TIME MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCES AMONG ADULT LEARNERS IN AN ONLINE

UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAM

by

Russell Lee Fox

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this case study was to discover the time management experiences of adult learners in an online undergraduate degree program at a mid-sized, Midwestern private university. The theory guiding this study was Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory as it emphasized the connection between time management and both productivity and life satisfaction. Data was collected through online (Zoom) interviews, a virtual (Zoom) focus group, and photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1992) exercise in which participants took photographs that represented their priorities, obligations, and time-wasters, which were the three categories of time management identified in time equity theory (Tourangbam, 2011). Data was analyzed qualitatively, allowing emergent categories to form from the raw data. Data from the three types of sources were synthesized, and multi-layered member-checking was used to increase the dependability of the study. The results of this study demonstrated common experiences, behaviors, and understandings of priorities, obligations, and time-wasters among the participants. The participants consistently used time-management strategies identified in existing literature (Macan et al., 1990), as well as self-regulation behaviors (Bandura, 1991). However, participants did not make the distinction between priorities and obligations described by Tourangbam (2011) and used these terms interchangeably. All participants identified social media as a time-waster and admitted to struggling to minimize time-wasters. Participants described their places of study as typically chaotic, high-traffic areas with frequent interruptions, but also identified supportive family as a primary factor in their academic success.

Keywords: *time equity, goal-setting, priorities, obligations, time-wasters, adult learners*

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CCCU – Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

LMS – Learning Management System

OCE – Online Community Environment

ROT – Return On Time (investment)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Online education was a popular choice among a growing population of adult college students because of its convenience and flexibility (Kilburn et al., 2016). However, online education programs suffered a higher attrition rate compared with traditional programs, largely due to time management problems among adult learners (O'Shea et al., 2015). The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore the specific time management practices and experiences among adult students in an online undergraduate degree program. An instrumental case study explores a specific issue or phenomenon common to single or multiple cases (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). In this case study, the specific issue was time management practices among adult learners. This chapter begins with a description of the historical context of the development, popularity, and problems of online education programs. It describes the social context of the study in terms of exploring the aspects of online education programs that had been recognized as problematic and how these problems were related to time management. It identifies the theoretical context of the study in terms of existing research related to time management among college students, specifically among adult online college students. The Situation to Self section explains my interest in the study, my perceptions and biases about time management, and my reason for choosing an ontological approach to the study with a paradigm of post-positivism. The problem statement describes the rationale for the study, namely the higher attrition rate in online education and its relationship to time management practices. The purpose statement describes the intent to discover the factors that influenced time management among adults in an online program and identifies the guiding theory for this study as time equity theory (Tourangbam, 2011).

This chapter explains the significance of the study in terms of how it added to existing research on attrition/retention and time management in adult online programs. It also explains how the data from this study may be useful to student support services professionals at higher education institutions that offer adult online programs. Finally, it identifies the research question and provides definitions of key terms.

Background

This section discusses how the problem of attrition due to time management has evolved over decades. The historical, social, and theoretical contexts of the problem are discussed, citing the research on the topic and the recommendations for future study that form the basis of this study.

Historical Context

At the onset of online education, research on online education tended to focus on comparisons between on-site and online delivery of course content in terms of student achievement and retention, with emphasis on concerns over technical difficulties. Sitzmann et al. (2010) found that technical difficulties impaired learning, and the problem was confounded over time because low performance in one course increased the likelihood of attrition in the following course. The data were often presented in a cautionary way, suggesting that higher education institutions consider carefully before offering online programs. Studies showed students who took classes on-site outperformed their online counterparts by as much as 24% on objective summative assessments, and online programs suffered higher attrition rates (Emerson & MacKay, 2011).

In recent years, higher education enrollment has been flat, while enrollment in online education has been increasing, both in number of students and in percentage of the higher

education student population (O'Shea et al., 2015). McPherson and Bacow (2015) reported, "As of 2013, about 26 percent of all students took at least one course entirely online, and about 11 percent received all of their education online" (p. 137). The reason for the growth in online higher education, particularly among adult learners, was that online programs tended to be less expensive and more convenient (Kilburn et al., 2016). Working adults could maintain a full-time job while taking courses, completing work on their schedules. In addition, students who wanted to attend institutions distant from their hometowns no longer needed to bear the expense of moving and living on or near campus (Kilburn et al., 2016). However, as convenient and popular as online education had become, this convenience came with inherent problems. The most serious problem with online education was that the attrition rate in this modality "[could] be up to 20% higher than that of face-to-face programs" (O'Shea et al., 2015, p. 41). Effective time management was identified as a crucial factor in student success, and, since students were provided with flexible schedules in online courses, competence in time management was even more important (O'Shea et al., 2015). The majority of adult students who took courses in online programs worked full-time, and time management skills were identified as a significant factor affecting persistence in online courses (Yang et al., 2017). Research showed adult students were more likely to drop a course due to problems balancing academic work with professional work and the demands of family life (Meyer et al., 2019). Among college students of all ages, how one's time was spent was linked to academic performance. Landrum et al. (2006) found that college students who earned higher grades (A or B) in courses managed their study time differently from college students who did not perform as well (Landrum et al., 2006). Given the problem of higher attrition rates in online higher education programs and the connection between

retention and time management skills, Landrum et al. (2006) suggested further research was needed to examine more deeply how students managed their time.

Social Context

For decades, college students reported high levels of stress (Herrera et al., 2017), and many colleges offered time management training as a method of lowering students' stress (Macan et al., 1990). College students who worked while attending college reported higher stress than college students who did not (Herrera et al., 2017; Macan et al., 1990). Working adult students in online programs also needed to balance their family responsibilities with schoolwork, which meant time management was an even more significant factor in their success (O'Shea et al., 2015). While the need for social connectedness (Bean & Metzger, 1985) and technical support (Kingsley & Sharon, 2014; Sitzmann et al., 2010) were cited as factors affecting attrition rates among adult students, effective time management was found to be a more significant predictor of students' GPA (Basila, 2014; Yang et al., 2017). While younger college students tended to view their coursework as a top priority, adult learners were different. Meyer et al. (2019) found adult online learners were more likely to report dropping a course as a result of intentional prioritization of family over academic work. With this backdrop, it is no wonder student services departments in higher education institutions offered time management training, but studies failed to show significant evidence that this training reduced student stress (Macan et al., 1990), so further research was needed to explore what effective time management looked like in the lives of successful adult online students.

Theoretical Context

Effective time management was linked to student perception of better academic performance, greater satisfaction in life, and less work-induced stress (Javaeed, 2019; Macan et

al., 1990). But students who worked while attending college reported higher stress levels than

college students who did not (Herrera et al., 2017; Macan et al., 1990). Student stress levels were

historically addressed through optional time management training seminars, which typically

taught goal-setting, prioritization of tasks, and list-making (Macan et al., 1990). However, even

though no significant evidence emerged to support the hypothesis that students who were taught

these specific time management strategies experienced less stress or that time management

training increased academic performance (Macan et al., 1990), research showed there were

definite differences between how high-performing (A-B) college students and low-performing

(C-F) college students managed their study time (Landrum et al., 2006). Significantly, research

showed no significant difference between the total amount of study time between higher-

performing and lower-performing students, but there was a significant difference in how the time

was spent (Landrum et al., 2006). Because of this, Landrum et al. (2006) suggested further

research was needed to explore how successful students organized their study time and how they

balanced this time with other activities. Tourangbam (2011) theorized that the decisions people

make about how to spend their time were what determined their levels of success, satisfaction,

and family status. This theory, called time equity, suggested successful people consciously

decided to take control of their time, dividing it into three categories: time-wasters (activities that

were not necessary and did not progress toward goals), obligations (activities that were required

but did not progress directly toward goals), and priorities (activities that progressed directly

toward goals) (Tourangbam, 2011). Proactively planning one's time to eliminate time-wasters, to

devote the most productive hours toward priorities, and to delegate or spend less productive

hours on obligations were the keys to time management and success (Tourangbam, 2011). These

principles were supported by research that showed time management to be a significant predictor

of GPA (Basila, 2014; Landrum et al., 2006). This study builds on the existing research by taking a deep look into the specific circumstances that must be balanced in the lives of adult online students and how successful adult online students understand and experience time management. Specifically, this study will explore adult student understandings of priorities, obligations, and time-wasters.

Situation to Self

My primary motivation for this study was to explore the challenges of managing one's time in the adult online learning environment to discover insights into the experiences these students had while balancing school, work, and family. These insights were important to me because, at the time of the study, I chaired two departments in an adult online education program and taught a full-time load of adult online courses. Having earned my bachelor's and master's degrees on-site, I was in the process of earning a doctoral degree online. My preference would have been to complete my Ed.D. on-site, but that was not practical because of my work schedule and location. My perception was that time management was an essential skill in online education, and prioritizing tasks was the most important part of time management, but I also thought time management required a level of self-awareness that some people did not have. For instance, if part of a student's time management plan was to use his or her most productive work hours for priority tasks, the student would first need to identify the time of day when the most productive work hours occurred. My experience suggested the undergraduate adult students whom I served struggled with time management, and I wanted to understand how to best provide support for them. I also wanted to understand the specific factors that interfered with effective time management and how successful students overcame them because this data might inform

my course writing in terms of appropriate workload, as well as my department policies on

accepting late work.

I used an ontological approach to this study. The ontological approach was appropriate

because the participants' perceptions and experiences were unique (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I

assumed students' backgrounds and previous educational and professional experiences varied,

and students' experiences varied based on factors such as motivation, family status, and

profession. The paradigm of my study was realism because I was interested in exploring the real

time management experiences of the participants in the natural environment of the online

classroom. Realism was appropriate because I explored the real experiences of the participants in

a contemporary setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

My faith was the predominant factor affecting my interpretation of the data and my

interactions with students. Having experienced both teaching and learning online, I was able to

see things from the perspective of online students. I had an axiological assumption in favor of

on-site education, and I was concerned about the significant influence poor time management

had on attrition rates in online courses. I was also driven by an axiological assumption of

Christian conviction and compassion to provide the best possible online experience and support

to online students, as well as a professional desire to contribute to the body of knowledge

regarding best practices in course writing and policy-making in adult online programs.

Problem Statement

The problem I researched was the higher attrition rate in online education and its

relationship to time management among adult learners in online undergraduate degree programs.

Time management was an important factor in the retention of undergraduate adult students in

higher education. Adult students often had competing obligations that made time management

difficult. While online education had become popular among adults because of convenience and speed, research showed that this modality correlated with higher attrition rates (Emerson & MacKay, 2011; Poot et al., 2017). Multiple studies had identified time management as a significant factor in student retention and success (Landrum et al., 2006; O'Shea et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2017).

Some colleges and universities initially refused to offer online education courses, and the higher attrition rates were a viable reason. The problem was that universities needed to balance educational ideals, institutional reputation, and market demands to remain both true to their missions and fiscally sustainable (Johnson et al., 2016; Toufaily et al., 2018). Over the previous decade, Tomlinson (2018) conducted studies on student attitudes toward higher education and concluded the relationship between students and universities was becoming "increasingly transactional" (p. 711). Possibly more than ever before, universities needed to determine what students' expectations were as consumers if they wanted to remain viable. The need for online higher education had become even clearer in recent months, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In previous research, Davis et al. (2018) concluded students who lived in on-campus housing were at a greater risk of contracting communicable diseases due to living near one another. If students were choosing online education more and more in a relatively healthy world, the implications of pandemics were clear.

For online higher education programs to thrive, they had to offer online courses and reduce attrition rates to stay competitive in the academic marketplace. A gap existed in research in that there had been little research exploring the specific time management challenges and strategies among adult online students. Research was needed to identify the challenges and time management strategies of successful online students to help course writers to understand

appropriate workloads. The data would also inform the practices of institutions that provided effective time management training to students. Finally, the data would inform institutional strategies for increasing retention rates in online programs.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this case study was to explore the specific time management practices and experiences among a group of adult students in an online undergraduate degree program at a mid-sized, Midwestern, private university. T*ime management practices* were defined as behaviors that include organizing, planning, scheduling, goal-setting, and perceived control of time (Bajec, 2019). The theory guiding this study was time equity theory, which argued for the primacy of conscious time management decision-making in determining success and satisfaction (Tourangbam, 2011). Exploring the experiences of adult online learners was intended to help universities to understand student needs regarding course load scheduling, course workload, and time management training.

Significance of the Study

This section explains the empirical, theoretical, and practical significance of this study. The empirical significance section discusses how the insights gained from this study may be used to shed light on existing theory, as well as to form a working hypothesis for future studies. The theoretical significance section discusses how this study builds on the existing theories regarding time management and attrition among adult students in online environments. The practical significance section identifies ways in which the results of this study may be used to inform the practices of higher education administrators.

Empirical Significance

Understanding the experiences with time management among successful adult online students may lead to lower attrition rates and help higher education institutions decide whether to embrace or resist the adoption of the online modality. This study builds upon the research conducted by O'Shea et al. (2015), which explored how both undergraduate and graduate students in Australia learned in online environments. While their study focused on the factors affecting student engagement, this case study focused on the experiences of adult online students in America, the challenges of the academic-work-family balance, and the time management strategies they used to overcome these challenges. It also built on the work of Poot et al. (2017), who identified a lack of sustained motivation among online students as a primary factor affecting the high attrition rates in higher education because unmotivated students did not prioritize tasks effectively. This case study explored the factors affecting students' ability to manage their time by allowing adult online students to describe these experiences as they learned.

Theoretical Significance

While case studies do not offer much in the way of statistical generalizations due to the small sample size, they can provide empirical evidence on theoretical concepts (Yin, 2014). The data gained from this study allowed me to form a working hypothesis about the time management practices among successful adult online students that could be tested in future quantitative research. The case study (not the specific case) added some empirical evidence to Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory, shedding light on what task prioritization looked like to adult online students.

Practical Significance

The study also had practical significance through informing higher education administrators about the appropriate workload for adult students and the type of time

management training that could be provided to these students. It also provided data for higher education institutions where online programs are being considered because of their financial benefits, but where higher attrition rates are a concern. Finally, this study provided adult online learners with a detailed look at the time management practices of others, which may help them to improve their time management practices.

Research Questions

The more a researcher's questions seek to determine how or why a phenomenon works, the more appropriate a case study is to answer them (Yin, 2018). This study sought to explore the phenomenon of time management among adult learners in online environments because prior research had determined that a deeper look into this phenomenon was needed (Landrum et al., 2006). The following research questions formed the basis of this case study. The primary research questions are listed first, followed by secondary questions, which were aligned with Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory because they explored the three types of activities defined by this theory. Each research question is followed by an explanation of its purpose and relevance.

What are the time management experiences of adult students in an online undergraduate degree program? This was the central research question, which was important because poor time management had been identified as a significant contributing factor to the high attrition rates in online education (Basila, 2014; Landrum et al., 2006; O'Shea et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2017). Exploring the time management experiences of adult online students was intended to help higher education institutions to develop time management training for these students, which could help to raise retention rates. This question also shed some empirical light on Tourangbam's

(2011) time equity theory, which held that prioritizing tasks and actively managing one's time were primary determinants of productivity and satisfaction.

1. How do adult online students define and manage their priorities? This was the first of three sub-questions, which explored adult online students' time management experiences in terms of the three task categories identified by Tourangbam (2011) in his time equity theory. Exploring how these students define and manage their priorities meant examining their experience with tasks directly related to their academic goals, such as reading, completing assignments, and studying.

2. How do adult online students balance their obligations with their priorities? This sub-question explored student experiences in the second task category identified by Tourangbam (2011). Exploring student obligations meant examining their experiences with tasks that were unrelated to their academic goals but were required. These tasks included such things as care of children, work requirements, and home maintenance. Tasks that did not contribute to one's goals, according to Tourangbam (2011), should be completed in the less productive hours of the day.

3. How do adult online students minimize time wasters? According to Tourangbam (2011), time wasters were tasks or activities that were not required and did not progress toward goals. Exploring students' experiences with time wasters was important because, once identified, students could then design strategies to minimize these activities while enrolled in academic courses, especially during the most productive hours of the day.

Definitions

1. Attrition occurs when a student who has enrolled in an institution one semester is not enrolled

in the following semester and has also not completed a declared degree program (Bean &

Metzer, 1985).

2. Fragmented time-chunking is dividing work into categories by importance and then sub-

dividing those tasks into manageable tasks (Gaskin, & Skousen, 2016).

3. Multitasking is the strategy of working on multiple tasks simultaneously (Gaskin, & Skousen,

2016).

4 *Nontraditional Adult Learners* are students aged 25 or older, or students who are under 25, but

have adult responsibilities, such as full-time employment, financial independence, having

children who are dependents, being a single parent, or having delayed entry into higher

education (Chen, 2017).

5. Obligations are activities that are required but do not contribute to progress toward goals

(Tourangbam, 2011)

6. Online Community Environment (OCE) is defined as "people who interact with each other,

who share a purpose providing a reason for the community, whose interaction is guided by

mutual policies, rituals and rules and whose social interaction takes place via computer

systems" (Preece, 2001, p. 1).

7. Persistence occurs when a student completes all course requirements in a degree program

(Yang, 2016). (This term is used interchangeably with *retention* in this study because of the

similarity of the definitions used in the source material.)

8. Priorities are activities that contribute to progress toward goals (Tourangbam, 2011)

9. Retention occurs when a student completes a declared degree program (Landrum et al. 2006).

10. *Self-efficacy* is a person's perceived ability to understand, organize, and complete a task (Bandura & Schunk, 1981).

11. *Self-regulation* is the ability to plan and manage one's time, to set goals, to focus on academic work, to organize and use study materials, to establish a productive work environment, and to use social resources effectively (Williams et al., 2019).

12. *Time management behaviors* include organizing, planning, scheduling, goal-setting, and perceived control of time (Bajec, 2019).

13. *Time-wasters* are activities that are not necessary and do not contribute to progress toward goals (Tourangbam, 2011)

Summary

Online education became popular in the 2000s because of convenience and speed, but this convenience came at the cost of higher attrition rates (Poot et al., 2017). The problem was that universities needed to respond to the market demand for online education to remain fiscally sustainable. For higher education institutions to remain solvent, they also needed to reduce attrition rates in online programs. Exploring the time management challenges adult students experienced while taking online courses was an important part of that process. The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore the challenges experienced by adult students in an online program and to understand the time management behaviors of successful students. Discovering the time management strategies utilized by successful students was intended to help universities to develop or improve existing time management training in student support services.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter is a discussion of the existing literature based on research related to time management among adult learners in online higher education. The first section discusses the theoretical framework, time equity theory, which will guide this case study. The second section will discuss the related research in the context of higher education, including the relationship between time management and attrition rates, whether time management can be learned, time management and work productivity, student work-family-academics balance, and adult learners. The last section of the literature review is a summary of the current research on time management as it applies to this study. For the purposes of this study, the term *time management* will be used with its accepted meaning among existing literature: time management behaviors include organizing, planning, scheduling, and goal setting, which implies a perceived control of time (Bajec, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was Tourangbam's (2011) concept of time equity, which is referred to as time equity theory because of its roots in existing theory. Time equity theory is the principle that time is the one thing that is distributed to all humans equitably, and that how humans decide to spend their time is directly related to how fulfilling and successful their lives will be (Tourangbam, 2011). It was an empowering theory because people who embraced it could take control of their lives, rather than being victims of circumstance (Tourangbam, 2011). Current quantitative literature supported time equity theory in the correlations found between time management skills and optimism, purpose, self-esteem, and reported good health (Bajec, 2019; Wang & Wang, 2018). A limited amount of qualitative

research also supported the concept that one's time management practices were related to one's happiness. Beattie et al. (2019) conducted a qualitative study that found that college freshmen who did not manage their time effectively were more likely to feel unhappy or experience depression.

Time equity theory posited that to practice effective time management, one had to first evaluate his or her current use of time in terms of return on time (ROT), which was similar to the concept of return on investment (ROI) (Tourangbam, 2011). Evaluating time use according to ROT involved dividing one's time use into three categories: time wasters, which were activities that were unnecessary and did not advance a person toward one's goals, obligations, which were activities that were required, but did not directly advance one toward one's goals, and priorities, which were activities that did advance one directly toward one's goals (Tourangbam, 2011). For this study, the focus was on the participants' academic goals, and the ROT categories were applied accordingly when exploring their behaviors and experiences. ROT relied on effective goal-setting, which was well-established in the research literature as a way of improving both motivation and performance when the goals were specific and challenging, but achievable, and when feedback on the extent to which the goals had been met was provided (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2019). For goals to be effective, they had to be challenging, but achievable. Research participants produced better quality work when their goals were challenging than they produced when goals were less challenging (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018).

The value of studying time management experiences is well-established in the research literature. For many (if not most) people, time was considered to be valuable and scarce (Noussair & Stoop, 2015). Researchers even showed that time could be used as a reward for

productivity, and, in some circumstances, employees viewed the reward of time as equal to the reward of money (Noussair & Stoop, 2015). College students' use of time was also shown to predict other behaviors. For instance, the amount of time college freshmen spent watching television predicted enrollment in less-challenging courses during their senior year (Small et al., 2017). Beattie et al. (2019) found that college freshmen with self-reported poor time management skills spent little time studying, which was directly correlated to poor academic performance. The same study showed that students who performed poorly in academics had expected to achieve their academic goals and were unhappy that they had performed poorly (Beattie et al., 2019).

Another important concept in time equity theory was peak working hours (Tourangbam, 2011). Tourangbam (2011) theorized that everyone had a particular time of day when he or she produced the best quality work, due to motivational factors, energy level, and other factors. Which hours were peak working hours varied by individual (Tourangbam, 2011). However, depending on one's natural tendencies, sometimes people did not use peak working hours to complete important tasks. Among college students, procrastinators tended to begin working on academic work in the evening, as opposed to the morning, without regard to whether these were the peak working hours (Hensley et al., 2018). This decision affected sleep patterns, and sleep patterns affected academic performance (Hensley et al., 2018). Students who slept more on weekends than on weekdays were outperformed by students who did not show this tendency (Hensley et al., 2018). To implement time equity theory, once activities were divided into the three categories of priorities, obligations, and time-wasters, a person would then plan to dedicate peak working hours to priorities, while non-peak working hours were dedicated to obligations, and time-wasters were eliminated (Tourangbam, 2011). Dedicating peak working hours to one's

priorities was important because work submitted close to a deadline had been associated with lower quality than work submitted earlier (Balasubramanian & Sivadasan, 2018). Dividing work into categories by importance and then subdividing those tasks into manageable tasks was referred to as fragmented time-chunking (Gaskin, & Skousen, 2016). Online education involved the digitization of learning, which made fragmented time-chunking easier (Bandura & Schunk, 1981), but the claim that it made learning more effective was challenged on the basis that time management strategies such as this rewarded unreasonable workloads and failed to acknowledge the value of leisure time and its effect on productivity (Wajcman, 2019). Others criticized time management strategies generally, on the basis that they placed too much emphasis on urgent tasks (tasks that needed to be completed by a deadline) and too little on tasks that were important (tasks that had the most value) (Lee, 2017).

