

Understanding adult student stop-out: Perspectives of mid-career online graduate students

by

Amanda S. Gnadt

B.S., Kansas State University, 2007

M.S., Kansas State University, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Special Education, Counseling and Student Development  
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY  
Manhattan, Kansas

2023

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The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the experiences of adult graduate students who stop-out, or take a break from enrollment, but who ultimately persist by reenrolling. The participants in this study were enrolled in an online master's degree program. Symbolic interactionism was the theoretical framework for this study using criterion sampling. While findings revealed the individualistic nature of the stop-out experience, there were commonalities among participants. They valued flexibility, convenience of process, and receiving timely information. Graduate programs are encouraged to identify central support personnel, implement reenrollment plans, and acknowledge the silent stop-out.

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Approved by:

Major Professor  
Dr. Doris Wright Carroll

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family.

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

Online graduate programs offer adult learners the opportunity to earn an advanced degree while maintaining life and work commitments. The online format is well suited for the mid-career professional because it does not require in-person attendance or set class times, which provides adults with outside commitments more flexibility (Muljana & Lou, 2019). The number of adults enrolled in online graduate programs has been increasing since 2012 (NCES, 2021). Adult learners tend to be goal-oriented; many choose graduate school to help them achieve a goal, perhaps a promotion at work, or the opportunity to change careers. These students are independent learners who are willing to take responsibility for their learning; but occasionally, adult learners run into an obstacle and need to stop-out.

The obstacle causing the need to stop-out could be the loss of a job, the death of a family member, an unexpected illness, a relocation, a deployment, the birth of a child, and the list goes on. The need to stop-out, or the need to take a break from enrollment without notification followed by reenrollment later, is not uncommon for adult learners (Haydarov et al., 2013; Schulte, 2015). Stop-out is not a new concept, but it is an action that is important for faculty and staff to know about so they can best support students. This study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the student stop-out experience and why some students persist.

### **Contextual Information**

Chapter one provides contextual information for this study, which is inspired by the growing number of adult learners in online graduate programs (Layne et al., 2013). It begins by providing contextual information about distance education, adult learners, and introduces the stop-out enrollment behavior, which is the focus of this study. The chapter concludes with a statement about the rationale for this study and introduces a research methodological framework.

## **Distance Education**

*Distance education* is a broad term used to describe teaching and learning that does not occur face to face. Distance education includes synchronous and asynchronous classroom settings that use a variety of technologies, including, but not limited to video, internet, satellite, and virtual reality. In distance education, students and instructors are not in a physical classroom together. Enrollment in distance education courses has continued to increase with three million students enrolled in online courses exclusively in 2018 (Seaman et al., 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic required people in all sectors — at work, school, and home — to shift their normal operations to minimize in-person contact. Education was impacted at all levels, including higher education. Schools moved their students and faculty from in-person classrooms to virtual environments. This shift to a virtual setting meant literally moving what normally happens in person to online or remote learning settings.

It is important to distinguish between two types of distance education: remote learning and online learning. Remote learning is mostly synchronous, meaning students engage with the instructor at a set time; it typically does not include instructional design and seeks to replicate the traditional classroom experience and may not include a learning management system (learning management system; Hardy, 2020). Remote learning is something that can be turned off and on as needed (Ray, 2021).

Also, according to Hardy, “Online learning is strategic, thoughtful and deliberate. It includes an ecosystem that addresses vision, strategy, governance, faculty development, instructional course design, technology, and student support” (Hardy, 2020). Online learning is intentional from beginning to end. The entire course or program is designed to be delivered at a distance and is characterized as being a flexible mode of learning (Muljana & Lou, 2019).

Therefore, it is developed using instructional tools that support students and faculty in the online format such as a learning management system to house course materials and activities (Muljana & Lou, 2019).

Both remote and online learning fall under the umbrella of distance education but are distinctly different from one another. This study focused on students enrolled in online programs, those which are intentionally designed for online delivery and do not attempt to mirror in person, traditional teaching methods.

### **Adult Learners**

Adult graduate students are becoming more frequent in online graduate programs. The number of graduate students enrolled in online courses has steadily increased since 2012. In fall 2020, 3.1 million graduate students took at least one online course (NCES, 2022), with the majority being exclusively online graduate students (NCES, 2021). In fall 2020, 61 percent of graduate students were female, 39 percent male. The majority of graduate students were White (61%) followed by, Black (14%), Hispanic (12%), Asian/Pacific Islander (9%), and multi-racial (2%) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Adult graduate students can maintain personal and work commitments while pursuing a graduate degree without relocating when participating in online learning (Park & Choi, 2009). This flexibility is ideal for adult learners who for any number of reasons cannot attend in-person courses. These programs provide an opportunity to earn a degree or certificate while maintaining family and work responsibilities (Muljana & Lou, 2019).

This student population enrolls in graduate programs to advance their careers, to remain relevant in their field, and to expand their knowledge base (Hegarty, 2011). There is a readiness to learn found in the adult student population; many adults make a conscious decision to pursue education when they are ready and see value in taking that step (Knowles, 1970). Adults often

have a problem-centered approach; they have a specific problem serving as the trigger or transition pushing them to pursue further education (Knowles, 1970; Schlossberg, 1984). There is a need to recognize and research the mid-career professional enrolled in online graduate programs (Hydarov et al., 2013; Kerns, 2006; Milman et al., 2015). Serving adult learners means recognizing that their place in life is different from a traditional-aged student. Adult learners live a complex reality, with many roles to fill; adding “student” to their list of responsibilities means adding a new set of needs. Online programs can support adult learners in a variety of ways, both in and out of the classroom.

Interactions with faculty, peers, and student services are important to adult students (Milman et al., 2015). The Education Advisory Board, an educational market research firm, conducted an adult learner survey and found that a school’s responsiveness to inquiries is very important to students (EAB, 2019a). Adult learners enrolled in online programs reported positive feelings toward online learning and emphasized the importance of community as a key component to successful distance education courses (Dzubinski et al., 2012). Adult learners bring work-life experiences into the classroom, and they appreciate being able to share those experiences with their peers and to learn from their classmates’ experiences too (Knowles, 1970). Relationships with faculty are important throughout the graduate experience (Offerman, 2011). The instructor sets the tone of the class to encourage learning and engages adult learners throughout the process (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Instructors acting as facilitators encourage adult students to participate fully in course activities by sharing and learning while allowing students the ability to choose how they learn.

Online adult learners need support from the university just like their traditional-age counterparts, but they need it in a format that meets their needs. An online orientation and



distance education support office can equip students with the information they need and minimize additional stress (Aversa & MacCall, 2013; Zellner & Moore; 2011). For example, providing administrative assistance “after hours” means giving the adult learner who works during the day an opportunity to ask questions about enrollment, financial aid, and much more. As the number of adults enrolled in online programs has grown, their retention becomes important for institutions (Layne et al., 2013).

Distance education provides adult learners with the opportunity to advance their knowledge and to meet career goals while maintaining work, family, and community commitments. Developing an understanding of their experiences will help faculty, staff, and programs better serve these students. This study seeks to investigate the experiences of online graduate students who stop-out from coursework and then return. The results of this research will inform retention practices for an online graduate program.

### **Rationale for this Study**

Students sometimes need a break from coursework. This break is called a stop-out. Some of them return to their coursework and others do not. It is understandable that adult learners sometimes need a break, but how can programs support students through their stop-out and ultimately lead them to reenrollment? Supporting adult learners through a stop-out may help retain those students to degree completion. Stop-out is an under-researched phenomenon and one that is deserving of our time and attention. This study seeks to expand the field of research by focusing on adult learners enrolled in online graduate programs.

## **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of adult online learners who stop-out during their graduate studies and ultimately reenroll. Three research questions guided this study:

1. What do adult online learners experience during a stop-out from their studies?
2. What do adult online learners experience during a stop-out that motivates them to return?
3. How does a student's prior enrollment experience influence their decision to return to coursework after a stop-out?

## **Summary**

This chapter has described distance education, adult learners, and stop-out, all to provide rationale for the need of this study. Research on student stop-out behavior is limited, and there is a need to better support students through a stop-out. The qualitative nature of this study allows for a deep dive into the lived experiences of the student participants and seeks to understand how they experienced a stop-out from coursework. The study seeks to add to the body of literature around online graduate programs and adult learners enrolled in those programs. As researcher, I will acknowledge that my life experiences make me somewhat subjective; I address this issue in Chapter Three. I will seek to represent the participants in this study accurately and will seek their reflections on my work. The next chapter, Chapter Two, reviews pertinent literature to provide context for this study.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter reviews the literature on enrollment behaviors, persistence, and retention as it relates to the adult learner. The chapter begins with a discussion of adult learner motivation and moves into ideas about retention, drop-out, stop-out, and persistence. The factors related to student persistence are broken into three categories and are covered in depth. The chapter concludes with a look at two student-retention models. Retention models attempt to explain the complex interaction between an institution, its practitioners, and students, to provide a framework for understanding how to help students persist to completion (Manyanga et al., 2017). In addition to retention models, there are a number of factors influencing a learner's decision to continue with their studies or to withdraw. These factors are helpful when thinking about strategies to retain adult learners.

### Learner Motivation

Motivation is the *thing* that keeps us pushing forward to reach our goals. It is the “why” to our actions, the reason for our decisions, and the guiding light to keep us moving (Cherry, 2022). For a working mom, motivation might be the paycheck that allows her to feed her family. For a mid-career professional, it might be the lure of a promotion and a raise. Motivation comes in as many variations as there are goals and people to create them.

Houle (1961) identified three types of learning motivations in adult learning theory: (1) goal-orientated, (2) activity-oriented, and (3) learning-oriented. While the three types are different, they are not completely distinct (Houle, 1961). Goal-oriented learning motivations take place for the sake of achieving a specific goal, such as earning a promotion (Houle, 1961). Goal-oriented learning is frequently associated with continuing education — the idea that people enroll in a program to achieve a goal to help them move forward (Houle, 1961). Activity-

oriented learning motivations are when the learner chooses a learning opportunity for the sake of the activity to engage with others (Houle, 1961). These learners are engaged in courses for the purpose of connecting with peers, meeting people, and expanding their connections or perhaps because the content caught their attention (Houle, 1961). The activity-oriented learner is less interested in accomplishing the goal of completing the course, certificate, or degree (Houle, 1961). Learning-oriented learning motivation is focused on knowledge acquisition for the enjoyment of learning—for example, someone who attends a lecture to learn more about a specific musician whom they admire (Houle, 1961). Learning-oriented people are seeking more knowledge; the desire to learn is a constant for the learning-oriented individual because they have a thirst for knowledge (Houle, 1961). Cognitive interest was the primary motivational orientation for adult learners enrolled in master's and doctoral degree programs according to Francois (2014). Cognitive interest is aligned with the learning-oriented group outlined by Houle; those demonstrating a thirst for knowledge and a desire to continue learning are deemed motivated by cognitive interest (Francois, 2014). Adults have a three pronged *need to know* when engaged with learning: the need to know what they are going to learn, the need to know how they will learn, and why that information is important (Knowles et al., 2015). Providing the contextual what, how, and why is motivating for adult learners because it helps them see the application to their lives and demonstrates how the learning fits into their goals (Knowles et al., 2015).

The motivation to engage in learning occurs when three elements come together: (1) the recognition of a need or an interest, (2) the will to do something about it, and (3) the opportunity to do so (Houle, 1961). Francois (2014) stated that adults are motivated to engage with further education because it helps them expand their knowledge, achieve professional goals, and meet

external expectations. Goal and activity-oriented learning occur as a result of a transition, an event causing a change in the life of an individual. For example, a supervisor who encourages an employee to pursue additional education to become eligible for another position (Houle, 1961). Adults are motivated to enroll in degree programs to help them solve here and now problems (Francois, 2014).

Schlossberg's transition theory examines the ways in which adults process and move through them (Schlossberg, 1984). A transition is something that causes an individual to change their assumptions about the world, which results in changed behaviors and relationships for the individual (Schlossberg, 1984). Transitions are anticipated, unanticipated, nonevents, or chronic hassles. A nonevent is when an anticipated transition does not occur, and a chronic hassle has a constant presence. (Schlossberg, 1984). For example, acceptance to graduate school creates a transition — the applicant has a new role as a student which will create changes in their relationships with work, family, and friends as they take on new responsibilities of schoolwork.

Schlossberg identified three phases to the transition process: approaching change, taking stock, and taking charge (Schlossberg, 1984). Approaching change is the period of transition identification and an opportunity to locate the individual in the process (Schlossberg, 1984). In the case of a newly admitted graduate student, the acceptance marks the approaching change phase. The adult learner expected an admissions decision and now as an admitted student she can begin processing what will need to change or adjust to make room for her responsibilities as a student. Taking stock is an opportunity to identify potential resources for dealing with the transition, and taking charge is identifying how an individual manages the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). When a newly admitted student takes stock of her resources for helping her succeed, she might have a conversation with her supervisor about flexible work scheduling. The

third phase of the transition process is taking charge. During this phase, the adult learner focuses on strengthening resources and strategies. For example, a newly admitted graduate student might complete an orientation and join an online student support group to prepare for the academic journey ahead.

