	40%	50%
21. In difficult situations, I can pause without immediately reacting.	0%	0%	10%	70%	20%
22. When I have a sensation in my body, it's difficult for me to describe it because I can't find the right words.	30%	40%	20%	10%	0%
23. It seems I am "running on automatic" without much awareness of what I'm doing.	30%	60%	10%	0%	0%
24. When I have distressing thoughts or images, I feel calm soon after.	10%	10%	40%	30%	10%
25. I tell myself that I shouldn't be thinking the way I'm thinking.	50%	20%	30%	0%	0%
26. I notice the smells and aromas of things.	0%	0%	10%	30%	60%
27. Even when I'm feeling terribly upset, I can find a way to put it into words.	0%	0%	20%	60%	20%
28. I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.	20%	50%	30%	0%	0%

29. When I have distressing thoughts or images, I am able to just notice them without reacting.	0%	10%	40%	30%	20%
30. I think some of my emotions are bad or inappropriate and I shouldn't feel them.	60%	20%	20%	0%	0%
31. I notice visual elements in art or nature, such as colors, shapes, textures, or patterns of light and shadow.	0%	0%	10%	20%	70%
32. My natural tendency is to put my experiences into words.	0%	10%	0%	60%	30%
33. When I have distressing thoughts or images, I just notice them and let them go.	10%	20%	50%	10%	10%
34. I do jobs or tasks automatically without being aware of what I'm doing.	30%	60%	10%	0%	0%
35. When I have distressing thoughts or images, I judge myself as good or bad depending on what the thought or image is about.	30%	30%	30%	10%	0%
36. I pay attention to how my emotions affect my thoughts and behavior.	0%	0%	10%	60%	30%
37. I can usually describe how I feel at the moment in considerable detail.	0%	0%	20%	30%	50%
38. I find myself doing things without paying attention.	30%	20%	40%	10%	0%
39. I disapprove of myself when I have irrational ideas.	30%	60%	0%	10%	0%

The participants rated themselves mainly as 4 or 5 on the Likert scale, with 5 meaning "very often or always true," on each item related to having a mindfulness skills. They rated themselves mainly as 1 or 2 on the Likert scale, meaning "never or very rarely true," for the items that related to lacking mindfulness skills. The categories in which they rated themselves were observing skills, nonjudging skills, nonreactivity skills, and describing skills. The participants self-rated their observing skills high, giving themselves ratings that overall demonstrate that they have basic mindfulness skills. The statements about the participants' observing skills received ratings ranging from 60% to 90% as being a 4 or 5 on the Likert scale, with 5 meaning "very often or always true." The participants self-assessed 50% to 90% in their ability to act with awareness. For the statements about the nonjudging of inner experience,

participants rated themselves as 60% to 90% at avoiding judging behavior. The statements on nonreactivity to inner experience received the highest amount of negative or neutral self-assessments, ranging from 20% to 90%. Seventy to ninety percent of participants' self-assessed positively about their describing skills.

Formal Interviews

Participants completed semi-structured interviews; I used the Interview Guide (Appendix D) to conduct the interviews. The questions and sub questions were created to extract the answers to the research questions, which were aligned with Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure and Bean and Metzner's (1985) and Rovai's (1993) research that built on Tinto's Model of Student Departure (1975). Nine of the interviews were conducted using the video conferencing tool Zoom. In one case, Google Hangouts was used to video conference. The interviews were audio recorded using my phone, then transcribed. The interviews lasted between 28 and 78 minutes, depending on the participants' responses. Once transcriptions were complete, I listened to the interviews again while reading the transcripts to ensure transcript accuracy. The data was analyzed as outlined in Chapter Three. During the focus group session, the participants shared that they enjoyed learning about the lived experiences of other participants and hoped to read more rich textural analysis; thus, the drafts of Chapters Four and Five were revised to include more details about the lived experiences of the participants.

I then completed the coding of the information (Appendices H and G) followed by imaginative variation, which was aided by the researcher journal and the Researcher's Coding Notes (Appendix I). Imaginative variation is the process through which researchers allow themes that describe the data to emerge from the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). The textural and structural descriptions in the coding and interviews help describe the lived experiences and

factors that encouraged participants to persist in online mindfulness programs and were synthesized so that the essence of the phenomenon could emerge (Moustakas, 1994).

Themes

The themes that emerged about the essence of persisting in online mindfulness programs and the lived experiences of participants are explained in this section. The themes that emerged that answer Research Question One were enjoyment through engaging design and facilitation, a sense of belonging to a community, and relevant learning. The themes that emerged that answer Research Question Two were feelings of belonging, academic learning, and applying learning. The themes that emerged that answer Research Question Three were program organization, earning the respect of the instructor, instructor perceptions of the learners, and their learning helping them with professional or career advancement. The themes that emerged that answer Research Question Four were participant ideas around persistence and participant executive functioning and time management skills. Participant quotations are used to further explain the themes that emerged and provide participant voices to answer the research questions.

Research Question One

The first research question was, "What do nontraditional learners experience as they persist in online mindfulness programs?" The themes that emerged to answer this question were enjoyment through engaging design and facilitation, a sense of community, and relevant learning from the programs. The participants described that the programs were engaging and got them actively involved in their learning and in interacting with others, which made them more enjoyable than if they had involved mainly passive learning and not interacting with others. The programs also offered the opportunity to interact with peers and the instructor in a manner that allowed the participants to build a sense of community online. All of the participants articulated

that they enjoyed the opportunity to learn more about mindfulness, noting that their learning was relevant to their lives and careers.

Enjoyment through engaging design and facilitation. Participants used words such as "enjoyable" to describe their experiences in the online mindfulness programs. They attributed their engagement and enjoyment to the program design, instructor facilitation, and media used in the programs. The participants were actively involved in their learning through various assignments and in the learning community through discussion boards, chats, and video conferences where everyone could see each other. The programs used different activities and media through which to get participants involved in their learning. For example, Amy explained that materials were designed using multiple modalities, making the content of the program appealing and engaging. Moreover, she explained that the materials were organized and designed in a pedagogically sound manner, noting "a teaching methodology behind it" and that the instructor was knowledgeable and enthusiastic. All of the participants described that the media used, such as videos, audio files, and written material, in their online mindfulness programs, made the content engaging. Learning activities were chunked into smaller components so that participants did not need to spend much time engaging with the content at a single point in time, which allowed them to enjoy the programs and content more because the completion of each module or section in the program was not burdensome. Speaking to this idea, Amy said she liked that many of the assignments only took five minutes to complete, which decreased any reticence to engage. Ellie spoke to these modalities of instruction, saying that each week, there were videos, readings and research, and a chat forum in which she needed to participate. She said that "there was enough structure, yet enough freedom," which allowed her to relax and enjoy the program. The modalities and the structure allowed her to engage in the program without

worrying about what she needed to do next; she was able to focus on and complete one part of the program at a time.

Participants expressed that they liked that these various types of assignments and strategies of instruction. Their assignments involved a combination of independent learning, such as meditation practice or journaling, and group work, such as group conversations during a video call or conversations on discussion boards. For example, Cate shared that she enjoyed both the self-study tasks as well as group components in her online mindfulness program. She felt that the different kinds of tasks helped her learn in different ways. Dave said that he enjoyed the small group, synchronous online discussions because they gave him the chance to talk about "the homework assignments or how the activities affected [me] throughout the past week." He was involved in the conversations, listening as well as sharing, which motivated him to keep coming back each week. Frank, on the other hand, said he liked the writing prompts for individual reflection. He also liked the balance of independent and group learning, noting he also liked the different ways to interact with other learners in the program. Participants liked having opportunities to join in discussions and share ideas, and they also liked having the opportunity to retreat, learn on their own, and reflect on their learning in private.

The participants shared that requirements to engage in the online community led to the development of relationships, which led to building a sense of community and provided accountability to complete assignments and ultimately the program. Hillary explained that she felt that the asynchronous discussion boards and interactive assignments held her more accountable to completing assignments. Nine of the ten participants felt that they developed community to which they felt they belonged, which was influential to their persistence in the online mindfulness program.

A sense of community. Being part of a group that regularly met online around the shared interest of learning about mindfulness, participants felt a sense of community. Nine of the ten participants shared that they felt like they belonged as member of a community as they interacted within their programs with the instructor and other individuals who shared a common goal and commitment to develop mindfulness. For example, Cate said it felt "like you're part of a tribe" and that "your people become your people through the experience," indicating that the group bonded together through the experiences of being in an online mindfulness program together.

McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined a sense of community as the feeling from members that they belong, the impression that they matter to each other and to the larger group, and a faith that their needs will be met through their work together. Speaking to this idea, Cate said there was a feeling of "you're a part of this this club." The "club," to speak, was formed because learners showed up each week, shared their ideas, and listened to each other. These actions were ways of demonstrating that each participant believed that other learners mattered and that they could learn and grow through the online mindfulness program together. Beth concurred that "a feeling of everybody showing up" supported her learning and persistence in the program. The participants noted that experiencing other learners' willingness to show up each week, participating in listening to others without judgment, and collaboratively working together, all contributed to the participants' feeling of belonging and sense that they were part of a community, which influenced their persistence.

The instructor was an important part of the community as well as critical in creating the sense of community among the learners in the online mindfulness programs. In addition to creating assignments that required interaction, as discussed above, the instructors created a safe environment by providing emotional support and communicating the value that each person

brought to the program. All participants reported that the instructors not only planned and implemented the programs themselves, but also offered support through answering questions in a timely manner. Ian said, "the instructor as emotional support was useful." Instructors encouraged learners by asking them questions, praising them, and building on learners' comments. The instructor was also an important figure in helping newer learners transition into their online mindfulness programs. For example, Frank said that the instructor "[makes] me feel as special as a somewhat-newer person" to the program. This participant reported that the instructor spoke with students individually during the weekly video conferences, greeting them by name when they came on screen and asking how they had been. Taking a personal interest in the online learners, then communicating in an interested way in front of the other learners, showed learners that everyone in the community mattered.

Moreover, instructors intentionally developed social presence, "the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as *real people*" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89), through a variety of ways, including personal sharing about themselves, consistently showing up for synchronous online meetings, and providing timely feedback. Amy felt a sense of connection when she watched her instructor in the videos, noting it was "almost like she's there in the room with you" and that she "knows who you are." Instructors made efforts to project themselves and their personal characteristics into the community, and consequently participants described their instructors as real people who were approachable and who cared about the learners. Instructors got to know the learners as people. Participants, in their interviews, provided examples of how instructors asked them about their personal lives during phone calls and synchronous online sessions. Ian said that he liked the one-on-one calls with the

instructor. Some participants reported that they could e-mail instructors, and the instructors would respond privately. Sometimes participants' inquiries and questions were relevant to the entire group participating in the program, so the instructor would facilitate group discussions around those inquiries. Participants talked about personally struggling with topics such as mindful conflict. The instructor then set up times to facilitate discussions about such topics via live video conferences or discussion boards.

The sense of community was created over time for participants as they interacted with each other and their instructors. As Beth noted, the "feeling of getting to know people" happened when participating in small group discussion boards, the larger group discussions, and weekly program video conferences over the duration of the program. "[T]alk[ing] about different practices" and sharing "experiences" through these various mediums is what Beth, like other participants, attributed to developing a sense of belonging and ultimately community over time. Noteworthy was the fact that participants shared that this community built over the course of the program occurred completely online. Frank concurred, stating, "I feel that I can have a bit of relationship in the online space." He felt that through sharing with and listening to others in the program, he experienced validation "in my knowledge" and garnered "a sense of … attentiveness and compassion". Other participants described the community experienced as an online place where individuals care about, trust, and respect each other and share common purpose, values, and beliefs. For example, Joanna said that "everyone's encouraging" and "fully supportive" online. In reflecting on his participation in video conference calls during his program, Dave expressed, "I'm getting an ally on a call." This sense of community was not bound by any geographical or cultural borders as participants described the community they shared, often, as Ellie said, with "people from all over the world." Georgina said she found the online community

to be warm, open, accepting, and supportive, which helped her personal mindfulness practice. Three participants noted that a significant part of their community experience was the laughter and joy they shared in the online environment

Relevant learning. Participants also experienced relevant learning as they developed skills and knowledge in their online mindfulness program that they could apply immediately in their personal lives and jobs. During his interview, Frank said that he liked "the chance to do something that applied right back into my life." Joanna similarly acknowledged that her development of mindfulness in the program resulted in personal growth, making her "much more aware, much more balanced." Personal and professional growth resultant of relevant learning left many participants, like Cate feeling "accomplished." For others, like, Frank, knowledge development in concepts like the future of Buddhism, the history of mindfulness, and Integral Theory was intellectually stimulating and satisfying.