Little research existed on the experiences of people using time-chunking as a time-management strategy in the workplace or academic settings, but research had been done on the strategy of multitasking, which may be understood as its opposite. Multitasking, which is the strategy of working on multiple tasks simultaneously, was shown to decrease the time it takes to complete tasks, but measuring the time it takes to complete a task was different from measuring whether the task was completed well, and the use of multitasking also correlated with higher stress levels in participants (Gaskin, & Skousen, 2016). While some studies showed multitasking significantly reduced the quality of decision-making (Kocher et al., 2019), other studies showed no correlation between media multitasking and academic achievement (Law & Stock, 2019). This research sheds some light on the experiences of adult learners with fragmented time-chunking and multitasking because their experiences were studied in terms of how they

prioritized and divided tasks into the three categories, as well as whether and how they multi-tasked while doing schoolwork.

Time equity theory is rooted in Abert Bandura's self-efficacy (1981) and self-regulation (1991) theories. Self-efficacy is the perception that one has of his or her ability to understand, organize, and complete a task (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Self-efficacy has been positively correlated to academic achievement (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Gan, 2019; Ghaniadeh, 2016; He et al., 2018; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019) and psychological well-being (He et al., 2018). Specifically, elementary schoolchildren with strong self-efficacy outperformed their peers on mathematics tasks (Bandura & Schunk, 1981), college students with strong self-efficacy outperformed their peers on English assessments (Gan, 2019), and adult students in online college courses with strong self-efficacy outperformed their peers in academic performance generally (Williams et al., 2019). The importance of belief in one's ability to organize learning material, in particular, was a necessary element of time management (Bandura, 1991; Tourangbam, 2011). While cause and effect are difficult to establish in scientific research, students who exhibited strong self-efficacy responded differently when faced with challenging academic problems (Bandura, 1991). They tended to research to find the answers to the questions, rather than guessing, as their low self-efficacy peers tended to do (Wajcman, 2019). Self-efficacy is a strong basis for time equity theory, not only because self-efficacy was one of the strongest factors in academic success (Ayllón & Colomer, 2019; Gan, 2019), but also because one's self-efficacy could also be improved through the use of short-term goal setting (Ayllón & Colomer, 2019; Gan, 2019). Whether long-term goal setting affected self-efficacy was difficult to determine because, when was studied, the participants broke the long-term goals down into proximal goals (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Gaskin, & Skousen, 2016). Goal-setting

has been a well-established convention in many different time management and learning theories (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018; Bajec, 2019; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Tourangbam, 2011). The key point is that perceived self-efficacy has been positively correlated with self-regulating time management (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Gaskin, & Skousen, 2016).

Directly related to self-efficacy theory is Bandura's self-regulation theory, which emphasized personal agency, positing that human behavior was driven by influence on itself (Bandura, 1991). Self-regulating behaviors include monitoring one's own behavior and its effects on one's life, making judgments about one's own behavior based on personal standards, and reacting to one's own previous actions and decisions (Bandura, 1991). An example would be setting a short-term goal to complete a paper and planning a reward of the opportunity for relaxation on vacation when the paper is complete. By making the vacation contingent on completing the paper, the individual acts as his or her own agent of will, imposing standards and rewards on oneself. Thus, self-efficacy, the belief in the ability to perform a task, influences self-regulation, the decision to set standards and impose them on oneself, which influences one to set goals and make plans to achieve them, which involves time management. Self-regulated students planned their study time, kept track of their grades and learning progress, controlled their learning environment and practices, and reflected on their learning (Hensley et al., 2018). These students tended to be proactive and self-directed (Hensley et al., 2018). Time management theories, and, in particular, time equity theory, are natural outgrowths of self-efficacy theory and self-regulation theory because the beliefs in one's ability to complete tasks and to act on one's own behalf were presumably related to one's ability to control time. Abundant evidence exists to support this conclusion (Bajec, 2019; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Hensley et al. 2018; Hurk, 2006). In fact, like self-efficacy and self-regulation, time management behaviors have been able

to predict goal achievement, as well as academic performance (Bajec, 2019; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Hensley et al., 2018; Hurk, 2006).

As well-established as the link between self-efficacy, time management, goal-setting, and academic achievement are, a gap in the literature existed when it came to adult learners in an online higher education environment (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Rothes et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). While some data existed, most of it was quantitative in nature (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Rothes et al., 2017). Qualitative research was needed to explore the experiences of adult learners in higher education, particularly through interviews, focus groups, and case studies (Rothes et al., 2017). Data gathered from case studies is useful for providing a deeper understanding of existing theoretical principles (Yin, 2018). Therefore, exploring the time management behaviors of adult online higher education students in an instrumental case study not only filled the gap in the literature, but also produced data that clarified common time management practices of adult learners. It also helped to identify the time management strategies of successful adult learners, which can inform the time management training practices in institutions of higher education.

Related Literature

This section discusses how the existing literature related to time management, attrition in higher education, work productivity, work-life-family balance, and the characteristics and needs of adult learners applies to this study. It provides evidence of the correlation between poor time management skills and the problem of high attrition rates in online higher education to illustrate the need for this study. Existing literature is presented that suggested time management could be learned, although more research in this area was needed (Landrum, 2006). Research from China, Ghana, Spain, Germany, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sweden shed light on the relationship between

time management and work productivity. Finally, this section discusses the recent literature

regarding the work-family-academics balance in higher education and the implications for the

changing makeup of the higher education student population (Chen, 2017).

Time Management and Attrition in Higher Education

A prevalent problem in higher education has always been predicting whether students

would be successful when making the jump from secondary school to higher education. While it

seemed presumable that students who performed well in high school would continue to perform

well at the college level, this was not predictably the case. Students' G.P.A. in high school was

not a significant predictor of college success (Beattie et al., 2019). Existing research showed that

to be successful in higher education, a student needed to have good time management skills,

critical thinking skills, and adequate academic support, which meant timely and robust feedback

from the instructor (Rose et al., 2018). Many studies were conducted to identify factors that

could predict success or failure at the tertiary level. College students often cited such things as

lack of academic support, lack of guidance from family, lack of study skills, and financial issues

as causes for their academic struggles (Rose et al., 2018).   A specific factor related to study

skills and family support that has been associated with a high probability of attrition is time

pressure (Morison & Cowley, 2017).

Time pressures, along with personal circumstances, use of support services, and student

engagement level, was a significant factor affecting attrition rates in higher education (Morison

& Cowley, 2017, Greene & Maggs, 2015). Time pressure usually manifested itself in the

students' abilities to balance time spent on professional obligations, family responsibilities, and

schoolwork (Castello et al., 2017; Choi & Choi, 2018; Morison & Cowley, 2017; Stone et al.,

2016). Many students reported that time management was the most difficult challenge to

overcome during their college years, and most reported they had not anticipated time challenges would be as difficult as they turned out to be (Morison & Cowley, 2017). Beattie et al. (2019) found that most students who performed poorly during their freshman year of college had expected to be successful, and they were generally disappointed that they had not succeeded. This suggested that these students did not intentionally prioritize other tasks over studying, but they lacked the necessary time management skills to be successful. Insufficient research has been done to explore how college students spend their time (Greene & Maggs, 2015).

Attrition in higher education can also be affected by public policy. Over the past 30 years, governments and institutions attempted to remedy a perceived inequality of access to higher education through more flexible admissions policies, competency-based education, and new teaching methods, including online education (Salamonson et al., 2018). Not only did these efforts result in a large number of under-prepared students entering higher education classrooms, but they also resulted in many more students from lower socio-economic backgrounds attending college (Salamonson et al., 2018). These students typically needed to work full-time while in school, and many entered higher education later in life, so they already had family responsibilities when they entered college (Salamonson et al., 2019). In online education, attrition rates were significantly higher than in traditional classrooms (Bettinger et al., 2017; Stone & Springer, 2019). As more institutions offered online courses, this problem became more serious, and not enough was being done to address it (McPherson & Bacow, 2015). Students who took even a single course online may have hindered their learning because the evidence showed students taking online courses performed worse than students in on-site courses, not only in the online course itself, but in future courses, as well (Bettinger et al., 2017).

Not surprisingly, adult students were more likely to be managing a family and full-time work than traditional students while in college, and they were more than 40% more likely to drop out than traditional students (Webb & Cotton, 2018). To remain competitive in the marketplace, higher education institutions needed to provide personalized interventions that included training in time management (Kelley et al., 2016; Morison & Cowley, 2017). Even before this period of economic shutdown in response to COVID-19, university administrators were beginning to feel compelled to perform a delicate balancing act between doing what was best for their students and remaining economically viable (McPherson & Bacow, 2015). One perspective of the higher attrition rates in the online modality was that students did not feel connected with their instructor or their peers, and the lack of social connectedness impaired learning (Martins & Nunes, 2016). Higher education institutions responded to this by using virtual classrooms, such as WebEx and Zoom (Martins & Nunes, 2016). While virtual classrooms enabled students to feel more connected with the instructor and peers, requiring students to be online during live sessions conflicted with one of the main reasons students sought out online programs: schedule flexibility (Martins & Nunes, 2016).

Can Time Management Be Learned?

Another way higher education institutions addressed high attrition rates was through time management training (Gilar-Corbí et al., 2018). Research revealed that people made better decisions when they were not under the pressure of meeting deadlines (Kocher et al., 2019) and that work completed close to deadlines was of lower quality than work completed earlier (Balasubramanian & Sivadasan, 2018). However, deadlines could not be removed completely, and the ability to meet deadlines was considered a life skill that could be taught (Kellenberg et al., 2017). Research on workers with flexible schedules in Nepal showed that, while providing

flexible schedules seemed to be an effective way to lower stress, evidence suggested that employees tended to manage their time poorly in this environment and that some structure was beneficial to productivity (Lehdonvirta, 2018). Many research experts suggested teaching self-regulation behaviors, which included time management, should be a goal of adult education programs (Gilar-Corbí et al., 2018; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Webb & Cotton, 2018). Beattie et al. (2019) suggested that college students needed to be taught how to study and how to set aside ample time for study. However, the ability to meet deadlines was a difficult trait to measure, and the data often seemed contradictory (Kocher et al., 2019; Sæle et al., 2016). For example, in studies, procrastination was not linked to G.P.A. (Sæle et al., 2016), but students who demonstrated the ability to meet deadlines outperformed their peers under time pressure, even when their peers violated the deadlines (Kocher et al., 2019). Procrastination was also associated with completing academic tasks later in the day, which was correlated with less sleep and ineffective study habits, such as cramming (spending five or more hours studying just before a test) (Hensley et al., 2018). Hensley et al. (2018) found that poor-performing college students did not significantly differ from students who excelled academically in terms of how much time was spent studying or how much time was spent sleeping. Irregular sleep patterns were found in most college students, regardless of academic performance (Hensley et al., 2018). Late-start studying (beginning after 9:00 P.M.) was, however, found to be a risk factor for ineffective time use (Hensley et al., 2018). If the tendency toward procrastination was inherent, then these students may have been naturally disadvantaged in academic performance. On the contrary, people who were naturally inclined to plan were more likely to begin writing a paper earlier, dividing the work over multiple days (Hensley et al., 2018). Effective academic time use was positively correlated with consistent weekday studying, Saturday studying, consistent bedtime, and

consistent wake-up time, even though academic performance was not significantly correlated to consistent sleep time (Hensley et al., 2018). The uncertainty lay in how strong these natural tendencies were and whether students could learn to overcome them. In one study, adult students' ability to manage time effectively was positively correlated with their parents' level of education (Williams et al., 2019), which could arguably be evidence time management could be learned, or, alternately, time management skills were hereditary. Some people seem to have had more natural ability to meet deadlines than others; this may lead to the belief that time management is an innate quality (Gan, 2019). Yet, time management training at some institutions has led to increased self-efficacy, which has already been positively correlated with better academic performance (Ayllón & Colomer, 2019; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Gan, 2019; Ghaniadeh, 2016; Hurk, 2006; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2016; Sæle et al., 2016). Time enrolled in college has not been a significant factor correlating to effective time management (Hensley et al., 2018). Students did not naturally become better at time management through completing courses in college (Hensley et al., 2018), so teaching time management skills directly may be necessary and important. Effective time management was also shown to have other benefits, such as reduced stress and better quality of sleep (Wang & Wang, 2018). Similar training was suggested for students entering master's degree programs, which would teach such topics as computer literacy, research skills, and stress management (Motseke, 2016), which may be related to time management (Motseke, 2016; Stone et al., 2016; Wang & Wang, 2018). However, more research was needed to understand time management among adult students (Landrum, 2006).

Even the perception of time itself was not a universal character trait (Bajec, 2019). People perceived time differently, and the way people perceived time predicted their time management

behaviors (Bajec, 2019). For example, some people naturally tended to focus on the future and plan for it (Bajec, 2019). This perspective was called future perspective, and it was positively correlated with all of the identified time management behaviors (Bajec, 2019). Others tended to view life through the lens that things happen to them (Bajec, 2019). They perceived a more external locus of control, were reactive, rather than proactive, and their perspective was negatively correlated with all of the accepted time management behaviors (Bajec, 2019). Others had a present hedonistic perspective, meaning they were focused on the things that brought them pleasure in the present time and did not spend much time reflecting on the past or planning for the future; they tended to take risks more than people who held the other perspectives (Bajec, 2019). Present hedonistic perspective was negatively correlated with organization and perceived control of time, but not with the other time management behaviors, such as goal-setting and planning (Bajec, 2019). These different perceptions made it difficult to address time management in large groups, but it was found that particular dispositions toward learning could change in an educational setting (Bajec, 2019; Choi, 2017; Hurk, 2006; Kellenberg et al., 2017), so individualized time management training could still have been effective. In a consumerist age, when students wanted every course to be relevant to their career goals (Smith, 2017; Toufaily et al., 2018), a course in time management was a tough sell. Making the course required may have been the only viable option because the people who needed time-management training the most were the least likely to attend optional training, and, unfortunately, they may also have been the least likely group to implement any training they received (Bajec, 2019). If a time management course were to prove able to lower attrition rates significantly, it could be cost-effective for institutions to require the course, but offer it tuition-free (Yomtoy et al., 2017). Another option was to simply incorporate time management into existing required courses, such as composition

(Baject, 2019). A third option was peer mentoring, which received positive feedback from adult learners, particularly when it came to learning how to manage time (Yomtoy et al., 2017). In this case study, exploring adult online learners' experiences with time management while they were taking courses was intended to provide some specific insights into whether offering time management training was practical, and, if so, what type of content should be included in such a course.

Time Management and Happiness

Probably the boldest claim made by Tourangbam (2011) was that time management led to a more satisfying and happy life. In the context of higher education, it has already been well established that effective time management is positively and significantly correlated with better academic performance (Landrum et al., 2006; Macan et al., 1990). A study of college freshmen also concluded that students who earn scores of D or F expressed more feelings of unhappiness than their peers who earned As and Bs (Beattie et al., 2018). Specifically, in terms of life satisfaction, thrivers (students who earned As and Bs) were separated from divers (students who earned Ds and Fs) by more than half a standard deviation (Beattie et al., 2018). The implication was that helping students to improve their time management could improve their grades, which could make them experience more life satisfaction. Kim et al. (2019) identified time management as the "most important factor that supports the students' goals and task strategies" (p. 90892). Academic achievement, health, and relaxation were the three most common goals identified by the students in this study (Kim et al., 2019). They identified the following tasks as ways of achieving those goals: concentration, planning, attendance, adjusting smartphone use, exercising, eating regular meals, and resting (Kim et al., 2019). They identified time management as a "fundamental element for achieving such goals and task strategies" (Kim et al,

2019, p. 90892). This evidence suggested that college students' happiness (as represented in goal-setting) was directly related to their academic achievement and that they viewed time management as an important strategy for academic achievement.

Time Management and Work Productivity

Much of the research on time management has been conducted in the business world, rather than the academic world (Tourangbam, 2011). A look into time management strategies and research into the relationship between time management and work quality in different parts of the world can be useful when trying to understand student experiences, especially when the subjects are adult learners. One theory that has been used to explain the relationship between time management and work quality is time allocation theory (Wei et al., 2018). This theory divided employees' time into working hours and non-working hours and held the seemingly unconventional position that decisions made during non-working hours were more important than decisions made during working hours when it came to impact on work performance (Wei et al., 2018). This theory was significantly different from Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory, which did not consider non-work hours, and has been criticized for placing no value on leisure time (Wajcman, 2019). Research conducted among Chinese assembly line manufacturing employees found that increased housework among its employees improved the quality of work produced in the factory (Wei et al., 2018). If increased housework were interpreted as a result of good time management skills, this finding supports research suggesting that effective time management leads to greater life satisfaction and productivity (Bajec, 2019; Wang & Wang, 2018). However, Wei et al. (2018) also found that women did more housework than men, and increased housework among male participants did not have the same positive effect on work production as it did among female participants. The researchers suggested this was because, in

Chinese culture, women were motivated more by family roles, while men were motivated more by their professional roles (Wei et al., 2018). However, the nature of the work done in the study setting should also be considered. Since time allocation theory was the theoretical framework, and time allocation theory was concerned with the quality of decision-making during work hours versus non-working hours, it seems relevant to question the number and weight of decisions assembly-line workers typically made during a workday. The repetitive, machine-like nature of the work in a factory hardly makes for an appropriate setting for a study about professional decision-making. However, Wei et al. (2018) did raise questions about how people spent their leisure time and the extent to which this affected their work performance.

Perhaps more relevant research was conducted among service workers in Ghana, Africa, which found employees were generally poor at time management (as measured exclusively by how they spent their time at work) (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018). Wajcman (2019) suggested that the eight-hour workday was too long, which partially explained the behavior of the typical worker. Amponsah-Tawiah et al. (2018) found that employees typically arrived at work around 6:30 A.M. to avoid traffic on the way to work, but they did not typically start working until 8:00 A.M. They also began thinking about break time and end the end of the workday at least 15 minutes before the time for each arrived, which also decreased productivity (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018). Recommendations were made for employers to stop paying employees based on the number of hours they were present (presenteeism) and to start paying them based on goal achievement (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018). This approach was supported by research that linked goal-setting and effective time management to greater academic success (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018; Bajec, 2019; Hensley et al., 2018; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Tourangbam, 2011), but was also challenged by research that showed Nepalese workers' production dropped

when they were given too much flexibility in their schedules (Lehdonvirta, 2018). The supposed

benefit for employers was that they would no longer lose money on employees stealing time by

not being engaged in work during work hours (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018). It was suggested

that pay could be based on the value of achieving the goal, rather than on seniority or the number

of hours an employee is present at work (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018), which was consistent

with research that identifies goal-setting as one of the primary features of effective time

management (Bajec, 2019; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Hensley et al., 2018; Hurk, 2006).

Employees could no longer cheat the system by clocking in early, but not working, or clocking in

another employee who was not present (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018). One benefit for

employees identified was that they could be given more flexibility to work from home

(Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018). This was another benefit that became more relevant in 2020,

due to the Coronavirus pandemic and the partial shutdown of the economy. Both the employer

and the employees in the system of presenteeism could justifiably be accused of poor time

management, and both parties could benefit from better time management (Amponsah-Tawiah et

al., 2018; Kocher et al., 2019).

The Work-Family-Academics Balance among Higher Education Students

Higher participation rates in tertiary education were a global trend, and Liyanagamage et

al. (2019) showed that a higher percentage of students were working while attending college.

Limited research has been conducted to explore the emotional effect of trying to balance the

responsibilities of employment and academics simultaneously (Liyanagamage et al., 2019).

Research is needed to explore how much time spent working reduces the time for study. The

question of why students are working during college should also be explored. Are most students

working part-time jobs because they have extra time and want extra money, or are students

working out of necessity, to pay for college or because they have families to support? These are questions that qualitative case-study research can explore.

Much of the time management challenges in the workplace involved the balance of time between family and work (Chen, 2017; Neilson & Stanfors, 2018; SmithBattle, 2016). In Spain, time management was studied by comparing breadwinner couples (couples in which only one spouse worked outside of the home) and dual-income couples (Garcia-Roman et al., 2016). While it is not surprising to learn that dual-income earners spent less time with their children than breadwinner couples, it may be unexpected to learn that spouses in dual-income families did not spend less time with one another than their peers in breadwinner couples (Garcia-Roman et al., 2016). Most time management researchers have studied time management in terms of employers requiring people to sacrifice time that could have been dedicated to academic work (Green & Maggs, 2015; SmithBattle, 2016). Garcia-Roman et al. (2016) showed that, in Spain, spouses were able to coordinate their schedules to spend more time together. A similar study in Sweden supported these findings; dual-income couples spent more time with one another than previous generations of single-income couples (Neilson & Stanfors, 2018). The discrepancy between time spent together and time spent with their children in Spanish families suggested that it was either more difficult or less desirable for parents in dual-income households to spend time with their children than with one another (Garcia-Roman et al., 2016). In contrast, the Swedish study found that, as more families became dual-income from 1990 to 2010, couples not only spent more time together, but they also spent more time with their children (Neilson & Stanfors, 2018). While the Spanish study revealed fathers were spending more time with their children than previous generations and taking a more active role in parenting, even in dual-earner households, mothers spent significantly more time with children than fathers (Garcia-Roman et

al., 2016). Children in Spanish households overall spent less time with their parents than in past generations, but this time gap was largely filled by grandparents and other members of the extended families, rather than utilizing the daycare model, which was prevalent in America (Garcia-Roman et al., 2016). In Sweden, the shift toward more time with children and spouses was attributed to stronger familial bonds and parents actively favoring time with family over time alone (Neilson & Stanfors, 2018).

In America, research indicated that adults faced a higher risk of attrition due to the demands of work and family (Webb & Cotton, 2018). The complicating factor of having children while in college was demonstrated in an American study of teen mothers, which showed that, although teen mothers generally desired to finish high school and attend college, these desires were often not met (SmithBattle, 2016). One such student summed up the typical change in attitude toward school in this way: "I know that I have bigger priorities now than I did before I was pregnant. And it just makes me think more than I used to. And take things more seriously now… I'm gonna have to go back and get my GED . . . so I can better my education and have a good enough job to support me and my child" (SmithBattle, 2016, p. 355). When these teen mothers and their parents were interviewed, they identified the factors that inhibited the pursuit of higher education as work demands, family responsibilities, including child care, and policies at their high schools and colleges that made it difficult to meet their goals (SmithBattle, 2016). Thirteen of the nineteen teen mothers in SmithBattle's (2016) study reported that they were employed after having their children. The teens' parents typically expected them to work to provide for their children while they were in school, and this was not affected by the new mothers' socio-economic status (SmithBattle, 2016). One of the teens' mothers told her, "You need to take responsibility. Move out and make a life for your own baby," and expected her to

financially support herself and her child with little help from her parents (SmithBattle, 2016, p. 358). The teen's new sense of responsibility was reflected in her response: "I was wantin' to do it by myself anyway. I don't wanna be leaning on other people to support him. I'd rather do it myself. Because I'm sick of my parents always telling me, take responsibility" (SmithBattle, 2016, p. 358). Notably, these teen mothers did not express the expectation that they would be able to rely on the fathers of their children for any financial or emotional support (SmithBattle, 2016). One teen mother in the study, however, described her high school as supportive of her academic goals (SmithBattle, 2016). Her high school provided flexible attendance and college advising that encouraged and enabled her to succeed (SmithBattle, 2016). SmithBattle (2016) suggested that this high school should be the model for how schools should view teen pregnancy, not as a tragic occurrence, but as an opportunity to take advantage of the students' renewed motivation to finish school and attend college. Homeschooling was also identified as a factor that significantly increased the students' ability to continue their education, but only the students who lived in suburban areas had access to homeschooling (SmithBattle, 2016). SmithBattle (2016) concluded that motherhood served as a motivation that transformed under-achieving and apathetic teenage girls into young women who were motivated to achieve academic goals to improve their lives and care for their children. The paradox was that this renewed motivation was accompanied by an unexpected level of demand on their time. To help these students to succeed, colleges needed to understand these demands and how they may be able to help students manage their time.