Schlossberg's theory presents four Ss of transition to explain how individuals evaluate their resources for moving through a transition. The four Ss of transition are situation, self, support, and strategies' each S represents a potential asset and/or liability for handling the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The first S, *situation*, includes the trigger setting off the transition, the aspects that can be controlled, the potential changes in role, and the duration of the transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The second S, *self*, encompasses the characteristics of the individual such as demographics, cultural influences, and personality. These characteristics impact how the individual perceives the situation and how they choose to move forward (Anderson et al., 2012). The third S is *support*, which is received from family, friends, spiritual beliefs, and leaders. People use their supports for encouragement, sounding boards, and feedback as they move through a transition (Anderson et al., 2012). The person who was recently admitted to graduate school might talk through career-change options with a close friend as she begins to plan for her return to school. In one study focused on women over the age of 40 who return to graduate school, support networks played a huge role in the perceived success of these women (Thomas, 2010). The fourth S, *strategies*, connotes the coping methods used to help the individual through the transition, which may include seeking information and advice (Anderson et al., 2012).

Schlossberg's transition theory helps to explain the process of making that change and highlights a set of factors that influence it. Motivation is the effort and commitment we put forth

to accomplish something (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Sogunro's (2015) working definition of motivation states it is "what stimulates and sustains a learner toward accomplishing educational goals overtime [*sic*]" (p. 23). Adult learners may be motivated by the opportunity to apply for a new position or by the desire to expand their knowledge of a particular topic. Lee and Pang (2014) found that the most influential motivational orientation for adult learners was career advancement. External factors such as career, family, and financial goals are beyond the control of colleges and universities; however, Sogunro (2015) encourages an effort to motivate adult students to achieve success in their academic programs and courses.

Sogunro identified eight motivating factors for adults seeking master's degrees at U.S. institutions and had students rank them from most to least important: (1) quality of instruction, (2) quality of curriculum, (3) relevance and pragmatism, (4) interactive classroom and effective management, (5) progressive assessment and timely feedback, (6) self-directedness, (7) conducive learning environment, and (8) academic advising practices (Sogunro, 2015, p. 27).

*Quality of instruction*, the first factor, refers to how the content is delivered and includes things like use of technology and recognition of experiences the adult learner brings to the course content (Sogunro, 2015). Students desire the opportunity to share their real-life experiences with classmates, which allows them to connect their experiences to the content (Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2015). The second factor, *quality of curriculum*, is critical in that the course material should be relevant and interesting to the learner. The course syllabus often sets the tone for how material will be covered and is regarded highly by adult learners (Sogunro, 2015).

*Relevance and pragmatism*, the third motivating factor, refers to the importance of connecting content to reality. The fourth motivating factor is *effective classroom management*, meaning interactions with peers and the instructor are respectful, informational, and useful (Ginsberg &

Wlodkowski, 2105; Sogunro, 2015;). *Progressive assessment and timely feedback* are fifth on the list; this refers to the desire for regular instructor communication and feedback (Sogunro, 2015). The sixth motivating factor, *self-directedness*, is the opportunity to be responsible for one's own learning (Sogunro, 2015). Seventh on the list was a *conducive learning environment*, which refers to the atmosphere of the classroom (Sogunro, 2015). Participants ranked *effective academic advising practices* as the eighth motivating factor for adult learners (Sogunro, 2015). Good academic advising helps students develop a plan for their learning and take control of the process (Sogunro, 2015).

It is important for academic programs to consider learner motivations in order to retain students and support them throughout their academic journey (Sogunro, 2015). Schlossberg's transition theory provides a foundation for understanding the ways in which adult learners process changes in their many roles and responsibilities (Anderson et al., 2012).

The current study considers the role of support staff and academic advising in motivating students to persist through a life transition. Sogunro's (2015) factors of effective academic advising, progressive assessment, and timely feedback, are all potential keys to supporting students who experience a transition that results in a stop-out from course work. Offering programs and services tailored to adult learners may increase student motivation and therefore student persistence.

### **Student Retention, Drop-out, and Stop-out**

Student retention has long been recognized as an important research area in higher education. It is a broad issue that varies among student populations, including but not limited to traditional, adult, online, and on-campus students (Manyanga et al., 2017). This study aims to expand research in student persistence and retention for adult learners at the graduate level.



Research focused on part-time and online graduate students is less common than research focused on their traditional graduate student counterparts (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011), but it is an area worthy of research because this population is “fundamentally different from traditional undergraduate students” (Haydarov et al., 2013, p. 430). Adult learners have work and family obligations that limit their discretionary time (Boston et al., 2011; Haydarov et al., 2013). The context in which a part-time graduate student works and lives requires a different lens and interpretation of retention. The terminology around retention must be addressed because it provides the contextual background needed to understand the importance placed on retention.

## **Retention**

Retention is the concept of institutions reenrolling students, an act of keeping them from year to year (Hagedorn, 2006; Haydarov et al., 2013; IPEDS, 2020). Simply put, students who remain enrolled are retained. There is an expectation for institutions to develop and implement measures to support students, which, in theory, ensures retention of students from year to year (Manyanga et al., 2017). Retention results from a combination of institutional and student factors. Institutional factors include the connection a student feels to the university, communication and responsiveness from programs, and course-level supports such as course design (Milman et al., 2015; Muljana & Lou, 2019; Sogunro, 2015; Yang et al., 2017). Student factors are characteristics of the individual student such as personal goals, motivation, and self-discipline (Budash & Shaw, 2017; Yang et al., 2017). Some students continue their studies from term to term; others do not. One formal definition of “retention rate” is:

A measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. For four-year institutions, this is the percentage of first-time bachelors (or equivalent) degree-seeking undergraduates from the previous fall

who are again enrolled in the current fall. For all other institutions this is the percentage of first-time degree/certificate-seeking students from the previous fall who either re-enrolled or successfully completed their program by the current fall. (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.)

It should be noted that this definition is designed around four-year bachelor's degree-seeking students and programs. The IPEDS' definition of retention rate does not account for flexible start dates and enrollment patterns of online graduate programs, so it therefore may not accurately count students who have been retained in online graduate programs (Haydarov et al., 2013). Retention can be difficult to measure, especially for online adult learners who have priorities outside of their education and may take stop-outs in their coursework (Zellner & Moore, 2011).

The IPEDS glossary indicates that retention should be measured from fall to fall, a measurement practice not particularly suited for programs with rolling admissions. Additionally, students who stop out and later reenroll are potentially counted as drop out students in the fall-to-fall retention method, making the IPEDS definition inappropriate for online graduate programs seeking to offer flexibility to students (Haydarov et al., 2013; Zellner & Moore, 2011).

Researchers have offered other ways of considering retention that may be a better fit for online and adult learners. Martinez (2003) suggested that learners who progress from one part of an educational program to the next have been retained—a definition which leaves room for interpretation of what progress looks like. For example, the completion of one class and enrollment in a subsequent semester could be retention. Other scholars have suggested course completion as another form of retention (Park & Choi, 2009).

Hagedorn (2006) identified four distinct types of retention based on situations: (1) institutional, (2) system, (3) major (academic program), and (4) course (Hagedorn, 2006).

*Institutional retention* “is the measure of the proportion of students who remain enrolled at the same institution from year to year” (Hagedorn, 2006, p. 15). This type is often assumed by the literature and professionals in higher education. *System retention* which is the idea that higher education is the “system” and considers student transfers from one institution to another as a retained student in the system of higher education (Hagedorn, 2006, p. 15). Measuring system retention requires a great deal of tracking and is not common in the United States, even if some state university systems do track student transfers within their state. *Major*, or sometimes *discipline* retention, is a narrower focus within a given institution, marked by the proportion of students reenrolling in a specific academic program (Hagedorn, 2006). Students changing majors impacts discipline retention, but university retention remains unchanged. *Course retention* is the measure of course completion (Hagedorn, 2006, p. 16). Considering the various types of retention demonstrates the complexities of retention and shows the value of narrowing the definition for a specific study. For this study, discipline retention (academic program) was examined because the goal was to understand the experience of a student who ultimately persisted in their academic program. Students who reenroll in courses in a specific academic program until degree completion are the primary focus.

## **Drop-out**

Drop-out is the term used to describe a student’s voluntary exit from an academic course or program. When a student voluntarily stops enrolling in course work, it is referred to as a drop-out (Schulte, 2015). Drop-out may occur at mid-term or it may be a decision made prior to the beginning of the term. Drop-out can also mean stopped engagement with an academic program. Drop-out is sometimes used as the opposite of retention in literature, though it is only one alternative to retention (Hagedorn, 2006). Historically, online programs have higher attrition

rates than on-campus programs (Bawa, 2016; Diaz, 2002; Peck et al., 2018; Radovan, 2019; Simpson, 2013). There are various types of student departure — from leaving the institution to leaving the educational system as a whole. Sometimes departure is temporary (stop-out) and sometimes it is permanent (drop-out; Tinto, 1994; Woosley, 2004). Drop-out is defined as “a student who no longer attends course in the middle of a term or does not enroll in subsequent terms” (Schulte, 2015, p. 133). However, retention and drop-out are not truly dichotomous because student paths are variable and rarely straightforward (Hagedorn, 2006; Haydarov et al., 2013; Porter, 2003). Additionally, each university may have its own timeline for how long a student remains active without being enrolled and if continuous enrollment is required to maintain an active status (Haydarov et al., 2013; Zellner & Moore, 2011). An enrolled student may drop-out and return later to complete the degree (stop-out), or the student may attend another college or university to achieve their goal (Hagedorn, 2006). Yet another option may be that the student never had the goal of completing a degree; when the student departed from the school their objective had been met (Hagedorn, 2006). Literature on student drop-out often does not distinguish if the drop-out was from higher education overall or from a specific college or university (Tinto, 1994).

Student departure is not one size fits all. There are multiple subpopulations of departed students including drop-out, stop-out, transfer out, and withdrawal (Haas & Hadjar, 2020; Hoyt & Winn, 2004). The complexities of student enrollment behavior make it difficult to utilize simple and restrictive definitions; therefore, context is hugely important. Studies on online student withdrawal show that students drop for a variety of reasons including those related to personal life, work life, and course reasons (Park et al., 2008; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Because the reasons are numerous, and students can withdraw from online learning at any point,

there is a need to further research and understand the various types of departure from online learning (Bawa, 2016).

### **Stop-out**

The definition of stop-out used in this study is *an enrollment behavior described as a break from enrollment followed by reenrollment at a later date* (Haydarov et al., 2013; Schulte, 2015; Zellner & Moore, 2011). Stop-out is less common in literature and is often geared toward undergraduate students (Schulte, 2015). Students who sit out for a semester or more are often counted as drop-outs and therefore contribute to attrition numbers (Tinto, 1993; Woosley et al., 2005). Stop-out is temporary in nature but is often mistaken for a permanent departure (Stratton et al., 2008). The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education defined the stop-out population as “those who choose to reenroll after an absence of one or more semesters” (Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, 1973). The stop-out student does not complete their degree in the “normal” timeframe because of semesters without enrollment (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). A stop-out is temporary, meaning that the student has intentions of returning to the program and eventually complete their degree (Woosley et al., 2005). Understanding student stop-out activity and “the factors contributing to reenrollment would provide a more informative description of attrition” (Johnson, 2006, p. 906). Adult students enrolled part-time in graduate programs may need one or more stop-outs during their program due to finances, family, and work responsibilities (Hydarov et al., 2013; Schulte, 2015).

A study conducted by Woosley et al. (2005) focused on reenrollment intentions of stop-out students as well as their actual enrollment behavior using Tinto’s (1993) student departure model. The study used a survey to ask about the students’ educational and institutional commitments (Woosley et al., 2005). The study found that 55 percent of stop-out students

expressed intentions to reenroll, and 40 percent of stop-out students reenrolled within four semesters of their stop-out (Woosley et al., 2005). This study highlights four major findings: (1) stop-outs represent a substantial number of withdrawals; (2) student goals and commitments are predictors of reenrollment intentions; (3) student intentions do predict their reenrollment behavior; and (4) the experience at the institution (more so than academic success) was a significant predictor of reenrollment intentions and reenrollment (Woosley et al., 2005). Essentially, students who expressed commitment to achieving their educational goal and who reported positive impressions of the institution were more likely to make plans to reenroll (Woosley et al., 2005). This study suggests that if the withdrawal and reenrollment processes are simple and personal, the commitments these students already feel will be enough to make reenrollment more likely (Woosley et al., 2005). The stop-out population provides an opportunity to increase student retention by setting the stage for students to seamlessly move through a stop-out and ultimately return to their studies (Woosley et al., 2005). The researchers encourage institutions to collect information from students who stop-out and to use interventions to encourage these students to reenroll in the future (Woosley et al., 2005).