Research Question Two

The second research question stemmed from Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, which stated that students who achieve social and academic integration are more likely to persist in educational programs. The research question is, "What social and academic (e.g., mindfulness development) factors do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?"

The (a) the sense of belonging to an online community, (b) the inspiration of other learners, (c) deep-learning about mindfulness, and (d) the application of mindfulness to improve life (e.g., personal and vocational) were salient themes that emerged as participants described their persistence. Their learning was a great motivator for them to persist in the online mindfulness programs. Ian said that "seeing progress was exciting and motivating."

Having a sense of belonging to a community. For nine of ten participants, the sense of belonging to the online community, which was described as a theme above, was a key factor identified in their persistence in their online mindfulness program. Thus, sense of community was not just something the participants experienced (e.g., textural description), but it was the reason they persisted (e.g., structural description). The participants reported that they felt that they had peers who understood them in their online community and that the community supported not only each other's learning, but persistence in the program. Frank said that he liked the humor and laughter that occurred when he, his peers, and instructor were online together, which provided him with a "sense of humanness, sweetness, realness," which, like other participants, he identified as a key contributing factor to his persistence.

During the times when participants were less motivated to continue, the relationships they built through the program encouraged them to persist. Georgina shared in her interview that when she would think about not continuing in her program, she would think about "one person you look forward to seeing," noting the camaraderie she shared with other learners was a reason to persist in her program. For a few of the participants, like Frank, the relationships that motivated persistence were authentic and deep, and in them he felt "a sense of love," a "sense of humanness," and a "sense of familiarity." Several participants shared that they have forged genuine friendships with other online mindfulness program learners who they met through their program. Dave said he felt "a special connection" with the other learners in his program, which encouraged him to persist.

It was not surprising that many of the participants forged relationships and developed a sense of community, as many of the programs were designed in a manner that encouraged learners to intentionally interact with each other. By design, the programs had regularly

scheduled synchronous video calls or asynchronous discussion board assignments that encouraged learners to interact with each other and to share their ideas, listen to or read others' ideas, and respond to each other. The design of the asynchronous Joanna's program promoted interaction among program learners, and she found that receiving regular responses to her posting resulted in her feeling "like a person was there" and that they had "a connection." The listening and care that participants received from each other in their online mindfulness programs was supported through the structured interactions with other learners.

Inspiration. The participants felt inspired by the other learners in their online mindfulness programs, which encouraged them to persist. They were impressed by the other people in their online mindfulness programs and looked to each other for guidance and insights in how to become the most mindful and "best" people they could be. For example, Cate said she liked spending time online with people who are trying to "be better people" and "be the best versions of themselves." Her respect for other learners encouraged her to keep the online mindfulness program, and the learning therein, as a priority in her life. Participants also felt inspired by the diversity of perspectives offered by others in their online mindfulness programs. They were inspired by people who lived in different places, were undertaking challenges they had never undertaken themselves, and who offered perspectives they had never considered. The participants found the differences between the other learners and themselves to be inspiring. They liked that they could learn about mindfulness and its applications from people who had different ways of looking at the world.

Engaging in deep learning. Another theme that emerged was deep learning as participants reported that they developed an understanding about the scientific and empirical aspects of mindfulness. Amy said that she enjoyed learning information about mindfulness that

was scientific, based in brain research, "academic and science-y," and "not just airy fairy stuff." Other participants, like, Joanna, noted that an increased understanding of the mindfulness research and the impact of mindfulness on the brain helped improve her awareness of how mindfulness can impact thinking and be applied practically. Learning about the history of mindfulness as it relates to religion was also touted as a motivator of persistence when participants were asked in interviews about reasons they persisted. Participants shared that they were able to explore and better understand mindfulness as they learned about the history of mindfulness, including its roots in Buddhism, and how mindfulness was brought from eastern traditions to the rest of the world. Frank said he gained "cognitive clarity about what Buddhism is."

Applying mindfulness to improve life. The final theme that emerged as a motivator of participants' persistence in the online mindfulness programs was applying learning, or applying mindfulness strategies, in personal and vocational aspects of life. Although several participants had completed other mindfulness programs previously, they explained that their knowledge of how to apply mindfulness continued to expand through the online mindfulness program, making them better practitioners. While they may have studied mindfulness before, they shared that they could feel themselves becoming more mindful and less reactive because of the sustained and regular practice from the online mindfulness program. They were able to apply their learning to their professional and personal lives.

Participants were able to apply what they had learned about being more mindful and present into their professional lives during and after completing the online mindfulness programs. They were able to pause and listen when colleagues brought them a problem. They had increased awareness around their moods, including when they were feeling angry, and could

pause before responding to the workplace stimulus that has provoked that reaction. Several participants reported that colleagues noticed a change in their demeanor, that they seemed calmer and less reactive.

Some participants enrolled in online mindfulness programs that were specific to their fields, which helped them apply their learning to their workplace right away. For example, several of the participants were teachers or counselors who were enrolled in education-related mindfulness programs, and they noted that the programs helped them learn techniques to use in school settings. They were able to work with groups of students and educators to support their school or division in becoming more mindful and in using mindfulness more in school. Ellie enjoyed learning about the "development of mindfulness in mental health settings" and "how to soothe the nervous system." This participant is a counselor who liked that she could apply her learning to her counseling practice. She felt that her learning from the online mindfulness program was directly applicable to her work.

Personal life application of mindfulness learning was also vital because this application allowed participants to improve or transform their lives. Participants shared that this overall learning affected their work lives and personal lives because they learned to be less reactive, manage their emotions, listen better, and increase their level of empathy. Speaking to this idea, Dave said about his mindfulness learning and how he has applied it, "It's so all-encompassing. It affects every area of my life."

Practically applying mindfulness techniques and strategies, participants noted improvements they were able to make personally, such as learning to be less reactive. In their interviews, Cate said that now she now "pauses before I react to anything" and Ian said that "when people do something that makes me angry, I try to pause for a second before I blow up at

them." They developed the awareness they need to mitigate their responses when they become emotionally triggered during an exchange. Along this line of thinking, Ellie said she liked that her learning about mindfulness helps her "to make intentional decisions rather than just reacting." Participants are now more deliberate when responding to situations. They are able to slow down their responses and communications so that they can ensure that their words and actions are the ones they feel are best suited for the situation at hand. This slowing down has given them the opportunity to plan their responses rather than just reacting. For example, Ian said that after the online mindfulness program, he is "moving slower" and "being more premeditated." Building on this idea in her interview, Amy said that learning about mindfulness through these online mindfulness programs has helped her to "open up a little bit and be there for people" and "listen rather than just jump in and go." She feels that she is better at "holding space for somebody."

An additional mindfulness lesson that many participants learned was how to deal with difficult emotions. They have an increased awareness of their emotions, which is the first step in learning how to manage those emotions. Beth said she now has "a different relationship with [her] emotions" and does "not [get] so caught up." She said her learning has helped her avoid getting "as emotionally charged a lot of times." Participants shared that when they have an increased awareness over their emotions, they are able to work with them in a different way. They can take a step back to observe their reactions, notice how they are feeling, and develop a deliberate, rather than a reactive, response. Building on this idea, Joanna said that now she is "much calmer and cooler, more collected. . . . I don't let things wind me up, I don't take things as personally, I recognize that I have the control to have response over things, have a responsibility

of how I react." Because the participants have that increased awareness of their emotions and the skills to work with those emotions, they have more control over their responses and behaviors.

This increased mindfulness and being less reactive also helped develop participants' empathy skills. Because the participants were less focused on problem-solving and judging during conversations, they were able to listen and relax into the conversations. This openness allowed them to have the mind space needed to understand the speaker's perspective in a deep and meaningful way; this understanding gave them more empathy for the speaker and for people in general. Along this line of thinking, Ian said he is now "more patient with people, less judgmental" and that he has "[realized] that we're all struggling with our own issues." In line with this thinking, during his interview, Dave said that now he is "more calm, more open, and accepting." These feelings of calmness, openness, and acceptance are important aspects of empathy-building, as they allow the listener to be truly emotionally present for the speaker and thus are the foundation for that increased capacity for empathy.

Participants also reported that they were able to notice narratives that they were telling and retelling themselves, then use mindfulness to stop those negative narratives. They grew their awareness of their internal narratives, when the narratives started in their minds, and what they could learn from those narratives. Based on this awareness, they were able to then make decisions about the extent to which they wanted to trust and engage with those narratives, especially when those narratives were negative and potentially self-harming. In some cases, participants noticed when the narratives were a form of negative self-talk; they were then able to stop those narratives from repeating in their internal dialogue. During his interview, Dave said that the online mindfulness program helped him notice that "I tell myself a lot of stories that are not true" and that through mindfulness, he "learned how to look at those stories objectively. . . I

could see the story forming in my head objectively." He said that being mindful about his thought patterns has "allowed me to move on and to be more free." That awareness of their internal narratives allowed them to look at those narratives more objectively and to be more aware of their thought patterns.

The result of this overall improvement is that participants felt that they developed their mental processes and their ability to focus on their intuition because they had the tools and skills to support that development. They developed specific strategies and learned about actions they can take when faced with challenges. For example, Joanna said she feels like now she has "some wisdom and good sense about things" and she is likely to engage in "more deep breathing" and "remove myself from situations" when things are challenging. The participants have developed the skills they needed to become more emotionally aware in various situations.

Research Question Three

The third research question stems from Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure and was also informed by Bean and Metzner's (1985) and Rovai's (1993) ideas about what helps learners persist. This question is, "What institutional supports do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness program?"

The themes that emerged from that data were (a) well-organized programs, (b) earning the respect of the instructor, and (c) their learning provided them with professional advancement or helped their careers in some way.

Well-organized programs. Well-organized programs supported the participants' learning and persistence. Participants reported that their programs had clearly outlined curricula, learning objectives, and tasks for the week, all of which helped them understand what to expect

for the week and to therefore structure their time and schedule so that they could complete learning tasks and assignments prior to weekly meetings. Some participants had video conferencing meetings with their instructor or other learners weekly. Other participants had weekly assignments on discussion boards; they needed to post their responses to prompts, read others' responses, and share their ideas into their responses to others' posts. Programs being organized encouraged learners to persist because they allowed the participants to focus on their learning, rather than spending time trying to determine how to navigate program modules, activities, or expectations. Their cognitive load was spent on learning about mindfulness rather than on trying to figure out what the expectations were each week. For example, Joanna explained, "it was really clearly outlined and structured. . . . So it wasn't hard to persist. It wasn't confusing. It was quite achievable. . . . It was concrete and sequential. You could just tick it off and be like, 'okay, and now I've got this left to do.'" She liked knowing "what the next thing was and when it was." Having a sequential program during which each module's learning objectives built on the previous week's learning objectives helped participants to consolidate their learning as they moved forward through the program. Each week's learning made sense and was achievable.

Programs that gave learners detailed guides and expectations allowed the learners to focus on their learning and not on figuring out what they needed to do next. Having a detailed guide or syllabus allowed learners to plan their time in the long-term and short-term, seek out additional resources if needed, and understand how their knowledge would progress each week. This detailed plan helped learners feel that there was a purpose to the learning tasks and assignments that they received. Ian said that the program "had a relatively detailed plan" and there were "detailed instructions and guidance," which helped her focus on her learning and

understand the program overall.

In addition, the program material and concepts were well-scaffolded, with each week's activities and learning objectives building on those of the previous week. The participants understood how one week's learning objectives and tasks prepared them for the learning objectives and tasks for the following week. The result was that learners were continually stretched to learn about mindfulness with successive levels of depth and breadth. Their knowledge was gradually deepened as they progressed through the online mindfulness program. Participants shared that they liked that teaching and learning were organized in such a coherent, scaffolded way. Dave said that he liked the "continual progression" of the online mindfulness program because each week seemed to build on the previous week's learning.