Most research into how college students spend their time is focused on the short-term, such as a single course, but little research has been done on how they spend their time over longer periods, such as semesters or school years (Green & Maggs, 2015; Herrera et al., 2017).

Much of the research into time management among college students is based on the effect of employment and/or participation in extra-curricular activities on academic performance (Kim & Baker, 2015). The time trade-off hypothesis suggests students' time spent working or participating in extra-curricular activities caused them to sacrifice study time (Green & Maggs, 2015). Research has supported some aspects of the time trade-off hypothesis. Green & Maggs (2015) found that the number of hours spent working did have a significant negative effect on the number of hours spent studying. This negative impact was found to be most significant on weekdays, when students were likely to have sacrificed academic study hours for work hours (Green & Maggs, 2015). However, time spent in other organized activities, especially those that took place on weekends, were less related to the number of hours a student spent on academic work (Green & Maggs, 2015). Some studies have shown that students who earned higher grade-point averages in college spent more time studying (Hensley et al., 2018), although other studies have produced conflicting data (Greene & Maggs, 2015).

German students transitioning from secondary school to university reported experiencing more stress from work overload than their peers who transitioned from secondary school to full-time employment (Herrera et al., 2017). This higher stress level was even more pronounced among students who worked part-time while attending university, causing concern that the added stress could lead to health issues among university students (Herrera et al., 2017). Medical students in Pakistan were found to experience similar high stress levels because of university workload, while no courses in time management were offered (Javaeed, 2019). Indeed, Green and Maggs (2015) found that students who were employed spent less time studying when measured over an entire semester than their non-working peers. However, the time trade-off hypothesis was challenged by the finding that, although students who participated in extra-

curricular activities did spend less time studying during the week, they typically spent more time than their peers studying on the weekends, making up the difference. Researchers emphasized that any study time lost on extra-curricular activities or work must be weighed against the social, cognitive, and practical skills benefits of these activities (Green & Maggs, 2015; Wajcman, 2019).

Although it has been shown both employment time and leisure time among college students have increased over the past three decades, inadequate research had been conducted on how students balanced work, family, and academic time because most studies focused on either work-academic balance or extra-curricular/academic balance (Green & Maggs, 2015; Landrum, 2006). A gap existed in the literature regarding how students balance work, extra-curriculars, and family time (Green & Maggs, 2015; Landrum, 2006). This case study will add to this body of knowledge by exploring all of the time management demands and strategies among a group of adult learners, allowing them to discuss freely the specific challenges they face, the strategies they use to overcome the challenges, and their perception of the effectiveness of the strategies they employ.

The Adult Learner

Non-traditional adult learners have been typically defined in literature as students who are over 25 years old and have adult responsibilities, such as living independently, having dependents, and/or having delayed the pursuit of higher education, rather than attending immediately following high school graduation (Chen, 2017). The adult learner is more likely to face the challenges of both family responsibilities and employment obligations while enrolled in a course of study in higher education, but what else is known about adult learners? Most adult learners enrolled in higher education programs to raise their employment status, either through

promotion or career change (Kim & Baker, 2015). Other common reasons for enrolling in

college cited by adult students included improving their job skills, personal reasons, and

supporting a family (Lowe & Gale, 2016). For comparison, 77% of traditional students, who

were typically younger, identified securing a job as the reason they were attending college (Lowe

& Gale, 2016). Indeed, it has been found that earning a two-year undergraduate degree

significantly increased the hourly wages of adults compared with peers who held only high

school diplomas (Kim & Baker, 2015). However, to achieve the goal of earning a two-year

degree, students had to sacrifice while in school to the extent that adult students enrolled in

undergraduate programs earned less while in school than their peers who held high school

diplomas and were not enrolled in school (Kim & Baker, 2015). Long-term studies should

include the cost of tuition and explore this phenomenon over a long term to discover how many

years adults with two-year degrees must work to make the sacrifice pay off (Kim & Baker,

2015). This is especially relevant because, although non-traditional adult students have been said

to represent 38.7% of students enrolled in higher education, a much larger percentage of students

fit the description, making traditional students the exception, rather than the rule (Chen, 2017).

That number has been increasing, as online programs have offered more opportunities for adults,

especially those who came from families where neither parent held a college degree (Stone et al.,

2016; Williams et al., 2019). Even though the makeup of the typical student body has changed

dramatically in recent years, the majority of resources offered and money spent at higher

education institutions was directed at traditional students who lived on campus (Chen, 2017).

More effort should be placed on understanding the unique needs of adult learners since the trend

seems unlikely to reverse in the foreseeable future (Landrum, 2006).

The growing percentage of adult students is not limited to the United States. Lowe and Gale (2016) conducted studies in 2011 and 2016 in Scotland to identify trends in adult learning. They found that, over this five-year period, the percentage of college tuition that was paid by students' employers dropped "dramatically," as employers shifted toward reliance on apprenticeships to recruit and train new employees (Lowe & Gale, 2016, p. 364). They also identified a reduction in the number of single parents enrolling in higher education (Lowe & Gale, 2016). Even with these shifts, 39% of students in Scottish higher education institutions were over 25 years old. Understanding the needs and motivations of adult students continues to be an important issue in the effort to reduce attrition rates among adult students.

A study of teenage mothers in America showed that becoming a mother in high school had a positive effect on the mother's motivation to finish high school and attend college (SmithBattle, 2016). The teen mothers in this study performed higher academically after discovering their pregnancy than they had previously (SmithBattle, 2016). With improved motivation and grades, it would seem that these students would be likely to succeed in college, as well, but this was not the case. Even though these women were more motivated and achieved more academically in high school, when they made the transition to college, they found that work responsibilities, family responsibilities, and inflexible policies at their places of study kept them from achieving their academic goals (SmithBattle, 2016). SmithBattle (2016) concluded that both employers and colleges needed to explore more flexible policies that would encourage young, unmarried mothers to remain in school and help them to be successful.

Motseke (2016) found that adult learners are motivated to raise their socioeconomic statuses through higher education, but they have more challenges to overcome. Adult learners have cited difficulty learning to use technology, lack of research skills, stress, and employer

workload as reasons for taking longer or failing to complete their degree programs (Motseke, 2016; Stone et al., 2016). The importance of understanding stressors in adult students is that stress has been found to correlate with lower levels of psychological well-being among college students (He et al., 2018). A healthy level of psychological well-being was defined as one that was characterized by "improved sleep patterns, levels of concentration, and clarity of thinking (He et al., 2018). It may seem logical to assume that, although adult students have reported more stress than younger students as a result of family and professional obligations, adult learners should have stronger stress management skills as a result of life experiences. However, He et al. (2018) concluded that adult learners did not typically possess greater stress-management abilities than younger students. Instead, adult students were found to have greater levels of stress and lower levels of psychological well-being (He et al., 2018). It should be noted that He et al. (2018) studied stress factors among nursing students and that students in medical fields typically reported higher stress than students in non-medical education programs (He et al., 2018).

Each one of the difficulties reported by adult students could be complicated by poor time-management skills (Stone et al., 2016). Time was a valuable commodity in the lives of adult learners. They wanted their academic programs to demonstrate respect for their time and to teach them skills and knowledge that are relevant to their career goals (Smith, 2017). They were motivated by family and by increasing their income (Buck, 2016). They appreciated the immediate feedback available when they took quizzes online (Johnson et al., 2018). They wanted their courses to be taught by subject-matter experts, but they also wanted to feel they were trusted to complete independent reading and assignments on their own time (Smith, 2017). Unfortunately, they also experienced higher stress than traditional students due to time pressure, family relationships, personal circumstances, and financial pressures (Motseke, 2016; Stone et

al., 2016; Wang & Wang, 2018). Notably, they also reported the presence and role of the instructor were important (Johnson et al., 2018; Martins & Nunes, 2016). These combined characteristics pose a serious challenge to higher education institutions, which must balance academic rigor, accessibility, instructor presence, and flexibility of schedule to attract the growing market of adult online learners.

Adult Learners and Work/Family/School Balance

Existing research has shown that adult learners typically faced the challenge of balancing the responsibilities of work, school, and family more than traditional students (Kremer, 2016). While younger students did not report conflict between school and family as being a significant challenge, almost 60% of adult students reported that family responsibilities negatively affected their schoolwork (Lowe & Gale, 2016). Women tended to experience greater conflict between work and family than men (Kremer, 2016). This was been explained by the proposition that women were required to perform a larger number of roles simultaneously during a typical day than their male counterparts (Kremer, 2016). While males were found to perform in different roles, they were more likely to have the advantage of compartmentalizing their time in these roles (Kremer, 2016). This separation of roles into separate time slots appeared to lessen the conflict between work and family responsibilities (Kremer, 2016). Among adult students, the most significant problem cited in interviews after starting college was that they did not anticipate the challenge of time management (Lowe & Gale, 2016). One respondent said, "I fell behind at the start, time management was hard, with four kids at home and working full time" (Lowe & Gale, 2016, p. 333).

While the conflict between work and family was significant, Kremer (2016) found that the strongest conflict among working adult college students with families was between school

and work. When students who had dropped out of college were asked to cite the reason for dropping out, younger students cited reasons such as "lack of maturity, ambition, and commitment," while adult students cited reasons such as "family/partner commitments and lack of family support (Lowe & Gale, 2016, p. 336). School-work conflict also generated the largest amount of stress and was associated with poor psychological health (Kremer, 2016). Lowe and Gale (2016) found that adult students who worked typically cited family responsibilities as the reason for working, while younger students who worked typically chose to work to make extra spending money. Kremer (2016) hypothesized that women experienced greater school-family conflict and a greater amount of resulting stress, but this was not the case. No significant difference was found between the level of school-family conflict between men and women who were adult college students and who worked outside the home (Kremer, 2016). The same study found that school and work hours were negatively correlated, such that the more hours students worked for employers, the less time they spent working on schoolwork (Kremer, 2016). The more students worked on schoolwork, the fewer hours they worked for employers (Kremer, 2016). The more hours students spent doing schoolwork, the greater the school-work conflict (Kremer, 2016). While the conflict between work and family was greater in women than in men, the conflicts between school and work, as well as between school and family, were not affected by gender (Kremer, 2016). In one study, 44% of adult college students reported that the balance between family and schoolwork had both positive and negative effects on academic performance (Lowe & Gale, 2016). The presence of a family who were supportive of the student's academic endeavors was reportedly a significant enhancer of college work performance, while the presence of a family who were not supportive was a significant hindrance (Lowe & Gale, 2016). Lowe and Gale (2016) also found that access to childcare was a significant factor in reducing the

chance of adult working students with families dropping out of higher education courses. In general, single adult students experienced less work-school stress than married adult students, but married adult students exhibited more ability to handle the resulting stress (Kremer, 2016). To lessen the stress between family and work responsibilities, Kremer (2016) suggested that employers should explore the possibility of offering more flexible work schedules, which would allow their employees to meet the demands of their competing roles. Lowe and Gale (2016) suggested that universities that offered flexible schedules were needed by adult working students to alleviate the conflict between attending lectures and going to work. Of course, higher education has been heavily engaged in flexible scheduling for decades, the most recent major development being the emergence of online education.

To be successful in an online learning environment, students must be able to balance their work, family, and study time on their own. When a student leaves home or work to attend a class in a traditional setting, many of the demands on the student's attention are left behind. However, when the student is learning from home, the demands may be more present, immediate, and demanding. It has been well established that family responsibilities could contribute to stress among adult learners (Buck, 2016; Motseke, 2016; Stone et al., 2016; Wang & Wang, 2018), but an adult learner's family also could positively affect the student's psychological well-being (He et al., 2018). Social support has been positively correlated with psychological well-being, which was associated with better concentration (He et al., 2018). Social support was defined as support from friends, family, and significant others (He et al., 2018). However, He et al. (2018) found that only social support from family and significant others was significantly positively correlated with positive psychological well-being. Providing a better life for one's children was shown to be a positive motivation for pursuing higher education (SmithBattle, 2016), but even adult

students without children cited family support as an important factor in their academic success (Buck, 2016). Family social support took two forms: emotional support and tangible support (He et al., 2018). Examples of emotional support were encouraging the family member who was a student, expressing belief in one's ability, and listening to the student (He et al., 2018). Examples of tangible support were providing study space in the home, where the student could study uninterrupted, relieving the student of childcare responsibilities through babysitting, or providing technical support for the student. Adult students reported that it was difficult to stay focused on academic work when other family activities were happening at the same time, especially when family members had access to the area in which the student was working (Buck, 2016). One mother in Buck's study (2016) commented that it was difficult to complete schoolwork in the morning because her children woke up at 6:30 A.M., forcing her to complete the work between 8:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M., when she was tired, resulting in sloppy work (Buck, 2016). In terms of Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory, this woman was unable to complete her academic work during her prime working hours, meaning that it was impossible to do her best work. Buck (2016) also found that the time, location, and method of studying were significant factors affecting persistence in distance-learning programs. University-provided support services, such as off-campus library services, were available to support online learners, but little data was available on how often students interacted with these support services or what those interactions looked like (Buck, 2016). One of the significant factors identified as helpful to online learners was having a space dedicated to studying, such as a home office. The ability to shut the door and close out distractions was found to be significant, but not all online learners had the luxury of such a space (Buck, 2016). Adult learners tended to study and complete academic work early in the morning or late at night when the children were asleep (Buck, 2016). While many institutions

offered 24/7 access to the library and other resources, many did not offer live help during the hours when most adult students were completing their work. Kremer (2016) found that the adult students' acceptance of the responsibility for balancing work, school, and family obligations was a primary factor in successfully balancing these responsibilities. However, Kremer (2016) also suggested that higher learning institutions could actively help adult students succeed by providing various accommodations, including "counseling, flexibility in study requirements and assignments, administrative arrangements, group work, and childcare" (p. 364). The challenge for universities in exploring these interventions is to maintain a high standard of education while removing or reducing unnecessary hindrances for adult learners. Each of the interventions that are provided should also be closely monitored for its effectiveness, not only in terms of immediate grades, but also in long-term academic success and career success.

Summary

Time has been identified as a valuable commodity, and learning to manage time effectively has been positively correlated with optimism, purpose, self-esteem, and reported good health (Bajec, 2019; Wang & Wang, 2018). The value of studying time management experiences has been well-established in research literature (Hensley et al., 2018; Motseke, 2016; Stone et al., 2016). To date, the most effective time-management strategies have involved goal-setting and breaking tasks up to prioritize them and schedule task completion (Tourangbam, 2011). These strategies were grounded in the well-established theories of self-efficacy and self-regulation (Bajec, 2019; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Hurk, 2006).

The emergence and popularity of online education brought with it serious problems with attrition (O'Shea et al., 2015, Sitzmann et al., 2010) and quality of learning (Bettinger et al., 2017), but effective time management has been shown to improve academic achievement

(Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Hensley et al., 2018; Rothes et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). The

challenges of time management among adult learners was even more pronounced (Webb &

Cotton, 2018), yet little research had been done exploring the specific experiences of adult

learners over multiple online courses (Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Green & Maggs, 2015; Rothes

et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019). Most of the research that has been completed on adult online

students has been quantitative and correlational in nature (Green & Maggs, 2014; Landrum,

2006; Rothes et al., 2017). Most of the research into time management among college students

was gathered through surveys, and often the questions were subjective and/or based on student

estimations. For example, Lowe and Gale's (2016) study asked students to estimate how much

time they spent on a typical week studying, working, and performing family responsibility tasks.

This question assumed that students were able to accurately estimate the number of hours spent

on specific activities in a typical week, rather than measuring time spent in an actual week. This

numerical data may be somewhat useful, if reliable, for obtaining quantitative, correlational data,

but it did not produce insight into how students perceive time management challenges. A

qualitative case study may provide this information through both individual and group

interviews, as well as through activities that require students to illustrate their perceptions.

This case study provides data to fill the gap by providing deeper, qualitative data using

strategies that have been identified as needed by previous researchers (Rothes et al., 2017).

Deeply exploring a group of adult learners' experiences with time management in an online

setting produced valuable insights that can be used by institutions of higher learning to plan

strategic interventions to meet these students' needs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore the specific time management practices and experiences among adult students in an online undergraduate degree program. I gathered data by interviewing participants, conducting a focus group, and analyzing a photovoice exercise (Wang & Burris, 1992) among adult students in an online undergraduate degree program. In this chapter, I describe the methodology that was used to collect and analyze data and the ethical considerations used to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of the participants and the research site.

Design

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and uses a theoretical framework to study how individuals or groups understand, give meaning to, or ascribe meaning to a problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative case study was used to examine the problem of time management among adult learners in an online undergraduate program based on Creswell and Poth's (2018) description of the study of a problem through analysis of participants' responses. This method was a good fit for this dissertation because of the ability to explore the problem of time management in a natural institutional setting. Royalwood was chosen because of its role in providing flexible online degree programs for adult learners. Conducting a qualitative instrumental case study revealed insights into the experiences of adult student participants concerning Royalwood university's adult online education programs and practices that support the needs of adult learners through flexible scheduling and asynchronous online education. The research took place in the online environment via Zoom interviews and email. The instruments used in data collection included individual semi-structured Zoom interviews, a focus group, and

a photovoice (Wang and Burris, 1992) exercise in which participants provided photographic representations of their perceptions of the three types of tasks defined by Tourangbam (2011): priorities, responsibilities, and time-wasters as related to their academic goals. Yin (2018) described qualitative research as developing understanding through close examination of participants' words, actions, and records, and identifying patterns that emerge from the data. Qualitative research explores specific problems, how participants behave in response to these problems, and the motivations and reasons for their behaviors (Yin, 2018). This dissertation identifies themes that reveal how the participants perceived time management and how they made decisions when conflicting responsibilities demanded their time. Understanding was gained through analysis of transcripts from individual interviews and a focus group, as well as from photographs taken and explained by the participants. Identified themes were then verified through multi-layered member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Specifically, interview transcripts were sent to participants for member checking, themes identified in the photovoice images were member-checked during the individual interviews, and transcripts of the focus group were sent to the focus group participants for member checking (Yin, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized the need for qualitative research to be conducted in a specific setting that allows participants to offer data that is subjective and based on their own experiences and behaviors in response to the problem. The open-ended interview and focus group questions, as well as the photovoice exercise, allowed the participants to provide unique data from their perspectives.

Axiological Assumptions

In this study, I began with the axiological assumption that effective time management was key to academic success and applied the theoretical framework of time equity theory

(Tourangbam, 2011) to the problem of high attrition rates among adult learners in online education (O'Shea et al., 2015, Sitzmann et al., 2010) and its link to time management (Yang et al., 2019). Qualitative researchers collect data from participants in a natural, contemporary setting and use inductive and deductive reasoning to identify themes (Crewell & Poth 2018). Qualitative research was appropriate for this dissertation because I studied the problem in the natural, contemporary setting of an adult online undergraduate program at a Midwestern private university. The instrumental case study for this dissertation was conducted through the lens of time equity theory (Tourangbam, 2011), which is a way to view the time management behaviors of individuals and groups by dividing time management into types of tasks and emphasizing prioritization and the value of time. Through data collection and analysis, I identified themes that emerged from the participants' experiences and perceptions of the problem of time management, using inductive reasoning by collecting specific experiential data from the participants and synthesizing it, allowing abstract themes to emerge that provided insights into their experiences as related to time equity theory and any university practices that supported retention related to time management. Instrumental case studies examine human experiences through detailed descriptions of the participants, allowing the researcher(s) to focus on and gain understanding of a phenomenon or problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this case, the problem was the complex relationship between time management and attrition in adult online undergraduate education. An instrumental case study allowed me to investigate the behaviors and motivations of these learners, their perception of university policies and practices, and any emergent themes related to time management that affected academic success and retention. To develop findings and support them, direct quotes from the participants were used, as well as photographs taken by the participants, that illustrate their perceptions of the three types of activities described by

Tourangbam (2011), namely priorities, obligations, and time-wasters. Each participant wrote a brief explanation of each photo taken. I reflected on the assumptions about time management that I brought to the research and on the themes that emerged from the participants in the study. The report includes a complex description of the participants' real experiences with time management during their courses, building a working hypothesis for future study of time management among adult online students and, hopefully, informing time management training at universities for adult learners in online programs. Qualitative research is the best choice for exploring the answers to the questions "how" and "why" regarding a poorly understood phenomenon (Crews & Parker, 2017); therefore, I used qualitative research to explore how these students managed their time and why time management was such a prominent problem among adult students.

Case Study

Case study research is used to "develop an in-depth understanding of a single case or explore an issue or problem using the case as a specific illustration" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 96). This case study explored the problem of time management as it relates to attrition among adult online higher education students. Case studies take place in real-life settings, in this case, an actual adult online program at a mid-sized, private Christian university in the Midwest. Case studies may study individuals, small groups, or organizations, but they may also study abstracts, such as communities, circumstances (Parker, 2016), relationships, or decision-making processes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Case studies that are qualitative in nature study real-life systems over time, collecting detailed information from multiple sources and reporting the data in detail with identified themes. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Detailed description of the data is an important part of the case study process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study approach is appropriate when

research is conducted in a bounded system, which means the participants are selected with specific bounds, such as time and place (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, the participants were chosen within the specific bounds of a single online degree program at a mid-sized private Christian university. Data was gathered within a single academic year. For the purposes of this study, the term *adult learner*s refers to students over 25 years of age who were enrolled in an online undergraduate business degree program at Royalwood University. All of the participants in this study were selected within these bounds.

Instrumental Case Study

Instrumental case studies are used to study a specific phenomenon or issue shared among a small group of participants (Stake, 1995). This case study was instrumental because the single issue of time management among adult online learners and its relationship to the problem of high attrition rates was studied (Yin, 2018). The participants were instrumental in exploring this issue by serving as an example of the issue. A case study may research a single case or multiple cases. Since the case I studied was common, and since I sought to shed light on the social processes and experiences of the participants concerning existing theory on time management, I used a single-case design, which was most appropriate for this purpose (Yin, 2018). While existing research, such as that conducted by Bettinger et al. (2019) used instrumental case studies to compare the performance of online students with on-site students and showed lower performance among online students, I used an instrumental case study to explore why adult online students were more likely to drop a course due to time management issues (Meyer et al., 2019) and to explore deeply how these students managed their time.