Students who are able to articulate their educational goal may be more likely to persist (Shaw et al., 2016). That educational goal may or may not be degree completion, but rather it may have been a certain course or two (Hagedorn, 2006; Tinto, 1993). In a study conducted by Hoyt and Winn (2004), more than half of the stop-out population reported financial concerns as their primary reason for not enrolling. They also found stop-out students to be more likely to enroll in school part time while working full time (Hoyt & Winn, 2004). These students reported an interest in being contacted about reenrollment in the future, perhaps indicating Woosley et al., (2005) to be correct in creating a simple path to reenrollment for stop-out students (Hoyt &

Winn, 2004). Whatever the reason for the stop-out, there are potentially major implications for colleges and universities that can return those students, thereby decreasing their dropout rate (Barefoot, 2004).

The Education Advisory Board (EAB) is an educational research organization partnering with education leaders, practitioners, and staff to provide solutions to schools (EAB, 2021). While preventing a stop-out is beyond the control of the institution, there are recommendations for promoting persistence in online adult learners overall. EAB encourages institutions serving online adult learners to track term-to-term persistence and to make plans to contact students about reenrollment during a stop-out period (EAB, 2015b). Finding ways to work with students before, during, and after a stop-out is key to retaining those students. Some researchers argue that students who stop-out are likely underrepresented in graduation and retention rates (Barefoot, 2004; Woosley et al., 2005). There seems to be an opportunity for institutions to expand their retention efforts to this specific pool of students who stop-out for a period of time. The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center found that students who stop-out become part of a population referred to as “some college, no degree,” but that 10 percent of that population has a high potential of becoming completers (2019). It is common for potential completers to stop-out more than once, but if they have made significant progress toward their degree, they are a population prime for returning and may be an ideal market for enrollment managers trying to increase enrollments (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2019).

Expanding ideas about student departure allows for the realization that an interruption in enrollment may be very natural (Schulte, 2015; Stratton et al., 2008). With a different understanding of student departure, the conversation about measuring student retention may also shift to include altered calculations for online graduate programs. The fall-to-fall retention

calculation is not ideal for online graduate students (Haydarov et al., 2013). A refreshed outlook at retention opens the door for developing a deeper understanding of the stop-out experiences of students, which ultimately provides institutions with the opportunity to develop and implement strategies to support student persistence. Rethinking attrition in terms of drop-out and stop-out may impact the reported rates of withdrawal from programs. In the long run, this approach may have a positive impact on retention rates. More research is needed.

## **Persistence**

Persistence is a term used in the conversation about student retention. Rovai (2003) defined persistence as “the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles” (p. 1). Persistence is an action by the student; it is the act of pursuing enrollment, attending classes, and continuing these efforts throughout the semester, year, and degree program. Persistence is a term used in the broader retention conversation. Although it is not defined by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), it is however included as part of the definition of retention: “a measure of the rate at which students persist in their educational program at an institution” (National Center for Education Statistics., n.d.). Persistence is used in the literature as the opposite of attrition or withdrawing and sometimes it is used to describe the collection of factors — unrelated to knowledge — contributing to the completion of the academic goals (Hart, 2012; Park & Choi, 2009). In this study, Hart’s (2012) definition of persistence is used: “a multi-faceted phenomenon that leads to the completion of an online program of study” (p. 29). Factors related to persistence can be encouraging (flexibility of asynchronous course work) or discouraging (limited access to resources) toward reenrollment (Budash & Shaw, 2017; Hart, 2012; Yang et al., 2017). Each student has a unique set of factors influencing their persistence in their degree program.



Park et al. (2008) suggested that persistence is not necessarily positive and attrition necessarily negative; rather, they are situational. Learners decide if it is the right time and worth their effort to pursue a program (Glazer & Murphy, 2015; Park et al., 2009). Malmberg (2000) defined attrition as “the voluntary or involuntary discontinuance of a student’s participation in the degree program prior to degree completion” (p. 14). Students leave courses, programs, and institutions for numerous reasons, but some return and graduate. This study seeks to explore these experiences. The parameters around when and how to measure persistence and attrition are difficult to define (Park et al., 2009). Adult and online learners have reported flexibility, affordability, financial support, and academic outcomes (such as helping students achieve career goals) as top priorities when choosing a school (EAB, 2015a; Thistoll & Yates, 2016).

Online programs and courses have historically reported higher attrition rates than traditional programs and courses (EAB, 2015a; Lee et al., 2013; Park et al., 2009; Peck et al., 2018; Willging & Johnson, 2009). In a study focused on online course dropout, Bukralia (2009) found that degree-seeking status, financial aid status, and current GPA were the greatest predictors of online course retention.

### **Factors of Persistence**

There are many factors influencing a student’s decision to persist, factors that are both internal and external to the institution. Thistoll and Yates (2016) suggest there is a triality, or a relationship between the student, the institution, and the external environment, which influences student persistence. Persistence factors can be categorized into three areas: (1) institutional factors, (2) individual student characteristics, and (3) external factors (Thistoll & Yates, 2016). The models developed by Rovai (2003) and Park and Choi (2009) account for factors in each of

these areas when considering student attrition and persistence. It is likely a unique combination of these factors influencing student drop-out and stop-out decisions.

**Institutional and program factors.** Persistence factors related to the institution and program are those that are within the bounds of the institution or the academic program and may influence student persistence in courses and degree programs. Institutional factors can be influenced by faculty and staff; they include quality of courses and faculty, the perceived degree of learning, and support from institutional faculty and staff (Yang et al., 2017).

An online student population may feel isolated and disconnected from the institution because they do not spend physical time on campus. Therefore, it is important to ensure that online students have access to services tailored to them, for example offering after-hours support for enrollment and financial aid questions (Zellner & Moore, 2011). Providing an academic support coordinator or distance education support coordinator can foster online student persistence (Aversa & MacCall, 2013; EAB, 2015a; Su & Waugh, 2018; Zellner & Moore, 2011). This dedicated support staff should serve adult learners by providing information about dropping courses, stopping out, enrollment, time management, and degree completion (Zellner & Moore, 2011). The one-stop-shop for services was shown to improve student satisfaction and may increase persistence (EAB, 2015a; Fairchild, 2003; Zellner & Moore, 2011). Thistoll and Yates (2016) encourage institutions to provide comprehensive course planning advice to be sure students have all the information about their courses and how the institution will aid in the student's goals. An orientation dedicated to online students sharing information about resources they need to navigate the university successfully can aid in student persistence (Bawa, 2016; Zellner & Moore, 2011), as can helping students set realistic expectations regarding the time commitment required for the online graduate program and providing strategies for being

successful (Su & Waugh, 2018). Fairchild (2003) suggests that an orientation specifically addressing barriers to the adult learner's experience may help equip students to overcome common obstacles such as navigating multiple roles.

Course level supports, such as interactions with faculty and peers, were found to be important to online graduate students (Milman et al., 2015; Muljana & Lou, 2019). Developing courses with respect to the needs of online graduate students, providing student services aimed at encouraging persistence, and educating university faculty and staff about persistence and attrition are strategies to increase persistence in online graduate students (Park et al., 2011). Placing an emphasis on practical application of course material — showing adult learners how course material can be applied to their work — is an important piece in encouraging persistence (Hegarty, 2011; Thistoll & Yates, 2016). Hegarty (2011) also encouraged faculty to operate classrooms similarly to the workplaces in which adult learners spend their time outside of the classroom—meaning more group discussion and team decision making rather than instructor-provided content followed by examination.

Laing and Laing (2015) suggest three linear steps to successful course retention. Step one is orientation and socialization; step two includes social interaction and social presence; step three is the establishment of learning communities. These three steps have been shown to lead to increased student retention and satisfaction. For example, Washington State University commissions peer mentors in online classrooms to increase class discussion, answer student questions, and reach out to students who fade away in the online environment (EAB, 2015a).

Faculty are another key factor in student persistence. Online adult learners may not need the same level of social connection from their peers or the university but support from faculty and staff is crucial (EAB, 2015a; Milman et al., 2015). According to Cohen and Greenberg

(2011), students value faculty support more than faculty expertise. They have a desire to be seen and understood as an adult by their instructors. Perceived support is important to students as they move through their programs (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Instructor feedback and responsiveness was found to be crucial to student persistence (Budash & Shaw, 2017; Yang et al., 2017). Timely feedback and a willingness to work with distance students are important from within the program (EAB, 2015a; Ivankova & Stick, 2007; Su & Waugh, 2018; Thistoll & Yates, 2016). Prompt communication from instructors helps to alleviate stress and improve performance (Budash & Shaw, 2017). Students appreciate feedback with comments and constructive criticism to help learners know how to improve (Budash & Shaw, 2017).

Providing timely student services and assistance to students encourages student persistence. Glazer and Murphy (2015) suggest adult learners enrolled in online programs need additional services and support, such as writing assistance, in order to persist in their programs. Content should be sequenced to build upon itself and should be relevant to learners according to Beaudoin, Kurtz, and Eden (2009). Yang et al. (2017) emphasized the importance of continued professional development and learning for online instructors and program administrators. Providing faculty and staff with knowledge and resources about the field of distance education will improve the experience for students and lead to greater student persistence.

While the institution cannot control all the demands on student time or the obstacles learners face, they do have the ability to increase flexibility, communication, and outreach to students in meaningful ways. Faculty, staff, and administrators can develop initiatives geared toward adult learners in online programs to make education accessible in a way that is meaningful to this population.

**Individual characteristics.** Individual learner characteristics are those internal to the student. They may be inherent characteristics or learned skills. Examples of individual characteristics are time management, organizational strategies, motivation, and determination. They are within the individual and therefore are beyond the control of the program and institution; still, they play a role in student persistence and drop-out decisions. Retention models often include these characteristics as an important factor influencing reenrollment behaviors.

Research study results vary in the significance of these factors often depending on situation, time, and place. Students reported that a sense of learning, accomplishment, and pride motivated them to persist in an online master's degree program (Yang et al., 2017). Other students in that study reported higher persistence based on the ability to apply what they were learning to their current career. Budash and Shaw (2017) found persistent students to have long-term career enhancement goals, which contributed to their daily internal motivation in the online classroom. Adult learning theory suggests that the here and now usability of knowledge is highly valued by adult learners (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). High levels of self-direction, self-regulation, and self-discipline are critical to doctoral student persistence (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Self-regulation refers to the student's ability to identify goals and monitor progress toward that goal independently (Kelly & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Budash and Shaw (2017) found that persistent learners were reluctant to acknowledge barriers to their online program, but when pressed acknowledged conflicting commitments. Cross (2014) studied grit, the trait level measure of perseverance and passion for long-term goals in non-traditional doctoral students, finding that the grittier the student, the more likely they are to persist. Developing a sense of ownership over one's education is another indicator of student persistence (Crede & Borrego, 2014; Shaw et al., 2016).

Lee and Choi (2013) proposed that an internal academic locus of control, student satisfaction, learning strategies, and flow experience lead to higher retention rates in online learning. Flow experience refers to the level of engagement a student has with the learning experience (Lee & Choi, 2013). This study found internal academic locus of control and student satisfaction did have an impact on online student retention, that the level of engagement or flow was directly related to student satisfaction. Students with an internal locus of control are more likely to complete online courses than those with an academic external locus of control (Lee et al., 2013). Metacognitive self-regulation for learning is a significant indicator of successful online course completion (Lee et al., 2013). Metacognitive self-regulation refers to the student's ability to evaluate, organize, transform, and memorize information. Budash and Shaw (2017) found proactive planning and time management to be primary characteristics of persistent students. In their study, students placed high value on the ability to organize their time around school, work, and personal commitments (Budash & Shaw, 2017). Learners with a higher level of autonomy and those who could articulate their educational goals were more likely to persist (Shaw et al. 2016).

Demographic data such as age, gender, race, ethnicity, and marital status may be another facet of student drop-out and persistence. Eshghi et al. (2011) found students who are enrolled full-time, married, and older have a higher risk of dropping out. DeClou (2016) found that students with children are more likely to withdraw from graduate school. Practical assumptions can be made about each of these variables. For example, students enrolled full-time and working full-time have less flexibility to pursue their coursework. Married students likely have family commitments in addition to school and work obligations, and older students may decide pursuing a graduate degree is not their highest priority based on other obligations. In another study, older

students enrolled in online courses were more likely to be retained than their traditional-aged counterparts; this could be due to the flexibility of online programming (James et al., 2016). Research parameters and variables used certainly play a role in the study of retention, persistence, and drop-out.

Waugh and Su-Searle (2014) found that more female students dropped an online cohort program than their male counterparts. Again, there could be many reasons female students dropped out in this study; perhaps there were more women enrolled in the program overall, or perhaps they are more likely to provide child or elder care (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Previous academic experience with online education and cumulative GPA were the strongest individual factors for drop-out in a study conducted on undergraduate online course enrollments (Cochran et al., 2014).

These internal characteristics and qualities seem to influence student enrollment behavior and are worthy of further investigation. The individual characteristics of students may be beyond the control of institutions, their faculty, and staff, but perhaps developing an understanding of these factors can help positively influence student services for online learners.