Earning the respect of the instructor. Participants' ideas about how they were perceived by their online mindfulness program instructors encouraged them to persist in their online mindfulness programs. It was important to them to feel that the instructor had a positive opinion of them and that the instructor also enjoyed his or her interactions with them. The five participants who had real-time classes with an instructor as part of their online mindfulness program said that the instructor was a motivating factor in their persistence in their online mindfulness program. They shared that they respected and admired their instructor and wanted the instructor to respect them. They wanted to show up and participate in a way that earned the instructors' respect and that would allow them to build a relationship with the instructor. Participants shared that they were concerned about their instructors' perceptions of them and that they wanted to be seen as a serious mindfulness practitioner. They cared about what the instructor thought of them and valued the instructors' opinions of their mindfulness practice. Ian shared that he persisted in the program in part because he "didn't want to lose face with the

instructor." This earning of respect was important for participants in encouraging them to persist in their online mindfulness programs. Participants hoped that the instructors would see their progress and value their participation in their online mindfulness programs. In line with this idea, Dave said that he wanted to "make my instructors proud."

Supporting professional advancement. The third theme that emerged is that several participants were motivated to persist in the program because they wanted knowledge that would help them with professional advancement in some capacity. Participants expressed that learning about mindfulness could help them in their current career or could help them make a move to a new career. Six participants persisted in their online mindfulness program because of direct benefit to their careers, either because they would receive a certificate upon completion of the program or because they could see how their improved mindfulness skills benefited their careers. Cate said that the "professional outcome" was motivating in terms of encouraging her to persist. She sought a program that would allow her to earn a certificate that would enhance her credibility as a yoga instructor. Two participants shared that they were seeking a certificate that would enhance their business and three participants shared that they were seeking a program that would enhance their educational work in schools. They were able to directly connect their learning from the online mindfulness program that focused on mindfulness in schools to their work in counseling and as instructors. Their earning a certificate or evidence of program completion was seen as a way to develop professionally and advance in their careers.

Two participants were considering a mindfulness-related career change. One of these participants, Amy, who has been an attorney, instructor, and worked in the business sector, is hoping to transition to becoming a children's yoga instructor. She expressed that "I need to stay in it to get the qualification." She said that the "information and the knowledge" and

"techniques" were useful and added to her skill set. For participants seeking a career change to move to a mindfulness-related career, having evidence in the form of certificates that they had completed mindfulness programs, benefited them. Another participant had been so inspired by his learning about mindfulness that he is considering a career change in a few years. This participant, Frank, shared that he is considering "engaging in a formal instructor path" to become a mindfulness instructor, so he wanted to experience an online mindfulness program. He currently works in the healthcare sector and wants to use his experiences in online mindfulness programs to help him with a career change to becoming a mindfulness instructor.

Other participants who work in the wellness sector shared that becoming better mindfulness practitioners helps them with their careers. For example, Cate, who is a wellness consultant, said "professional outcome" was one of the reasons she persisted in the program, as she was hoping to learn mindfulness skills that would support her work with helping organizations develop wellness and innovation strategies for their employees and clients. She sought to learn specific mindfulness skills and strategies that she could use and teach those organizations. Another participant works in a hospital and said he regularly uses mindfulness processes with his colleagues. He is able to help others pause, notice their reactions, and switch perspectives when making decisions. Building on these ideas about how to use mindfulness holistically at work, Amy said that she "wanted to be able to be in a position where I could share that or introduce those ideas to people" and that in order to grow her business, "I had to be very aware of my own attitudes." Participants felt that they could use the mindfulness skills to give them an edge in their careers, as they could be more observant, notice their own reactions, and consider multiple perspectives. One participant likened having mindfulness skills to having a "superpower" at work.

The three participants who participated in one or more of the Mindful Schools online mindfulness programs were seeking to use what they had learned in school settings. One is a school counselor and two are instructors. They had a direct transfer of their skills to their workplace and, in some cases, their schools even paid for them to attend the online mindfulness program so that they could create mindfulness programs in their schools for students and instructors. They shared that they felt they could use mindfulness skills as educators and could teach mindfulness skills to their students. The counselor created a mindfulness program for the students in the school in which she worked; she reported that her school administrators and she worked together to analyze disciplinary data, finding that students who had completed her mindfulness program had fewer disciplinary problems than students who had not completed the program she created. In these cases, the participants felt that their learning from their online mindfulness program directly impacted their careers and workplaces.

Other participants shared that, although mindfulness is not a requirement of their work, they actively use the mindfulness skills they have learned in their jobs. Participants reported that they are able to be less reactive and more present at work. They also serve as role models for mindfulness for their colleagues who seek to learn more about mindfulness. One participant, Dave, said that others at his workplace look to him for guidance on mindfulness because they know he studies the subject. Dave expressed that in his workplace, colleagues know that he studies mindfulness, so he feels like he is held accountable for being a role model for mindfulness, which encourages him in deepening his mindfulness skills. He feels pressure to make sure he models mindfulness at work, being observant rather than reactive in challenging situations. He has led colleagues in mindfulness meditations and practices at work because they have asked him to help them learn more.

Research Question Four

The fourth research question is, "what factors external to the training program (e.g., personal and external factors) do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?" This research question connects to Bean and Metzner's (1985) ideas about external factors and learner motivation and Rovai's (1993) ideas about learner-program match.

The themes that emerged were that participants persisted in online mindfulness programs because (a) they value persistence in general, and (b) they possessed strong executive functioning and time management skills.

Valuing persistence. Six participants shared their values of persistence, which directly contributed to their decision to persist in their online mindfulness program. Participants described themselves as persistent people, noting that in life they persisted. They self-labeled themselves as persistent, sharing that quitting a program would not occur to them because they generally do not quit programs once they have started them. As Joanna shared, it is "not really in my nature to quit." Other participants shared similar ideas about persisting and finishing things once they have started them. For example, Cate also said that "I'm a finisher," and, "I see the value in completing the circle and really finishing things …." Amy said, "I don't like leaving things unfinished" and "I like completion." Fulfilling commitments was a value most of the participants held.

Other participants shared that they might have felt that they missed out on something important if they had not persisted in the program. They wanted to get everything out of it they could, which meant they needed to persist until the end. Frank said he wanted to complete the

online mindfulness program so that he would have the "full experience." For others, completing a program that had a set start and end date was fulfilling. They liked the feeling that they had accomplished something.

Others shared they saw persisting in the online mindfulness program as a way to develop their character. Georgina said that the program helped her "build resilience" and "build grit," which are important qualities to her. Participants felt personally challenged by joining a program, which added to the list of things they needed to accomplish each week, and balancing the demands of that program with the demands of other parts of their lives. In line with this idea, Ian expressed that he took persisting in his online program as a personal challenge, saying that he "want[ed] to prove to myself that I can do something." Participants felt satisfied knowing that they could undertake a challenge, commit to it, and see it to the end.

Possessing executive function skills. Participants attributed their executive functioning skills such as time management, knowing how to set priorities, and scheduling according to those priorities, to their persistence. Participants made persisting in the online mindfulness program a priority, so they scheduled time each day or week to complete tasks, complete assignments, and attend online video conferences when requested. Nine participants cited that their time management skills helped them persist in the program. All participants were adults who were able to manage a full-time job, an online mindfulness program, interpersonal relationships, and the day-to-day aspects of being an adult; they were able to do all these tasks because they had time management skills. All participants were university graduates and almost all had master's degrees or more advanced degrees, indicating that they already had the skills needed to successfully complete long-term formal learning programs. All participants indicated that scheduling in time to complete mindfulness activities came naturally to them because they

already possessed those time management skills. They used a variety of ways to track and calendar their homework assignments and class activities. For example, Amy said that she used a diary to schedule in the time to complete assignments. Other participants spoke more generally about how they scheduled in time for homework and class by building a weekly routine and putting homework completion or daily mindfulness activities on their calendars. For example, Georgina said that "having scheduled times" helped her. Other participants had daily routines for homework completion. Ian said that doing program assignments at "a set time every day" and "creating a routine" helped him persist.

Participants reported that inherent in their time management skills was their ability to create their schedule according to their priorities. Because persisting in their online mindfulness program was a priority, they made other sacrifices so that they could complete it. One participant shared that she needed to negotiate use of the family living room during class time with her teenaged son, so she needed to work with him on their competing priorities so that they could both use common spaces in their home. Another participant shared that in order to be rested and prepared for Saturday morning class, he would not go out with friends on Friday nights. He needed to prioritize completing his online mindfulness program, so he used that priority when scheduling in events each week. Building on these ideas, Dave said, "I make time for [the online mindfulness class]" and that he set priorities; "I had to say 'no' to a lot of things," he said. In order for participants to successfully complete their online mindfulness program, they had to make other aspects of their lives, such as their social lives, less of a priority.

Conclusion

For this study, ten nontraditional learners shared their experiences of persisting in online mindfulness programs. Each participant was a nontraditional learner who had participated in at

least one online mindfulness program lasting 14 days or more. Through a survey, interviews, and a focus group session, they shared their lived experiences in their online mindfulness programs and their reasons for persisting in those programs..

I focused my research on four research questions that guided my inquiry into the essence of the participants' experiences and their persistence in their programs. These four questions were informed by Tinto's Model of Student Departure (1975, 1993) and used the research approach of Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology (1994). The four research questions helped me gather information about what nontraditional learners experience as they persist in online mindfulness programs, what social and academic factors they describe as influencing their persistence, what institutional supports influence their persistence, and what factors external to the training program they describe as influencing their persistence.

Table 4 summarizes the findings for each Research Question.

Table 5 – Summary of Findings

Research Question	Findings
1. What do nontraditional learners experience as they persist in online mindfulness programs?	Enjoyment through engaging design and facilitation A sense of community Relevant learning from the programs
2. What social and academic (e.g., mindfulness development) factors do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?	Having a sense of belonging to a community Being inspired by others Engaging in deep learning Applying mindfulness strategies to improve life

3. What institutional supports do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness program?	Having a well-organized program Being respected by the instructor Supporting professional advancement, which included earning a certificate or certification
4. What factors external to the training program (e.g., personal and external factors) do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?	Valuing persistence Possessing executive function skills

The next chapter contains a summary of the study, a revisiting of the theoretical frameworks used, the implications of the study, the audience for the recommendations, the limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. The purpose of the next chapter is to share ideas about how my study can be used to improve learner experiences in online mindfulness programs in order to support their persistence.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter, there is a brief summary of the study and findings. A discussion of the findings is provided. Current literature is integrated into the chapter to provide a clearer understanding of the themes within the discussion. The theoretical framework is revisited with discussions related to findings also. Finally, the study implications, recommendations, delimitations, and areas of future research, are discussed.

A Summary of the Study

Even though there are numerous benefits of and widespread interest in learning about mindfulness through online programs (Dimidjian et al., 2014; Glück & Maercker, 2011), there is a problem with learner persistence. In academic studies on online mindfulness programs, participants' persistence rates vary widely, with some reporting participants persist at rates of 17% (Mak, Chio, Chan, Lui, & Wu, 2017) to 37% (Boggs et al., 2014) to 85% (Davis & Zautra, 2013). Even for programs that have higher rates of learner persistence, participants may only complete a small portion of the program. For example, Dimidjian et al. (2014) investigated an online mindfulness program for which only 53% of participants completed half the program.

Persistence in online mindfulness programs matters because understanding learner persistence is important for organizations seeking to design programs that support learners' growth in mindfulness practice and completion of their mindfulness programs. When these organizations understand the academic and social factors that encourage learner persistence in online mindfulness programs (Tinto, 1975, 1982) as well as the external factors that cam promote or inhibit persistence (Bean & Metzner, 1985; Rovai, 2003), they are better positioned to design programs that promote growth and persistence. Thus, this study investigated the lived

experiences of nontraditional learners who persisted in online mindfulness programs and has findings that may be useful for organizations offering online mindfulness programs.

This study examined the persistence of nontraditional learners enrolled in non-degree seeking, online mindfulness programs. Persistence was defined as "the ability to complete an online course despite obstacles or adverse circumstances" (Hart, 2012, p. 30). Nontraditional learners were defined as any individual over the age of 24 who was working while enrolled in a learning program (Metzner & Bean, 1987). Moreover, non-degree seeking online programs were defined as supporting a type of learning that connects to the learner's career or personal life and does not result in a university degree (Livingstone, 2001; Yanchar & Hawkley, 2014). The online mindfulness programs in which they enrolled had goals and objectives defined by an online instructor and the programs had a structured format. The main objectives of the programs were for participants to learn mindfulness techniques (Chin, Slutsky, Raye, & Creswell, 2013). These programs were completed on a website or mobile application (Chin, Slutsky, Raye, & Creswell, 2013). Therefore, for the purpose of this study, an online mindfulness program was defined as a mindfulness program completed in its entirety on a computer or mobile device via Internet connection. The online mindfulness programs were administered via a website or mobile application. The duration of 14 days or more was selected as a focus because previous online mindfulness studies were generally 13 days or longer (Cavanaugh et al., 2013; Glück & Maercker, 2011). While there are many online mindfulness programs that are longer than 14 days (Boettcher et al., 2014; Krusche et al., 2012), an investigation of the experiences of learners who have persisted for more than two weeks may have increased the meaningfulness of the study's findings.