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Research Questions

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What are the time management experiences of adult students in an online undergraduate degree program?

1. How do adult online students define and manage their academic, professional, and family priorities?

2. How do adult online students balance their obligations, defined by Tourangbam (2011) as tasks which must be completed, but do not progress toward [academic] goals, with their priorities, defined by Tourangbam (2011) as tasks which must be completed and which progress one toward [academic] goals.

3. How do adult online students minimize time wasters, defined by Tourangbam (2011) as tasks which are not necessary and which do not progress toward completion of [academic] goals?

Setting

The case study was conducted entirely online through the adult online learning division of a mid-sized, private Christian university in the Midwest, which is referred to by the pseudonym Royalwood University in this study. A small group of students in the undergraduate program was studied during a single academic year. This university was chosen because it had been offering online education for decades and had a large adult online education program. At the time of the study, the adult online undergraduate division consisted of 72% women, 28% men, 65%, White, 23% Black, and 1% Asian students. The division was run by a 17-member cabinet, the highest-ranking member being the Chancellor. Royalwood University was highly respected among Evangelical schools and had a reputation for being a good value. The undergraduate adult online program, which had been largely responsible for funding the university in previous years, experienced a significant drop in enrollment from 2019 to 2022.

Royalwood enjoyed a better-than-average retention rate of 78.8%, which still left room for improvement, but enrollment was down 43% over the period mentioned. Research was needed to discover the time management challenges adult online students were facing because they had been correlated with attrition rates (Yang et al., 2017) and because this data may help current and future online faculty and administration to understand the needs of adult online learners.

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Participants

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I employed purposeful, criteria-based sampling to identify participants who were at least 25 years of age and who were enrolled in an adult online undergraduate degree program at Royalwood University. While the term *adult non-traditional student* sometimes included students who were under 25 but had adult responsibilities (Chen, 2017), limiting the participants to students 25 and older simplified the participant selection process. This sampling method was effective for yielding a sample of participants who were relevant to the study because they had been identified as the subset of higher education students who were at the highest risk of attrition by virtue of their age (Webb & Cotton, 2018) and their choice to pursue their degrees online (Bettinger et al., 2017; Stone & Springer, 2019). These participants also shared a common experience and a narrow focus for the study (Etikan et al., 2016). I solicited the academic leader of the adult online learning program, who was knowledgeable about the program and assisted me in recruiting participants. The academic leader provided me with a list of the email addresses of students who fit the parameters of the study, and I sent each of them an invitation to participate in the study (See Appendix A), consent forms (See Appendix B), and demographics surveys (See Appendix G) to approximately 1,500 students. Of those 1,500 students, 41 students replied to the invitation. Of those 41, 39 students expressed interest in participating in the study and returned the completed forms. The other two students' replies inquired about compensation for

participation in the study. Since I was not offering compensation for the study, I ignored these two requests and invited the other 39 respondents to participate, creating a participant pool. This is a large number of participants for a case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, Gentles et al., 2015), but it was appropriate because I expected most participants in the pool would not complete each phase of the study, and because high attrition rates are typical for online programs (O'Shea et al., 2015, Sitzmann et al., 2010). From the initial pool of 39, a total of 14 participants completed all phases of the study. Two participants asked to be removed during the interview scheduling process, and 25 were either unable to fit the interview into their schedule or did not return the invitation. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of all participants.

Procedures

I obtained Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (See Appendix C) from Liberty University before beginning to gather data. The Royalwood University IRB approved the study by confirming Liberty University IRB approval. I collected data from each participant during at least one adult-education online course in the participants' undergraduate program. Courses were typically five workshops, each lasting one week, but some courses lasted six weeks. Data was collected within a single semester, from January 24, 2002, until April 4, 2002. Data collection began with a photovoice exercise (See Appendix F), in which the participants took photographs that represented their perceptions of priorities, obligations, and time-wasters. Each participant also wrote a brief explanation of why each photograph was chosen and what it represented to that individual. Participants submitted photographs and explanations via email. Data collection continued through one 30-minute semi-structured Zoom interview with each participant (See Appendix D) and concluded with a virtual focus group including 4 volunteer participants (See Appendix E). The photovoice exercise was distributed and collected before the individual

interviews. I memoed the photographs and explanations, looking for common themes. During the individual interviews, I allowed the participants to discuss their reasons for taking each photograph to represent priorities, obligations, and time-wasters. I conducted member-checking by allowing students to provide feedback on the themes I had identified in the photovoice exercise. I compared and synthesized the data from the interviews and photovoice exercise to identify common themes. I used Otter.ai transcribing software to transcribe the interviews. After proofreading the transcripts and memoing the interviews, I identified themes that emerged from the participants' responses. I then invited all 14 participants to participate in a focus group. By scheduling only one date and time for the focus group, I allowed the participants to self-select according to their availability, which narrowed the number to four participants through convenience sampling. I used Otter.ai software to transcribe the focus group and conducted a close analysis of the transcript, coding and identifying themes as they emerged. I synthesized this data with the analysis of the photovoice exercise and generated word clouds based on students' responses to the interview questions. Initial themes were identified as synonyms were synthesized into larger themes and sub-themes using a Microsoft Sortable Notes Template (See Appendix I). These themes and sub-themes were verified through member-checking before conclusions were drawn. All recordings and transcripts were stored on an encrypted hard drive. In each interview and in the focus group, I asked students to describe the experiences they had during the course that interfered with their coursework. I also asked students to describe any time management strategies used during the course to reduce the time challenges they encountered. I also asked them about their experiences specifically with priorities, obligations, and time-wasters. I conducted multi-level member-checking on participant feedback on the transcripts, as well as on emerging themes identified in the interviews, focus group, and photovoice exercise.

Member checking for the interview transcripts was conducted via email. Member checking for themes identified in the photovoice exercise was conducted during the individual interviews. Member checking of the focus group transcripts was conducted via email. Member checking increased the dependability of the data (Guest & Mitchell, 2013). Comparing data gathered from different sources in a case study is called triangulating the data (Phan et al., 2018, Yin, 2018) and is an established procedure for increasing the dependability of the study (Yin, 2018).

The Researcher's Role

As the English and Fine Arts department chair in the adult online education division at Royalwood University, I took precautions to ensure I had no direct connection with the participants in this study. One of these precautions was to exclude English courses from the study. General education, nursing, social work, and business courses were the sources for the participant pool. Another precaution was to avoid choosing any student for the study whom I had taught in my courses, choosing only participants with whom I had no relationship inside or outside of the university. My role was limited to collecting data through interviews and documents, and analysis of the data to answer the research questions.

The bias I inherently had regarding time management in online education was based on my previous experience as a student and as an instructor. I had earned degrees both on-site and online, and, at the time of the study, I taught both on-site and online. My experiences had led me to two conclusions about online education. My perception was that poor time management was a major contributor to poor work quality and attrition in online education. I also believed in time equity theory as expressed by Tourangbam (2011) to the extent that prioritizing tasks and actively managing one's time were primary determinants of productivity and satisfaction. Although I was interested in discovering the participants' experiences, rather than influencing

them, my inherent biases could have influenced the participants' responses during the interviews. I addressed this potential by using open-ended questions, by avoiding comments on participants' answers, and by triangulating the data between the three collection methods. Using different sources is an established method of triangulating data to increase the validity of a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My role as the human instrument in this study was to conduct interviews and a focus group and to analyze the participant photographs and explanations that related their perceptions of the facets of time management. I recognized that my role was not to impose my views but to access the participants' perceptions and experiences to discover evidence. The interpretation and analysis in my final report were limited to my understanding of the data, and others may view the same data differently.

Data Collection

I applied for approval from Liberty University's IRB during the spring semester of 2022 and was approved to conduct my study in the same semester. I worked with Royalwood University's IRB, which approved my study based on recognition of having met Liberty University's IRB requirements. No data was collected from participants until all necessary IRB approvals were granted by both Liberty University and Royalwood University (See Appendix C). All data for a research study must be systematically gathered (Olsen, 2012). The data gathering in this study was systemized by distributing and collecting a photovoice exercise to and from each participant via email and by conducting individual interviews and a focus group via Zoom meeting. "The choice of the research theme and the narrow research question is crucial" (Olsen, 2012, p. 3). Data collection in this study focused on discovering the participants' experiences with time management challenges and strategies while completing online undergraduate courses. The methods for data collection are described in the following sub-

sections. Data in this study was collected using a realist perspective. Collecting data from a realist perspective means the researcher desires to collect information about real human experiences and behaviors, where the researcher believes in collecting information about objective truths (Yin, 2018). I sought to explore the real human experiences of adult online undergraduate students to shed light on objective truths about time management.

Photovoice Activity

"Photovoice is a process by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique" (Wang & Burris, 1997, p. 369). In this case, the community was online adult undergraduate learners. Two common purposes for photovoice are to allow the participants to record the strengths and concerns of their community and to reach policymakers (Wang & Burris, 1997). In this case, participants recorded their experiences with time management in online education, including strategies they used effectively and challenges they faced with time management. The policymakers who will benefit from the study data are higher education administrators who make decisions about course workload, scheduling, and student support services, including time management training.

Participants were entrusted to take photographs that represented their experiences to become catalysts for change (Wang & Burris, 2007). In this case study, participants were asked to take and submit three photographs that represented their perceptions of their priorities, obligations, and time-wasters. Participants were then asked to write a paragraph explanation explaining their reasons for choosing each of the photographs. This activity was distributed and submitted during an online course via email as the first stage of data collection. The photographs and explanations were analyzed by tracking the frequency of specific images and ideas and arranging them by similarity and contrast. Tabulating the frequency of repeated ideas and

arranging similar and contrasting images visually are established ways of beginning analysis in

qualitative case studies (Yin, 2018). Synthesis of the data gathered from the interviews, focus

group, and documents produced insight into the participants' experiences with time management.

The photovoice activity was inductive and content-driven. Because this was a qualitative case

study, the analysis did not look to confirm themes evident from the other forms of data collection

but instead allowed themes to emerge from within the data itself (Guest et al., 2013).

Interview

One semi-structured online interview via Zoom was conducted with each participant

during an online course. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes. Semi-structured

interviews are conversations involving at least two people, and which are centered on open-

ended prompts (Olsen, 2012). Unlike structured interviews, the interviewer is free to probe the

interviewee for elaboration and clarity, using phrases such as, "Why was what?" "Tell me more,"

and, "What else can you remember about that?" (Olsen, 2012). The following questions were

used for the interview:

1. Please state (or remind me of) your name.

2. On a day when you have a lot of academic work to complete, how do you prioritize your
   tasks?

3. Since you have been enrolled in this course, please describe any obligations you have
   had, either professionally or personally, that have affected your ability to meet deadlines
   or complete your coursework.

4. Since you have multiple assignments per week, including multiple assignments due on
   the same day, how do you decide which assignments to complete first?

5. How do you know when you are making the best use of your time?

6. What causes you to waste time?

7. Describe your surroundings on a typical day as you are completing your assignments.

8. Please describe any strategies you use to help you manage your time.

9. Tell me about a day when you managed your time effectively.

10. How important is it to you that you complete your work on time?

11. What types of assignments do you think are the most challenging when it comes to meeting deadlines?

12. What effect, if any, does it have on your relationships with friends and family when you have a deadline coming up for an assignment?

13. Describe any conversations you have had with your instructor via email or telephone regarding the deadlines for assignments in this course.

14. In what courses are deadlines the most important, and why?

15. What advice would you give to prospective college students about time management?

16. What is the most helpful thing an instructor or friend has told you about time management?

17. Tell me about each of the images you chose for the photovoice activity, and explain your reason for choosing each photograph.

Question 1 was used to identify the student to recognize any changes in the students' point-of-view over time and over three methods of data collection while they were in the course. Pseudonyms were used to protect the students' privacy in the final report (Olsen, 2012). Question 2 was designed to address the research questions by determining whether the participant typically sets goals or made lists. Macan et al. (1990) identified list-making as a time management strategy that was typically taught in university student support seminars.

Tourangbam (2011) suggested setting goals and prioritizing tasks by the extent to which they support progress toward meeting goals increases productivity. Basila (2014) listed setting realistic goals as an effective time management strategy. The question was aligned with Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory, which defined priorities as tasks that contributed directly toward one's goals. Question 3 was designed to identify the obligations that affected coursework and raised stress levels among participants. Macan et al. (1990) found that college students who worked full-time reported higher stress levels, lower satisfaction levels with their work quality, and increased potential to feel overloaded by their various roles. Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory defined obligations as tasks that must be completed but do not contribute directly to one's goals. Questions 4 and 5 were designed to determine how the participants prioritized tasks. Macan et al. (1990) identified task prioritization as a time management strategy typically taught in university student support seminars. Tourangbam (2011) defined priorities as tasks that contribute directly toward goal achievement and argued that prioritization of tasks is an essential time management strategy that increases productivity and satisfaction. Question 6 was designed to explore the participants' experiences with time wasters, which Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory defined as tasks that do not contribute toward one's goals and are not necessary. Question 7 was designed to explore the participants' perceptions of organization and whether the participants were naturally organized. Macan et al. (1990) identified a tendency toward disorganization as a factor associated with lower perceived work quality, lower satisfaction, and increased potential to feel role overload. Question 8 was designed to address the research question directly and in an open-ended way by allowing participants to directly describe their experiences with time management. Landrum et al. (2006) suggested that investigation into how students managed their time and balance study activities

with other activities was an area that needs further research. Question 9 was designed to give the participant as much flexibility as possible and to tell a story in as much detail as possible. It was also designed to allow the participants to say something positive about time management experiences, rather than assuming that the participants had trouble with time management. This question helped me, as a researcher, to keep my opinion separate from the study. It was important to allow the themes to emerge naturally (Guest et al., 2013). Question 10 was designed to explore the participants' values regarding time management. Meyer et al. (2019) found that adult students were more likely than traditional students to place a greater priority on family than on academics. Question 11 was designed to explore the question of whether time management-related stress was related to specific types of assignments. Recent literature identified stress as a result of poor time management and a cause of attrition in higher education, but the same studies showed that lack of research skills was also a major contributor (Motseke, 2016; Stone et al., 2016). This question provided data that could inform university preparation courses designed to reduce stress. Question 12 was designed to explore the effect of time-management-related stress on family relationships. This question was relevant because adult students have reported feeling overwhelmed by their various roles (Macan et al., 1990). Question 13 addressed the literature that suggested online students did not feel connected with their instructor as much as traditional students (Martins & Nunes, 2016). This question explored the participant-instructor relationship and whether a lack of connection could be causing time management issues related to attrition. Question 14 approached the issue of whether poor research skills or other weaknesses were related to time management by exploring whether certain courses tended to be more challenging than others when it came to meeting deadlines. Again, Motseke (2016) and Stone et al. (2016) found that a lack of research skills and technical knowledge could affect time management and

stress. Question 15 prompted the participant to think more practically about time management by removing the participant from the question. It also revealed whether the participant felt in control of time management, which could affect the participant's productivity (Bandura, 1981). Question 16 was designed to explore the participant's perception of effective time management. Bajec (2019) found that people perceived time differently, so their perception of effective time management was likely to be different, as well. These questions were reviewed and approved by my dissertation chair before I conducted the interviews, and I conducted a pilot interview outside of and prior to the study to verify that the questions were clear. Question 17 represented the first level of member-checking (Yin, 2017). Having analyzed the data from the photovoice activity, I asked this question and follow-up questions to determine the extent to which my analysis accurately reflected the intentions of the participants. This process, called participant feedback (Parker, 2016) was used to increase the credibility of the study. About a week after each interview, I emailed each participant a transcript of the interview and asked them to check and see that it accurately reflected their ideas. Participants had the opportunity to revise or clarify any points made in the interviews. This was the second layer of member-checking (Yin, 2018).

Focus Group

Rothes et al. (2017) suggested focus groups were an important tool for gaining a more in-depth understanding of motivational processes in adult education. I conducted one virtual focus group during the final week of the semester, after the completion of the individual interviews. The focus group took approximately one hour, and the questions were limited to 13 to allow maximum participation. All 14 participants were invited to take part in the focus group. Four participants were available on the date and time of the focus group and volunteered to participate. The questions for the focus group were similar to the questions asked during the

interviews but were more directly focused on priorities, obligations, and time-wasters, as described in Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory. Focus groups are used to corroborate evidence from other sources of data (Yin, 2018), in this case, the interviews and photovoice activity. The following questions were used for the focus group.

1. On a day when you have a lot of academic work to complete, how do you decide which tasks are priorities, and how do you organize your time around them?

2. What advice would you give to prospective adult students regarding their professional and personal obligations and how they might affect one's time management?

3. How do you identify time-wasting activities, and how have you managed them during your degree program?

4. How would you describe your experience taking photographs that represented priorities, obligations, and time-wasters?

5. Describe how you manage your time at work, compared with how you manage your time with schoolwork.

6. In what ways has your social life changed as a result of taking online courses?

7. How much time would you say you spend on academic work per week?

8. Describe what study time looks like to you.

9. Describe any time management training or instruction you have had, whether in your academic program or elsewhere.

10. Estimate your level of confidence in your ability to manage your time effectively both before and after any time management training you have had.

11. Describe a time when you missed a deadline in the current or a past course, and how you handled it.

12. Describe a time when an instructor gave you too much work. What did you do about it?

13. If you could only complete one task tomorrow, what would it be, and why would you choose this task?

Question 1 aligned with Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory and was designed to determine whether the participants organized time around priorities through list-making (Macan et al., 1990), goal-setting (Tourangbam, 2011), or other prioritization strategies. Question 2 was designed to explore participants' experiences with obligations common to adult students and their ability to manage the stress related to them. Macan et al. (1990) found students who worked full-time experienced more stress, so this question was designed to explore that experience and how the participants managed this stress. Question 3 was designed to explore the types of activities the participants identified as time-wasters and whether they attempted to eliminate them, as Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory suggested, and whether and how they minimized time-wasters. Question 4 was designed to triangulate the data from the interviews and the photovoice activity and to provide clarity on why specific images were chosen. Question 5 was designed to explore whether the participants managed their time differently when completing professional tasks and academic tasks. Yang et al. (2017) determined that the majority of adult students worked full-time, and Webb and Cotton (2018) found that students who worked full-time were 40% more likely to drop out of college than students who did not work full-time. This suggested that adult students may have prioritized professional tasks above academic tasks. Question 6 was designed to explore how the participants viewed the importance of social activities compared with academic tasks and how the two types of activities were balanced. Research had shown that some tasks, even though they reduced study time, produced considerable benefits that made them worthwhile (Green & Maggs, 2015; Wajcman, 2019).

Questions 7 and 8 explored the amount of time the participants spent studying and what study time looked like for the participant because research had produced mixed results on study time. While research showed that the amount of time a college student spent studying could predict whether they took more challenging courses later in their program (Small et al., 2017), previous studies had shown that successful (A-B) students spent their study time differently from lower-performing students (Landrum et al., 2006). Landrum (2016) also suggested a need for further research into how study time was spent. Questions 9 and 10 asked participants to identify and evaluate any time management training they had been exposed to because time management training had been shown to improve self-efficacy, resulting in higher academic performance (Ayllón & Colomer, 2019; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Gan, 2019; Ghaniadeh, 2016; Hurk, 2006; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Kelley et al., 2016; Sæle et al., 2016). Questions 11 and 12 were designed to explore how students responded when they felt overwhelmed or when they had failed to meet a deadline because the literature had shown that online students felt disconnected from the instructor (Martins & Nunes, 2016), which resulted in a reluctance to ask for help or to request extensions on deadlines. Question 13 was designed to identify the participants' highest priority at the time. Meyer et al. (2019) found that adult students were more likely to place a higher priority on family responsibilities than academics, which was not something accounted for in time equity theory, but could be a significant factor in retention rates and an area in need of further study.

Data Analysis

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested a data analysis spiral for qualitative research that includes managing and organizing data, reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and

classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the data.

Managing and Organizing the Data

Olsen (2012) identified a systematic method of data collection as an important aspect of qualitative research. I collected data through a photovoice activity [See Appendix F], through an individual interview with each participant, and through a focus group with four of the participants. I used Otter AI transcribing software to collect the data from the interviews and stored the transcripts on a password-protected external hard drive. The open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed themes to emerge naturally (Olsen, 2012), while the different methods of gathering data allowed for triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Reading and Memoing Emergent Ideas

Once the data was collected, I memoed and coded the transcripts and then used a Microsoft Sortable Notes Template (See Appendix I) to organize the data, identifying emerging ideas. Memoing, coding, and identifying emergent themes are established methods in the qualitative analysis of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). As described by Creswell and Poth (2018), categorical aggregation was used to collect instances of words and phrases from the data that related to participants' understanding of priorities, obligations, and time-wasters, which were the categories suggested by Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory.

Describing and Classifying Codes into Themes

I allowed themes to emerge naturally, noting themes that illuminated common perceptions among the participants. Word clouds were used to illustrate the relative frequency of words and phrases to help determine the themes. The themes were analyzed to develop naturalistic generalizations (Yin, 2018) to describe common perceptions, practices, and

motivations regarding time management among the participants to provide insight that could identify the needs of adult online learners and inform time management training.

Developing and Assessing Interpretations

Initial themes were combined by identifying synonyms in the word clouds to form larger themes and sub-themes. These themes were analyzed through inductive analysis in terms of how they provided answers to the research questions (Yin, 2018). According to Yin (2017), data analysis consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or testing evidence that addresses the research questions while searching for patterns in the data. The goal of this case study was to reveal patterns of attitudes, behaviors, and motivations regarding time management through the lens of time equity theory (Tourangbam, 2011), to inform this theory, and to inform retention practices related to time management. Triangulating the data from multiple collection instruments and multi-level member checking were used to enhance the validity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Representing and Visualizing the Data

The final report identifies the purpose and findings of the case study. It identifies the research questions and describes the data-collection process. Findings and themes are discussed in the context of time equity theory (Tourangbam, 2011), as well as building an understanding of the needs of adult learners in the online undergraduate environment. This information is used to suggest possible improvements to the retention and student support efforts in higher education institutions. The report provides a rich description of the university, the degree program, the online platform, the learning management system, and the participants themselves. This

description is an established method for increasing the transferability of the findings (Flick, 2014).