**External factors.** External factors are the events, obligations, and people from beyond the university that influence the student. For adult learners, external factors may be even more influential than the influence the university can provide (Thistoll & Yates, 2016). External factors can provide a great deal of support and encouragement for students; for example, some places of employment provide financial support or paid time off to complete studies. They can also be a substantial reason for a student stop-out or drop-out; losing one's job may influence the decision to withdraw from all classes or even the program entirely. Employment may cause

students to struggle with their course work. A positive response and flexibility on the part of institutions may result in retention rather than attrition (Moore & Greenland, 2017).

Students need support from within the program and university, as well as outside the institution (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). External factors such as family, work, finances, life crises, support, and encouragement have a strong influence on student drop-out decisions (Conceicao & Lehman, 2012; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2009). Students reported family and work as their two biggest motivators for persisting in a graduate program (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011). Financial assistance, social support, and friends and family were all predictors of dissertation completion success (Kelly & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). Finances are one of the most common reasons students give for withdrawing from a course or program (EAB, 2015a; Hoyt & Winn, 2004). EAB suggests that helping students navigate financial holds can decrease attrition by up to eight percent (EAB, 2015a). For instance, Xavier University put specific practices into place to help students get their financial holds cleared, making the path to enrollment smooth (EAB, 2015a).

Each learner has a distinct set of external factors influencing persistence, and how those factors are addressed varies by individual (Conceicao & Lehman, 2012). External factors can be supportive or disruptive to the learner, and how they are perceived may change over time (Budash & Shaw, 2017). While institutions cannot control the external factors influencing student enrollment behavior, providing a supportive and understanding culture may benefit adult learners (EAB, 2015a).

### **Margin Theory**

Another potential factor of persistence is described by Howard McClusky's Margin Theory (1970), which addresses the capacity adults have for taking on additional responsibilities



such as graduate school. Margin theory uses the terms *power*, *load*, and *margin*. Power is the set of resources available to an individual to help them cope with load. These resources can be talents, physical assets, characteristics, or connections to others (McClusky, 1970). Load is the set of demands made on a person by self and society such as work, family, church, and community commitments, among others (McClusky, 1970). Margin is a function of the relationship of load to power (McClusky, 1970, p. 82). Another way to say it is that margin is the excess capacity an individual has to engage in additional activities. When load (demands) equals or outweighs power (resources), things feel overwhelming and out of control. This is the point when people are stretched too thin and cannot successfully meet their obligations (McClusky, 1970). Individuals who can maintain a reserve of power are able to navigate unforeseen challenges, take additional risks, and explore other opportunities (McClusky, 1970).

Many of the factors of persistence addressed in this chapter play a role in Margin Theory. Support from family, friends, and work are all resources available to the student. For example, a workplace willing to help pay tuition or offer reduced hours while in school provides resources to manage the additional load of graduate school expectations. Additionally, faculty and staff who provide flexibility for an adult learner are offering power to help the student manage work and school responsibilities.

Factors influencing student persistence are influenced by a combination of institutional factors, student internal characteristics, and external factors. Institutions can work to provide student services geared toward online adult learners, to encourage instructor engagement, and to remain in contact with students to help increase persistence. However, the individual traits of the student and her external environment will also influence her persistence. Many of these factors play a role in the power and load a student feels throughout their educational experience and

ultimately impacts the capacity students have for continuing their education. The next section will discuss how these factors fit into student retention models.

## **Student Retention Models**

Understanding retention models informs the basis of this study, although it should be noted that many of the foundational models are based solely on campus-based, undergraduate students. The early retention studies of online students used traditional retention models and therefore did not account for the differences inherent to online learning (Ice et al., 2012). Vincent Tinto (1975, 1993) developed an early and foundational model of student retention: the student integration model. While Tinto laid a foundation for student retention research, this study does not address the adult learner or the online learning format. Therefore, this discussion begins with Rovai's composite persistence model (2003) which placed an emphasis on online adult learners. This section reviews additional retention models for adult learners, online learners, and concludes with a description of a reenrollment plan model.

### **Composite Persistence Model**

Rovai (2003) synthesized Tinto's Student Integration Model (1975, 1993) and Bean and Metzner's Student Attrition Model (1985) and incorporated the skills and needs of online learners into the Composite Persistence Model. Rovai defines persistence as "the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles" (2003, p. 1). This model focuses on student characteristics and skills prior to admission, as well as external and internal factors influencing students after admission. There are four factor groups in this model: (1) student characteristics, (2) student skills prior to admission, (3) external factors affecting students after admission, and (4) internal factors affecting students after admission (Rovai, 2003).

Internal factors considered prior to admission are the characteristics and skills developed before the student applies for admission; these factors play a role in student persistence according to Rovai (2003). Student characteristics include demographics (age, ethnicity, gender), intellectual development, academic performance, and preparation. Examples of student skills are computer/information literacy, time management, and writing skills. The past experiences and skills brought with the student have the potential to influence persistence. External factors include environmental variables such as: finances, family responsibilities, support from friends/family, and life crises (Rovai, 2003). Internal factors include academic and social integration, goal commitment, self-esteem, accessibility to services, and pedagogy fit (Rovai, 2003). The Composite Persistence Model recognizes the diverse needs of online learners, while including the characteristics of nontraditional students. The student attrition model and the composite persistence model are retention models at the institutional and/or program levels.

The next framework addresses online course withdrawal, specifically for adult learners. This framework is useful in developing an understanding of the reasons adult learners drop-out of online courses.

### **Rovai Restructured: Framework for Adult Drop-Out in Online Learning**

In an effort to understand the reasons adult learners drop-out of online courses, Park and Choi (2009) conducted a review of literature related to retention frameworks. They agreed with Rovai's (2003) Composite Persistence Model and adjusted it to fit the scope of online course completion. They indicated a need to incorporate a time component to the model. Some factors are relevant prior to the course beginning, while others are relevant during the course, (Park & Choi, 2009). The external factors moved in the model to indicate their impact both before the course begins and during the course (Park & Choi, 2009). For example, a family member

becoming ill and requiring care may cause a student to drop a course before it even begins. Likewise, family or work commitments may cause a student to withdraw before the end of the semester. Park and Choi indicated a direct tie to drop-out/persistence from external factors, as well as the combination of learner characteristics and internal factors such as motivation, academic integration, and technology usability/issues (2009).

Park and Choi's (2009) restructuring of Rovai's (2003) Composite Persistence Model brings into account additional factors for online adult learners. An emphasis is placed on the importance of external factors influencing student persistence prior to enrollment and during the class. While Park and Choi's (2009) framework limits the scope to course retention, it might inform online program retention at the graduate level.

Park et al. (2008) conducted a study to understand voluntary withdrawal from a graduate program. They defined student withdrawal as "students who leave for reasons not obviously related to academic requirements" (2008). This study grouped withdrawal reasons into two categories: personal reasons and program reasons. Personal reasons, such as an unexpected life event, were cited most often as the reason for program withdrawal; unexpected life events include many external factors, including finances, death of a family member, and time constraints by family and friends (Park et al., 2008). Program reasons for withdrawal included a learning preference for face-to-face interaction, a lack of skills needed to utilize the technology required, or a change of educational/career goals (Park et al., 2008). The Park and Choi framework helps to identify reasons adult learners drop-out of online courses. The Education Advisory Board (EAB) proposes a reenrollment plan to keep adult learners persisting in their academic program even when a stop-out occurs.

## **EAB's Reenrollment Plan**

The EAB is a research organization focused on higher education. Institutions subscribe to forums, or areas of focus within higher education. One forum is adult and online education, which researches best practices for student recruitment and retention among other aspects of working with the adult population. The EAB reenrollment plan encourages persistence among adult learners when a stop-out occurs and presents strategies for academic programs to implement when a student stops out. These students may benefit from support at the university level to encourage them to reenroll. The EAB reenrollment plan includes monitoring student enrollment, which may aid in preventing impulse stop-outs; for example, a student who stops out because of something that can easily be helped (e.g., understanding the bursar's office policy around tuition payments; EAB, 2015a). The plan recommends sending mass email reminders to students who are not enrolled for the upcoming semester, while those who remain unenrolled receive a more personalized message followed by a phone call to encourage reenrollment (EAB, 2015b). Some stop-outs are not preventable; for example, a student who chooses to sit out for a period due to loss of a job or health concerns. In these instances, it is suggested that someone — the advisor or a coordinator — request permission to reconnect with the student later in the semester to plan for reenrollment. Following up with students has yielded success regarding retention (EAB, 2019a). Intentional efforts with students who stop-out may increase overall retention and allows colleges and universities to better serve their students.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Symbolic interaction and adult learning theory shape the theoretical framework for this qualitative study. Additionally, relevant research around graduate student stop-outs informed this

study. The theoretical framework was the lens used to frame the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), influenced research question formation, as well as data collection and analysis.

Symbolic interactionism, also part of the theoretical framework, has three premises articulated by Blumer (1969). The first is that people act toward things based on the meanings they have for them. The second: that these meanings are developed through social interactions; finally, each meaning is processed and modified through an individual's interpretive processes. In other words, our actions toward people, objects, and ideas are based on our understanding of them. That understanding is developed through our social interactions with others and then interpreted and modified by us as we encounter people, objects, and ideas. In this framework, it is especially important for researchers to pay attention to the meaning given to objects, people, ideas, and experiences (Blumer, 1969).

Adult learning theory, as the classic adult learning theorist Malcolm Knowles (1970) defined it, states that adult learners are independent and have a desire to apply their learning to work and life immediately. They expect their life experience to be acknowledged in the classroom. Adult learners desire graduate degrees, but their competing obligations of family, work, and community create obstacles. Adult Learning Theory, then, describes adults as independent learners, meaning they do not rely on authority to transmit information and guide their decisions. They take responsibility for their own motivation (Pew, 2007). Adults are self-directed, contributing members of society who view themselves as capable of making decisions about their education and career (Knowles, 1970). Self-directed points to the independent nature of adults and their willingness to engage in the process (Knowles et al., 2015). Adult learners are described as "older" than their traditional counterparts. They are likely working at least part-time and have families who depend on them (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Pappas & Jerman, 2011;

Offerman, 2011). Seventy percent of adult graduate students are employed full-time, and 41 percent of all online students are also parents (Aslanian et al., 2019).

Adult learners need to stop-out of their studies for numerous reasons (i.e., financial, work, family, etc.). The stop-out population are those who “do not complete their plan of study within the normal time schedule, having skipped a term or more and then return” (Hoyt, 2004, p. 397). These stop-out students have intentions of returning to their course work and do ultimately complete degrees (Woosley et al., 2005). Understanding why these students stop-out and why they return influences how institutions approach student withdrawals. Woosley et al. (2005) suggest that a simple and personal withdrawal and reenrollment process may be enough to encourage stop-out students to return to their course work.

Stop-out enrollment behavior and adult learning theory informed the development of this study as I want to explore the experiences of adult learners who stop-out of an online program for a semester. Constructionist and symbolic interactionist views are central to this study in that each framework is considered when developing research questions, interview questions, and the study overall. In using the symbolic interactionism lens, realize that the researcher’s own socially-constructed meanings will influence how they interpret participants’ stories. The combination of these theories, symbolic interaction, adult learning theory, and stop-out enrollment behaviors, influenced the lens and goals of this study.

## **Summary**

Adult graduate students are pursuing further education to advance their careers while maintaining their personal and professional commitments. Their motivations and challenges are different than their traditional counterparts (Hydarov et al., 2013). Recognizing the life stage and life experience adult learners bring to graduate study is important to serving them. Additionally,

it is important for colleges and universities to develop a deeper understanding of the factors encouraging persistence for this population. They need flexibility and understanding from faculty and staff because of their personal and professional commitments. They have families, full-time jobs, and other obligations demanding their time. Retaining these students means understanding the external factors pushing them forward and pulling them back. It means changing the way we think about adult-learner persistence and retention and accepting the need for a leave of absence. Perhaps with a better understanding of adult-learner persistence, educators can make a difference in influencing a student's decision to return to the program after a leave of absence. The next chapter explains this study's methodology.



## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

Chapter three, which describes the research framework of the study, begins with a description of its qualitative research and the methodological framework. The research design includes the rationale for selecting the methodology's case study. The chapter identifies the process of participant selection, data collection, and analysis, and concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and rigor.

### **Methodology**

This research is qualitative in nature because of its goal to understand participant experiences. Qualitative research seeks to understand the world from their perspective (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A qualitative approach empowers participants to share their stories and provides me with a truer understanding of the stop-out experience. As a qualitative researcher, my own beliefs and values will influence this work, but I will do my best to acknowledge my position throughout. There are four elements of research included in the development of this study: (1) theoretical framework, (2) epistemology, (3) methodology, and (4) methods (Crotty, 1998).

The theoretical framework is the lens used to support the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The theories underpinning this study are symbolic interactionism and adult learning theory. Symbolic interactionism is the idea that we develop meanings for things based on our social interactions with them (Blumer, 1969). We interact with people and things based on the meaning they have for us, and we create that meaning based on our interactions. Adult learning theory is the idea that adults bring professional and life experiences to the classroom, that they are independent and self-motivated learners who seek a collaborative approach to learning rather than a top-down, instructor-knows-all approach (Knowles, 1970).