This study, guided by theory, focused on the academic, social, and external factors that influenced learners' persistence. Under Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, academic integration was defined as academic self-esteem, personal development of the learner, the grades the learner achieves, learner enjoyment of the subject and of learning, self-identifying as a student, and alignment of the learner with academic norms (Tinto, 1975, 1993). For the purpose of this study, academic integration was the learner's development of his or her feeling more confident about his or her mindfulness skills, feeling that his or her mindfulness skills are developing, and his or her enjoying the improvement of those mindfulness skills. In Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, social integration was defined as the learner's having a group of friends, feeling connected to instructors and staff, and the learner's enjoyment of the program from a social standpoint. For the purpose of this study, social integration was the learner's feeling connected to other mindfulness practitioners and enjoying connecting with others socially through the online mindfulness program. External factors included personal factors such as valuing persistence and possessing executive functioning skills, supported their persisting in online mindfulness programs.

Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure and the literature on online mindfulness training guided the following research questions for this study**:**

Research Question 1. What do nontraditional learners experience as they persist in online mindfulness programs?

Research Question 2. What social and academic (e.g., mindfulness development) factors do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?

Research Question 3. What institutional supports do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness program?

Research Question 4. What factors external to the training program (e.g., personal and external factors) do nontraditional learners describe as influencing their persistence in their online mindfulness programs?

In order to answer the questions, I garnered participants through convenience sampling, then purposeful sampling using maximum variation of program type, program duration, gender, ethnicity, and location. I gathered information through a survey, individual interviews, and a focus group session. The survey was used to gather background information about the participants, their experiences with online mindfulness programs, and their mindfulness in general. The interviews were semi-structured so that they yielded rich, descriptive information about the phenomenon of persistence in online mindfulness programs. The focus group session was used to triangulate the data, conclusions, and recommendations.

Data were analyzed following Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach. Learners described their experience in their online mindfulness programs as enjoyable given their engaging designs and facilitation. Participants described experiencing a sense of community and relevant learning. Feeling a sense of belonging to their online mindfulness community, which participants attributed as a social factor related to their persistence, emerged because of the regular engagement in online interactions with peers and the instructor. Salient to their persistence was also the inspiration of others. Others within the community modeled and inspired them in their own learning and growth, promoting their persistence.

Participants described the academic integration factor, which also promoted their persistence. They reported that their learning was relevant and could be applied in a manner that

improved their professional and personal lives. Engaging in deep learning about mindfulness was also stimulating and a prominent academic integration factor that resulted ultimately in their persistence.

Institutional factors including well-organized programs, the respect of the instructor, and having the opportunity for professional growth such as career advancement or earning a certificate as a direct result of the program, were also important factors participants associated with persistence. Finally, participants relayed that valuing persistence and having goof executive functioning skills, such as time management, were relevant to their persistence.

Theoretical Framework Revisited: Tinto's Model of Student Departure (1975, 1993)

Tinto's (1975, 1993, 2012) Model of Student Departure and ideas relating to this theory guided the questions posed for this study. In his theory he explained how learners' experiences, including academic and social integration within programs and an institution, as well as external factors, encourage them to persist. Findings of this study supported Tinto's theory. For, learners who persist in online mindfulness programs do so because of a combination of academic integration, social integration, external factors, and institutional supports. While this study does not contribute any theoretical elements to the Tinto's (1975, 1993) work, the findings indicate the applicability of his model to online mindfulness programs and illuminate how the constructs of academic and social integration as well as institutional and external factors play out in this type of program. These findings also cohere with previous research done within the university context showing that instructor engagement with learners in online programs and well-organized courses support learner persistence and help learners feel academically and socially integrated (Rockinson-Szapkiw, Spaulding, & Spaulding, 2016; Rovai, 2003). The findings of this study also confirm that online programs that create community and a sense of belonging also help

learners to persist (Croxton, 2014; Frydenberg, 2007; Rovai, 2002). While previous research has found that a positive learner relationship with faculty advisors and mentors and other learners fosters community, trust, and dedication – all central to persistence (Rovai, 2002; Tinto, 1997), albeit more complex and still in need of investigation, is the idea of inspiration. In this study, learners noted that their persistence was partially attributed to being inspired by their peers and instructor. Also, interestingly external factors that contributed to the success of these online mindfulness learners were not connected to learning styles or familial factors, as found in previous studies (Harrell & Bower, 2011; Ho & Tabata, 2001; Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al, 2016). Other external factors that did contribute to learner persistence such as learner time management skills (Bunn, 2004; Glück & Maercker, 2011; Holder, 2007), learner perceptions around persistence (Bunn, 2003; Holder, 2007), and learner goals (Glück & Maercker, 2011; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009) were consistent with other studies.

Implications

The findings of this study provide implications that are consistent with Tinto's (2012) four conditions to maximize learner success and persistence (e.g., expectations, support, feedback and assessment, and involvement). The findings also provide implications consistent with online learning literature, as explained in the subsequent paragraphs.

Organized content. Well-organized programs and clear expectations helped participants to persist, and that it was important to support learners' efforts to navigate a program and construct meaning from instructional content in a well laid out manner. Consistent with previous research (Anderson, 2001; Hattie, 2010), participants noted that the provision of clear goals and a modular layout with clear instructions and expectations (e.g., weekly discussion expectations) made navigating the program easy. Thus, when instructional designers develop online

mindfulness programs, they may thus improve learner persistence by providing clear learning goals, ensuring instructions for completing activities, providing clear instruction for using required technology, set expectations for participation in discussion activities, and communicate assignment deadlines.

Institutional supports (Bean, 1982; Levin & Levin, 1991; Rovai, 1993; Tinto, 1993) include providing learners with a calendar and timetable, a well-organized syllabus, and clarity around the number of hours per week they should expect for homework in order to be successful. Other institutional supports could include ensuring that the online mindfulness program is easy to log onto and navigate. Organizations can provide learners with a technology support team that can help them if they encounter technology-related problems. They can also make note of technology-related issues that arise so that they can notice if a pattern emerges and the interface or dashboard of the online mindfulness program needs a redesign.

Institutional support needs to be aligned and contextualized according to the program and students should feel that they are supported in being successful in the program (Tinto, 2012). The learners shared that they felt supported by the online mindfulness organization itself, whether it be through communicating syllabi and program expectations, or because logging on and engaging in program learning was straightforward. Participants liked that the programs had a structure because they knew what learning would occur next and they could complete homework assignments to prepare for class sessions and future learning.

Instructor engagement and feedback. Learners should receive feedback so that they can "adjust their behaviors to the new academic and social demands" of the program (Tinto, 2012, p. 5). This feedback can be automated and can also be used to target learners who have disengaged from the program (Tinto, 2012). For example, an online system can notify instructors

and then encourage learners through e-mail to seek help, complete assignments, and access support tools (Tinto, 2012). Nine of the participants also received positive reinforcement from the instructor or other students for participating in the program.

Socially engaging. Programs that engage learners academically and socially with classmates, especially through learning activities, encourage students to be successful and persist in their programs (Rockinson-Szapkiw, et al., 2016; Tinto, 2012). "Such engagements lead not only to social affiliations and the social and emotional support they provide, but also to greater involvement in learning activities and the learning they produce" (Tinto, 2012, p. 5). Nine of the ten participants shared that they felt encouraged by the online community to persist in their program. They shared that they looked forward to their interactions with others through the program and felt inspired by the stories others shared. Nine of the participants also reported that they knew the instructor, a current student in the program, or a former student in the program, prior to enrolling in the program; these participants shared that those offline relationships helped them to feel more a part of the online learning community.

Building community. Instructors of online mindfulness programs also need to intentionally build their online community through those engagements. One of the themes that emerged from the research was that the online community was impactful for nine of the ten participants in encouraging them to persist. The findings of this research coupled with that of previous studies (Croxton, 2014; Frydenberg, 2007; Ivankova & Stick, 2005) provides a number of practical ways to build community. Participants identified weekly video conference calls where the learners could see each other as well as the instructor, encouraged them to persist in their online mindfulness programs. The Gardner-Nix, Backman, Barbati, and Grummitt (2008)

study demonstrated that video conferences can be as effective as in-person interactions with an instructor.

Community was built in the online mindfulness programs in how the instructors set up the interactions among the learners. Previous studies show that how instructors encourage learners to interact with each other online can lead to the creation of an online community among the learners, which supports learner persistence (Ho & Tabata, 2001; Ivankova & Stick, 2005; Rovai, 2002). In four of the programs, learners were often split up into break-out groups where they would share their progress from the previous week, their thoughts on mindfulness, or some other topic. They learned to listen to and support each other, which created strong relationships. The participants who had joined online mindfulness programs where there were small group interactions of this type reported that they felt motivated to persist in the program because they developed genuine, meaningful relationships with other leaders. Another characteristic of the majority of online mindfulness programs was that there was some level of engagement with the program instructor. The program instructor may have commented on a message board post, interacted with the learner through video conference call, or engaged the learner in some other way. Nine of the ten participants shared that they felt connected to their program instructor, which encouraged them to persist. One way that organizations can foster these instructor-learner relationships is by instructors sending learners a message if they notice that they have not logged on in a set amount of time. They could also provide learners with a message board or instructor contact information so that learners can ask for advice or guidance related to the content.

Relevant content. Another way that organizations offering online mindfulness programs can encourage learners to persist is by ensuring that the academic content of the program is relevant to the learners' lives or require assignments where learners are required to reflect upon

how the mindfulness content can be applied to personal and professional lives (Aljohani, 2016; Tinto, 2004). All the participants shared that they felt that the content of their online mindfulness program was worthwhile and impacted their lives and possibly careers. They felt encouraged to persist in their online mindfulness program because they could see the benefits of their learning in their offline lives. The benefits they could see in their lives included topics such as learning to be less reactive, how to listen without judgement, how to manage difficult emotions, how to notice and then stop telling themselves negative narratives, and how to live life mindfully in general. Organizations can ensure that their online mindfulness programs have real world applicability by encouraging instructional designers and program instructors to reflect on the content they teach. They can also provide learners with opportunities to give feedback about what they would like to learn and what would be most useful to them, then incorporate that feedback into their program revisions.

Audience for the Recommendations

Instructional designers and program instructors can use the findings of this study to develop strategies that encourage learner persistence for nontraditional learners. They can help these learners overcome those challenges through creating institutional supports that encourage social integration and academic integration and minimize the challenges that learners might encounter when seeking to study mindfulness through an online mindfulness program.

Instructional designers and program instructors can help learners with academic integration by ensuring that their programs are relevant, that each module of the program builds on the previous module, and that learners are challenged with interesting material through various modalities that allows them to deepen their understandings. They can help with social integration by creating opportunities to engage and interact with learners and by giving them

opportunities to engage with and learn from each other through discussion board posts, video conference calls, and the like. Further, they can support learners by providing clear program outlines and syllabi that explain the program expectations. They can also make their programs easy to log onto and navigate, and provide learners with opportunities to ask for help or feedback.

Limitations

The findings should be applied with caution and in recognition of the limitations. The limitations include discrepancies in the type of mindfulness programs that participants completed, their variety and range of experiences, and their prior learning about mindfulness. While the study included participants completing a wide range of online mindfulness programs, many of the online mindfulness programs were related to mindfulness in general, Zen and mindfulness, or education and mindfulness. The experiences and perceptions of participants who studied within other mindfulness programs may have different experiences. Moreover, many of the participants in this study had multiple online mindfulness experiences. All had completed informal or formal online and in-person mindfulness programs prior to enrolling in the online mindfulness program about which they were interviewed. This prior learning about mindfulness could have contributed to learner-program fit, resulting in high levels of persistence (Rovai, 1993). Learner's engaging in online mindfulness programs for the first time may have varying experiences and reasons for persisting.

Another limitation was the participants' memory and interpretation of their past experiences learning about mindfulness through formal online programs. Several of the participants did not remember much towards the start of the interviews, but recalled more as the interviews continued. The participants whose programs were completed more than a month

before the study often found it challenging to think back to what their experiences were like and what helped them persist. They were able to recall more towards the end of the interviews, so they often looped back, adding to previous answers. Participants who had completed more than one online mindfulness program sometimes were not sure about what takeaways they had from which program. Participants' memory and interpretation of past online mindfulness programs affected the outcomes of the study.