<div align="center">**Trustworthiness**</div>

The trustworthiness of this qualitative research study can be assessed in terms of the accuracy of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Trustworthiness is important because it reduces threats to the validity and reliability of the study (Flick, 2014). Validation of the data is a process that will be described in terms of credibility, dependability, and transferability or confirmability in the subsections below.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. Credibility depends on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher (Parker, 2016). Participant feedback was used to validate the themes identified by the researcher and to suggest revisions and/or clarifications in this qualitative case study. I solicited participant feedback at multiple points during this study. The first layer of participant feedback occurred during the individual interviews. I shared my preliminary analysis of the participants' photovoice activities and allowed them to give feedback on how well my notes, analysis, and themes represented their views. Next, I emailed transcripts of the individual interviews to participants and allowed them to confirm that what they had said in the interview was correctly transcribed and accurately reflected their experience. I also emailed my preliminary analysis of the interviews and allowed participants to provide feedback. Finally, after the focus group, I emailed transcripts and preliminary analysis of the focus group to the participants, allowing the opportunity for feedback. This multi-layered member-checking increased the credibility of the study.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability and confirmability are similar to reliability in quantitative studies and deal with consistency, which is addressed through the provision of rich detail about the context and setting of the study (Yin, 2014). Triangulation has been frequently used to establish dependability and confirmability (Yin, 2014). I compared the data gathered from Zoom interviews and focus group with data gathered from the photovoice activity to validate the identified themes.

Transferability

Transferability is another aspect of qualitative research that should be considered; it refers to the possibility that what was found in one context applies to another context. Transferability has been established in qualitative case studies by providing detailed descriptions of the cases (Flick, 2014). I provided a rich description of the university, the degree program, and the online platform, as well as the participants themselves, to increase the transferability of my findings.

<div align="center">

Ethical Considerations

</div>

The use of aliases can be used in case studies to protect participant privacy and the privacy of the host setting (Parker, 2016). Since student information protected by FERPA was collected, aliases were assigned to all participants, and these aliases were used when triangulating data. Since the data may reveal negative attitudes toward the course, instructor, program, or university where the participants are studying, the reputations of the aforementioned were protected by using a pseudonym for the university and the program. In compliance with Liberty University's IRB training, all data for this study was stored on an encrypted external hard drive, and all data will be destroyed within three years of the final report.

Summary

Chapter Three described the design for this qualitative research study and the procedures that were followed. This case study explored the participants' experiences with time management as they progressed through an online undergraduate course. Data was gathered through interviews, a focus group, and a photovoice activity. The data were coded and organized using procedures expressed by Flick (2014), Babbie (2004), and Guest (2014) and practiced by Parker (2016) to identify themes. These themes were evaluated using participant feedback, triangulation, and a detailed description of the study setting. Confidentiality and privacy were protected using the established methods of pseudonyms, encrypted storage devices, and destroying all data after the study, which is a common protocol for case study research (Parker, 2016).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, single case study was to discover the time management experiences of adult learners in an online undergraduate degree program at a mid-sized, Midwestern private university. This chapter reports on the findings of this study. Data was gathered through a Photovoice activity, online interviews via Zoom, and an online focus group via Zoom to answer the research questions. This chapter includes information about each participant in the study, followed by a description of data gathered during the study and the themes that emerged from the data. Finally, the research questions are answered based on the data.

Participants

Table 1 below represents all of the participants in the case study and the information they reported on the demographics survey.

Table 1

Student Participants

Participant	Age	Marital Status	Children	Employment Status	Race
Alana	28	Married	2	Full-time	White
Brian	43	Married	2	Full-time	White
Chris	36	Single	None	Full-time	African-American
Christy	43	Single	3	Full-time	White
Hannah	28	Married	None	Seeking	White
Jane	41	Married	3	Full-time	White
Katie	36	Single	4	Full-time	White

Michelle	25	Single	None	Seeking	White
Nancy	35	Single	2	Full-time	African-American
Olan	48	Married	3	Part-time (2)	African
Sally	44	Married	1	Full-time	White
Sarah	47	Single	2	Full-time	African-American
Sheena	49	Married	4	Full-time	White
Susan	40	Single	1	Full-time	Undisclosed

Purposeful, criteria-based sampling was used to identify participants who were at least 25 years of age and who were enrolled in the adult online undergraduate degree program at Royalwood University during the 2022 spring semester. Criteria-based sampling is useful when seeking to understand information-rich cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The academic leader of the program assisted in participant selection by a providing list of students who fit the qualifications, along with their university email addresses. The list included approximately 1,500 students, who were sent emails inviting them to participate in the study (See Appendix A). A consent form (See Appendix B) and a demographics survey (See Appendix G) were attached to each email. Forty-one students replied to the email, but only 39 had completed the forms and expressed interest in participating. Since the case study involved three phases of data collection, (a Photovoice activity, individual Zoom interviews, and a focus group), participants were self-selected through attrition. From the initial pool of 39 students, a total of 14 completed both the Photovoice activity and the individual interview, and four participants[1] completed the Photovoice, the individual interview, and participated in the focus group. Two participants

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[1] Focus group participants were Brian, Jane, Michelle, and Olan.

requested to be removed from the study, and 25 either did not return the invitation to the Zoom interview or did not return the completed Photovoice activity. The case study participants included 14 students, 3 of whom were male and 11 who were female, 11 who identified as White, and three of African-American descent. One participant was of African descent, born and living in Nigeria at the time of the study. The participants are described below.

Alana

Alana is a 28-year-old White wife and mother of two, who works full-time as a chief-of-staff for a software company while pursuing her associate's degree. . She works ten hours a day and reserves a block of time each evening to complete her academic work

Brian

Brian is a 43-year-old White husband and father of two, who works as a full-time hospital administrator. At the time of the study, Brian's wife is expecting a child. His job requires him to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, so he is anticipating the four weeks of family leave that he will receive when his child is born. He recently remodeled his house, adding a living room in the basement, and this is where completes most of his schoolwork. However, he often completes the reading and discussion boards for his online courses while on lunch break at work.

Chris

Chris is a 36-year-old single African-American man with no children. During a previous course, Chris contracted COVID-19 and was unable to complete two weeks' worth of school assignments. His instructor obtained permission from the dean to extend the course past its usual deadline, allowing Chris to make up the work. His final grade was not as high as he had wanted it to be, but, under the circumstances, he was glad to have had the opportunity to complete the course. He is employed full-time in a computer lab at a hospital and is fortunate to have a

significant amount of free time at work to complete his school assignments. His workday ends at 4:30, and he typically gives himself an hour to eat and relax before beginning the portion of his schoolwork that he does at home.

Christy

Christy is a 43-year-old single White mother of three, who works full-time. She reports that the challenge of meeting academic deadlines is that she must balance these deadlines with doctor appointments and the extra-curricular activities her children are involved in. She says that she has never missed a deadline for an assignment, but she has been close to missing a deadline on a few occasions.

Hannah

Hannah is a 28-year-old White woman, who is married with no children. Rather than doing her schoolwork during the day, while her husband is at work, she waits for him to get home before starting it. She is recovering from brain surgery and was released to go back to work two weeks ago. She has a home office, but she does not like to do schoolwork there, preferring to work in the parts of the house, where she feels her husband can hold her accountable. She reports that she does not miss deadlines and that she will sometimes finish a week's worth of schoolwork in a single day. Hannah is seeking employment. Her professional goal is a career in addiction counseling, and her motivation comes from being a recovering addict, herself. She is grateful to be enrolled at Royalwood University because of the empathy and compassion shown by her instructors

Jane

Jane is a 41-year-old White wife and mother of three young children, ages 6, 8, and 9, all of whom are involved in either wrestling or baseball. She works full-time as a nurse at a private

practice. Her family struggled during the pandemic because the entire family contracted COVID-19. She reports that the pandemic was challenging to the family budget, as well as to her time management concerning her online course. She completes most of her assignments at home, where it is difficult because of frequent interruptions from her children.

Katie

Katie is a 36-year-old single White mother of four, who works full-time at a nursing home care center. She works 12-hour days, so, when it is time for schoolwork, she locks herself in her bedroom to avoid interruptions from the children. She admits to having missed deadlines for assignments in the past without requesting an extension before the deadline. She reports that her professors have been lenient with deadlines.

Michelle

Michelle is a 25-year-old single White female with no children. She is currently seeking employment. During the current course, she has filled out multiple job applications, participated in a wedding, registered for graduation, and dealt with family problems, all of which made completing schoolwork more challenging. She is a strong believer in starting work early and asking for help when needed. Her eventual goal is to earn a Ph.D.

Nancy

Nancy is a 35-year-old single African-American mother of two children, who works two jobs. During the week, she works the third shift with autistic children, and on the weekends, she works in a nursing home. She failed to turn in a writing assignment this week, so she emailed the instructor, who told her that she could turn it in for reduced credit. Missing the deadline is frustrating to her because she knows she will not receive full credit for the assignment. She completes much of her schoolwork while working at the nursing home.

Olan

Olan is a 48-year-old African husband and father of three children. He believes strongly that education is his top priority and that meeting deadlines is important. He works two part-time jobs while studying accounting online. He sets alarms on his phone to remind himself when it is time to study and time to stop.

Sally

Sally is a 44-year-old White wife and mother of one child. She works 40-50 hours per week and considers herself a perfectionist. She dislikes group work because it causes her stress to feel as if her grade depends on the performance of others. The only time she has ever contacted an instructor was to report on a peer, who was not doing her part of a group project.

Sarah

Sarah is a 47-year-old African-American single mother of two children, who works full time and is also caring for her aging parents and a cousin who suffers from a traumatic brain injury. These responsibilities caused her to fall two weeks behind in her current course, but she is determined to stay in the course and make up the work. The instructor in her current course is working with her, but he told her that the topic she chose to write her assignment on will not work, so she needs to redo the first assignment.

Sheena

Sheena is a 49-year-old White wife and mother of four children who works full-time as an enrollment counselor at Royalwood University. She was a teacher for 13 years and also worked for non-profit organizations in the past. Her goal is to earn a Master's degree in public administration and to teach as an adjunct at a private university. Her daughter has been diagnosed as bipolar and has had episodes that resulted in hospital visits. She and her husband

are also responsible for caring for her aging father-in-law. She does work from home some days, which helps her to keep up with her multiple obligations.

Susan

Susan is a 40-year-old single mother of one child, who preferred not to share her ethnicity. She works full-time as a program manager at a hospital, sometimes until midnight, and is the vice-president of the board for her son's baseball organization. Among other things, she is responsible for fundraising for the team. Her father suffers from Parkinson's disease, and she and her siblings are often needed to care for him. She completes her schoolwork in a home office, but she doesn't close the door, so interruptions from her son are a frequent occurrence.

Results

The results of this study demonstrated that there were common experiences, behaviors, and understandings of priorities, obligations, and time-wasters among the participants. For example, all 14 participants reported the use of either digital or manual calendars as a time-management tool, all participants described purposefully prioritizing their tasks, and all participants identified social media as a time-waster. Twelve of the fourteen participants expressed the belief that meeting academic deadlines was important or very important. Table 2 below shows all the themes and sub-themes identified in the data as the participants described their experiences.

Table 2

Emergent Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-Themes (Number of participants)
Use of Time-Management Strategies	Calendars/Planners (14)[2]

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[2] Numbers in parentheses refer to the number of participants who mentioned the theme at least once during the interview, focus group, Photovoice activity, or during member-checking.

	List-making (9)
	Goal-setting (5)
	Starting Early (5)
	Purposeful Prioritization (14)
Self-Regulation Behaviors	Contacted Instructor for Help (9)
	Reported Procrastination as a Problem (9)
	Meeting Deadlines is Important (12)
Priority/Obligation Ambiguity	Professional Work Identified as Top Priority (6)
	Family is an Obligation (10)
Time-Wasters Identified	Social Media (14)
	Television (7)
Place-of-Study	Home (High-Traffic Area) (7)
	Home Office (6)
	At work (5)
Supportive Family (9)	

Time Management Strategies

The first theme that emerged was the consistent and intentional use of time-management strategies among the participants. Each of the participants described using specific time-management strategies that were well-established in the literature review section of this paper, even though only one participant reported having received formal training in time management. During the focus group discussion, Jane attributed her knowledge of time management to her career experience: "Right after I graduated, I started with the Indiana Department of Child

Services, which is all about deadlines. So, I think that having that background with DCS and having the responsibility of knowing what needs to be done first and how to manage [my] time has really helped me."

Calendars/Planners

The first sub-theme under time-management strategies is the use of calendars or planners to assist in time management. Each of the participants reported using either a digital calendar, such as Microsoft Outlook Calendar or Google Calendar, or using a traditional calendar or planner. Most participants accessed a digital calendar on their smartphones, so they had access at almost any time of day. Alana said, "Everything's on a Google Calendar, and everybody says they hate my calendar because it looks like a nightmare, but that's how I prioritize and stay on top of everything." Figure 1 below shows Alana's Google Calendar as represented in her Photovoice activity in response to the prompt, "Please copy and paste your photograph that represents one of your priorities here."

**Figure 1**

Alana's Google Calendar
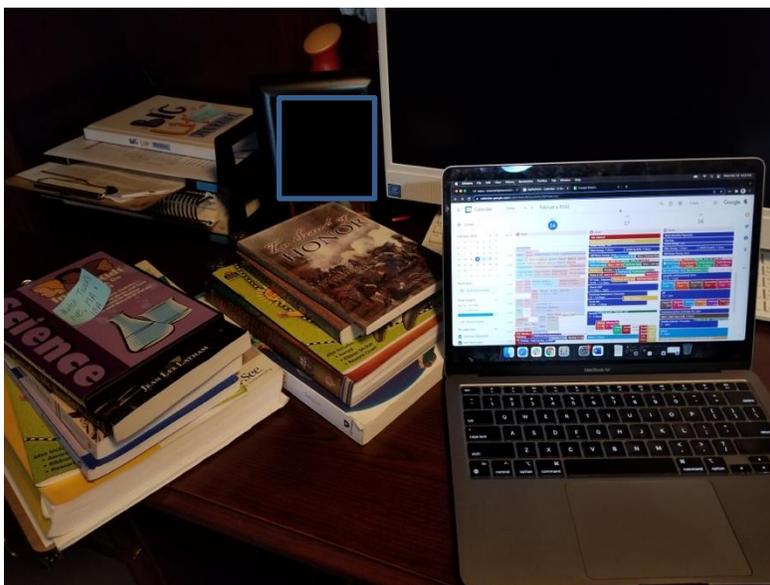
Whether digital or physical, all the participants agreed that calendars were effective in helping them to organize and prioritize their tasks. Sheena expressed it this way: "From the [Photovoice] pictures, you saw my calendar; I kind of live and die by that calendar. If I don't use my calendar, I'm probably going to miss something."

Participants who opted to use digital calendars cited ease of use and convenient access as reasons for using them, while those who used physical calendars expressed distrust of relying on smartphones. "What if my battery dies, or I leave my phone somewhere?" asked Sheena. Sarah reported using both digital and physical calendars to balance work and school: "So there's all those luxuries of a smartphone with reminders, calendar appointments, and then I have color-coded ink pens to mark things on my calendar. So, with the three kids, even with a 25-year-old, I'm still mom. So, there's a color code for each kid" (See Figure 2 below). Sheena included a photo of her calendar in the Photovoice activity in response to the prompt, "Please copy and paste your photograph that represents one of your obligations here."

Figure 2

Sheena's Calendar
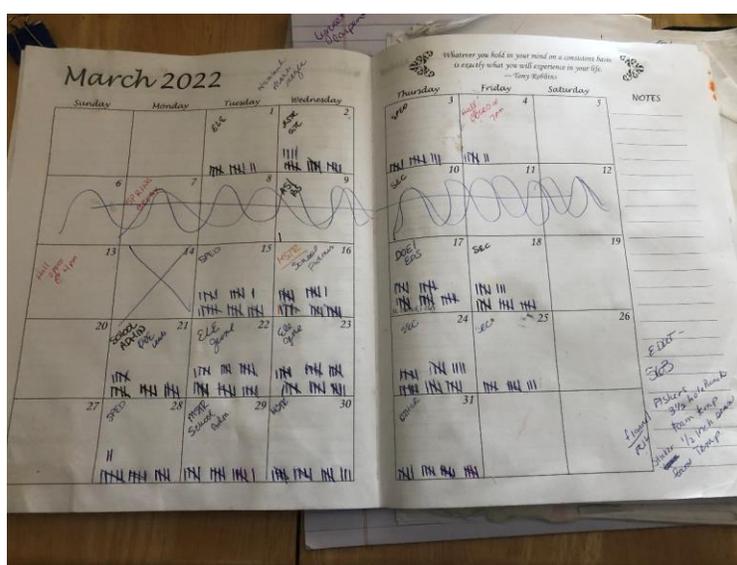
List-making

The second-most common time management behavior, described by nine of the fourteen participants, was list-making. Participants described making a list of the assignments in a workshop, including the due dates, and organizing them into the order they were to be completed. Olan described using smartphone applications to generate lists, but most participants made physical lists and checked off items as they were completed. Sarah described a sophisticated coding method for her lists:

> I make a list that has subsections, and then there's the check. A check will mean one thing, and a dash means something else; an *x* will mean something. So, someone else will look at it and kind of be like, "What is she doing?" But after you've looked at it enough, you'll be able to look at it and say "Oh, [Alex] has basketball practice. That means it is at a different location, not the regular location, or this person has a doctor's appointment" or whatever.

Even though each workshop in the online courses included a Workshop Overview page that listed every discussion board, assignment, and due date, the participants generally preferred to write a physical list themselves, where the order of tasks could be rearranged and where professional or personal tasks could be included. The act of physically checking items off a list as they were completed even seemed to work as a psychological reward system. When asked how she knew she was managing her time effectively, Sarah said, "I want to say there's a gut feeling that I can kind of look over the list of things, and if there's a bunch of stuff checked off, and I feel good, I think I've done a good job." Checking completed items off the list produced a good feeling, which could produce the energy and psychological momentum necessary to move on to the next task. List-making behavior is an effective time-management strategy that is often

taught in time-management training (Macan et al., 1990). List-making can be seen as a visual

representation of goal-setting, with the end goal of checking all items off the list.

Goal-setting

According to Tourangbam (2011), goal-setting is an essential part of effective time

management because priorities are defined as tasks that need to be completed and that progress

toward meeting one's goals. Although most participants did not distinguish clearly between

priorities and obligations (a phenomenon that will be discussed later in this chapter), five of the

participants specifically mentioned goal-setting when asked to identify a strategy they used to

complete their academic assignments. During the focus group, Michelle said, "Priorities and

obligations are my focus right now because I am so close to reaching my goals and maintaining

my grades all the way through my classes with the work I put in." She also included a

photograph of one of her lists in the "priorities" section of her Photovoice (See Figure 3 below).

Figure 3

Michelle's List
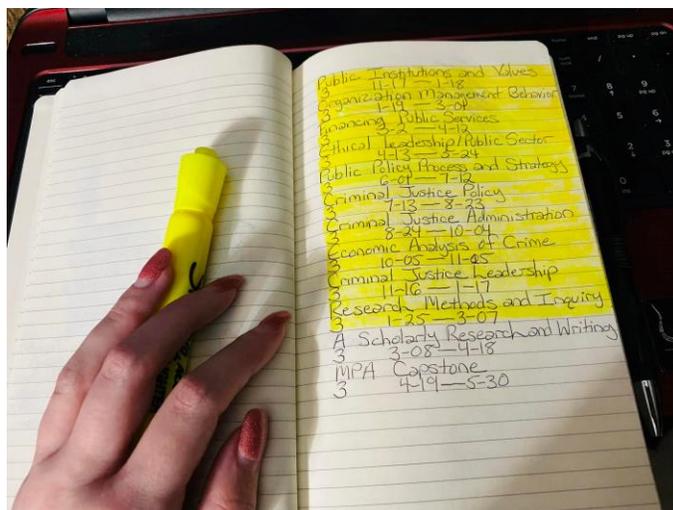
For Michelle, goal-setting was a way of knowing that she was effectively managing her time.

She explained, "I know I am making the best use of time when I am completing goals. If I am

not actively working towards a goal, then it can be postponed until I complete other tasks first. This includes homework, which leads to a good grade, then to a passed class, and, finally, to my graduation." Since making a checklist involves listing goals and checking them off as they are met, it is logical to combine list-making and goal-setting. When this synthesis is done, all of the participants actively set goals during their courses.

Sometimes the goals expressed by the participants were based on learning from the mistakes of the past. During the focus group, Brian said, "I was a 1.8 GPA high school student that did not apply himself, and, in making sure that I get this degree, it's my life goal right now. I mean, it is my short-term and long-term goal right now. I've got everything else that I need. And my biggest goal is to get this done and then to teach my kids that you know homework comes first." Brian's explanation during the focus group was also reflected in his Photovoice activity, where he placed a photograph of himself reading to his infant son in the "priorities" section of the activity (See Figure 4 below). Because Brian experienced negative circumstances as a result of not being diligent in his academic work during high school, he was motivated to teach his children how to manage time by modeling good time management strategies.

Figure 4.

Brian Reading to His Son

In her individual interview, Susan discussed rewarding herself when she met specific goals:

> You know, homework is always the number one [priority] besides sports and work, but if
> I can make it to a point where it's Saturday, and I'm done, I'm rewarding myself on
> Sunday to do something fun, whether it's my son and I going somewhere, I'm going
> shopping, or something, that's my reward for doing all my stuff that I'm supposed to do.

Susan's description of rewarding herself for meeting goals is consistent with Wajcman's (2019) emphasis on the importance of leisure time and its effect on work performance.

Sheena explained that she applied the goal-setting strategies she was required to use at work to her academic work, but her attitude toward meeting her goals seemed to be skeptical. She said that her daily goal (set by supervisors) was to make 50 calls a day at her job as an enrollment counselor at Royalwood University. When asked to identify her time-management strategies, she said,

> When I'm at my job, we have a metric, a goal that we shoot for every day. And it's an
> arbitrary goal, and it absolutely can fluctuate if I end up speaking on the phone in person
> to students. I may only make 15 phone calls a day because my conversations tend to run

very long. In education, our conversations tend to run very long. So, you know, seven 30-

minute phone calls pretty well takes up most of the day. So, if I get a few extra phone

calls in, that pretty well does it, but that metric kind of gives us a goal to hit. And so, in

my job, I've adjusted that goal to my own personal thing; supposed to be 50, I go for 35.

Most days, I can make 35 without a problem. Only rarely do I make 50, unless the calls

are what we call "poor-quality calls." We leave a lot of voicemail. I can make 50 phone

calls if I'm just leaving voicemail, yeah, but I know I'm being productive if I make 35

good calls. I know I'm using my time wisely when, if by noon, I've reached a certain

benchmark.

Sheena makes a distinction between checking a box and doing quality work, and, for her, doing

quality work is more important than meeting quantitative goals.

Starting Early

Royalwood University's undergraduate online courses all include syllabi and general tips

for success. One of those tips is to read through the entire course before Workshop One starts

(students are given access to the courses one week before they officially start), and another one is

to get started early in the workshop. Online courses are written on an accelerated schedule, so a

course that might take a full semester if taken the traditional way takes only five or six weeks.

Due to this schedule, the workload can be heavy, which is why students are encouraged to start

early.