Epistemology refers to types of knowledge (Crotty, 1998). This study adopts a social constructionist view of knowledge, which believes meaning is created by humans as they engage with the world (Crotty, 1998). In constructionism, everything is subjective and therefore dependent upon an individual's interpretation to be real. The methodology proposed for this research is case study with investigator self-experimentation. Case study research investigates a real-life experience in depth and within its real-world context (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014). The case study will use multiple perspectives to contribute to the understanding of a larger phenomenon. One perspective will be my own. *Participant researcher* is the term used when the researcher becomes a participant in the study (Throne, 2019). Investigator self-experimentation allowed this researcher to explore their own personal experiences as additional data for this study. The autoethnography portion of this study is “an element of doing the work and observing the self while doing the work” (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 102). The methods are the ways in which data will be collected, and this study will collect data in a variety of ways including documentation, interviews, and archives.

## **Research Questions**

The goal of this study is to understand the experiences of students who stop-out from their graduate coursework — and assess why they persist after a stop-out. Why do they reenroll in courses? What brings them back? I hope to discover the reasons why students who stop-out from their coursework then return to their studies. The research questions that guided this study include:

1. What do adult online learners experience during a stop-out from their studies?
2. What do adult online learners experience during a stop-out that motivates them to return?

3. How do students' prior enrollment experiences influence their decision to return to coursework after a stop-out?

## **Research Scope**

This study was designed to understand graduate student stop-outs. In this case study research, the researcher explored the experiences of students who reenrolled after a stop-out to understand why the student reenrolled and what factors encouraged their decision. The methodological framework informed the lens by which this case study was analyzed.

## **Qualitative Research**

The present study is qualitative. Qualitative research seeks to understand the world through the eyes of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The practice of qualitative study means that researchers seek to observe and interpret people and things in their natural settings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In qualitative research, researchers take on the belief and orientation that the world can be interpreted through the meanings people give to objects and experiences — it is situational and context dependent (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Qualitative research empowers people to share their stories, and it helps researchers explore and understand a particular issue by deepening understanding and shedding light on new meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researchers engage in qualitative research as a tool to help them understand how participants experience the world in which they live and how their experiences shape their actions. Researchers use multiple strategies to gain multiple perspectives and achieve a deeper understanding of a phenomenon, realizing that true objective reality can never be captured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Flick, 2014). The researcher collects a variety of

data in their quest to understand a phenomenon, including artifacts, stories, interviews, observations, and much more (Bhattacharya, 2017; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

The researcher plays a role in qualitative research; as such, she must begin with her own ontology, or nature of being, and epistemology—or how we know what we know (Bhattacharya, 2017). Acknowledging our position in the world — our cultural background, values, and beliefs — and how it influences a study is a key difference between qualitative and quantitative study (Bhattacharya, 2017). Quantitative researchers seek to generalize data and to keep the researcher position removed from the research (Flick, 2014). Understanding one’s assumptions and beliefs and how we believe we know those things helps to situate the researcher in the study (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). There is value in acknowledging positionality because researcher bias is very difficult to avoid, even with the best of intentions; so, instead of trying to eliminate the researcher’s beliefs and values, we openly acknowledge how they influence the work. In fact, this study uses the researcher as participant, by which I examine my personal experience to strengthen the data (Probst, 2016; Throne, 2019).

The current study used four elements of research: (1) theoretical framework, (2) epistemology, (3) methodology, and (4) methods as identified by Crotty (1998). The theoretical framework is the philosophical view informing all aspects of the study — it provides a foundation and context for the processes used. Epistemology is the “theory of knowledge,” or how we know what we know (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The methodology is the overall strategy developed for how the study was conducted, and the methods are the actual ways in which data was collected (Crotty, 1998). In the next section, I will discuss the theoretical framework for this study.

## **Epistemology**

Epistemology refers to types of knowledge (Crotty, 1998). This study adopts a constructionist view of knowledge. Constructionists believe knowledge and therefore reality and meaning are developed from humans interacting with each other and the world around them (Crotty, 1998). Meaning is not inherent but rather constructed by humans as they engage with the world (Crotty, 1998). In this view, meaning cannot be described as “objective” because meaning does not exist without the interpretation of the human (Crotty, 1998). Everything in constructionism is subjective — it includes the past experiences of the individual constructing meaning. It is an ongoing process and one that may look different to each individual person.

Social constructionism focuses on where people live and work to provide context to their interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). People create meaning based on their social experiences. In this study, social constructionism will be demonstrated by looking at the interactions that students have with faculty and staff and how those interactions impact student behavior. Researchers use broad questions to allow participants to share their interpretations and the meanings they have created (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, this approach makes room for historical and cultural influences as part of how individuals make meaning of their experiences (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study uses a constructionist interpretive framework. The next section describes methodological framework and data collection methods.

## **Research Design**

In this section, I detail the research design including the methodological framework and data collection methods. Next, I explain participant selection and my membership role as the

researcher. I then address data collection methods, and finally I address data management, data analysis, and data verification and trustworthiness.

## **Methodological Framework**

Case study research is defined as an approach in which the investigator explores a real-life phenomenon (the case) in depth and within its real-world context, through detailed data collection involving multiple sources of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014). Case studies can be defined within certain parameters such as the place or timeframe, and sometimes specific individuals or cases are selected to best understand the issue (Stake, 1995). Researchers using the case study approach should pay special attention to the contexts surrounding the case including historical, physical, economic, political, and cultural environments (Stake, 2005). In an effort to best understand a specific case, researchers collect many forms of data such as interviews, observations, and documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study was designed as a single instrumental case study which can “provide insight into an issue or to redraw a generalization” (Stake, 2005, p. 445). The case is singular, but it uses multiple perspectives to contribute to the understanding of a larger issue, which allows for investigation into the experiences of a student who stops out and reenrolls.

## **Methods**

In this study, I collected data in multiple formats and in multiple ways. In case study research, data can be collected via documentation, archives, interviews, direct observations, participant-observation, and artifacts (Yin, 2018). In this study, data took on three different forms: interviews, academic history, and broader enrollment patterns. Interviews were held with two participants (students) who shared the common experience of dropping all courses and then reenrolling in coursework the subsequent semester. Academic history and plans included a

review of approved programs of study and past enrollment patterns. The third point of collection, broader enrollment patterns, were found within the Great Plains IDEA student population and within the specific program being studied. A final and fourth point of collection was my personal experience with stopping out.

## **Great Plains IDEA**

The Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA) is a consortium of universities working together to offer online graduate programs to working professionals (*Our mission*, n.d.). Great Plains IDEA utilizes a unique collaborative approach to online education, one that allows universities to capitalize on resources ranging from faculty expertise to student services. Great Plains IDEA programs generally take a practical approach to their curriculum, which is designed with the working professional in mind.

The primary purpose of an inter-institutional alliance is to collaboratively develop educational opportunities and to deliver high quality, fully online, academic programs (Moxley et al., 2010). Great Plains IDEA provides a space for university faculty and administrators to work creatively and collaboratively to develop academic programs to meet the needs of online learners. The alliance is founded on three guiding principles: (1) act as equal partners, (2) be respectful of differences among institutions, and (3) streamline and simplify student navigation (Moxley et al., 2010).

Students apply and are admitted to one university, where they build their transcripts and earn their degrees. Students enroll and pay for classes through their home university. Courses are taught by faculty at each partner university and are offered asynchronously and fully online. “The mission of Great Plains IDEA is to serve learners by offering online, flexible, affordable instruction for a virtual community of individuals from diverse backgrounds. Our alliance offers

high quality, academic programs that are greater in reach and significance than any single university could offer alone by sharing resources in efficient ways” (*Our mission*, n.d.). The focus on sharing resources and combining expertise all for the benefit of the student, who has a multitude of responsibilities, is the goal of Great Plains IDEA.

Today, Great Plains IDEA supports nine academic programs in the human sciences: (1) Community Development, (2) Dietetics, (3) Early Care and Education for a Mobile Society, (4) Family Community Services, (5) Family Consumer Sciences Education, (6) Family Financial Planning, (7) Gerontology, (8) Merchandising, and (9) Youth Development. Eight of the programs are offered at the master’s level while the Early Care and Education for a Mobile Society program is a bachelor’s-level degree completion (*Discover our programs*, n.d.). The next section discusses the population for this study, participant selection, and access.

### **Participant Selection and Gaining Access**

Great Plains IDEA granted permission to access their student population as participants and to name the alliance in this study (see Appendix A and Appendix B for the approval letters). Criterion and purposeful sampling methods helped to identify and select two final participants for this study. Criterion sampling ensured that all participants shared the common experience of an unplanned stop-out from course work and that all participants were admitted to a master’s level program (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to select participants and sites for study because they were believed to have the potential to inform a deeper understanding of the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2014; Merriam, 1998). In this case, potential student participants were volunteers, and final participants were selected based on participant agreement. Predetermined criteria included:



1. Admission to a Great Plains IDEA university and a Great Plains IDEA master's level academic program
2. The student must have stopped out from study in the previous term (spring 2021)
3. The student has since reenrolled in courses
4. The stop-out must have been unplanned, meaning the student had enrolled in coursework for spring 2021, but then due to unexpected circumstances dropped all course work and stopped out for the entire semester.

The Great Plains IDEA eight master's degree programs had 650 students admitted and/or enrolled during the spring 2021 term. Of that population, 411 were female and 103 were male; 9 did not report gender. A total of 66 students withdrew from all coursework, constituting these students as stop-outs for the spring 2021 term. Of those students, 48 were female and 17 were male; 1 did not report gender. To be eligible for this study, students had to reenroll in coursework for fall 2021. The number of eligible participants for this study was 10. After identifying the population, students received an invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix C). Two students responded to the invitation and served as the sample for this study. Several attempts to expand the participant pool failed; therefore, it was determined to add me, the researcher, to the participant pool for a total of three participants in this study. Adding my personal experience with stopping out to the data allowed me to explore the stop-out phenomenon from an additional perspective.

Due to the small number of eligible participants, a one-phased screening approach was used (Yin, 2014). In one-phase screening, the researcher collects limited information about potential candidates from individuals or documentation (Yin, 2014). This screening process was intentional to maintain the rigor of the study.

It must be noted that this research was conducted during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. COVID-19 is a disease caused by a coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2 (World Health Organization, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic began for the United States in early 2020 and is ongoing; the economic impact on Americans has been intense. According to Parker et al. (2020), one-quarter of Americans reported having had trouble paying their bills. Many Americans have been touched by job loss or disruption of employment, meaning reduced hours or reduced pay (Parker et al, 2020). It is possible COVID-19 influenced a student's stop-out experience.

### **Research Location**

The interviews and meetings with student participants took place via Zoom, a videoconferencing software, due to the inter-institutional nature of the alliance and their online/off campus location. Participants were able to select their physical location prior to the Zoom session and were encouraged to find a mostly private and comfortable location. Sessions were recorded using Zoom and saved to the researcher's laptop. Participant permission to record was obtained beforehand. A third-party service transcribed, Rev, transcribed the interviews (Rev, 2021). Transcriptions were coded and analyzed later.

### **Participant Role**

The study's participants were given a set of expectations prior to agreeing to contribute their experiences. Expectations were outlined in the informed consent documentation and included cooperation and willingness to share stories and experiences; if a participant was not comfortable with the study, they could withdraw. Building trust with participants was one of my responsibilities as the researcher. I wanted each participant in this study to feel comfortable and safe sharing their experiences. Participants were expected to be available for interviews lasting up to one hour each. Interviews were especially helpful in uncovering the "how" and "why" of

experiences (Yin, 2014). Multiple interviews provided the opportunity to follow up on specific aspects of the participants experience, and member checking was the participants' opportunity to confirm accurate reflection by the researcher (Yin, 2014). In the next section, I will discuss researcher positionality — the lens and experiences I brought to this study.

### **The Third Participant: The Researcher**

As author, I am the third participant in this study. I am intimately familiar with the stop-out experience, as I experienced it firsthand. During the summer 2022 term, I was enrolled in doctoral research hours, but I silently stopped out. I avoided my research and everything about my graduate program for the semester. I had reached a tipping point and needed a break. I told no one and therefore I refer to this period as a silent stop out. It appeared I was active in my research, but in reality, I was disconnected. The opportunity to examine the stop-out phenomenon from my own point of view became available when the participant pool remained small.

The researcher as participant concept is common in autoethnographic studies and can fit into other qualitative studies as well, so argues Johnston et al. (2017). Today, qualitative researchers are more transparent than ever before about their individual experiences and biases (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Reflecting on the stop-out experiences of participants and triangulating their experiences with my own strengthens the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). In the next section, I address my position within the study.

### **Positionality**

Positionality is a way for researchers to identify and process their biases, values, and experiences, which will be brought into their interpretations of the research being conducted. Positionality is the opportunity for the researcher to acknowledge her personal experiences,

values, and lens (Bhattacharya, 2017; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Positionality is recognizing that personal experiences shape how researchers conduct their study and engage with participants. Acknowledging our own experiences with a phenomenon ensures as much transparency and objectivity as possible (Johnston et al, 2017).