Recommendations for Future Research

The voices of nontraditional learners studying mindfulness through online programs is missing from research, especially research about what factors help learners persist. Replicating this study with a larger sample would provide a fuller and richer description of the phenomenon of nontraditional learners who persist in online mindfulness programs. Investigating specific factors quantitatively and building a persistence model could be a next step to extend this research. Also, examining specific online mindfulness programs to determine how instructional design and program instructors affected learner persistence would also yield more data about persistence in online mindfulness programs. Synthesizing the learners', instructors' and designers' perceptions and experiences using a case study approach could yield additional "lessons learned," as it would give varied perspectives to the same programs.

While there are numerous approaches to understanding the factors that encourage nontraditional learners to persist in online mindfulness programs, more research is needed to provide a well-rounded view of persistence in online mindfulness programs. Quantitative studies and qualitative studies may be developed to examine questions such as the following:

- What is the relationship between learner-instructor contact and persistence rates?
- What is the relationship between learner-learner contact and persistence rates?

- What is the relationship between the content offered and persistence rates?
- What is the relationship between learner completion rates of prior offline mindfulness programs and learner persistence rates in online mindfulness programs?
- How do instructors encourage social integration in online mindfulness programs?
- How do instructors encourage academic integration in online mindfulness programs?
- How do learners perceive the role of the social integration in their programs as contributing to their persistence?
- How do learners perceive the role of the academic integration in their programs as contributing to their persistence?
- How does increased confidence in their learning contribute to learner persistence?
- How do learners perceive the role of their self-identity as persistent learners as contributing to their persistence?
- How do learners perceive the role of external factors as contributing to their persistence?
- In what ways can online mindfulness programs better identify and support struggling learners?
- What are the characteristics and features of online mindfulness programs with high rates of learner persistence?

Conclusion

Using Tinto's (1975, 1993) Model of Student Departure, I described the phenomenon of nontraditional learners persisting in online mindfulness programs in order to understand their lived experiences and what factors helped them persist. Through understanding this phenomenon, I was able to deduce the themes that encouraged the participants to persist in these online mindfulness programs. These themes included the ways in which academic integration,

social integration, external factors, and institutional supports encouraged them to persist in online mindfulness programs. Academic integration themes included relevant learning, engaging in deep learning, and applying learning to their lives. Social integration themes included feeling a sense of community, enjoying belonging to a community, and earning the respect of the instructor. These themes were achieved through program design that was engaging and well facilitated. Themes relating to external factors included valuing persistence and possessing executive functioning skills. Themes relating to institutional factors included well-organized programs and program completion supporting professional advancement.

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APPENDIX A

Social Media Post and E-mail Template to Solicit Participants

Hello!

As you may know, I'm approaching the end of my doctoral program in Instructional and Curriculum Leadership from the University of Memphis. I'm finishing up by spending this winter on my dissertation, which examines persistence in online mindfulness programs. If you'd like to participate in my study, please visit __ for the survey link. The study purpose and procedures are explained below.

Background Information: The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences as perceived by online learners who persisted in an online mindfulness program. The data collected will aid in understanding how participants perceive the barriers to persistence, how instructional designers can overcome barriers to persistence, and the essence of the lived experiences of learners who participate in online mindfulness programs.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I ask that you take approximately 30 minutes to complete an online survey; if selected for the study, you will then participate in an interview and focus group session, each which may last up to two hours. Contact information is requested on the survey and you will be contacted within the next two to four weeks to arrange for the interview. During the interview and focus group session, you will be recorded while responding to questions via Zoom (software application that allow users to make voice and video calls over the Internet).

Thank you!
Sheila

APPENDIX B

Google Forms Intake Survey Template to Determine Participant Eligibility

Please allow yourself 30 total minutes to take this survey.

Section 1: Background Information

Question:	Rationale for survey inclusion
Pseudonym you would like to use:	Participant information
E-mail address:	Participant contact information
Have you attended an online mindfulness program? Yes/No	Participant eligibility for sample inclusion
Name of the online mindfulness program(s):	Participant background information; maximum variation for purposeful sampling
When did you complete the program(s)?	Participant eligibility for sample inclusion
How long was the program (in days, weeks, etc.)?	Participant eligibility for sample inclusion; maximum variation for purposeful sampling
How was the program delivered? Phone application Website YouTube Other	Participant eligibility for sample inclusion
Describe the program.	Participant background information
Did you work full-time when you participated in the program? Yes/No	Participant eligibility for sample inclusion
Are you willing and able to participate in a 1-2 hour interview and a 1-2 hour focus group session online? YES/NO	Participant eligibility for sample inclusion
What was your primary reason for pursuing the online mindfulness program? a. Personal goal b. Learning c. Vocational advancement d. Vocational requirement (i.e. needed to maintain job) e. Financial advancement f. Family responsibility g. Other (Please specify)	Participant background information

Section 1 Continued

What was your primary reason for pursuing the online mindfulness program? a. Personal goal b. Learning c. Vocational advancement d. Vocational requirement (i.e. needed to maintain job) e. Financial advancement f. Family responsibility Other (Please specify):	Participant background information
What is the primary factor that influenced your choice to persist in the program? a. Personal determination/ reach a goal b. Vocational advancement c. Vocational requirement (i.e. need to maintain job) d. Financial advancement e. Financial commitment (i.e. have too much money invested to quit) f. Family responsibility g. Embarrassment of not finishing h. Other (Please specify):	Participant background information
Can you access Zoom, a software application that allows users to conference online, in your location at your computer?	Participant eligibility for sample inclusion
What is your gender? a. Male b. Female	Participant background information; maximum variation for purposeful sampling
What is your present citizenship status?	Participant background information
In what country do you currently live?	Participant background information
To which racial or ethnic group(s) do you belong? Please check all that apply. a. Asian b. Black c. Native American d. Latino e. White f. Other (please specify):	Participant background information; maximum variation for purposeful sampling

Section 1 Continued

How old are you?	Participant background information; maximum variation for purposeful sampling

Section 2: Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire

Please allow yourself 20 minutes to complete this questionnaire.

Please rate each of the following statements with the number that best describes your own opinion of what is generally true for you.		**Never or very rarely true (1)**	**Rarely true (2)**	**Sometimes true (3)**	**Often true (4)**	**Very often or always true (5)**
FFQM 1	When I'm walking, I deliberately notice the sensations of my body moving. (OBS)					
FFQM 2	I'm good at finding words to describe my feelings. (D)					
FFQM 3	I criticize myself for having irrational or inappropriate emotions. (NJ-R)					
FFQM 4	I perceive my feelings and emotions without having to react to them. (NR)					
FFQM 5	When I do things, my mind wanders off and I'm easily distracted. (AA-R)					
FFQM 6	When I take a shower or bath, I stay alert to the sensations of water on my body. (OBS)					
FFQM 7	I can easily put my beliefs, opinions, and expectations into words. (D)					
FFQM 8	I don't pay attention to what I'm doing because I'm daydreaming, worrying, or otherwise distracted. (AA-R)					

Section 2 Continued

FFQM 9	I watch my feelings without getting lost in them. (NR)					
FFQM 10	I tell myself I shouldn't be feeling the way I'm feeling. (NJ-R)					
FFQM 11	I notice how foods and drinks affect my thoughts, bodily sensations, and emotions. (OBS)					
FFQM 12	It's hard for me to find the words to describe what I'm thinking. (D-R)					
FFQM 13	I am easily distracted. (AA-R)					
FFQM 14	I believe some of my thoughts are abnormal or bad and I shouldn't think that way. (NJ-R)					
FFQM 15	I pay attention to sensations, such as the wind in my hair or sun on my face. (OBS)					
FFQM 16	I have trouble thinking of the right words to express how I feel about things. (D-R)					
FFQM 17	I make judgments about whether my thoughts are good or bad. (NJ-R)					
FFQM 18	I find it difficult to stay focused on what's happening in the present. (AAR)					
FFQM 19	When I have distressing thoughts or images, I "step back" and am aware of the thought or image without getting taken over by it. (NR)					
FFQM 20	I pay attention to sounds, such as clocks ticking, birds chirping, or cars passing. (OBS)					

Section 2 Continued

FFQM 21	In difficult situations, I can pause without immediately reacting. (NR)					
FFQM 22	When I have a sensation in my body, it's difficult for me to describe it because I can't find the right words. (D-R)					
FFQM 23	It seems I am "running on automatic" without much awareness of what I'm doing. (AA-R)					
FFQM 24	When I have distressing thoughts or images, I feel calm soon after. (NR)					
FFQM 25	I tell myself that I shouldn't be thinking the way I'm thinking. (NJ-R)					
FFQM 26	I notice the smells and aromas of things. (OBS)					
FFQM 27	Even when I'm feeling terribly upset, I can find a way to put it into words. (D)					
FFQM 28	I rush through activities without being really attentive to them. (AA-R)					
FFQM 29	When I have distressing thoughts or images, I am able just to notice them without reacting. (NR)					
FFQM 30	I think some of my emotions are bad or inappropriate and I shouldn't feel them. (NJ-R)					
FFQM 31	I notice visual elements in art or nature, such as colors, shapes, textures, or patterns of light and shadow. (OBS)					
FFQM 32	My natural tendency is to put my experiences into words. (D)					

Section 2: Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, Continued

FFQM 33	When I have distressing thoughts or images, I just notice them and let them go. (NR)					
FFQM 34	I do jobs or tasks automatically without being aware of what I'm doing. (AA-R)					
FFQM 35	When I have distressing thoughts or images, I judge myself as good or bad depending what the thought or image is about. (NJ-R)					
FFQM 36	I pay attention to how my emotions affect my thoughts and behavior. (OBS)					
FFQM 37	I can usually describe how I feel at the moment in considerable detail. (D)					
FFQM 38	I find myself doing things without paying attention. (AA-R)					
FFQM 39	I disapprove of myself when I have irrational ideas. (NJ-R)					

Scoring guidelines:

Note: R = reverse-scored item

Subscale Directions	Score TOTAL	Score item average
Observing: Sum items 1 + 6 + 11 + 15 + 20 + 26 + 31 + 36		
Describing: Sum items 2 + 7 + 12R + 16R + 22R + 27 + 32 + 37		
Acting with Awareness: Sum items 5R + 8R + 13R + 18R + 23R + 28R + 34R + 38R		
Nonjuging of Inner Experience: Sum items 3R + 10R + 14R + 17R + 25R + 30R + 35R + 39R		
Nonreactivity to Inner Experience: Sum items 4 + 9 + 19 + 21 + 24 + 29 + 33		
Score FFMQ (add subscale scores)		

Note: Some researchers divide the total in each category by the number of items in that category to get an average category score. The total RRMQ can be divided by 39 to get an average item score.

APPENDIX C

Letter of Confidentiality and Consent Form

A Transcendental Phenomenological Study on Persistence in Online Mindfulness Programs
by Sheila Seiler
University of Memphis
March 2019

Consent for Research Participation

Title	A Transcendental Phenomenological Study on Persistence in Online Mindfulness Programs
Researcher(s)	Sheila Seiler, University of Memphis
Researchers Contact Information	00(260) 97 0404 162, sheila.b.seiler@gmail.com

You are being asked to participate in a research study. The box below highlights key information for you to consider when deciding if you want to participate. More detailed information is provided below the box. Please ask the researcher any questions about the study before you make your decision. If you volunteer, you will be one of about ten people to do so.

Key Information for You to Consider

Voluntary Consent: You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.
Purpose: The purpose of this research is to determine the academic and social factors that encourage people to persevere and remain in online mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs).
Duration: It is expected that your participation will last for two sessions: one interview and one focus group session. The focus group session will take place within one month of the interview.
Procedures and Activities: You will be asked to answer questions about your experiences in online mindfulness programs and what helped you persist in those programs. You will also be asked to review the initial results of the study and share your feedback during a focus group session.
Risk: Some of the foreseeable risk or discomforts of your participation include minimal emotional or psychological risk relating to sharing your experiences with

mindfulness.
Benefits: Some of the benefits that may be expected include the enjoyment of sharing your experiences and finding out about the experiences of others. You may develop an increased awareness of how you persisted in an online mindfulness program after being asked to think and answer questions about this phenomenon.
Alternatives: Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is to not participate.

Who is conducting this research?

Sheila Seiler of the University of Memphis, Department of Instructional and Curriciulum Leadership, is in charge of the study. Her faculty advisor is Dr. Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw. There may be other research team members assisting during the study.