Five of the participants in the study either specifically mentioned that they started their

work early in the week or said they would advise prospective students to get started early. Alana

described a time when she asked the instructor if it was okay to work ahead: "So there was just

one week that, it sounds silly, but I asked if I could get my stuff done a week early. I know it

sounds silly: 'Do you mind if I work ahead because I'm waiting?'" Brian said that starting

schoolwork early was key to getting it completed because, if he waited until he was home from

work, he would be too exhausted to do so:

> My brain is so exhausted from thinking all day long. I'm trying to keep it all together. It's
>
> just, I can't explain, it other than, you know, when you lift weights or when you go
>
> running; you're just so fatigued and tired. Yeah, when you don't think you can process
>
> another problem, that's when I start working here [at work] on my schoolwork, which is
>
> probably not a good thing. But that's why it's important to prioritize and get stuff done
>
> early.

Alana described starting her schoolwork early as a way of limiting the number of hours a

day spent on schoolwork. She found that, if she dedicated two hours a day to schoolwork, she

could tell her children that she would stop schoolwork at a specific time, giving her more time

with them. She reports that this time-management strategy has been successful in balancing her

schoolwork with her family time.

When asked what advice she would give to prospective adult online students, Michelle

said,

> I would recommend revising your schedule and allowing yourself time on the weekend to
>
> go over your work again, if you do it early. For example, I have to continually go over
>
> assignment guidelines because I do not process everything correctly the first time. I have
>
> just learned that I need to re-read and double-check the outline because I will miss
>
> obvious points and get frustrated with myself.

Starting schoolwork early yielded the benefit of being able to check her work before it was

submitted. She pointed out that this is one of the few areas where online students had an

advantage over traditional students. Students in Royalwood's online courses could typically

submit an assignment early in the week, allow the originality-checker and the grammar-checking

features of the assignment folder to provide feedback, revise the assignment, and resubmit to the

same folder before the deadline. Royalwood's students also had free access to the tutoring

service Tutor.com, but the service had a 24-hour minimum turnaround time for papers, so, to

take advantage of the tutoring service, work needed to be completed early in the workshop.

Purposeful Prioritization of Tasks

All the preceding time-management strategies had one thing in common: they all

involved participants purposefully prioritizing their tasks. Whether it was placing tasks on a

calendar and organizing them by the due date, making checklists and checking off tasks as they

were completed, setting goals, or starting early, decisions had to be made about which tasks

would take priority over other tasks.

During the focus group, Brian said that he arranged his assignments by difficulty,

completing the easiest assignments first. He explained, "If multiple tasks share the same due

date, I prioritize based on the order of labor intensity. I will work from the easiest to the most

complex and use the completion of an assignment as motivation." Jane replied that she also used

this strategy after realizing that simply doing the assignments in the order they were presented in

the course was not the best strategy: "I tried to go off of what to do first, but also look at things

in advance to try to look at the demand for what's expected out of me that week so that I don't

have everything due on one day."

Prioritizing tasks by the ease of completion was common, and the tasks that were

identified as more demanding were almost always writing assignments. Sarah explained,

> The things that I know I can 100% do with ease, I do first. So that's the reading, and, in this course, if there's a quiz, that's me displaying knowledge hands down, so it's an easy, quick task. So, you get the reading done, you answer the questions. And then I go into things that need more attention. So, if there's writing that needs to be done or responding, I kind of separate it out in buckets to get it finished.

Dividing larger assignments up into tasks was another layer of purposeful prioritization of tasks. When a paper needed to be completed, Sarah would do the background reading and take a quiz on the material first. That knowledge would then be applied to the paper, which would be broken down into pre-writing, planning, organizing, drafting, revising, and editing. These were the "buckets" she referred to. These buckets needed to be completed in order, but she would complete one each day, after having completed the easier tasks.

Like Jane, Nancy initially tried completing assignments in the order they were presented in the workshop, without considering which assignments would take more time:

> I view them in order, just how they are in order in the workshops, so I go to my workshop for the week, and I'll look at . . . wait. Let me take that back. When I first started this, I did them in order. I just knocked them all down in order. Yeah, what I do now is, I do all my papers first, then discussions, and then the quiz labs. Okay, I did that last week. So, I'm trying to determine which way is better. Do I go straight down? Or do I pick my papers first because they require more words and more thought? So, last weekend, I did all the Word [writing] assignments first. Okay, and the discussions, and then the quiz last.

Nancy was still thinking through the best strategy for prioritizing her academic tasks, but she had learned that purposefully prioritizing tasks was better than simply completing them in the order they were presented. At the time of the study, her strategy was to complete the most difficult

tasks (paper) first and save the easier assignments for later in the week. One problem with this strategy was that discussion boards, which were universally seen as easier assignments, were due on day five of the workshop, and the papers were due on day seven.

Sally's strategy for prioritizing tasks was unique. When asked how she decided which tasks to complete first, she said, "The most important tasks." When asked to clarify what made an assignment "important," she identified important assignments as the ones that were worth the most points. In most courses in Royalwood's online undergraduate degree program, assignments worth the most points were usually papers, which were the most common method of assessment in the program. The exception to this rule were courses that involved a final exam or certification exam, but these types of assessments were more common in graduate degree programs.

Self-Regulation Behaviors

Most, if not all the participants reported or exhibited what Bandura (1991) referred to as self-regulation. The behaviors in the previous section are considered self-regulation behaviors because they demonstrate the participants' belief in being the agents of their own destinies. Not only did they believe they had the power to control outcomes, but they actively took steps to manage those outcomes. These behaviors also include how the participants reacted when they faced difficulty balancing their priorities or when faced with unexpected circumstances that prevented them from meeting deadlines. Christy displayed self-regulation when she offered this advice to prospective students about breaking large assignments down:

Give yourself 30 minutes to work on a project if you've got several projects due at the same time. You know, spend 20 minutes on this one and then 20 minutes on that one. I just feel like, don't set yourself up to fail by saying, "I'm going to work on this for three hours. I'm going to get it done," because I just don't think that's realistic.

Michelle's advice was similar: "You just have to practice time management. If you spend too much time away or are sick, then you must double up on your academic work later in the week. She went on to describe actively regulating not only her work and academic time, but her resting time, as well: "I usually mentally give myself short breaks to allow 20 minutes of reading or internet surfing and then make myself go back to working." Aside from the behaviors directly associated with time management, self-regulation behaviors also included contacting the instructor for help, identifying procrastination as a problem and addressing it, and expressing the belief that meeting deadlines for assignments was important.

Contacted Instructor for Help

When asked to describe their past experiences in courses when it became unavoidable to miss a deadline for an assignment, nine of the participants reported having personal contact with instructors via email. Eight participants had contacted their instructor, and one reported that the instructor had contacted her. One additional participant said that, although he had never contacted an instructor before, if he fell behind in his work, he would email the instructor.

In the case where the instructor reached out to the student, the instructor was inquiring about missing assignments. The participant had failed to turn in multiple assignments and fell behind because of having to care for ill family members. The instructor reached out, considered the participant's circumstances, and offered to allow extra time for the participant to make up the assignments, which she did.

Of the eight participants who requested an extension from the instructor, three asked for the extension before the deadline, and four asked after the deadline. All three participants who requested an extension before the deadline were granted an extension with no point deduction for being late. Of the four students who asked after the deadline, three received extensions, but two

of the three had points deducted for being late. The one who did not receive a point deduction

had submitted the wrong assignment, and the instructor saw it as an honest mistake. The one

participant who was not permitted to submit the assignment because he asked after the deadline

did not believe it was unfair of the instructor, since the late work policy had been posted in the

course when it opened. Chris explained, "In a writing course I missed a deadline. Actually, the

professor told me that he didn't accept late assignments, which was understandable because it

definitely teaches me to use my time better. I definitely liked that."

One student reached out to the instructor to ask permission to complete work early. Her

request was granted. She reported that she had made this request in multiple courses, and had

never been denied permission. She did say that it was a challenge to remember to go back and

reply to her peers on discussion boards each week if all her assignments had been completed

early.

Reported Procrastination as a Problem

Self-regulation can also be seen when participants did not meet their deadlines or when

their goals were not met. One student reported never having missed a deadline. Of the other

thirteen, nine took personal responsibility for not achieving the goal and admitted that

procrastination was the main reason. When asked to identify the time-wasters in her life, Christy

said, "Laziness, procrastination. You know, being tired after working all day. Being a mom. I

would say that causes me to waste my time a lot." Although she added a few reasons as an

afterthought, her first reaction was to take responsibility and admit to laziness and

procrastination. This is an indicator that she believed she could control her level of success and

had made it more difficult for herself.

Olan also identified procrastination as a time-waster, quoting, "Procrastination is the thief of time," from the 1742 poem "Night Thoughts" by Edward Young. Olan, in particular, expressed a view of time management that was a virtual paraphrase of Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory. When asked to provide advice to potential adult online students, he said, "Do not procrastinate, so that you can be productive, have quality life with your family, and at the same time, live a good life."

Meeting Deadlines is Important

While it may have been presumed that all adult students enrolled in higher education courses believed that meeting assignment deadlines is important, only 12 of the 14 participants in this study agreed with this statement. The 12 participants who expressed that meeting deadlines was either important or very important typically saw meeting deadlines as tied to meeting other goals. Sally referred to herself as a "perfectionist" when it came to deadlines. She described being part of a group assignment, where one member was consistently late on providing his or her part of the assigned work. Sally emailed the instructor multiple times until the instructor told her she was "just going to have to relax."

Brian was motivated by his past performance in high school, which was poor. During the focus group, he explained,

> I was a 1.8 GPA high school student that did not apply himself, and I'm making sure that I get this degree. It's my life goal right now. I mean, it is my short-term and long-term goal right now. I've got everything else that I need. And my biggest goal is to get this done and then to teach my kids that, you know, homework comes first. I came from a household with no college graduates. No parents that went to college. So, that was kind

of the norm. You know, we want to change that now. Yeah, my dad was a Navy guy,

who didn't go to college, and my mom didn't go to college, either.

Meeting deadlines for Brian meant earning a degree, but it also meant setting an example for his children and starting a legacy of higher education in his family. Overall, the theme that meeting deadlines was important or very important was expressed strongly and was linked to role modeling for children and other goals.

Priority/Obligation Ambiguity

One of the purposes of this study was to shed light on an existing theory of time management, namely Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory. This theory defines priorities as tasks that must be completed and which advance one toward meeting one's goals (Tourangbam, 2011). It defines obligations as tasks that must be completed but do not advance one toward meeting one's goals (Tourangbam, 2011). Possibly the most significant theme that emerged from this study is that the participants did not make this distinction. Even when provided with the definitions used by Tourangbam (2011), participants consistently used the terms interchangeably.

Professional Work is a Priority

The most common answer when participants were asked to identify a priority was "work." However, when asked to explain why work was a priority, participants almost always mentioned family. Alana said, "If I have meetings for work, that's going to be my primary [priority]. Because, without me working, I can't support my family and the kids. So that's definitely my primary." In this statement, she identifies a work task as a priority, but in the same sentence explains that the reason the work goal is "primary" is that it moves her toward the goal of supporting her family. Looking at the statement in context, it appears that taking care of the

family is the most important goal, and attending the work meeting is a priority because it moves her toward a professional goal that directly supports a higher goal of supporting her family.

Family is an Obligation

The most common answer, when asked to identify an obligation, was "children" or "family." However, most participants used both terms, *priority* and *obligation*, to discuss work and family when discussing the work/family balance. They tended to see professional goals and family goals as interrelated. When asked to identify priorities in the Photovoice exercise, Brian included a photo of himself reading to his son, but in the focus group, he used the term *obligation* to describe his family responsibilities:

> With family and school, it's tough to give one a priority, but my wife and I are expecting another child right now. We're days away from it, probably. So, getting to her appointments and taking care of the kids, making sure they're in bed. And making sure that she's not taking the complete load of our other children right now, but I'm pulling my weight with that. That's definitely an obligation.

Katie expressed the same ambiguity when she described taking care of her children while taking online courses. In the Photovoice activity, she provided a photo of her children in the "priorities" section (See Figure 5), and under "obligations, she included a photograph of her bills (See Figure 6). During the interview, when asked to explain her reason for the placement of her photographs, she explained, "Yeah, work, school, and sleep, and then, you know, taking care of my kids and stuff. I mean, they're a priority, but they're also kind of an obligation. I work at a nursing home care center full-time, 12-hour shifts, 36 hours a week."

Figure 5

*Katie's Children Identified as a Priority*

Figure 6

Katie's Bills Identified as an Obligation

Net Balance							239.05
Bill	30	WR	WATER RES	1476	1483	7	48.67
Bill	30	SR	SEWAGE RES	1476	1483	7	59.27
Bill	30	GR	GAS RES	9717	9796	79	50.47
			GTF .000876 $6				
Bill	30	ER	ELECT RES	97288	98254	966	112.48
			ETF .001550- $1				
Bill		REV	ENVIRONMENTAL FEE				3.00
Bill		REF	TRASH SERVICE				18.40
Tax		Tax	Sales Tax				14.81
			Total New Charges				307.10

Katie was not the only participant to identify a specific priority in the Photovoice activity, and then contradict this view in another phase of data collection. Olan, for instance, in the interview, identified academic work as a priority. During member-checking, he reiterated, "Yeah, I

prioritize it by forcing it foremost. If I have my schoolwork, that is very important. I do it straightforward. I do it immediately. Okay, irrespective of whatever it is, family you know, work. I tackle it, and I stay up late. I mean to do it on time. Okay. Get it done." However, in the focus group, Olan said that the reason it was important to meet his deadlines was so that he could have quality time with his family. "The goal is to do it quickly," he said. Participants consistently linked both professional and academic work goals to family goals.

Time-Wasters Clearly Identified

Among all the questions that were asked of the participants, the one they answered the most quickly and consistently was, "What causes you to waste your time?" All 14 participants identified social media as their primary time-waster, and half that number identified television. Jane described how easily she could be distracted by social media: "The big thing for me is my phone. I have a very hard time with the phone not having notifications every 10 seconds and then I say okay, 'Who's that email from?' And next thing I know, I'm on Facebook." All the participants reported using their phones for social media, and three participants reported turning their phones off while studying to prevent it from distracting them. Katie said, "I like to put my phone on the other side of the room. I'm tempted to pick it up if it's near me." Many of the participants described social media as a guilty pleasure, both in the words they used and in their body language. The word *Facebook* was often accompanied by an eye-roll or a guilty laugh. Almost universally, identifying social media as a time-waster was easier than identifying priorities, and the participants identified social media immediately.

Television was discussed similarly, but participants seemed to have an easier time tuning out the television. Sheena even said she turned the television on while doing academic work,

describing it as "white noise" that helped her study. A few other participants said they preferred working with the television on but also admitted that it often became a distraction.

Place of Study

Distractions were also related to the place the participants chose to complete their assignments. Participants described three types of places where they typically completed assignments for their online courses: high-traffic areas inside the home, a home office, or at work. Participants described how their choice of place to study affected their potential to be interrupted by their children or by other people.

High-Traffic Areas in the Home

When asked to "Describe your surroundings on a typical day as you are completing your assignments," seven participants reported completing most of their school assignments at home in high-traffic areas, such as the dining room or living room of the house. The participants readily admitted that it was often difficult to study because of distractions. Alana said, "I mean, it's always chaotic. I have two kids, and so they're kind of wandering around asking me stuff." Christy described a similar atmosphere:

> Most of the time I do [my assignments] at home in my kitchen. So, I've got three kids walking through the house coming to get snacks. Of course, that's when they have the most questions, when I'm trying to do schoolwork, as well as having, you know, pets that like to have my attention, as well. So, it's not always like that, but generally, it's pretty crazy sometimes.

The word chaos was used by four participants when describing their surroundings when completing schoolwork at home.

Home Office

Five participants reported completing at least some of their work in a home office. Brian described a makeshift office in his basement and its effect on completing schoolwork:

We put a living room down in the basement, and I've kind of made my space down here. It's away from everyone else. It's quiet. I can focus. There's a chair back here if I want to sit back and read. It's better if I am uncomfortable when I do it. I find if I'm sitting in this rigid, rickety old chair, I tend to focus more on what the content is trying to tell me.

Participants who completed their work in home offices tended to favor a quieter atmosphere with fewer distractions. They also tended to identify using some specific means of keeping themselves from becoming too comfortable, such as Brian's description of the chair. Michelle described working in her home office while using caffeine to help her concentrate: "I work in my study, typically with something on [low music] while I type and research. I usually have a Coke with me to keep me focused. I keep the windows closed, so I am not distracted with things going on outside." The presence of a home office did not, however, always insulate the participants from interruptions. Even when working in a home office with the door closed, the potential for interruptions, especially from children, was common. Susan explained,

Alright, so I'm at home, and it's with my kid and my dog. Normally, you know, if, heaven forbid, I shut the door, then there was knocking and, you know, the dogs barking to go outside, and it's always, you know, there's never an uninterrupted moment. . . And I can't even lock the door. I mean, he'll take the little the key, and he'll come in like, 'Mom, what are you doing?' I try as best I can to do it after he's sleeping.

Interestingly, not every participant who had a home office completed schoolwork there. Two participants, Hannah and Alana, reported having a home office but choosing to complete schoolwork in the higher-traffic areas of the home. Hannah said that, if she worked in the home

office alone, it was easier for her to become distracted because no one was there to hold her accountable. Alana worked from home, so she used the home office for professional work but preferred not to complete schoolwork there: "I won't do my schoolwork here because I work here all day. So, it's usually somewhere else." In a follow-up question, Alana identified the dining room as her primary place to complete schoolwork.

At Work

Probably the most unexpected answer when asked to describe the participants' surrounding as they completed schoolwork was at their places of employment. Five participants reported completing at least some of their schoolwork during lunch break, before work, or even while on the job. Brian said, "I do actually use my same work laptop for school, so it kind of works out." Chris described his workplace as ideal for completing schoolwork:

> Well, mainly I study at work. I was fortunate to have a job where I worked by myself, and the job was very easy, to the point where I would only be busy probably two days a week. So, the rest of the days I was literally just sitting here, so I did a lot of schoolwork. In this setting, it's a quiet setting because I'm in a room by myself. But it's more of a lab setting. It's like a computer-type room. Everything's real quiet, but it's also inside of a hospital, too.

Supportive Family

Nine of the 14 participants mentioned specifically that their families supported their educational goals. Even those with children, who interrupted them often, reported that the children understood the temporary inconvenience of having a parent who was a busy student. Spouses were described in the same way. No participants reported having family members who

were not supportive of their goals. Sarah described the sacrifices her children had to make

sometimes to accommodate her schoolwork:

>I would say lately now that I'm not as accommodating, and people are supportive of it.
>
>The people around me are so used to me being able to do it all that they never think about
>
>me needing to turn off. So, my son is 15, and his practices are now from eight to ten. And
>
>this is a time that I'm normally winding down and can read and do [school] work. So, a
>
>couple of times, I've had to say, take your bike. I mean, we live in a suburb, take your
>
>bike, you know? Or I'm going to have on headphones and a laptop, so I won't be
>
>watching you at practice, right? And he's supportive. He understands.

When answering this question, Sarah gave the distinct impression of having made a recent

decision not to feel guilty for having to make these types of sacrifices. The choice to overcome

the instinct of motherhood to prioritize schoolwork did not seem to have been easy for her to

make.

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Research Question Responses

</div>

This section will provide concise, direct answers to the research questions as a precursor

to the discussion in Chapter Five.

Central Research Question

What are the time management experiences of adult students in an online undergraduate

degree program?   The participants in this study experienced a chaotic balance between work,

family, and academic work, with blurred lines separating the competing priorities and

obligations. They reported using many of the time-management strategies that have been

identified in the literature. They used calendars and lists to organize their tasks, they set goals

and reward systems, they broke larger assignments up into manageable chunks, and they reached

out to their instructors when they needed help. However, they are generally forced by their work and family schedules to use the time they had available, rather than being able to identify their prime working hours as described by Tourangbam (2011). None of the participants responded easily or quickly when the topic of primary working hours was discussed. Instead, they described an opportunistic approach to time spent on academic work.

Nancy described completing some of her academic work while on the job at the nursing home where she was employed:

Sometimes on the weekends, I'm only responsible for one client. She's mainly sleeping. She's like 80, so she's sleeping in her room, or she's watching TV while I'm doing [schoolwork]. And sometimes I feel bad because I'm actually getting paid to do a service, but she's kind of independent.

Participants seized whatever time was available to complete academic assignments. Many took their assignments to their jobs, completing assignments before work or on lunch break, while the participants with children often waited until their children were in bed to start their academic work.

Participants with children reported a strong link between their academic goals and the larger goals of providing for their families and being role models for their children. Brian said, "My biggest goal is to get this [degree] done and then to teach my kids that, you know, homework comes first." Their families were described as "supportive," and having children was a motivator to achieve their academic goals. However, the presence of children presented additional challenges, as well. All the participants described work and schoolwork as competing priorities, but those with children had to balance the demands of professional work, academic work, and caring for their children. If a child's baseball game occurred on the night before an

assignment was due, the participant might respond by completing the assignment earlier in the week, by completing the assignment while sitting in the bleachers at the game, by skipping the game, or by skipping the assignment. Participants described feelings of guilt and irresponsibility associated with their competing priorities.

Sub-Question One

How do adult online students define and manage their priorities? Tourangbam (2011) suggested that effective time management involved identifying priorities as tasks that were necessary and which progressed toward meeting a goal. Tourangbam (2011) also suggested identifying one's most productive working hours of the day and using this time on priorities. The participants in this study did not draw distinct lines between priorities and obligations, often identifying the same task as both a priority and an obligation. While professional work was the most commonly-identified priority, it was often directly linked to the family. Although participants tended to refer to the family as an obligation, they often expressed goals related to the family. For instance, when asked to identify a priority, Alana said, "If I have meetings for work, that's going to be my primary [priority]. Because without me working, I can't support my family and the kids." In this statement, Alana defines work as a priority, which is consistent with Tourangbam's (2011) definition because it moves her toward completing the broad goal of caring for her family. However, when asked to identify obligations, she said, "I chose [paying] bills as things that are obligations, because, when I think of obligations, I think of things I have to do, not necessarily that I want to do." Although paying bills is defined as an obligation in this quote, paying the bills is equally important in moving her toward the goal of supporting her family.

Brian said, "Professionally, I manage a fairly small team in a hospital, and so that's kind

of my number one priority." However, when asked to identify his obligations, he said,

With family and school, it's tough to give one a priority, but my wife and I are expecting

another child right now; we're days away from it, probably. So, getting to her

appointments and taking care of the kids, making sure they're in bed. And making sure

that she's not taking the complete load of our other children right now, but I'm pulling my

weight with that. That's definitely an obligation.

Brian's use of the words *priority* and *obligation* interchangeably was typical among the

participants.

The participants typically were not able to identify their most productive working hours

but instead described making use of available time between tasks that were tied to specific times.

They took their schoolwork to their jobs and completed work during lunch, they took laptops to

their children's basketball practice, and they worked while the children were asleep. Asked about

primary working hours, Susan described making the most of opportunities to complete school

assignments: "It is more like a fly-by-the-seat-of-my-pants kind of thing. We had baseball

tonight, and so he was tired when we got home. So, I'm just going to start working on this

[assignment] now, but I don't have a strategy per se. It's just more of when he goes to bed is

when I use an opportunistic strategy to do schoolwork."