Becoming a participant of this study was an opportunity for me to reflect on my own stop-out experience. I am a 37-year-old female, enrolled in a doctoral program in the College of Education. I work part time, and I am enrolled part time in my graduate program. I am married, and I have a dependent child living in my home. I am demographically similar to the student population of this study. While I did not stop-out during my master's degree program, I have experienced several periods of inactivity in writing this dissertation. Officially, I remained enrolled throughout my time as a doctoral student, but one semester produced very little writing.

Additionally, I worked with Great Plains IDEA and online graduate students for 10 years. I served as a student services professional linking Great Plains IDEA students to services and resources, as well as in an administrative role providing support to faculty, department chairs, and deans. I worked with students around a stop-out, and I acknowledge that I believe faculty and staff play a role in encouraging students to return from such a leave. My most recent role within the alliance does not include direct contact with students, but my work influenced how others within the alliance interacted with students.

I believe higher education is important for mid-career individuals and leads to an improved quality of life personally and professionally. I strongly believe working professionals need a different kind of learning experience than traditional on-campus students. I am convinced student persistence can be influenced by faculty and staff. I believe quality programs targeted at the adult graduate student demand flexibility but should not lack rigor — it is important to find a

balance of flexibility while maintaining a challenging and applicable program. The next section will address data sources, collection methods, and data management.

## **Data Collection Methods**

Multiple data sources informed this study including interviews and supplemental documents. The student enrollment records documentation showed enrollment patterns on a broader scale and interviews brought participant interpretation to the study. Multiple sources of data increased the richness of the data.

### **Data Sources**

One-on-one interviews were the primary data source for this study with the goal being to develop an understanding of the stop-out experience from the participants' point of view. The semi-structured interview included predetermined questions and probes to aid in creating a guided conversation rather than following a rigid question-and-answer session (Flick, 2014; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). A set of predetermined questions were asked of each student participant with a series of probes available to increase the richness of responses and to garner details about their stop-out and overall experience (Appendix A). Use of these pre-determined questions aided me as the researcher in taking special care to avoid leading questions during the interview process (Yin, 2014). Up to three interviews were conducted with each participant in the study, each scheduled for one hour and recorded with Zoom. Only audio files were used for transcription, which were outsourced to Rev. Qualitative research methodology can rely on field notes taken during and after participant interviews to help the researcher recall specific moments during the interview process. The notes can lead to additional questions for subsequent interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Yin, 2014). I utilized field notes in this process to deepen meaning around the data.

In addition to interview data, supplemental documents were collected and analyzed as well. Great Plains IDEA granted permission to access student records pending student consent and IRB approval, which were met. Records included student enrollment history, transcript information, and student programs of study. This data analysis revealed information about enrollment patterns of students who stop-out. Enrollment pattern data in the form of documentation came from ExpanSIS (Institute for Academic Alliances, 2006), with permission again approved by the Great Plains IDEA.

Data triangulation, which is collecting and analyzing multiple types of data, helps to extend the depth of information gathered about a particular case (Flick, 2014; Yin 2014). In this case, the design of the study included 1) interviews, 2) student enrollment records, and 3) ExpanSIS data. I used various forms of documentation in conjunction with participant interviews to view student stop-out from multiple perspectives and deepen the data set available for analysis. In the next section, I discuss the instrumentation of that data set.

### **Instrumentation**

Interviews are the primary data source for this research, and the interview guide serves as the instrument for this study. The guide is a list of questions and probes the researcher asks participants (Merriam, 1998). The interview guide can be found in Appendix E of this research. A semi-structured format allowed for conversational flow while providing questions to guide the discussion (Flick, 2014; Merriam, 1998; Yin, 2014). The interview questions were based on the research questions guiding this study. Questions aimed to elicit open-ended responses from participants to encourage as much sharing about the student's experience as possible. Probes are comments, questions, or actions to learn more about the question asked—for example an intentional silence to leave room for the participant to share more (Merriam, 1998). Some probes

were identified in the writing of the research questions to serve as prompts for ensuring all aspects are explored during the interview. It was expected that additional questions would arise as students shared their experiences (Stake, 2005). The semi-structured interview allowed for this type of shifting as the participant shared.

Each interview began with an explanation of my goals as researcher and an overview of what would happen with the participant's information; that pseudonyms would replace actual names and that data would be securely stored. Pseudonyms were assigned via an online random selection tool. Participants had an opportunity to review how their contributions were being reported to ensure accurate reflection (Merriam, 1998).

As data security is an aspect of building trust with participants, the next section outlines the data management plan for this study.

## **Data Management**

The data management plan outlines the process for organizing data and keeping it secure throughout the project (Flick, 2014). Data management ensured that all aspects of the collected materials were protected and easily accessed for coding and analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, data management included the following steps. I intentionally indexed transcripts by participant and interview date which aided in a streamlined coding process. All transcribed interviews were printed and kept in a three-ring binder for coding, and all documents were labeled and dated. Personally-identifiable information was redacted, and pseudonyms helped to maintain participant confidentiality. Data was kept in multiple formats, both printed and electronic. Additionally, files were saved on multiple devices — on a laptop computer, in a filing cabinet, and on a flash drive — and the data was kept in a locked office. Additional data management steps included:

1. Interview recordings, researcher notes, and documents were saved in password-protected locations which required duo-authentication to access.
2. Identifiable information of participants was fictionalized.
3. Data was shared in the dissertation and with faculty with the same level of confidentiality.

## **Data Analysis**

Data analysis in qualitative research arguably begins simultaneously with data collection, as the researcher begins reflecting on the data during the interview process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this analysis process, I moved through pre-coding, coding, and second-cycle coding. In precoding, field notes and reflections were written at the conclusion of each interview in an effort to capture as much data and interpretation as possible. This precoding effort provided initial ideas for consideration and created a path to revisit throughout analysis (Saldaña, 2013). While sometimes transcription becomes part of the analysis process, in this case all interviews were transcribed by a third party.

Once all transcripts, documents, and field notes were collected, coding began. Saldaña (2013) identifies two cycles of coding. The first cycle seeks to find meaning in the transcripts and to identify broad categories to explore further. The second cycle is an opportunity to reorganize and reanalyze data coded in the first cycle (Saldaña, 2013). Codes are researcher-generated constructs that represent the interpretation of the research. These codes later aid in pattern detection, categorizing, and ultimately to theme identification (Saldaña, 2013). Analytic memos help the researcher sift through the data and identify themes (Saldaña, 2013). In this case, analytic memos were used to make-sense of common themes participants shared. The memos help the researcher make connections between experiences shared by participants. The data



analysis process included peer debriefing or discussion with other researchers, namely members of my supervisory committee. Aural processing of the codes with others can help validate findings (Saldaña, 2013).

For this study, first-cycle coding used process and emotion coding. Process coding uses gerunds to show action in the data, for example, “deciding to stop-out” or “weighing my options.” The process coding allowed me to identify student, faculty, and staff actions around stop-out enrollment behavior. Once process coding was completed, I went back through the data using emotion coding. Emotion coding is “particularly useful for those studies that explore intrapersonal and interpersonal participant experiences and actions” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 105).

Second-cycle coding allows the researcher to develop overarching themes and categories based on first-cycle codes (Saldaña, 2013). Essentially, I used the codes from the first cycle to continue to narrow the list of categories (Saldaña, 2013). For this study, I planned to use pattern coding in the second cycle, as “pattern coding pulls together a lot of material into a more meaningful unit of analysis” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 210).

The final interview with participants was reserved for member checking — or an opportunity for participants to provide feedback about initial patterns and themes. Member checking ensures that the researcher has captured the essence of the participant’s experience. This validation is important because it works toward accuracy and continues to build rapport with participants.

## **Data Representation**

Following this study, I continued the conversation about stop-out students and potential strategies for encouraging reenrollment. I aim to submit an article to an appropriate journal focused on online education and/or adult learners. This study will also be informative for The

Great Plains IDEA and will be presented to the cabinet and board of directors so that best practices can be developed. The Great Plains IDEA management team staff seeks to learn more about stop-out students and have discussed conducting future studies. This study may inform future research conducted by the alliance.

### **Reciprocity and Research Ethics**

Conducting ethical research and adhering to the policies and practices of the Institutional Review Board is important to protect the participants of this study and ensure quality work. The proposal for this study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was approved on November 22, 2021. Approval to conduct research precluded interactions with potential research participants. Additionally, I obtained permission from the Great Plains IDEA cabinet to access student data and to request further participation from students.

In asking participants to engage in this study, it was important to show them the potential impact of their participation, as well as possible personal benefits. Reciprocity, or giving back to participants, is a key ethical factor in qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By sharing their personal experiences, students can influence how Great Plains IDEA faculty and staff interact with students who stop-out. Student participants may feel a sense of gratification by telling their story and feeling heard.

I strived to serve as a resource for participants and was available to connect them to additional resources as needed. For example, while unlikely, if interviews conjured strong emotions or troubling memories, I was prepared to refer students to Counseling and Psychological Services, or CAPS. There were no known risks for participants. I took steps to protect participant privacy, and participants had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

## **Trustworthiness and Rigor**

Quality was an important component of research. Tracy (2010) offers eight markers of quality in qualitative research: (1) worthy topic, (2) rich rigor, (3) sincerity, (4) credibility, (5) resonance, (6) significant contribution, (7) ethics, and (8) meaningful coherence. Using these criteria addressed the efforts made to ensure quality in this study.

First, a worthy topic was identified — it is relevant, timely, significant, or evocative (Tracy, 2010). This study sought to gain an understanding of online graduate student stop-out experiences. This study is timely because student retention and completion are critical (Barefoot, 2004; Boston et al., 2011). Budgets are being cut and schools are being scrutinized based on their ability to retain and graduate students in a timely manner. Understanding why a student stops out and how they experience the stop-out and their opportunity to return to their studies will be informative to retention efforts.

The second criterion is rigor. Rigor is marked by the richness of data collected and the depth of analysis conducted (Tracy, 2010). Ensuring that an abundance of data is collected makes it more likely to showcase the uniqueness of the phenomenon (Tracy, 2010). Multiple interviews were conducted. Student experiences were recorded, as well as the perceptions and actions of faculty and staff connected to the student participants. Additional student enrollment data analysis offered another view of stop-out patterns.

The third criterion is sincerity. Sincerity describes the researcher's authentic and genuine efforts to conduct honest and transparent research (Tracy, 2010). It did not “suggest a single reality or truth,” (p. 841), but rather included honesty about how the research may have been impacted by researcher biases (Tracy, 2010). I have reflected upon my personal interest in the topic of student stop-outs and described my personal connection to Great Plains IDEA.

The fourth criterion, credibility, refers to the extent to which the research reported feels trustworthy, complete, and plausible (Tracy, 2010). Several strategies can increase credibility including thick description, triangulation, and member reflections (Tracy, 2010). This study used multiple interviews with participants to provide an in-depth description of student stop-out experiences. Multiple sources of data provided a more complete picture to see whether multiple data sources pointed to similar conclusions. Finally, member reflections provided an opportunity for participants and the researcher to collaborate (Tracy, 2010). Participants reviewed researcher interpretations and provided feedback.

The fifth criterion is resonance. Resonance refers to the connection a reader feels to the research. It can promote empathetic feelings from the reader when they see themselves in the story or when they identify similar situations in their own lives (Tracy, 2010). My hope is that these research findings will inform additional studies about student stop-out and generate new ideas for faculty, staff, and administrators when working with students during a stop-out.

The sixth criterion is significant contribution. Research should extend knowledge, improve practice, or generate more research to be considered significant (Tracy, 2010). Expanding our understanding of the subject can be done in several ways — theoretically, heuristically, or practically (Tracy, 2010). This study aims to increase curiosity about student stop-outs and to identify strategies for faculty and staff to use when working with student stop-outs. The stop-out student justifies additional research, and this study will contribute to that body of knowledge.

The seventh criterion is ethics. Ethics in research means demonstrating ethical behavior through each step of the research process, such as meeting industry or IRB standards (Tracy, 2010). Creating a safe space for participants to engage in the study, maintaining their

confidentiality, and protecting participants throughout the process is all part of conducting ethical research (Tracy, 2010). After this study received IRB approval, measures were taken to protect participant privacy. I endeavored to provide a safe space for discussion about the stop-out experience and to do my best to capture and report findings accurately. Member reflections assisted in accurate reporting, and I worked to ensure participants understand how their story is being told. Finally, ethical considerations were taken in the closing of the study as data was stored/destroyed according to best practices.

The eighth criterion is meaningful coherence. Meaningfully coherent studies “interconnect their research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical framework” (Tracy, 2010, p. 848). In other words, in this study each step is connected through the threads of the theoretical framework. This study used a social constructionist viewpoint and sought to maintain that lens throughout data collection, analysis, and the reporting of findings.

These eight big-tent markers of quality as presented by Tracy (2010) provided a set of guidelines to use when assessing quality work in qualitative research. These criteria helped me seek quality in all aspects of this study.