The research team has no financial interest or conflicts of interest related to the research.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of this research is to determine the academic and social factors that encourage people to persevere and remain in online mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). You are being invited to participate because you are (a) non-traditional learner (b) who has participated in and completed an online mindfulness program lasting 14 days in the past six months. For the purposes of this inquiry, a non-traditional learner is defined as any individual over the age of 24 who may be working full-time while participating in an online mindfulness program.

How long will I be in this research?

The research will be conducted through online videoconferencing. It should take about one or two hours for the initial interview and one hour for the focus group session, which will take place within one month of the initial interview.

What happens if I agree to participate in this Research?

If you agree you will be asked to participate in an open-ended interview and a focus group session. The details about each are explained below.

For the interview:

The interview will last between one and two hours.

You can expect to answer questions about your experiences learning about mindfulness online and about the factors that contributed to your persistence in an online mindfulness program. Examples of questions are: Tell me about why you decided to study mindfulness online. What experiences led to this decision? How did you decide that mindfulness might be right for you? What helped you determine which program might be right for you?

The interview will be audio recorded.

Within one month of the interview, the researcher will e-mail you her findings. You will be invited to participate in an online focus group with the rest of the participants from the study.

For the focus group session:

The focus group session will last approximately one hour.

You can expect to answer questions to share your impressions of the researcher's findings. Examples of questions are: Tell me your general impression of my research findings. Tell me your thoughts about my findings about your lived experiences. Tell me your thoughts about my findings about what encouraged you to persist.

The focus group session will be video recorded.

Please note:

You can skip any question that makes you uncomfortable and you can stop any time.

What happens to the information collected for this research?

I will present the results of this research during my dissertation defense. I will keep your name and other identifying information confidential. Information collected for this research will not be shared in other forms than the dissertation defense.

How will my privacy and data confidentiality be protected?

I promise to protect your privacy and security of your personal information as best we can. Although you need to know about some limits to this promise. Measures I will take include:

The interview and the focus group session will be conducted in a private setting.

Information will be stored in a password-protected online folder; only the lead researcher will have the password.

The limit to the privacy protection is that, for the focus group session, there will be group participation. This means that others may find out who you are in this research setting.

Data will be stored for a period of three years after the dissertation defense. Only the lead researcher will have access to the data.

Individuals and organization that monitor this research may be permitted access to inspect the research records. This monitoring may include access to your private information and the information you shared. These individual and organization include:

Institutional Review Board

My Dissertation Committee Chair, Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw

What other choices do I have beside participating in this research?

If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

It is up to you to decide whether you want to volunteer for this study. It is also okay to decide to end your participation at any time. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decided to withdraw your participation. Your decision about participating will not affect your relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Memphis.

Will it cost me money to take part in this research?

There are no costs associated with participation in this research study.

Will I receive any compensation or reward for participating in this research?

You will not be compensated for taking part in this research.

Who can answer my question about this research?

Before you decide volunteer for this study, please ask any questions that might come to mind. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Sheila Seiler at sheila.b.seiler@gmail.com, or her Dissertation Committee Chair, Amanda Rockinson-Szapkiw, at rcknsnsz@memphis.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the Institutional Review Board staff at the University of Memphis at 901-678-2705 or email irb@memphis.edu. **I will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.**

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

I have had the opportunity to consider the information in this form. I have asked any questions needed for me to decide about my participation. I understand that I can ask additional questions though the study.

By signing below, I volunteer to participate in this research. I understand that I am not waiving any legal rights. I have been given a copy of this form. I understand that if my ability to consent for myself changes, either I or my legal representative may be asked to consent again prior to my continued participation

As described above, you will be audio and video recorded while performing the activities described above. Audio and video recordings will be used for data collection. Initial the space below if you consent to the use of audio and video recordings as described.
____ I agree to the use of audio and video recordings.

Name of Adult Participant	**Signature of Adult Participant**	**Date**

Researcher Signature (To be completed at the time of Informed Consent)

I have explained the research to the participant and answered all of his/her questions. I believe that he/she understand the information described in this consent form and freely consent to participate**.**

Name of Research Team Member	**Signature of Research Team Member**	**Date**

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

Interview question:	Ideas and theories with which this question is connected:	Research question to which this question is connected:
Tell me about why you decided to study mindfulness online. Subquestions: What experiences led to this decision? How did you decide that mindfulness might be right for you? What helped you determine which program might be right for you?	Tinto's (1975, 1993) and Bean and Metzner's (1985) ideas about learner motivation before entering a program; Rovai's (1993) ideas about learner-program fit	4
Tell me about your experience in the online mindfulness program. Subquestions: How did you feel while you completed the program? What did you enjoy the most about it? What was it like? Describe it.	Lived experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994)	1
Tell me about what you learned. Subquestions: To what extent did you enjoy what you were learning? Explain. What was something significant that you learned and how did you know it was significant?	Academic integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993)	2

Interview Guide, Continued

Tell me about how the program helped you develop. Subquestions: To what extent did you see the effects of the program in your life? How were you able to bring it into your daily life? To what extent did the online community help you develop? To what extent did your offline community help you develop?	Academic and social integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993)	2
Tell me about some challenges you faced while you were in the program. Subquestions: How did you balance the rest of your life with the demands of this program? Was there anything about the program itself that made it challenging to continue? Explain. Was there anything about your life that made it challenging to continue? Explain.	Bean and Metzner's (1985) and Rovai's (1993) ideas about external factors	4
Tell me about why you decided to stay in the program. Subquestions: Why did you feel it was worth it to stay in the program until the end? What in your offline life helped you persist in the program? **Did you have any mindfulness goals when you entered the program?**	Bean and Metzner's (1985) ideas about external factors and Rovai's (1993) ideas about learner-program match	

Interview Guide, Continued

To what extent did your mindfulness goals help you persist?		4
Tell me about things in the program that encouraged you to persist in staying in the program. Subquestions: What about the program made it easier for you to persist? To what extent did the online community help you persist? To what extent did what you were learning encourage you to persist?	Tinto's (1975, 1993), Bean and Metzner's (1985), and Rovai's (1993) ideas about what helps learners persist	2, 3, 4
Tell me about things in your life that encouraged you to persist in staying in the program. Subquestions: How did your life offline help you persist? **How did the structures in your life help you persist?**	Tinto's (1993) ideas about the needs of nontraditional learners	4
Tell me if there's anything else you want me to know about your persisting in this program.	This question provides participants with the opportunity to share their insights about their persistence in online mindfulness programs that might not be covered in the previous questions.	

APPENDIX F

Focus Group Guide

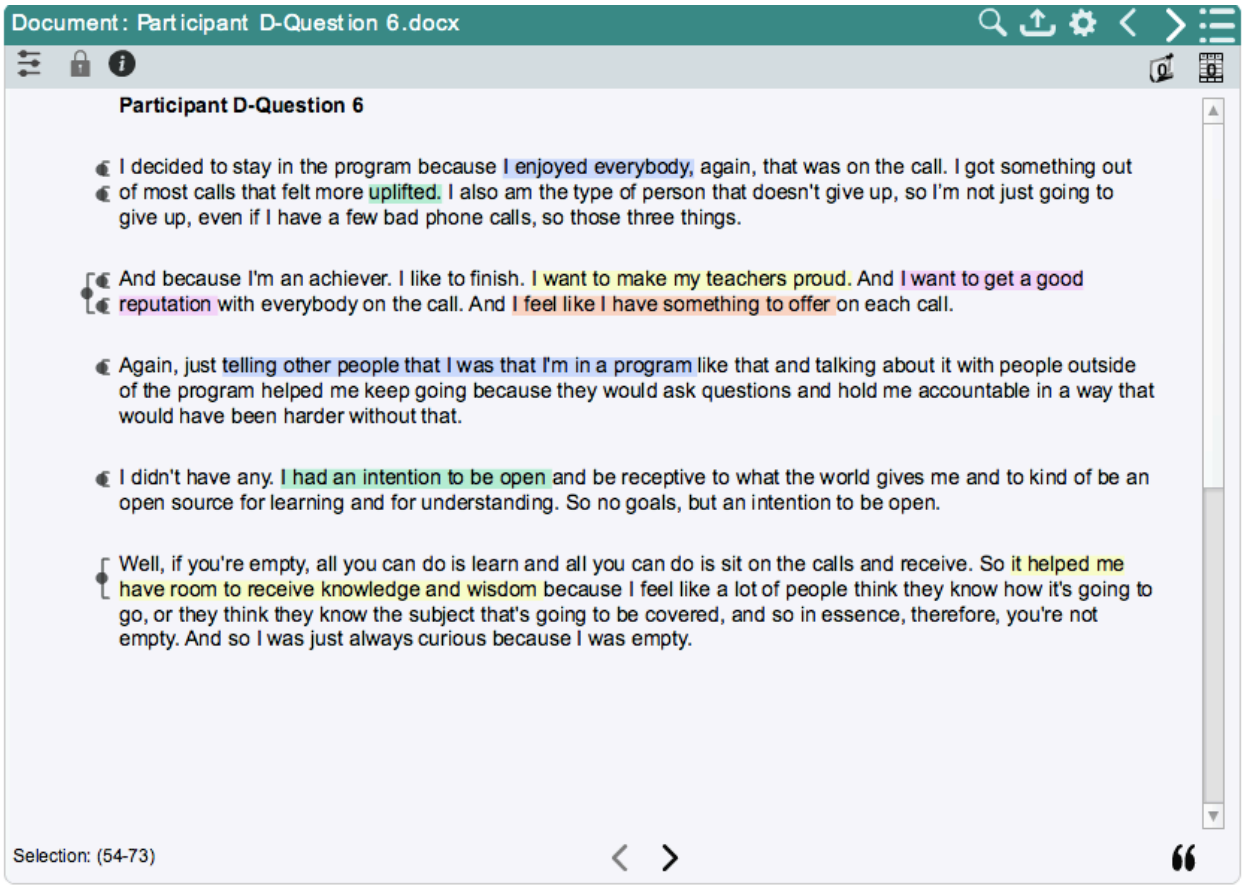
Comment from the focus group facilitator:	Remarks/rationale:
Introduction: "Hello everybody, my name is Sheila and this is the focus group that serves as a way for me to check my research. I will conduct the discussion, which will be audio recorded. You have been invited to discuss the findings that I've shared with you as articulated in the current draft of my Chapter 4 for my dissertation. I will ask you several open-ended questions. Your personal opinions and view are important for this research. There are no right or wrong answers. Please feel welcome to express yourself freely during the discussion. This conversation will be recorded, transcribed, and analyzed only for purpose of the research. Only I will listen to the tape. No names or personal information will be used in the report. Please keep everything that was said, including who said it, confidential. Some practical issues: the discussion will last for about one hour. We ask you to please switch off your mobile phones. Please give everyone the chance to express their opinion during the conversation. You can address each other when expressing your opinion. I am here to facilitate the discussion. Are there any questions about the purpose of or procedures for the focus group discussion?"	Before starting the focus group discussion, all participants were given copies of the research as shared in a current draft of my Chapter 4. They were informed at the start of their participation in this study about the purpose of the focus group, about confidentiality, and about practical issues. This introduction gives participants the opportunity to remember the purpose of this phase of the research, ask questions, and understand the logistics of the conversation.
Tell me your general impression of my research findings.	This opens the conversation in a completely open way, which helps avoid researcher bias.
Tell me your thoughts about my findings about your lived experiences.	This checks my conclusions about research question 1.
Tell me your thoughts about my findings about what encouraged you to persist.	This checks my conclusions about research questions 2 and 3.

Focus Group Guide, Continued

Tell me what you think I may have missed in my research and reporting.	This checks my overall research and allows participants the opportunity to build on what I discovered in my research.
Conclusion: "Thank you so much for participating in this focus group. My next step is to consider what you have shared today, then revise my Chapter 4 in a way that integrates your ideas. Once I have finished, I will share the final version with you and will invite you to my dissertation defense, which will take place online. Thank you again for all your support. If you have any questions or want to follow up about any aspect of this, please send me an e-mail."	This shows appreciation for the participants, assures them that their contributions are valuable, and tells them next steps.