Sub-Question Two

How do adult online students balance their obligations with their priorities? Although

the participants did not draw distinct lines between priorities and obligations, and although they

did not identify their most productive working hours, they did practice many time management

behaviors to balance their tasks. The most common strategies were using calendars, making lists,

and setting goals. Michelle said, "Priorities and obligations are my focus right now because I am so close to reaching my goals and maintaining my grades all the way through my classes with the work I put in."

The participants also reported self-regulation behaviors (Bandura, 1991), such as reaching out to their instructors when they needed help. They described positive interactions with their instructors when they reached out for help. Describing one of her former instructors at Royalwood, Hannah said, "I don't think I've ever had a better professor in my entire life. The teachers actually care about us, you know? They care about if we're taking in the material, they care about our faith, they care to hear our stories, and they show empathy and compassion…"

The participants also exhibited self-regulation behaviors (Bandura, 1991) by identifying procrastination and time-wasters as hurdles that had to be overcome to achieve their goals. They described specific strategies for overcoming these hurdles, such as using calendars to break down large assignments into chunks, and working on a small piece on multiple days, rather than trying to write papers on the last day of the workshop.

Sub-Question Three

How do adult online students minimize time wasters?   The most common time-waster, identified by all 14 participants, was social media, with television a distant second. Brian said, "Social media is my killer. It's my Achilles' heel. Anytime that I have this phone, it's my Achilles heel. It's something I wish I never even would have gotten started with." The participants described specific strategies for minimizing time wasters, such as turning their phones off, completing work in areas of the home (or work) where the television was not accessible, and putting their phones across the room while working on schoolwork. Brian described both of these strategies:

I have been fortunate enough to create a workstation for myself in my basement that allows me to focus directly on my work. My workstation includes a big wooden desk with an uncomfortable chair so that I can remain focused on the assignment. Social media is my biggest time-waster, and I work extremely hard at keeping my phone away from me when working on schoolwork.

Summary

Although the participants did not typically distinguish priorities from obligations as described by Tourangbam (2011), they were able to describe how their tasks were related to specific goals and how they prioritized their tasks. For the participants, family, work, and life goals were intertwined with each other. The goal of completing an undergraduate degree was directly related to a professional goal of a new job or a raise, which was directly connected to the goal of providing for one's family. Since work typically required them to perform tasks at specific times, these tasks took top priority. Academic tasks were completed whenever time was available, such as during lunch break at work, after children were asleep, and during children's sports practices.

Participants practiced time-management strategies, such as goal-setting, using calendars and lists, and minimizing time-wasters. They exhibited self-regulation behaviors, such as asking instructors for help and avoiding procrastination by breaking large assignments down and using a calendar to plan when each part would be completed. They reported positive relationships with their instructors as a result of reaching out for help.

The question participants answered the most quickly and easily was, "What causes you to waste your time?" All 14 participants identified social media as their primary time-waster. Participants minimized time-wasters by turning their phones off or placing them a distance away

from themselves. They identified television as another common time-waster and described the

strategy of completing work in a room with no television as a way of minimizing it. Although the

participants were able to identify strategies they used to minimize time-wasters, they admitted to

weakness in this area. Christy said, "I think, sometimes, I come home from work, and I'm like,

'Okay, I got to get this [schoolwork] done.' But I'll sit down, turn the TV on, and I'm like, 'Oh,

crap, it's 10 o'clock. I've wasted four hours watching TV.'"

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this instrumental case study was to explore the specific time management practices and experiences among adult students in an online undergraduate degree program through the lens of Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory. This chapter discusses the findings of the case study in light of the emergent themes. The chapter includes five sections: interpretation of the findings, implications for policies and practices, theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

Adult students in online undergraduate degree programs must balance multiple priorities related to professional work, family responsibilities, and academic work. This balance requires time management skills, including goal-setting, prioritization of tasks, and list-making (Macan et al., 1990). These strategies are supported by research that linked goal-setting and effective time management to greater academic success (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018; Bajec, 2019; Hensley et al., 2018; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Tourangbam, 2011). Adult online students who do not manage their time effectively are significantly more likely to withdraw from or fail a course (O'Shea et al., 2015). This study sought to explore the time management practices and experiences of adult learners in online undergraduate courses to inform best practices and to shed light on Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory.

This study utilized a central research question and three sub-questions to explore the time management practices and experiences of adult learners. The central research question sought to describe the participants' understanding and experiences of managing their time while completing coursework online. The participants described a constant balancing of high-priority

tasks related to professional work, academic work, and family responsibilities. Sub-question one sought to identify the participants' priorities and strategies for prioritizing tasks. The participants identified professional work most often as the top priority, but, when asked to explain why, they almost always explained work as a means of meeting the goal of taking care of family. Some participants identified the family as the top priority, but also frequently referred to caring for their children as an obligation, blurring the lines between priorities and obligations. Sub-question two sought to describe how participants balanced their obligations with their priorities. All the participants reported intentional use of strategies identified in the literature, such as using calendars, either digital or mechanical, to prioritize tasks and break large tasks into smaller chunks. (Macan et al., 1990). A majority of participants described making lists (or checklists) to help them organize their tasks, and some identified goal-setting and starting early as strategies for managing their time. All of the participants described at least one method of intentionally prioritizing their tasks. Only two of the participants expressed the view that meeting academic deadlines was not important to them. Sub-question five sought to identify activities the participants viewed as time wasters and to describe the efforts made by participants to minimize time wasters. All the participants identified social media, and half the participants identified television as time wasters. Strategies for minimizing time wasters included isolation in a home office or bedroom while working, turning smartphones off, and placing smartphones a distance from where the participants worked. Although the participants could identify strategies for minimizing time wasters, a large majority of them admitted allowing time wasters to interfere too much with schoolwork.

Interpretation of Findings

Research findings of this study revealed an interrelationship between professional work priorities and family goals. Participants were motivated to achieve academic goals to better provide for their families. This finding confirms SmithBattle's (2016) research, which describes the conundrum: having children motivated participants to perform better academically, but the responsibility of caring for children also placed pressure on participants because of the competing demands of childcare and schoolwork. The participants' ability to balance time spent on family responsibilities and schoolwork was directly related to their success, confirming existing literature on time pressure (Castello et al., 2017; Choi & Choi, 2018; Morison & Cowley, 2017; Stone et al., 2016).

Participants described the same tasks as priorities and obligations, revealing blurred lines between the terms *priority* and *obligation*. For example, it was common for a participant to identify professional work as a priority and taking care of children as an obligation in the Photovoice activity. However, during the interview and focus group, when asked to explain why work goals were important, the same participant would identify the goal of taking care of the family as the reason and would often refer to children as the top priority. Participants did not distinguish between the terms priority and obligation as described by Tourangbam (2011), and they did not identify their peak working hours as described by Tourangbam (2011). However, the participants universally employed time management strategies to balance tasks related to professional work, academic work, and family responsibilities.

Another theme was that participants reported self-regulation behaviors, including reaching out to their instructors for help, avoiding procrastination by breaking large tasks up into smaller chunks and expressing the view that meeting deadlines was important to them. As described by Bandura (1991), participants displayed behaviors that revealed both a belief that

they were able to control their levels of academic success and a tendency to act on their own behalf when they faced challenges. While participants did identify challenges and circumstances that arose during their courses, they did not typically use these circumstances as an excuse for failure. Instead, they adapted their plans, and, in a few cases, reached out to their instructors to request an extension on an assignment deadline.

Time wasters, which emerged as the most significant theme, were described as the importance of avoiding social media while completing schoolwork. All of the participants identified social media as their primary time-waster. While the participants easily identified social media as a time waster, they typically were not effective at limiting or eliminating social media use during times of study. A complicating factor was that smartphones were used to organize tasks, make lists, and set goals, but the same device also frequently distracted participants with social media notifications.

Place of study (the physical space where academic work was completed) also emerged as a significant theme. Most participants did not have a home office, and some of the participants who did have a physical space to complete their schoolwork were subject to interruptions from family members. This confirmed Buck's (2016) findings that, although having a quiet, isolated place in the home that was free from interruptions was linked to academic success, many adult participants did not have the luxury of such a space. Some participants reported completing schoolwork while on a lunch break or before work hours. Participants were generally unable to identify their most productive working hours, describing a strategy of taking advantage of the time available, rather than purposefully blocking out a specific time of day for study. Finally, although not originally a focus of this study, the theme of family support emerged, emphasizing the importance of a supportive family in meeting academic goals.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The themes that emerged from the case study were consistent use of time management practices, ambiguity between priorities and obligations, consistent demonstration of self-regulation behaviors, clear identification of time wasters, the effect of place of study, and the effect of a supportive family. The following section will describe the researcher's interpretation of these thematic findings.

Awareness and Practice of Time Management Strategies. Participants in this study demonstrated an understanding of the time management practices identified in the literature as important skills related to academic success (Amponsah-Tawiah et al., 2018; Bajec, 2019; Hensley et al., 2018; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Tourangbam, 2011). Only one participant reported having had specific training in time management, so it seems probable that the participants, as adult learners, acquired these strategies from professional, academic, and life experiences. Macan et al. (1990) found that students who took time management training in college did not perform better academically. The participants in this study would likely not have benefitted from time management training, since they were already practicing the time management strategies typically taught in this training.

Prioritization/Obligation Ambiguity. The participants did not demonstrate an understanding of the difference between priorities and obligations as described by Tourangbam (2011). Tourangbam (2011) defined priorities as tasks that needed to be performed and that advanced one toward a specific goal. For example, completing a specific project at work might progress one toward the goal of advancement to a new position. Obligations were defined as tasks that needed to be completed but did not advance one toward a specific goal. An example might be picking up a child from hockey practice after work. For the participants, this distinction

between priorities and obligations was not clear because, while completing tasks at work might lead to the completion of a specific work goal, professional goals were usually tied to larger family goals, such as providing for the children or purchasing a home in a specific school district. Participants viewed their academic, professional, and family goals as interrelated, and did not see one type of goal as more important than the others. Even when a participant stated that educational goals were the top priority, the same participant would later explain that the reason academic success was so important was that the participant wanted to be a role model for the children. This confirms SmithBattle's (2016) findings that having children was a motivator for completing high school and college. The inter-relatedness between academic achievement and providing for one's family that emerged in this study also confirms Buck's (2016) findings that even adult students who had no children cited support from the family as an important factor in their academic success. He et al., (2018) found that emotional and tangible support from family was associated with higher academic performance, and this could explain why participants did not make a distinction between academic priorities and family obligations.

Tourangbam (2011) suggested a strategy of identifying one's most productive working hours and dedicating these hours to priorities, leaving the less productive hours to complete obligations. This strategy was not supported in this study for two reasons. First, participants were not comfortable and were inconsistent with ranking professional, academic, and family goals by importance. Second, participants were required to complete professional tasks during business hours or a particular shift and did not have the freedom to choose when to accomplish these tasks. Family tasks were also often scheduled at specific times, so the participants were bound to a schedule. To accommodate academic work, participants broke larger tasks, such as writing papers, into smaller chunks and completed them when time was available, such as before work,

during lunch break, during children's athletic practices, and after children went to bed. Although

it was not practical for the participants to schedule their priorities during peak working hours,

their practice of breaking down larger tasks and completing smaller, more manageable chunks

with the time available has been shown to improve self-efficacy (Ayllón & Colomer, 2019; Gan,

2019). This is important because existing literature has shown that adult online students with

strong self-efficacy outperformed their peers academically (Williams et al., 2019). This practice

is also related to goal-setting because, as described in existing research, participants tended to

break long-term goals down into proximal goals (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Gaskin, & Skousen,

2016). This opportunistic strategy for completing academic work was almost universal among

the participants. The few exceptions were married participants who did not work outside the

home. These few participants reported having more time to complete schoolwork during the day

and were more likely to complete their work in larger blocks of time.

Time Wasters Easily Identified, More Difficult to Eliminate. Participants universally

identified social media as the most common and most troublesome time waster and were able to

identify strategies to minimize it. This finding is supported by Kim et al. (2019), whose college

student participants identified adjusting smartphone use as a way of increasing academic

achievement. However, participants in this study reported that they often indulged in social

media and succumbed to wasting time. Strategies the participants identified for preventing social

media on their phones from being a distraction included turning phones off or placing them out

of reach. However, participants also reported using the calendar function on their phones to

organize their tasks and also used their phones to email instructors. Sometimes they also used

their phones to access course content. This likely meant that phones were typically kept on and

within reach during study hours. Participants described instances when they picked up the phone

to check a due date or to email an instructor, only to find themselves browsing Facebook posts for hours. This finding is supported by existing literature that correlated multitasking with higher stress levels (Gaskin & Skousen, 2016) and significantly reduced quality of decision-making (Kocher et al., 2019).

Some participants described the use of social media as a reward for completing specific tasks. These participants also expressed a belief in the importance of rest and recreation during non-working hours. Consistent with the findings of Wei et al. (2018), participants believed that how they spent their non-working hours was just as important to meeting their goals as how they spent their working hours. Participants identified activities, such as social media, television, walking the dog, and working out at the gym as activities that served as breaks from professional, academic, and family tasks. One participant referred to these activities as "self-care," rather than time wasters. While Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory advocated for minimizing or removing time wasters, it may be more practical to use these activities as rewards for meeting specific goals or for breaks between tasks. Spending too much time on a task, even if it is a priority, can lead to stress and burnout (Hensley et al., 2018), but breaking up large tasks, setting proximal goals, and rewarding oneself for achieving proximal goals can increase academic performance (Ayllón & Colomer, 2019; Gan, 2019). Taking breaks and enjoying non-work time are important to rejuvenate oneself (Wei et al., 2018).

Place of Study Impacts Level of Focus and May Reflect Priorities. Buck (2016) found that having a home office or another place to seclude oneself during study was an important factor in academic success for adult students in higher education. A majority of the participants in this study did not have a home office in which to complete academic work. Those who did reported that the door to their office had to remain open, allowing children access. Alana said

that, since she completed her professional tasks in her home office, she chose not to complete

academic assignments there. She explained that she wanted to think of academic work as

different from her professional work, and she wanted to be visible to her children, who could

help keep her accountable. Hannah's preference for completing work in the living room was

similar. She explained that, if she completed her work in the living room, her husband could

hold her accountable. The presence of family members served as a motivator for these two

participants to stay on task. Although a few participants closed the door to their home office and

attempted to seclude themselves during study, all the participants with children reported frequent

interruptions from family members, especially their children. Meyer et al. (2019) found that adult

learners were more likely to place a higher priority on family than on academic work. This

finding was supported by this study. Only three participants identified schoolwork as their top

priority, and this was reflected in their reported study habits. Not only were the participants

willing to allow interruptions from children, but some participants actively chose to complete

their schoolwork in high-traffic areas of the home. Consistent with Buck's (2016) conclusions,

all the participants who described interruptions during study time expressed an understanding

that these interruptions hindered their focus on academics and lowered the quality of their work.

This suggests that lower-quality academic work was often a result of conscious choices to

prioritize family over academics, rather than a result of an inability to produce better quality

work.

      The Importance of Family Support. Although this case study was not focused on the

influence of family support on academic progress, the theme emerged naturally in conversations

with 9 of the 14 participants. The theme emerged during conversations about obligations that

kept participants from completing academic tasks and in conversations about their places of

study. While the participants often cited caring for children as an obligation, they were quick to explain that their children and spouses were supportive of their academic goals. The participants who discussed the issue unanimously believed this was an important factor in their academic success. No participants described family members or friends who disagreed with their decision to enroll in an online undergraduate degree program. Lowe and Gale (2016) found that adult students who were unsuccessful in academics often cited a lack of family support as a reason for withdrawal or failure, while those who were able to meet their academic goals often cited a supportive family as one of the reasons for their success. This case study seemed to support this finding, although the study did not look at the actual academic performance of the participants, relying only on self-reporting. At the time the data gathering concluded, only two of the participants reported that they were not passing, and one of these participants was confident that she would be able to revise her work to raise her grade before the course ended.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The data and analysis from this study have implications for multiple groups, including higher education course writers, instructors, administrators, and adult students in online programs. Implications for how courses should be written, both in terms of content and term length, will be identified. The implications for adult learners regarding the need to minimize social media as a time waster are clear, and some light is shed on strategies for doing so. Finally, for instructors, the study has implications regarding timely feedback and developing positive relationships with their adult students. These implications are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Implications for Policy

A few policy implications specific to institutions that serve adult populations of online students are highlighted by this research. Adult learners face the unique challenge of balancing professional work, academic work, and family, often having to make choices to prioritize one important task over another. This principle is well established in the literature (O'Shea et al., 2015) and sheds light on another well-established principle, that time management is essential to academic success for these students (O'Shea et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2017). Curriculum writers should determine whether large assignments could be broken down into smaller tasks in the curriculum. For instance, research papers could be broken down into more manageable tasks, such as thesis statement development, bibliography, note-taking, outlining, first draft, and revised draft. This practice is common in writing courses but less common in other courses that use papers as assessments. Miller et al. (2019) found that college students performed better on large assignments when they were broken down into smaller parts, and rigid deadlines were assigned to each part. Students in the same study who were given only a final deadline for a major project tended to procrastinate and did not perform as well. Moreover, the practice of breaking large assignments, especially assessments, up into smaller parts is a best practice because prior studies have shown that work completed close to the deadline is typically of lesser quality than work completed earlier (Balasubramanian & Sivadasan, 2018). If a paper is being used as an assessment, and it is broken up into benchmark assignments (For example, thesis: 10 points, bibliography: 20 points, outline: 10 points, draft: 60 points), students will have more time to reflect on an improve each part of the paper. Students who procrastinate or perform poorly on the first part of the assessment can revise and improve before the next benchmark assignment. These smaller, more manageable assignments build to the same assessment but do so in a way

that accommodates the chaotic schedule of adult students by giving them manageable tasks spread over a longer timeline. This practice will also help students develop the practice of developing proximal goals. Amponsah-Tawiah et al. (2018) and Williams et al. (2019) found that goal-setting improved motivation and performance when the goals were challenging but achievable, and when feedback on the achievement level was provided in a timely fashion. When larger assignments are broken up into smaller graded tasks, students can receive feedback and begin to revise earlier in the process, increasing their motivation and the quality of their work.

Alternate course schedules should also be considered. Current practice in online undergraduate degree programs is to write courses that are five or six weeks long. Online courses were originally designed for use in accelerated degree programs, which condense a semester-long course into five or six weeks. However, the typical adult learner is not more academically prepared than the typical traditional student who starts college right after high school because recent literature showed that a significant and growing percentage of adult learners came from families where neither parent held a college degree (Stone et al., 2016; Williams et al., 2019). Many online adult programs, including Royalwood University, have open admission policies, which increases the percentage of underprepared students who enroll (Salamonson et al., 2018). Considering the work/family/school balance that most adult students have to contend with, extending the online course over eight or twelve weeks should be considered.

Implications for Practice

This study illuminated some areas that should be considered by adult students and instructors. The most significant avoidable hindrance to effective time management for the

participants was social media. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that most students used their smartphone calendars to schedule and organize their tasks, as well as to communicate with their instructors. Similarly, participants often completed assignments on the same laptop or desktop that was used for accessing social media. Relying on the same device for schoolwork and for time wasters presented a challenge to time management. The participants in this study described how easily they were distracted by social media, even when they intended to use their phones for schoolwork. This suggests that a definite line should be drawn during study time between acceptable and unacceptable phone use. While adult students may believe they can complete their academic work and keep up with social media notifications, research has shown that multitasking significantly reduces quality decision-making (Kocher et al., 2019). Multitasking has also been linked to higher stress levels in students (Gaskin, & Skousen, 2016). Social media notifications should be disabled during study time, and social media applications could even be put to sleep during study time. This would allow students to focus more on academic tasks without interruption or temptation from social media. These practices may be helpful to all adult students in online programs who use smartphones for academic and social activities.

Self-efficacy was strong among the participants in this study. This was an encouraging finding because self-efficacy has been positively correlated to academic achievement (Bandura & Schunk, 1981; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Gan, 2019; Ghaniadeh, 2016; He et al., 2018; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Williams et al., 2019) and psychological well-being (He et al., 2018). More specifically, adult students in online college courses with strong self-efficacy outperformed their peers in academic performance generally (Williams et al., 2019). Self-efficacy is demonstrated in self-regulation and time management practices, which are crucial to academic

performance (O'Shea et al., 2015). With this in mind, online courses for adults should encourage self-efficacy by giving students chances to revise their work. Revision must be presented as an opportunity to improve the quality of student work, rather than as an additional required assignment. For example, writing courses often require students to submit a rough draft, followed by a final draft. Students with strong self-efficacy likely understand the purpose of multiple drafts, but students who lack self-efficacy may ask, "Why do I have to submit the paper again when I already did it?" It is common for these students to submit the final draft with minimal or no revisions at all. This practice can result in students with low self-efficacy feeling "punished twice" for the same paper, which may result in even lower self-efficacy. Since the purpose of revision is to improve the quality of the work, revisions should be optional, and the grade on the revised assignment should replace the grade on the first submission. This will encourage students and promote self-efficacy because it places more control of the grade into the students' hands. Revisions should be presented as opportunities for improvement, rather than as additional required assignments, to encourage self-efficacy among students. This approach encourages students to read instructor feedback and to communicate with their instructors.

Another important factor in academic achievement in higher education is robust and timely feedback from instructors (Rose et al., 2018). This factor has always been important, but when a semester-long course is compressed into a five-or-six-week timeline, the timeliness of feedback is even more critical. A common practice in online education is to allow instructors seven days to provide feedback on assignments after submission. However, if a paper or an opportunity for revising a paper is assigned in the second week, instructors must provide feedback more quickly. Students should be provided feedback on major assignments within 48 hours of the submission deadline to provide time for revision and reflection.

The participants in this study consistently described the instructors at Royalwood University as helpful, flexible, available, and supportive. Their perceptions of their instructors made them more likely to reach out to instructors when they were unable to meet deadlines or when they had questions. In the existing literature, one of the most common reasons adult students cited for withdrawing from online courses is that they did not feel connected to or supported by their instructors (Martins & Nunes, 2016). Therefore, instructors must actively engage students through feedback. An important factor in adult learners' ability to manage their time is the response time of their instructors. A student may not be able to complete an assignment until that student's question is answered. Therefore, it is crucial for the instructors at Royalwood, and perhaps at all online institutions, to respond to student inquiries and requests, as well as provide feedback on assignments, as quickly as possible. Instructors expect students to meet deadlines, and they should model this behavior by providing feedback promptly. In times when immediate answers or feedback cannot be given, instructors should at least assure the student that their request has been received. For instance, "Dave, I received your question about assignment 2.3, but I will not have access to my computer until 4:30 P.M. today. I will answer your question shortly after I get home." This type of communication was appreciated by the participants in this study because it sent the message that the instructor was present and cared about their well-being.