## **Summary**

This study seeks to understand graduate student stop-out experiences. It relies upon the theoretical and methodological framework explained above. The research design addresses the rationale for using the Great Plains IDEA student population and the data collection process. Multiple types of data from a variety of sources provided a rich dataset to code and analyze. Asking participants to reflect on my understanding of their story allowed for collaboration to elaborate on findings and best represent their lived experiences.

## Chapter 4 - Findings

The goal of this study was to develop an understanding of the stop-out experiences of adult learners enrolled in fully online graduate programs and to discover what leads them to reenrollment after their stop-out. Two theories frame this study: symbolic interactionism and adult learning theory. Symbolic interactionism is the idea that we make meaning based on our social interactions with people and things (Blumer, 1969). Adult Learning Theory describes the characteristics brought to the classroom by learners who bring additional professional and life experience and obligations to the classroom (Knowles, 1970). McClusky's Margin Theory (1970), a model within Adult Learning Theory, proved informative as it addresses the capacity adults have for taking on additional responsibilities based on the resources they have available at the time. The study was a single instrumental case study, an investigation of real-life experience within its real-world context (Poth, 2018; Yin, 2014).

To gain a deeper understanding of the stop-out experience, I conducted interviews with two adult learners enrolled in fully online graduate programs who stopped out during the spring 2021 semester. I also asked myself and answered the interview questions. One-on-one interviews served as the primary data source with enrollment data and documents serving as secondary sources. Interview transcription and coding occurred in two cycles, resulting in more than 600 data codes, which were categorized into 22 groups, then 10 sub-categories, and ultimately three overarching findings. Additionally, I maintained researcher memos, and completed peer debriefing alongside member checking to deepen my understanding of the data. In this chapter I provide a review of three primary findings and the subthemes within each.

## **Organization of Data**

First, I have introduced each of the participants in this study. Profiles have been created for each participant to bring them and their story to life. Next, I present each of the three primary findings and discuss the subthemes within. The three primary findings are presented as follows:

- (1) Support from staff and faculty is important.
  - a. Interactions with campus coordinators and faculty
  - b. Quick and simple processes
- (2) External influences on adult learners have impact.
  - a. Support from family, work, and friends
  - b. Stressors, pressures, and obstacles
  - c. The Covid-19 pandemic
- (3) Individual student characteristics are key.
  - a. Internal motivations
  - b. Ownership, autonomy, and empowerment
  - c. Intentionality and resolve

After presenting each finding, I provide concrete examples of each response; in other words, data excerpts from actual participant interviews support each finding. After some discussion, I revisit McClusky's Margin and Adult Learning Theories to discuss how the findings are related to each of these theories. Using these approaches, data excerpts, and theory, I provide an explanation of each finding.

## **Participants and their Stop-Out Experiences**

This section covers participant selection and creates descriptive profiles of each participant using symbolic interactionism as a lens. These profiles are narrative representations

of each participant based on field notes and interview transcriptions which contextualize the data and bring to life participants' stories.

Participants were identified for this study using predetermined selection criteria (see chapter 3). There were ten students eligible for this study. All 10 potential participants were contacted via email to request their participation. Several reminders were sent to solicit participants. Two students met all requirements and agreed to participate. Because of low student participation and because I had personally experienced a stop-out, I became the third participant in this study to strengthen the data. As Kirkman (1999) suggested, I answered the interview questions imagining that I was talking to the other participants. I examined my own responses to enrich the data collected from the two participants. Table 1 provides demographic data about the eligible participants for this study.

Table 4.1. Demographics of Eligible Participants

<b>Ethnicity</b>		<b>Age</b>		<b>Gender</b>	
American Indian or Alaska Native		25-34	5	Female	8
Asian		35-44	3	Male	2
Black or African American		45-54	1		
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander		55-64	1		
White	5	65+			
Not Reported	5				

### **Participant Interviews**

Interviews are an approach in qualitative research to deepen understanding of a specific experience. My approach to interviews was semi-structured with room to follow-up on



participant responses. I attempted to schedule second interviews with both participants, but only one responded to my email inquiry. A second interview was scheduled with the one willing participant. I completed one formal interview with myself, where I read the questions aloud and answered them. I did not conduct a second out loud interview with myself but did reflect on my narrative and adjusted it as I wrote. The second interview was a valuable opportunity to reconnect with the participant, to reflect upon my understanding of her experiences, and to ask additional clarifying questions.

### **Data Coding**

Once all data was collected and transcribed, coding began. Two cycles of coding were completed. The first cycle consisted of process and emotion coding. Process coding calls for me to look for action and to use gerunds to create codes. After process coding, I completed emotion coding, where I looked for emotions in the data. The first cycle of coding allowed me, as the researcher, to identify meaningful pieces of each participant's story. The second cycle of coding called for me to group the individual codes into similar categories. Pattern coding helped me identify overarching similarities between participants.

At the conclusion of the first round of pattern coding I found 22 categories. I then revisited the pattern coding concept and combined categories into 10 groups. Next, I arranged and rearranged the 10 groups continuously revisiting the data analysis in an iterative process, which is customary in qualitative research. This process led me to identify three primary findings addressed in this chapter. Before diving into the findings, it will be helpful to develop an understanding of each of the participants in this study.

## **Participant One: Karen**

Karen is a 65-year-old graduate student in the Great Plains IDEA program. She married right out of undergraduate work and started a family quickly. She reported,

I always wanted a master's degree, but then I got divorced and I was raising two boys on my own, and I was working on a career as well, and there really wasn't time for it, or money at that point.

Karen lives near her sons and enjoys spending time with them. Her oldest son is married with children, and she sees them as often as she can. Her younger son also lives nearby; he is not married but has a girlfriend. Karen, her youngest son, and his girlfriend, enjoy attending hockey games together and recently purchased tickets to a local theater where they attend regular shows.

She works as the director of payroll for a publishing company, which requires anywhere from 40 – 50 hours of her time each week. Karen's interest in the program developed when an outside professional visited her company to meet with employees and "it got me thinking about the role and I decided I wanted to get my master's in it." Karen reported a desire to earn her master's degree so she could help others during her retirement years.

So, my goal was, this would be something that I would do in retirement. That's what I was going to use this degree for. Since I have saved adequately for my retirement, I really, really was hoping to do it in a nonprofit situation, where I was helping people who could not afford someone, but who really need that help more than a lot of other people do.

She began exploring programs and reported,

I had to have an online program...because there's no way I could attend classes

with the job that I have. I decided that I liked Alabama and Great Plains IDEA, but since I live in the Midwest, I figured that Great Plains IDEA would be more geared to the type of clients that I was working with because you were a Midwest program...so I chose Great Plains IDEA and started (my first class) with retirement, and I picked that for a specific reason, because it was something I, (A), was interested in, and (B), it was something I knew a lot about.”

She was intentional in her first course selection as she disclosed. She was a bit tentative about entering graduate school and managing her full-time workload, however, as it often required more than 40 hours of her time each week.

Karen began her program in spring 2020 enrolling in just three credit hours. She felt successful and then enrolled in another three-credit course for the summer term. Her confidence was building each semester, so she enrolled in and successfully completed six credits in fall 2020. As she looked toward the spring 2021 semester, she had some personal goals outside of school and opted to enroll in just three credits and,

At the end of the fall 2020 semester, I found out I had breast cancer. So, they told me what I needed to do, and it seemed like I would be able to still continue with school. So, I took the spring semester class. Well, I got about four or five weeks into it, and I was so exhausted, I couldn't keep up. I wasn't even working, but I was so exhausted I couldn't keep up. So, I dropped that.

Karen ended up with additional health complications during the spring 2021 term that prolonged her cancer treatment plan; she ultimately sat out the summer 2021 term as well. She reenrolled for the fall 2021 semester. Again, she was intentional in her course selection, choosing an elective class that she felt would be less intense than some of the other remaining courses. Her

health issues continued, and she experienced a health episode during the fall term: “It was kind of like a stroke. Nothing made sense. It was weird for about an hour, and I ended up in the hospital for two days.” Even though Karen endured additional health challenges, she successfully completed the fall 2021 course. When we met in February 2022, she was again taking a break from coursework, but was enrolled for the summer 2022 term. She told me, “I will finish this, but it’s not going to be as quick as I had anticipated.”

This brief overview provides the context of Karen’s life, the experiences she had prior and during her enrollment, and other factors (family, health, retirement) that all factor into her daily experiences. Next, I will introduce Jessica, participant two.

### **Participant Two: Jessica**

Jessica is a 32-year-old graduate student enrolled in the Great Plains IDEA program. She is married and has two young children, a son who is four and a daughter who is two. Jessica decided to begin graduate school because,

I always knew I wanted my master’s and especially working in healthcare communications, we would sign our name and credentials, and certainly if you have MS by your name, there’s a certain, I don’t want to say degree of respect, but it definitely makes you a little more credible looking, so I wanted that...and I was really ready for a refresher and a deep dive back into everything.

Jessica began exploring programs by searching for fully online options and found the Great Plains IDEA program. She was familiar with one of the teaching faculty and had a friend who had completed her master’s degree through Great Plains IDEA. The friend “highly recommended it” and her campus coordinator “truthfully, has just been very easy to work with,

very personable, very fast to reply to things so that was very nice to see...I just felt very comfortable with that.”

Jessica earned her bachelor’s degree and initially went to work in a clinical setting, per the advice of teachers and peers. “I felt like I just did it (clinical work) because everyone said don’t immediately go to something else, go clinical.” After her stint in the clinical realm, Jessica opted to return to the company where she had an internship during her undergraduate career.

I worked in the communications department at first, so it was the healthcare resource center. So, when we would launch a new product, we would talk to healthcare professionals about the indicated use, the allergens that were in it and some non-indicated things and what research we had to substantiate and things like that.

She enjoyed being current in the field and felt like her role in the communications department kept her immersed in research. She began her master’s degree program while in the communications department and felt like it was an especially good fit for that role. After about five years, she changed departments within the company and now works in the regulations department, which she enjoys:

It’s the jack of all trades, so we do have to make sure when a product is going to launch in a market, that we’re staying within the regulations, but we’re also the overarching head to make sure we can substantiate different claims...I think it’s my forever role.

Jessica says her role in regulations “needs” the master’s degree less than her communications role, but she also acknowledged “my first course after my job change talked a lot about regulations and purity levels and different certifying agencies...so I was really pleasantly surprised how I was able to pull that back into my current career.”

She enrolled in her first graduate course in spring 2019 and successfully completed it. At the time, she was a mom of one, working full-time and feeling good about things. She and her husband planned to grow their family once Jessica finished graduate school, but life happened and they welcomed a daughter at the end of her first year, December 2019. She recalled feeling as though her daughter's birth was "timed perfectly so I had about an almost two-week break in between having her and starting classes again (in spring 2020)." She sailed through the transition and was continuously enrolled through fall 2020.

Jessica was enrolled in a course in which the content was particularly challenging for her during the fall 2020 term: "That was a course that I was least looking forward to and just hoping to get through." She had enrolled in another course for spring 2021, but at the end of her fall semester, she realized she was likely going to fail the course. After visiting with her campus coordinator and the professor, she applied for and was granted a leave of absence. She dropped her spring 2021 course and during her stop-out retook the course from the fall semester.

Jessica was able to successfully complete her challenge course during her stop-out in spring 2021. She enrolled in three credits for summer 2021 and six credits for fall 2021. When we met in February 2022 Jessica was enrolled in her final required course and was beginning her master's research project with plans to graduate in the next year.

### **Researcher as Participant: Amanda**

I am Amanda, a 37-year-old doctoral candidate enrolled in a hybrid program. I am married, and I have one son who is seven. I decided to pursue a doctoral degree because it has been a longtime personal goal. I will be the first person in my extended family to receive a doctoral degree. Another reason I chose to pursue a doctoral degree was for my career. I worked in higher education for 14 years and earning a Ph.D. became important to me as it felt like a form

of job security. Holding a doctorate degree increases the number of positions I can hold within the university setting.

I began my doctoral courses in 2014 and had my son at the end of that first year of classes. Classes were relatively easy to manage with an infant and my full-time job. I was used to being in school from my master's program, so it felt mostly normal. By the time I completed preliminary exams, I had a toddler. I recall feeling "mom guilt" about spending so much time focused on school, but I had my end goal in sight, and I did not want to let go. I also tried to remind myself, my son wouldn't remember me spending extra time on schoolwork; he was too young. As I moved into the dissertation phase of my program, I struggled to stay focused, progress seemed too slow, but it was still there. I kept enrolling and kept moving forward.

My full-time job became part-time in 2018. I felt optimistic. I was hopeful that by cutting back at work, I would be able to give more of my time to school. Instead, my responsibilities for the business my husband and I own took more of my time. In June 2021, I resigned from my position with Great Plains IDEA. Again, I thought I had the answer, and I would be able to get everything done as I was still making progress. I finished up my proposal and defended it in September 2021. My committee approved some edits, and I was free to move forward. I conducted interviews during the spring 2022 semester and collected data. My part-time job was technically part-time, but due to resignations the office was short staffed, and I was working as much or more than ever. I was tired. I was overwhelmed.