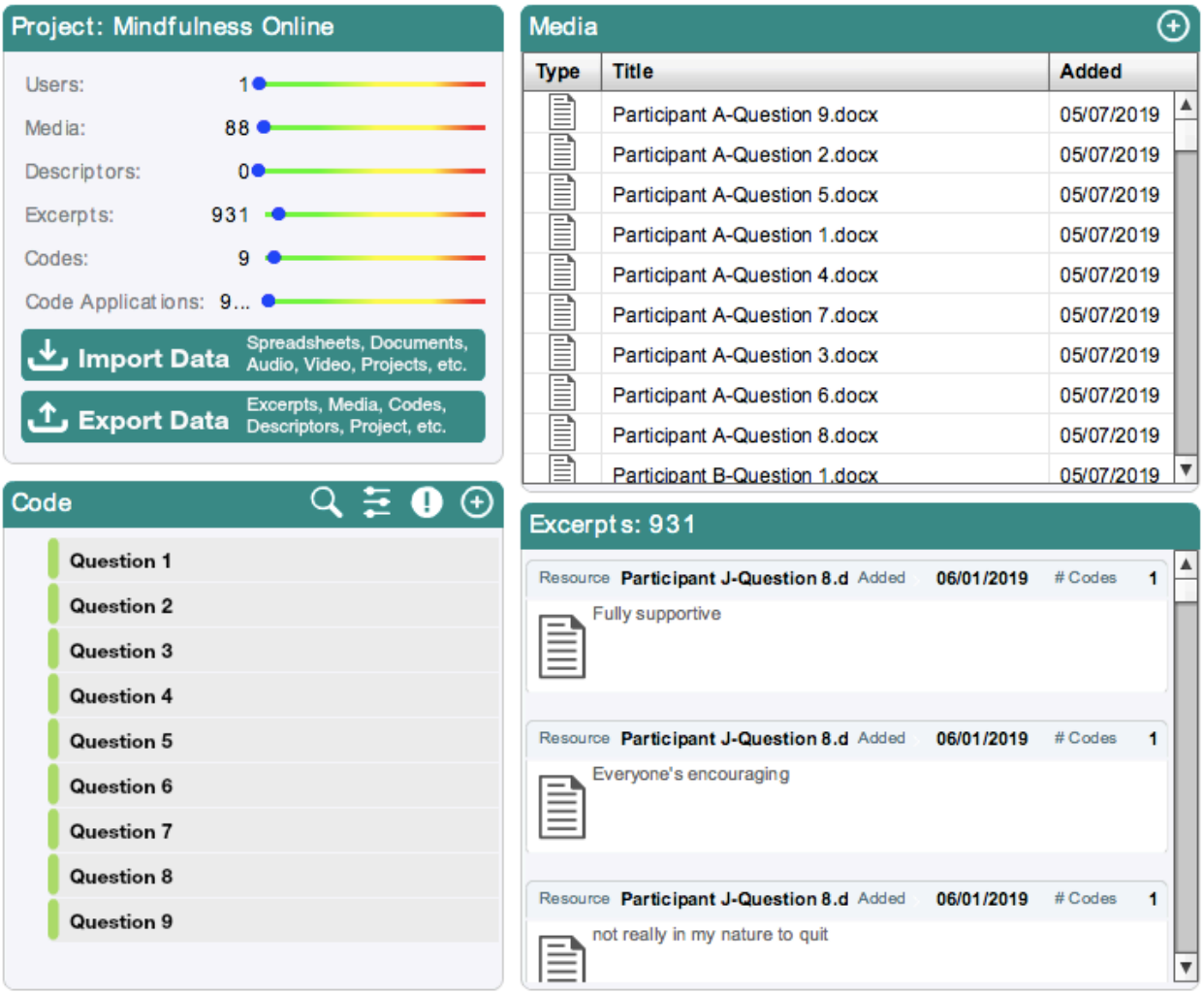
APPENDIX G

Coding Example



APPENDIX H

Coding Organization



APPENDIX I

Researcher's Coding Notes

Participant:	All codes:
A	Access, face-to-face learning, meeting people, interaction that you get, flexibility. choose the time, wanted to be able to offer a wider variety than I was certified to teach, cheaper to do it online, extend my offering, extend my qualifications, I realized that I needed it, the path that my life has taken, got into recovery, getting really into yoga, real journey, meditation, recovery, something I'm hoping to then share with other people, lot of research on the Internet, money, time, short courses, get a certificate from them at the end of it, build my professional standing, knowledge, professional development
B	interested in Integral Theory, feeling of homeness, mindfulness meditations, Integral piece, Zen piece, different spiritual disciplines, challenging class, clarity and groundedness, positive foundation, it was underneath everything, I was sleeping better, seeing some changes in my life, felt very positive, trying out different things, feeling what worked for me, therapy, being aware of physical sensations in the body
C	Access, part and parcel of trying to look at mindfulness training from different aspects, to really figure out actually defining what mindfulness is, instructor interaction in yoga, idea to want to define it better, idea of mindfulness on face value
D	Location, my sitting practice, I wanted to be successful, becoming more aware of bigger parts of who I am, I trust the instructor, I trust the people that are in the group
E	to deepen my practice, meditation, social change, so much politics, stress, I got divorced, I wanted to really be there mentally and emotionally for my kids, be there for myself, to survive, to have like a sense of home, a sense of spirituality, something that would sort of some rituals, something mindfulness space that would bring us together, I had developed enough relationships with leadership in school, professional development, to really understand the science and the data behind it, understanding how working with Mind Body with breath, helps to calm things, curriculum, You can mix and match and use what you want, simple, very easy to roll out, very easy to implement, concrete, tangible

Researcher's Coding Notes, Continued

F	live experience, live interaction, location, a part of my studies, looking for something that was more holistic, I got sucked into my corporate world work, didn't have the time or the focus, My wife was really sick, I was curious, checked out several different things, engaged in several different online programs, I wanted something that was applied, I wanted something that had direct interaction, I wanted a container
G	found it very helpful, wanted to expand my understanding, convenient, access, personal practice, wanted to teach students, I'm a total science geek, I love the research, healing kind of mental health, rescue thing, research-based, helpful to my students
H	yoga practice, get certified, wanted to share it with kids, my therapist, tools that they gave me were helpful for me personally, wanted to do children, totally useful far for adults
I	Benefits, to have a more clear mind, be more focused, recommended by a friend, free of charge
J	interested in learning, I love education, been in it a long time, opportunity, an interest, important, manageable, reasonable price, had looked through the website and it was attractive, had some different articles, it was short, time-wise

Question 2:

Participant:	All codes:
A	learning styles, teaching methodology behind it, clearly knew her stuff very well, very enthusiastic, supported by written materials, you have to engage. Holistic, passive, you can do them in five minutes, a real risk, I really liked it, really enjoying, great, motivating, the way it was set up, changing between different methods of delivery, very colorful, fun for kids, engaging, real, not intimidating, not annoying, user-friendly, very easy to see where everything, gives you a progress, you can jump ahead if you want, almost like she's there in the room with you, knows who you are, absolutely spot-on and what you need to know, six hours of material, you can divide it up, feels like a lot more than six hours

Question 2: Continued

B	very positive, I can get to a place of openness, vastness in places of no boundaries pretty easily, a little bit of distance from the issues, space for everything, inclusiveness, interested in going deeper, great, amazing, discipline, commitment, traditional, a large group of people, a leading figure in the group, help you individually, it's pretty well balanced, very open to everyone, a feeling of getting to know people, ability to get together in small groups, talk about different practices, people are able to share their own experience
C	Instructional, led by one instructor, have different components, self-independent study component, group component, a seven-dayer versus a 12-week-er, a huge community of people, you have opportunity to do question and answer at the end, you self-study for the week and then you go back and hit another topic, , free flowing, independent, open exploration learning, more academic, felt like going back to school as an adult, accomplished, overwhelmed, a worthy spending of time, community, insights, a group of professionals, coaches, body workers, massage therapists, yogis, psychotherapists, trainers and facilitators in the business world, like finding, like calling in from different planets, finding your kind of people, like you're part of a tribe, Your people become your people through the experience, no label, humanity
D	Amazing, been able to meet wonderful people, a good way for me to hold myself accountable, I felt okay, I didn't feel super accomplished, I felt fine, people, being able to learn, we get into a small groups, discuss how the homework assignments or how the activities affected us throughout the past week, teaches us another lesson on a certain topic, gives us more homework
E	really good, a six-week course, each week there were readings and there was a one-hour lecture to watch, some background readings and research, there was some sort of chat forum, we needed to participate in a group conversations, it allowed me to participate in something where people from all over the world were participating, it really much easier to access, There was enough structure yet enough freedom, there was a variety of instructors, I was excited, a little bit daunted, a little bit overwhelmed, energized, the ability to really sink things through from a scientific perspective, figure out how to talk about mindfulness in a way that would appeal to a variety of different people
F	Powerful, fantastic, mutually reinforcing, I can refer to my personal practice, I can refer to the whole group, I really get a sense of that attentiveness and compassion, I feel that I can have a bit of relationship in the online space, I felt myself validated in my knowledge, the chance to do something that applied right back into my life, a chance to really reflect on my life, have more of a sense of understanding, knowledge, The Future of Buddhism, history, evolution, Integral theory, Four Quadrant perspectives

Question 2: Continued

G	idea of the science and the theory, there was an opening retreat and a closing retreat, monthly meetings, real-time meetings, you could build relationships, you felt connected, great, broaden, learned, very warm, very open, very accepting, very supportive, external support, community, helps your own personal practice, science, neuroscience, organized on a weekly basis, had modules, personal practice, broad education, had different aspects of interaction, writing prompts, no one was freaking out on you, send you a little email, doable, there was an opening retreat and a closing retreat, practicum, You had to do a video of yourself teaching mindfulness to students, exceptional
H	There were some videos to watch, There were some discussion boards, I was more dedicated to practice, I felt accountable, I could do it on nights and weekends, to help others, Weekly videos, set up in modules, organized thematically, discussions online, discussion board
I	There was a PDF e-book which we're reading, sharing messages with the instructor, we did biweekly calls, help me calm down, help me focus, I started to think about people or experiences, there was an e-book reading, Each chapter was quite short and concise, very simple, having the one-on-one calls for the instructor
J	felt like I learned a lot, enjoyable, combination of the different aspects, science, spending time being quiet by myself, There were targets each week, it has made me much more aware, much more balanced, I can acknowledge feelings

Question 3:

Participant:	All codes:
A	child development, academic and science-y, less mystical, learning about how children's brains develop, not just sort of airy fairy stuff like, helping children, coordination, feeling confident, creating neural pathways, engaging more with children, being able to understand kids, be a positive influence in their life, help create whole happy human beings, better to show than to tell, better to relate than it is to expect understanding, storytelling really helps, not to get too hung up on them doing it correctly, brains are actually different, different levels of autonomy

Question 3: Continued

B	I get along with everybody, allowing things to come up about who I find challenging, I've been increasingly open, a better balance between autonomy and community, find it really easy to not be as community-oriented, reflecting back a lot better, learned about myself- that in this seeming simplicity, I tend to be a kind of a head-oriented person, satisfaction, contentment, able to reflect better, a better listener, being concerned about how to get people, an energetic way to give people love, stickiness, sending without any expectation of getting back, able to become more inclusive of my own processes
C	five different sensing aspects of our biology, ability to have a felt experience in the body that gives you information, interaction, being pro-prioception session, it's so multidisciplinary, many different topics that were being explored, to be pretty critical and analytical, to be learners, to be childlike, be extremely curious, open heart, a felt experience of learning, There was a connection, it's grocking something, idea of understanding it in your bones
D	I've learned how to unlearn is fear, storytelling, found that I tell myself a lot of stories that are not true, learned how to look at those stories objectively, to be free-functioning, it's so all encompassing, It affects every aspect of my life, I could see the story forming in my head objectively, it's allowed me to move on and to be more free
E	history of mindfulness in school settings, development of linking what's the mindfulness pain-based and be bizarre, development of mindfulness in mental health settings, how to soothe the nervous system, how when you're in a state as calm and relaxed and receptive, able to make intentional decisions rather than just reacting, working through trauma deprogramming things, learning that was part of my learning how to speak like an educator, coming to really be able to work in this government effectively, how to talk about mindfulness and sell it to a school audience
F	learned to consider trauma-informed approaches, leadership, administration, It wasn't too demanding of time, instructors themselves were very gifted people, you could feel connected, a lot of research-based stuff,
G	I can much more easily just drop into that sense of awareness, I'm more present, able to notice how people are making meaning and wonder what perspective they're taking, I'm less emotional, I've picked up some additional ways of dealing with stuff, There's a sense of efficacy, a felt sense of what it means to come from a contracted ego-self versus what we refer to as ‘free-functioning.’
H	this type of practice can help anyone, more space in my life, we can make this practice wherever we go, have been more quick to respond