Martins and Nunes (2016) found that adult students were 40% more likely to withdraw from a course than traditional college students due to feeling disconnected from the instructor and peers. A common practice to address this was to incorporate WebEx or Zoom sessions into online courses. Even though most of the participants described their instructors as helpful and flexible, only one of them (Sarah) reported having met with an instructor via Zoom. Sarah

explained that she had not understood the instructions for an assignment, but, after meeting with the instructor via Zoom, she had a better understanding of the assignment and felt strongly that she would be able to improve her work. Meetings between instructors and students through live online sessions are excellent ways of addressing the "disconnected" feeling adult students often have in online courses, but requiring students to meet online at specific times conflicts with one of the main reasons students sought out online programs: schedule flexibility (Martins & Nunes, 2016). This conflict should be resolved by allowing the option for students to participate in live discussions in place of online discussion boards and offering virtual office hours where students can drop in and ask their instructors questions. These practices accommodate flexible scheduling while providing students the opportunity to form more supportive and meaningful relationships with instructors and peers. Online higher education institutions should also consider offering alternate versions of courses for students who are identified as struggling in the first few weeks of a course. Alternate versions of the course could offer more time to complete work, but also require students to meet with the instructor via Zoom every week. The synchronous personal contact via Zoom should increase retention because students will feel more connected to the instructor (Martins & Nunes, 2016) and with their peers (He et al., 2018).

All the participants in this study were able to describe specific time management practices they employed to help organize their tasks, such as goal-setting, listing, and breaking large assignments down into smaller parts. Susan and Jane described learning time management practices through their training at work. However, some adult students may not have learned effective time management practices, and research shows they can be learned (Kellenberg et al., 2017), so higher education institutions, especially those that offer flexible online courses, should teach time management skills, including goal-setting, prioritization of tasks, and list-making

(Macan et al., 1990) as part of university 101 courses. This practice will increase self-regulation behaviors in students, which should increase retention (Gilar-Corbí et al., 2018; Kellenberg et al., 2017; Webb & Cotton, 2018). Beattie et al. (2019).

This study confirmed the findings of Buck (2016), that adult students tend to complete their academic work at odd hours, such as early morning before work and late at night after their children are in bed. As suggested by Kremer (2016), higher education institutions that serve adult online learners should do their best to offer academic support, such as advising and online librarian access, outside of normal working hours, and, if possible, offer these support services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This will help to alleviate the disadvantage adult students have when completing work outside of normal business hours.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

One of the purposes of this study was to shed light on existing theory, namely Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory, which purports that time is the only thing that is dealt equitably to all people and that the extent to which time is managed effectively determines the level of one's success and life satisfaction. The theory prescribes a specific strategy for managing time that starts with identifying priorities, obligations, time wasters, and peak hours. Tourangbam (2011) then describes the strategy of dedicating peak hours to priorities, dedicating off-peak hours to obligations, and minimizing or eliminating time wasters. The participants in this case study did not demonstrate the ability or desire to distinguish between priorities and obligations, instead seeing them as interrelated. Even tasks that were identified as obligations were usually tied to multi-level goals. This view was more aligned with the findings of O'Shea et al. (2015), who described time management among adults as a balancing of competing priorities.

Identifying time wasters, as described by Tourangbam (2011) was much easier for the participants, and they immediately acknowledged the need to minimize them.

One of the purposes of this study was to shed light on existing theory, namely Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory, which purports that time is the only thing that is dealt equitably to all people, and that the extent to which time is managed effectively determines the level of one's success and satisfaction in life. They expressed belief in the importance of meeting deadlines and made conscious decisions to prioritize tasks, and attributed their academic success to these practices, confirming the well-established theories of self-efficacy and self-regulation (Bajec, 2019; Bandura, 1991; Broadbent & Poon, 2015; Hurk, 2006).

The most novel discovery of this case study was that the participants were completing academic work while on the job. Sometimes this work took place during lunch break, sometimes before work, and sometimes during working hours. This phenomenon was not discussed in any of the literature reviewed for this study, and it reveals something important about the way the participants scheduled and organized their academic work. The participants were opportunistic in their approach to scheduling schoolwork. This may be viewed as placing schoolwork as a lower priority than professional work or family obligations, but they did not describe it in this way. They explained that their occupations typically required them to work during specific hours, and their family obligations tended to have rigid schedules, as well. Since the flexible nature of online courses allowed them to decide when to do the work, they completed assignments when work or family allowed them to. Academic tasks were scheduled in a practical way, out of perceived necessity, rather than by priority.

Limitations and Delimitations

The qualitative nature of this study allowed for a deep look into the life experiences of a

small group of adult learners in the context of existing time management theory. The conclusions and implications of this study are those of the researcher and may be interpreted differently by other researchers. The conclusions and implications may not be transferable to other institutions or to adult online learners in a generalized way. The boundaries of the study sample were adult students (25 years and older) enrolled in an online undergraduate program because students in this category have suffered higher attrition rates than traditional students (O'Shea et al., 2015). While Royalwood University was chosen as the site for this study because of the historically above-average retention rates in its online adult program, it is notable that, since the beginning of this study, the enrollment rate in the online program dropped by more than 40%. While this was a trend nationally, it makes studies of the causes of attrition even more significant.

The choice of an instrumental case study to shed light on Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory limited the scope of the exploration by requiring participants to discuss time management in terms of priorities, obligations, and time wasters. Since most of the participants did not perceive definite lines between priorities and obligations, it may have been more effective to have used Bandura's (1991) self-regulation theory as a framework for the study. However, Bandura's (1991) theory is well-established, while Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory is newer and lesser-known.

This study was limited by a lack of access to the academic records of the participants, instead relying on self-reporting. While this study was able to describe the time management perceptions and strategies of the participants, the level of success the participants had would have provided a clearer picture. For instance, almost all the participants reported having turned all assignments in on time, but this was not verified through access to the grade book. Only two of the students reported being unsuccessful in their courses, but this was also not verified.

Generally, the participants seemed to be conscientious about their academic work. This could be explained by this type of student being more likely to volunteer to take part in a case study, or it could be that the participants exaggerated their reported study time and academic success.

Delimitations of this study that limit its scope include the sample size (14 participants), the geographical location of the institution, and the specific type of institution. The general purpose of the study was to explore the time management perceptions and experiences among adult online learners in a midwestern, private university. The study did not include students who took some courses online and some on-site because students in fully-online courses were at a higher risk for attrition (O'Shea et al., 2015, Sitzmann et al., 2010)   Similarly, the sample excluded potential participants who were younger than 25 years of age because students 25 years of age and older experienced higher attrition rates (Webb & Cotton, 2018). Although non-traditional adult learners have been typically defined in literature as students who are over 25 years old and have adult responsibilities, such as living independently, having dependents, and/or having delayed the pursuit of higher education, rather than attending immediately following high school graduation (Chen, 2017), the simplified boundary of students 25 years or older enrolled in online an online undergraduate degree program at a mid-sized Midwestern private university allowed for easier recruitment of participants and more convenient data collection. The researcher was employed as an instructor at Royalwood, where the data was collected, but students who had been enrolled in any of the researcher's courses were excluded from the study to reduce the potential for researcher bias.

Recommendations for Future Research

Exploration of the time management perceptions and experiences in this study revealed that the adult learners were familiar with and practiced established time-management strategies.

It is often assumed that adult learners who do not manage their time effectively lack the knowledge of how to manage their time. This study suggested that adult learners view meeting academic deadlines as important, but they are bound by rigid work schedules and family obligations that make it difficult to meet deadlines, even when time management strategies are used. Further quantitative correlational research with a large sample size could reveal how much lower academic performance among adult students in online environments is due to a lack of understanding of how to manage their time, how much is due to time constraints that are out of their control, and how much is due to simply placing a lower priority on schoolwork. This type of research might better inform university administrators and course writers on whether extending five-week courses to 12-week courses would be effective in increasing retention. Correlations between specific time management perceptions and experiences and quality of academic work could be explored to inform time management instruction.

Another opportunity for future research would be a quantitative study on the relationship between course length (number of weeks), workload, and retention rates in online programs. While time management has been attributed as the most common cause of attrition among adult students (Basila, 2014; Yang et al., 2017), this type of research might reveal whether the expectations of course writers are too high regarding the amount of work that an adult learner can be expected to do in a week. This type of research might also reveal whether adult students feel more invested or engage more or less in courses of varying lengths.

A phenomenological study could be conducted using multiple semi-structured interviews to further explore the question, "How do adult students experience balancing work and family obligations with academic work in online environments?" Multiple interviews with the same participant over an entire course would a richer, thicker description of the experience. Such a

study would not prescribe meanings of the words *priority* and *obligation,* which was a point of tension between Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory and the findings of this study.

Finally, a mixed-methods version of this study could be done by providing the researcher access to the grade book. The researcher(s) could compare the qualitative data provided by the participants with the quantitative data gathered from the grade book. Most online learning management systems can also provide data on how much time students spend on specific activities. This data might provide insight into any differences between the participants' reported experiences and the objective data on their academic performance.

Conclusion

The purpose of this case study was to discover the time management experiences for adult learners in an online undergraduate degree program at a mid-sized, Midwestern private university. The participants' experiences were analyzed through the lens of Tourangbam's (2011) time equity theory, which prescribed identifying priorities, obligations, time wasters, and peak working hours. According to Tourangbam (2011), peak working hours should be spent on priorities, off-peak hours should be spent on obligations, and time wasters should be minimized or eliminated. This study did not support the practice of spending peak hours on priorities because the participants did not distinguish between priorities and obligations, instead seeing them as interrelated. This study supported Tourangbam's (2011) practice of identifying time-wasters and minimizing them as an important aspect of time management.

Adult students in online undergraduate degree programs must balance multiple priorities related to professional work, family responsibilities, and academic work. Participants in this study generally did not understand these three competing categories of tasks as a hierarchy. Instead, participants described a chaotic balance between work, family, and academic work, with

no clear lines between priorities and obligations. The work/school/family balance required time

management skills, including goal-setting, prioritization of tasks, and list-making, as described

by Macan et al. (1990). This case study found an interrelationship between professional work

priorities and family goals. Participants described the same tasks as priorities and obligations,

revealing their perception that the tasks are interrelated, competing priorities. Participants

consistently reported engaging in self-regulation behaviors, including reaching out to their

instructors for help, avoiding procrastination by breaking large tasks up into smaller chunks, and

expressing the view that meeting deadlines was important to them. These behaviors displayed

understanding and competence in time management. Participants generally could not identify

where they had learned these practices, although some attributed them to on-the-job training in

their professional field. Participants universally identified social media as the most common and

most troublesome time waster, and were able to identify strategies to minimize it. However, all

participants admitted to succumbing to the temptations of social media more often than they

would have liked. Some participants described the use of social media as a reward for

completing specific task.

Participants typically did not have home offices, and some who did reported a preference

for completing work in high-traffic areas of the home. They cited accountability and a desire to

complete schoolwork in a different place from where their professional work was completed as

their reasons for not using home offices. This is a significant finding because Buck (2016) found

that having a space to seclude oneself was an important factor for adult students' success in

higher education. This study confirmed a study by Rose et al. (2018), which found that timely

and robust feedback from instructors was a significant factor in the success of online students.

The study also confirmed Martins and Nunes (2016), who found that adult students were 40%

more likely to withdraw from a course than traditional college students due to feeling

disconnected from the instructor and peers. Participants described their instructors as helpful,

flexible, available, and supportive, and the participants were generally confident of their

academic success. The study confirmed Buck's (2016) research, which showed that adult

students tend to complete schoolwork at odd hours to accommodate professional and family

obligations. This challenges the practicality of Tourangbam's (2011) theory regarding the use of

prime working hours to complete priority tasks since adult students reported being bound to

fixed schedules for their professional and family tasks. Finally, this study identified potential

areas for future research, including qualitative research on the effect of rigidly time-bound tasks

on time management among adult online students, A phenomenological study could be

conducted using multiple semi-structured interviews to further explore the work/family/school

balance among adult online learners, and a mixed methods study comparing adult students'

reported use of time management practices to their academic performance in a course.

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APPENDIX A

[Recipient]
[Title]

Dear Student:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Ed.D. degree. The purpose of my research is to explore the time management experiences of adult students in an online undergraduate degree program, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 25 years of age or older and must be enrolled in at least one course in an online undergraduate degree program at IWU during the 2021-2022 academic year. Participants, if willing, will be asked to fill out a demographic survey via email, to participate in a photovoice activity, in which you will take three photographs and submit them to the researcher via email, to participate in one Zoom interview during one of your online courses, and, if selected, to participate in one focus group. It should take approximately 30 minutes for the interview to be conducted. The photovoice activity should take less than 30 minutes to complete, and the focus group will take one hour. Participation will be completely confidential, and all personal identifying information will be kept on an encrypted hard drive and destroyed three years after the study has been completed.

To participate, please reply to this email. If you are chosen to participate in the study, I will contact you in the next few weeks via phone, text, or email.

A consent document and a demographics survey are attached to this email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. The demographics form helps me to determine your eligibility for the study. Please complete both documents and return them by attaching them to your reply to this email. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Sincerely,

Russell Fox
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

TIME MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCES AMONG ADULT LEARNERS

IN AN ONLINE UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAM

Russell Fox
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to participate in a study of the experiences with time management among adult student who are currently enrolled in an online program. You were selected as a possible participant because you are enrolled in an undergraduate degree program designed for adults. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Russell Fox, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this research study is to explore the challenges and time management strategies experienced by adult learners in an online undergraduate degree program.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Select participants will be requested to complete a demographic survey and submit via email.
2. Select participants will be requested to take and submit three photographs that represent their priorities, obligations, and time-wasters, along with a one-paragraph explanation of why each photograph was chosen.
3. Select participants will be requested to participate in one interview during a course in your degree program. This interview expected to take less than 30 minutes and will be conducted online via password-protected Zoom technology. The interview will be recorded on video for future transcription purposes.
4. Select participants will be requested to participate in one virtual focus group during the course of study. The focus group is expected to take one hour and will be conducted online via password-protected Zoom technology. The focus group will be recorded on video for future transcription purposes.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely through encryption, and only the researcher will have access to the records. The following steps and procedures will be adhered to to maintain confidentiality:

- Participants and site will be assigned pseudonyms.
- Interview and focus group will be conducted via password-protected Zoom sessions.
- Data will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interview and focus group will be recorded (video and audio) and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on an encrypted external hard drive for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Photographs and explanations used in the photovoice activity will be stored on an encrypted hard drive upon submission for three years and then erased.

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

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please inform the researcher either during the Zoom interview, during the focus group, or via email at any time during the study. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Russell Fox. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him via email at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or by phone at ▮▮▮▮▮▮ .

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or email at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

If you are chosen for participation in this study, please indicate your preferred method of contact:

- ☐ Email _____
- ☐ Phone _____
- ☐ Text Message _____
- ☐ Any of the above

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

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

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Signature of Investigator

APPENDIX C

August 30, 2021

Russell Fox
Doctoral Candidate
Liberty University

<!-- redacted -->

Dear Russell:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Time Management Experiences Among

Adult Learners in an Online Undergraduate Degree Program, we have decided to permit you to

access National & Global student email contact information and invite them to participate in

your study and to conduct your study at Royalwood University.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ [The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

☐ [The requested data WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

☐ [I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.]

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
[Your Title]
[Your Company/Organization]

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please state (or remind me of) your name.

2. On a day when you have a lot of academic work to complete, how do you prioritize your tasks?

3. Since you have been enrolled in this course, please describe any obligations you have had, either professionally or personally, that have affected your ability to meet deadlines or complete your coursework.

4. Since you have multiple assignments per week, including multiple assignments due on the same day, how do you decide which assignments to complete first?

5. How do you know when you are making the best use of your time?

6. What causes you to waste time?

7. Describe your surroundings on a typical day as you are completing your assignments.

8. Please describe any strategies you use to help you manage your time.

9. Tell me about a day when you managed your time effectively.

10. How important is it to you that you complete your work on time?

11. What types of assignments do you think are the most challenging when it comes to meeting deadlines?

12. What effect, if any, does it have on your relationships with friends and family when you have a deadline coming up for an assignment?

13. Describe any conversations you have had with your instructor via email or telephone regarding the deadlines for assignments in this course.

14. In what courses are deadlines the most important, and why?

15. What advice would you give to prospective college students about time management?

16. What is the most helpful thing an instructor or friend has told you about time management?

17. Tell me about each of the photographs you chose for the photovoice activity, and explain why you chose each photograph.

APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. On a day when you have a lot of academic work to complete, how do you decide which tasks are priorities, and how do you organize your time around them?

2. What advice would you give to prospective adult students regarding their professional and personal obligations and how they might affect one's time management?

3. How do identify time-wasting activities, and how have you managed them during your degree program?

4. How would you describe your experience taking photographs that represented priorities, obligations, and time-wasters?

5. Describe how you manage your time at work, compared with how you manage your time with schoolwork.

6. In what ways has your social life changed as a result of taking online courses?

7. How much time would you say you spend on academic work per week?

8. Describe what study time looks like to you.

9. Describe any time management training or instruction you have had, whether in your academic program or elsewhere.

10. Estimate your level of confidence in your ability to manage your time effectively both before and after any time management training you have had.

11. Describe a time when you missed a deadline in the current or a past course, and how you handled it.

12. Describe a time when an instructor gave you too much work. What did you do about it?

13. If you could only complete one task tomorrow, what would it be, and why would you choose this task?

APPENDIX F

PHOTOVOICE EXERCISE

This exercise is designed to explore your perceptions and experiences with time management while taking online courses. There are no correct or incorrect answers. You will be using your mobile phone or camera to capture images that you think represent your perceptions and experiences with time management in terms of priorities, obligations, and time-wasters. In each blank below, please paste a digital image of each photo. After each image, please write a one-paragraph explanation of why you chose each image. You will be given the chance to share your photographs or images in a focus group of your peers in the future as part of this study, but you will not be required to share your answers with anyone except the researcher.

Please copy and paste your photograph that represents one of your **priorities** here:

Why did you choose this photo? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Please copy and paste your photo that represents one of your **obligations** here:

Why did you choose this photo? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Please copy and paste your photo that represents one of your **time-wasters** here:

Why did you choose this image? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Please send your completed exercise to ███████████████. Thank you!

APPENDIX G

Demographics Survey

Instructions: As part of the dissertation process, I am required to collect demographic information on all potential participants in my case study. Please note that this information is completely voluntary, and each question provides you with the opportunity to decline to answer. Declining to answer demographic questions will not affect whether or not you are chosen to participate in my research study. However, this information may help to shed light on the issues explored in my study if you choose to provide it.

1. What is your biological sex?
    A. Male
    B. Female
    C. Prefer not to answer.

2. What is your age?
    A. 25 – 34 years old
    B. 35 – 44 years old
    C. 45 –54
    D. 55+
    E. Prefer not to answer

3. Please specify your ethnicity.
    A. Caucasian
    B. African-American
    C. Latino or Hispanic
    D. Asian
    E. Native American
    F. Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
    G. Two or More of the above
    H. Other/Unknown
    I. Prefer not to say

4. Where is your home located?
    A. North America/Central America
    B. South America
    C. Europe
    D. Africa
    E. Asia
    F. Australia
    G. Caribbean Islands
    H. Pacific Islands
    I. Other: _____
    J. Prefer not to say

5. What is the highest degree or level of education you have completed?
   A. High School
   B. Bachelor's Degree
   C. Master's Degree
   D. Ph.D. or higher
   E. Trade School
   F. Prefer not to say

6. Are you married?
   A. Yes
   B. No
   C. Prefer not to say

7. What is your annual household income?
   A. Less than $25,000
   B. $25,000 - $50,000
   C. $50,000 - $100,000
   D. $100,000 - $200,000
   E. More than $200,000
   F. Prefer not to say

8. What is your current employment status?
   A. Employed Full-Time
   B. Employed Part-Time
   C. Seeking opportunities
   D. Retired
   E. Prefer not to say

9. How many children do you have?
   A. None
   B. 1
   C. 2-4
   D. More than 4
   E. Prefer not to say

10. Which languages are you capable of speaking fluently? (Circle all that apply)
    A. English
    B. Spanish
    C. Portuguese
    D. French
    E. Mandarin
    F. Arabic
    G. Other
    H. Prefer not to say

11. Where were you born?
   A. North America
   B. Central America
   C. South America
   D. Europe
   E. Africa
   F. Asia
   G. Australia
   H. Pacific Islander
   I. Caribbean Islands
   J. Other
   K. Prefer not to say

APPENDIX H

[Recipient]
[Title]

Dear Student:

Congratulations! You have been selected to participate in my research study through the School of Education at Liberty University! I have received your consent form and your demographics survey and determined that you are eligible to participate.

As a reminder, the purpose of my research is to explore the time management experiences of adult students in an online undergraduate degree program. The first step in participation is to complete a photovoice activity. Using the attached document, you will take three photographs using a camera or phone and attach them to the form. There are no correct or incorrect answers – I am interested in your perspective based on your experiences. After each photograph, you will write a short paragraph explaining why you chose that particular image. When you have completed the activity, attach it to your reply to this email.

I will be contacting you soon through the method you indicated on your consent form to schedule an online Zoom interview.

Thank you so much for participating in my research study!

Sincerely,

Russell Fox
Doctoral Candidate

APPENDIX I

Microsoft Sortable Notes Template (Excerpt)

Topic	Participant	Theme	Quote
Effect on Family	Katie	Academic work and family relationships negatively affect one another	It affects them. I get upset. Because you know, I have to blow him off. No, I can't go out and do fun stuff because I have schoolwork. I gotta get done. Watching my kids affects my grades. I have a hard time.
Priorities	Michelle	Academic work is a priority	My priority is to pass my classes, so I want the best grades I can get. I want to get good grades because I would like to get my Ph.D. once I pay down on my school loans.
Strategies	Hannah	Academic Writer	Because of that, you know, what is it the academic writer that we have? Yes, right. Yes. Yep. All through my associate's program. I thought I was writing correct APA format. I thought I was doing it right. And I got an academic writer, write my first essay and I'm like, Oh, my God. That program was just amazing. You guys do that for us. It's just great. I love it.
Priorities	Christy	Academics	See above
Priorities	Olan	Academics is Top Priority	Yeah, I prioritize it by forcing foremost you know, if I have my schoolwork that is very important. I do it straightforward. I do it immediately. Okay, irrespective of whatever it is, family you know, work. I tackle it and I stay up late. No, I mean, so to do it on time. Okay. Get it done.
Conversations with Instructors	Nancy	Accepted late work with point deduction	
Courses	Olan	Accounting	Yeah, it is on study accounting. It is most important in accounting. We must say that because in accounting professional, it is it is better. It is part of ethics of the profession to stick with the time. Okay, stick with the time you say ethics very, very important.
Strategies	Olan	Alarms	I use alarms. Something to keep to keep reminding me that I'll have to do something. Okay. I have to do a task. Yep. At this point in time. Yep. Alarm would keep me keep me remind me more reminding me every now and then.