Question 3: Continued

I	my mind is all over the map, moving slower, being more premeditated, realizing that we're all struggling with our own issues, shouldn't take things personally, give me more empathy
J	I really enjoyed it, I didn't feel like it was a burden, Equanimity, it was significant, balance of getting a feeling, physical feeling, emotional feeling, awareness

Question 4:

Participant:	All codes:
A	Patience, being honest, humble, confidence, open up a little bit and be there for people, listen rather than just jump in and go, holding space for somebody, given me focus and direction, how kids can be mindful, I coach myself a little bit, interactions
B	a different relationship with my emotions, not getting so caught up, Helping me be more aware of what's arising, continually being refined my ability, the way that I'm able to interact with my students, my interactions with my family, Being more flexible, I don't always need to adapt to my cultural surroundings, tend to see people differently, I'm assessing all the time, I'm more open to being wrong about people and situations, I meet things a lot more, I don't get as emotionally charged a lot of times, things don't upset me as much, positive, opportunity to hear what other people are experiencing, accountability, being a good girl, makes space for me, makes time for me, finding a way for me to have privacy, negotiate how we help each other, support each other as a family, we have conversations that are about development, they know where I'm coming from
C	pausing before I react to anything, getting better at responding to life, a mini-meditation mindfulness practice and I'll do that throughout the day, understand who they are in their place with lots of different personalities, physical interaction, they allow you to go deeper
D	I am bigger than I thought I was, I can take a lot more pain, I can take a lot more judgment, it's allowed me to be more calm, more open and accepting, I talk about mindfulness all the time, I ask for help from other people to help me integrate, keep me accountable, challenged me at times to change, they look to me as an example for that, they help keep me in integrity

Question 4: Continued

E	It gave me some structure to hang my hat on as an educator, develop an Approach To Learning life skills, figure out what seems I wanted to run, it helped me pose as a instructor of mindfulness, become more comfortable with a wider toolkit, helped me as somebody who is developing program, exciting, I had every great for an hour a week, I found it very challenging
F	I gained some cognitive clarity about what Buddhism is, I started to figure out how to find a distinguish between stuff, Less reactivity, my work has changed, I've developed more of an understanding, I've been learning how to trust my intuition more, I started teaching a basic sitting class, sharing of knowledge with others, my shift has been less anxiety, I'm more just interested in my life, I'm more curious about other people, accepting of people's different interpretations, I am interested in the value of being in community, pay attention, notice what feels true
G	definitely shift your practice into a deeper experience, mindfulness allowed me to be more with my students, making time, sharing an experience, care about the work that you're doing, observe the work that you're doing, love you, support what you're interested in
H	to help others than I personally, to help others, being empowered to share that with others
I	Taking time to look inward, realize that other times I just need to get out of my head and just look, being more patient with people, less judgmental, when people do something that makes me angry, I try to pause for a second before I blow up at them, reassurance from the instructor, helped me to motivate me, to get me started
J	much calmer and cooler, more collected, I don't let things wind me up, I don't take things as personally, I recognize that I have the control to have response over things, have a responsibility of how I react, I get responses from people that they think that I'm quite steady, I've got good responses, I don't let things wind me up, I have a perfectionist tendency, but I don't get wound up, I have some wisdom and good sense about things, more deep breathing, remove myself from situations, remind myself that I have that control over things, learned a lot through the reading and the videos

Question 5:

Participant:	All codes:
A	Time, fitting in, flexibility, staying motivated, not giving myself any time off, I get stressed, pressure, I have a diary, schedule, fully flexible, coaching, good chunks of time, produce something to progress, finding the time to do that, staying motivated, I can say I've completed the coaching and wellbeing modules, too bloody busy, I had to complete a module of that because I'd signed up, transitioning to a new country, making sure that I've got money coming in and food on the table
B	a matter of commitment, separate the internal from the external, balance, time, anticipatory grieving, a tough time getting out of bed, playing into connecting with the group, my mind goes blank, sadness, I love the group
C	Connection, identity and concepts of self, they're all very personal, to show up on time, perfect and to complete homework, be like the good student, I don't have to balance too much other stuff, I made room for it, Body Equals Brain one, timing issue, my instructor was my boyfriend, breaking loose with my relationship with Tom, wanted to push through and have integrity and finish the program and show up to every call and be pleasant
D	I try to be over expressive, body language, know-how of using technology, I make time for it, priority, I have to say ‘no’ to a lot of things
E	Time, I had a custody sharing agreement
F	people with very different levels, different amount of time, levels of depth of experience, lack of experience, awkwardness, time management, not do anything socially, eat well, sleep well, logistics of the travel, stay up later than usual
G	doing my counseling degree online at the same time, having scheduled times, taking my masters at the same time
H	wanted the certificate at the end, wanted to be able to go and use this professionally, very accessible, a lot of the material was easy to digest
I	making time, making it routine, a set time every day, creating a routine, extra accountability, advantages, convenient
J	Developing the personal practice, to be quiet and listen to your breath work, count your breaths, tighten different body parts, clenching different body parts, releasing them and isolating, I didn't find the program very demanding, It was short pieces, Everything seemed quite manageable, interesting and enjoyable, new information, only two hours or three hours a week

Question 6:

Participant:	All codes:
A	I paid for it, I was already halfway through, I would be silly not to finish it, I put half the effort in already, It was something I'd already paid, I don't like leaving things unfinished, I don't like leaving things unfinished, I like completion, I get something out of it at the end of the day in terms of professionally, it's going to help me in my business, I have the time and the flexibility, it relates to what I'm actually doing in my real life directly, to be more mindful, wanted to be able to be in a position where I could share that or introduce those ideas to people, help people who were struggling, I had to be very aware of my own attitudes, I want to help people primarily
B	Underlyingly, self-care, contribute to a better world, helps me makes better decisions, positive impact, development, experiences
C	I'm a finisher, personal dedication, once you choose to sign on to something, you're already placing value or worth on that thing, I see the value in completing the circle and really finishing things and then seeing where it's at, looking for deeper meaning, practice mindfulness better, be more life-oriented
D	I enjoyed everybody, uplifted, I want to make my instructors proud, I want to get a good reputation, I feel like I have something to offer, telling other people that I was that I'm in a program, I had an intention to be open, it helped me have room to receive knowledge and wisdom
E	I was gaining from it, well worth the effort, having had a body of experience in my own personal life, professional background, effectiveness, background
F	Feels good, a group of people that were real, value by staying engaged, vision and aspiration being in a Sangha, committing to regular relationships, formal relationship with a instructor, perseverance, full experience, An agreement with my wife that this was something that was important to me, good time management, wanted to know more about Diane and her approach, wanted to learn, wanted to be more regular in my practice, wanted to learn what was this about, A knowledgeable instructor, invitation and having a instructor who’s really conscious about engaging you
G	Value, field of education, career, being certified, official certification, supportive partner, supportive family, building my own personal practice, want to be a great meditator, personal growth, my mental health, build resilience, build grit, seeing your own personal change, you feel like you're growing
H	I bought it, I understood the value in the program, be able to work with kids, it could help others

Question 6: Continued

I	Accountability, didn't want to lose face with the instructor, wanted to see where I could get, started to notice changes, curious to explore more, most of my friends are kind of health- and wellness-focused, strength and weakness, wanted to just see if I could go beyond my little two seconds of solitude, wants to prove to myself that I can do something
J	I liked it, It was good, good information, it could be a benefit in the future, it would make me calmer, Short, doable, I signed up, I don't usually quit, I knew the information was valuable, interesting, wanted that certificate, it was a Foundation course, foundation, I paid for it, I was able to carve out the time quite easily, time structure, wanted to learn to be calmer inside myself, learn to bounce back, Not feel so reactive, I would learn different strategies and different techniques, I could feel the difference

Question 7:

Participant:	All codes:
A	I'm enjoying it, interesting, relatively short, not too much of a burden, I will get out of it what I need, some good stuff, I need to stay in it to get the qualification, I can pick it up, put it down whenever it suits me, no deadline, no long stop, nobody's been pursuing you, consolidation, information and the knowledge, techniques
B	Readings, small breakout groups, able to connect with people, been involved in so many different groups, a pretty postmodern, progressive, inspiring, respect, approach to life is so much bigger, I can do the things I need to do, time, accountability, a feeling of everybody showing up, supportive, helpful, there's room for questioning, there's room for doubt, there's no room for saying, ‘no, It's much more process-oriented, there's room for everything, New impetus, ideas that are inspiring, engaging, always fresh
C	Body Equals Brain, it didn't feel repetitive, wonderful learning materials, accessible, it was just the idea that they're all adults, makes you feel like you're a part of this this club, be better people, be the best versions of themselves, professional outcome, helping people get more in touch, my profession
D	Learning from the instructor, a special connection, It's always the people, humility, making me feel as special as a somewhat-newer person, to learn from my experience, I'm getting something out of it, I'm getting an ally on a call, I can also learn something new, continual progression

Question 7: Continued

E	Instructors, you could get as deeply involved as you wanted, curriculum, online community, different walks of life, different geographical areas, wanted to do more mindfulness, Backgrounds, you could ask pretty much anything and people would be there for you
F	Humor, laughter, A sense of love, sense of humanness, sweetness, realness, I don't feel so attached to having an outline, sense of familiarity, Getting to know people, break out in the triads, I'm global in my kind of consciousness like me, experience something that's truly global, fascinated by mindfulness and the Buddhist worldview
G	Opportunities, instructors, programmers, connection, you can make one connection, one person you look forward to seeing, very science, research-oriented
H	the instructor, valuable training, materials they were providing, accessible, materials, It was kind of fun, I could see it in action
I	had a relatively detailed plan, have more detailed instructions and guidance, the instructor as emotional support was useful, seeing progress was exciting and motivating
J	There were weekly modules, They each came with reading, It was reading and a video and responses, it was really clearly outlined and structured, It wasn't confusing, It was quite achievable, It was concrete and sequential, You could just tick it off, responding to my posts, felt like a person was there, There was a connection, even though it was a video, learning words like 'equanimity.', labeling or naming things that I have felt or noticed, easy, enjoyable, interesting

Question 8:

Participant:	All codes:
A	I'm enjoying it, interesting, relatively short, not too much of a burden, I will get out of it what I need, some good stuff, I need to stay in it to get the qualification, I can pick it up, put it down whenever it suits me, no deadline, no long stop, nobody's been pursuing you, consolidation, information and the knowledge, techniques

Question 8: Continued

B	Readings, small breakout groups, able to connect with people, been involved in so many different groups, a pretty postmodern, progressive, inspiring, respect, approach to life is so much bigger, I can do the things I need to do, time, accountability, a feeling of everybody showing up, supportive, helpful, there's room for questioning, there's room for doubt, there's no room for saying, 'no,' It's much more process-oriented, there's room for everything, New impetus, ideas that are inspiring, engaging, always fresh
C	Body Equals Brain, it didn't feel repetitive, wonderful learning materials, accessible, it was just the idea that they're all adults, makes you feel like you're a part of this this club, be better people, be the best versions of themselves, professional outcome, helping people get more in touch, my profession
D	Learning from the instructor, a special connection, It's always the people, humility, making me feel as special as a somewhat-newer person, to learn from my experience, I'm getting something out of it, I'm getting an ally on a call, I can also learn something new, continual progression
E	Instructors, you could get as deeply involved as you wanted, curriculum, online community, different walks of life, different geographical areas, wanted to do more mindfulness, Backgrounds, you could ask pretty much anything and people would be there for you
F	Humor, laughter , A sense of love, sense of humanness, sweetness, realness, I don't feel so attached to having an outline, sense of familiarity, Getting to know people, break out in the triads, I'm global in my kind of consciousness like me, experience something that's truly global, fascinated by mindfulness and the Buddhist worldview
G	opportunities, instructors, programmers, connection, you can make one connection, one person you look forward to seeing, very science, research-oriented
H	the instructor, valuable training, materials they were providing, accessible, materials, It was kind of fun, I could see it in action
I	Friends, my mom, structure, having time scheduled on the calendar and making it routine was good
J	Education, I like to learn, I am goal-oriented, not really in my nature to quit, Everyone's encouraging, Fully supportive

Question 9:

Participant:	All codes:
A	I can't wait for them to be over
B	
C	
D	to connect individually with people outside
E	
F	Buddhism broadly, Zen mindfulness, wanting to engage in something a little more goal-directed, precepts, engaging in a formal instructor path
G	
H	
I	always searching for something more in the world, like to experience some of those crazy experiences.
J	

APPENDIX J

Coding Organization