I had my data, and that felt good. I was excited, but as time went by, I started to wonder, "Have I done this right?" "Is my study even a good one?" "Am I even really qualified to be here?" Then, I froze. I allowed doubt to take control. I decided to hide from it all. While yes, I was enrolled in a summer 2022 class, I truly stopped out and made absolutely no progress. I was

stuck. I avoided everything related to school, and I mean *everything*. My advisor emailed over the summer, but I didn't know it — I was avoiding my inbox.

As my son began school, I started thinking about my own school again. I hadn't enrolled in my research hour for the semester. I debated if I even wanted to, when I said it out loud, my husband pushed back, "you've come too far not to finish now." I had other ideas, but deep down, I knew he was right. I responded to one of the emails my advisor sent, and we set up a meeting. I needed permission to enroll (I had waited *that* long), and I was ready to buckle down and get this thing done.

### **Summary of Participants and their Stop-outs**

Each participant in this study was enrolled in a Great Plains IDEA master's degree program and each experienced a stop-out during the spring 2021 semester. The participants were enrolled in two different programs and had two different reasons for stopping out. While each student's story is unique to her own lived experiences, they shared similar perspectives on their interactions with program staff and faculty, similar views regarding their support systems, and similar individual characteristics. The similarities between these two students strengthens the findings of this research and supports the persistence factors addressed in the literature review. The findings are also supportive of Margin Theory and Adult Learning Theory as addressed in previous chapters. Next, I will address the three primary findings of this research.

### **Finding: Support from staff and faculty is important**

The data revealed two subthemes of programmatic factors influencing stop-out students: (1) the role of interactions between students and campus coordinators, other students, and faculty, and (2) the value of quick and simple processes. While faculty and staff cannot control the environments in which students live, they can provide a consistent and supportive experience



for students within the academic setting. Online students are especially dependent on the information and interactions they receive from faculty and staff since they are not physically on campus to represent themselves. Receiving information in a timely manner, knowing who to contact for questions, and simplicity of processes were all cited as helpful factors by the participants in this study. First, let's look specifically at interactions with campus coordinators and faculty to learn more.

### **The Role of Interactions with Campus Coordinators and Faculty**

The first subtheme in the programmatic factors finding is the role of interactions with campus coordinators and faculty. When participants in this study reflected on their experiences in their programs within Great Plains IDEA, each expressed satisfaction. Karen stated, "I have not found anybody who wasn't overly willing to help, overly interested." Her interactions with faculty and staff led her to a place of confidence within the program. She felt supported. The interactions students have with their campus coordinator and faculty plays a role in the level of support students feel from the program. Providing consistent and timely communication is an important way for programs to support students.

Jessica referred to interactions with her campus coordinator throughout our conversation. She indicated that her campus coordinator knew about her struggles in her challenge course, and she became a sounding board for Jessica. Both Karen and Jessica expressed gratitude for responsive campus coordinators. Jessica shared that her campus coordinator has been "easy to work with" and that she was "very personable" and "very, very fast to reply to things." When asked about her satisfaction with her academic program, Jessica again credits her campus coordinator: "She's a really great support person and is really personable." Jessica's campus coordinator helped her walk through a revised timeline to graduation when she was considering

dropping her spring 2021 course. Karen shared similar sentiments about her campus coordinator saying that “she and the professor took care of everything after I said I needed to drop.”

Karen and Jessica both consulted with their campus coordinators prior to making the official decision to drop. They reached out to the central staff person at their university to collect information and because they received timely responses, they were able to make informed decisions. Additionally, each participant reported receiving a full refund after they dropped, and both expressed respect and gratitude toward their campus coordinators for making sure they had the best shot at a refund possible.

When asked about her experience with her program, Jessica complimented her faculty across the board, stating, “overall my professors have been very upfront about expected coursework.” She went on to explain that many faculty laid out all the modules early in the semester so that students could see what was coming ahead. She especially liked this transparency. Jessica addressed conversations she had with her professor about her grade during the fall 2020 semester. She reported a kind and caring professor who kept her informed as the end of the semester approached. When Jessica learned about the opportunity to drop the course for fall 2020 and immediately retake the content in spring 2021, she felt unsure at first. Her professor assured her that other students had done the same thing, which helped Jessica feel at ease with her decision to drop. Karen reported that her “professor was great. She let me finish the paper I was working on by the end of the semester” after talking about continued health challenges and reenrolling in courses.

Karen and Jessica reported satisfaction with their respective programs in Great Plains IDEA. They liked the structure of the programs, the faculty, and the campus coordinators. Moreover, both students expressed gratitude toward faculty and campus coordinators. The

empathy they received created a safe space for a student stop-out. Between understanding faculty and consistent, caring campus coordinators, Karen and Jessica each felt supported at school. They were relieved to have contacts on their side, people who understood the processes and could help them move through a difficult decision. They knew where to go with questions and felt empowered by the information they received. The interactions with faculty and campus coordinators played a key role in decision making for Karen and Jessica.

### **Quick and Simple Processes**

The second subtheme in the programmatic factors of persistence is quick and simple processes. Karen said,

It was simple, which was great under the circumstances, because I was not feeling well, and if I'd had to do something complex, even getting on a computer would have been difficult at that point...I just picked up my phone, emailed my campus coordinator and she got right back to me...a couple hours later it was over.

Clearly, the value of a clear and direct process was especially important for Karen who was experiencing extreme fatigue from cancer treatments. She reported that during her stop-out, she was kept in the loop by her campus coordinator who sent information about enrollment and reminders as the deadline approached.

Jessica valued the stop-out process because it allowed her to retake the course and earn a grade that allowed her to move forward and receive reimbursement from her employer. She said that knowing there was “a plan B and knowing that it was established, and my professor said there had been people previous to me who had done that option...it was like okay, other people have been here before...it was really pretty painless.” For Jessica, the process was more involved, yet simple. She referred multiple times to “how established the leave of absence was”

when talking about the decision to stop-out and retake the course. She was provided with an avenue to keep making progress in her program while circumventing a failing grade on her transcript. Additionally, Jessica referenced a simple reimbursement process at her place of employment. She recalled the ease with which she was able to submit information for a refund without feeling like she had to jump through hoops.

Institutions and programs can influence student persistence by providing clear and simple processes for students. Making information readily available about enrollment options, stop-out options, and other programmatic decisions can help empower students. Karen and Jessica valued being able to move quickly once they made their decision to stop-out. Each participant reported their timeframe for making the stop-out decision at about one week; when the struggle occurred, within 5–7 days they contemplated, consulted, and decided to stop-out. The window to provide support for the process is small, which further supports the importance of campus coordinator and faculty interactions.

### **Finding: External Influences on Adult Learners Have Impact**

The obligations beyond the academic program and institution are the external factors influencing adult learners. The list for many is long. The pressures — those intended or not intended — from partners, children, parents, colleagues, and beyond can build up and weigh heavily on an adult learner. Even those external forces that are supportive can sometimes be deterrents from forward progress. For example, the conflicting desire to be present for children and to set an example of striving for your own goals is both a positive and negative influence.

There are three subthemes addressed in the external influences finding: (1) support from family, friends, and work, (2) stressors, pressures, and obstacles, and (3) the Covid-19 pandemic.

## **Support from Family, Friends, and Work**

The first subtheme of external influences is support from family, friends, and work. Adult learners have a lot happening outside of school — work, family, community, and friends. These external influences play a role in student persistence. The participants in this study generally felt supported by their inner-most circle, as well as from outer circles too. One common thread between the participants was their overall gratitude and positivity toward those supporting them; they were each thankful for the support they received. Jessica talked more about support systems while Karen mentioned them directly less often. Jessica reported strong support from her husband: “If I need a Saturday or Sunday morning, he’ll get the kids out of the house so I can really focus.” She shared that her husband’s job has regular hours mixed with on-call time, but he has a good deal of flexibility in his schedule, which has allowed him to support her through graduate school. When she began considering a stop-out, Jessica consulted her husband. “I certainly discussed with my husband...and he was kind of neutral.” She reported that he helped her weigh her options, but that ultimately, he left the decision to her.

Jessica lives near family members who were able to provide support during her graduate coursework and stop-out. Jessica was thankful for grandparents living close and being able to help with her children. “My husband took both of our kids to his parents, and they just played while I was working...so, yea, I don’t know how people would do it if they didn’t have that.” The ability to pull in family members was a key to success for Jessica. She talked about the lineup of family members available to help with her children if needed. Jessica says her family is supportive of her decision to pursue graduate school. She laughed and said, “I think they would say I’m crazy, but they’re supportive...I think they think that it’s cool that I’m going back.”

Karen's children are grown, and she reported feeling supported—even encouraged—by her older son. He said things like, "I'm glad you're getting a degree. I'm glad you're doing it." Karen has a good friend who holds three master's degrees and earned one of them later in life, like Karen. The similar experience and passion for learning also encouraged Karen.

Jessica spoke frequently about how much she valued the flexibility awarded to her at work. She reported, "I can work a 12-hour day or sometimes I work a six-hour day...we manage our own time, which is really nice." She reflected on the importance of flexibility in her life whether it be the ability to manage her own work schedule, or the flexibility afforded by her husband's ability to help with their children so she can focus on school. When she changed departments, she reported gaining additional flexibility because of the kind of work she does now:

Now I'm not as structured around time worked, as I am around output...the main people I work with are in the United Kingdom, so lot of times I'll start work around 5:00 a.m., take a break to help get the kids out the door, and then usually I'll wrap up around 3:00 p.m., go get the kids, and then I'll work for around an hour after they go to bed...and I mean, I can do homework throughout the day if I need to.

When asked about support at work, all participants felt supported. Jessica shared that many of her colleagues have graduate degrees, so they "understand that I'm doing classes; they see textbooks on lunch break; things like that. I think that they're supportive...they just know what it's like. I think in that there's support, as long as it doesn't impede on my work."

Jessica recalled feeling very encouraged by her communications department manager when she was considering graduate work. "She was definitely a huge, huge advocate, and just helped me pull all the resources to get it rolling. I think she was...I wouldn't say pushy in any

way, but I would say highly supportive of going back.” After changing departments, she continued to feel support from her new manager.

She is also a dietitian with her master’s, and I think she knows it doesn’t always relate to exactly what I do in the day-to-day, but I have been able to pull some things out of classes and share them with her...so I would say supportive, probably all around.

Jessica and I felt support and understanding from managers and coworkers. Karen addressed that so long as her work was getting done, her office was supportive of continued education.

Karen and Jessica received financial assistance from their employers. Both had the opportunity to receive 100 percent tuition reimbursement. Karen’s employer is “paying for the majority of this. They won’t pay for the books, and some fees...but for the most part, they pay for the class(es) that I’m taking.” Her employer requires a grade of C or better to receive reimbursement and so that she can receive up to \$5,000 annually, so “if I...take one class all three semesters it would be completely paid for, except for the fees and the books. If I take more than one, then some of it becomes mine because I hit that \$5,000 limit.”

Jessica’s employer also provides tuition assistance. “They actually reimbursed 100 percent of my graduate school...that is if you have an A or a B, and then if you have a C, it’s 75% reimbursement, and then I think D and below is full self-pay.” She recalled talking with the tuition reimbursements department within human resources about withdrawing and what reimbursement would look like in her case.

They didn’t really spell out anything as far as a withdrawal concern. It’s basically once you wrap up the course, that’s when you submit your grade...so by retaking it, or doing that stop-out, it was a way to save a couple thousand dollars.

Jessica said her employer reimburses her for tuition and books: “I go ahead and pay for the semester. I pay for the credit hours and the textbooks. And then my manager signs it, and I submit it to HR.” She also submits proof of payment and proof of grade at the close of the semester to receive her reimbursement. As she reflected on the support she receives from work and the influence it has had she said, “I don’t think I would be in grad school without it. I mean, if I was paying out of pocket, there’s really no need for me to get a master’s other than just movement within the company.”

The external support received from family, friends, and work influenced the participants before, during, and after their stop-outs. They were appreciative of the flexibility provided by work, and Karen and Jessica were very thankful for the financial support received from their employers. Additionally, they were encouraged by friends and family thinking it was “cool” for them to pursue graduate work.

### **Stressors, Pressures, and Obstacles**

The second subtheme of the external influences include stressors, pressures, and obstacles, which can sometimes interfere with adult learners’ intentions and plans. These barriers are encountered throughout the student’s program: before, during, and after a stop-out.

For Karen, fatigue was a constant battle; she was exhausted from mentally maintaining her treatment schedule. “I wasn’t used to that many doctors and having to go for that many tests and having to do this and that and the other thing.” She described her treatment and medical schedule as a “full-time job.” In addition to the mental exhaustion, she was physically exhausted, but her rest was constantly interrupted by the medical world checking on her: “I just thought leave me alone and let me sleep.” She described her prolonged recovery as an additional obstacle. In addition to chemotherapy, Karen experienced,



An all-body infection, and I was in the hospital for 10 days. They couldn't find the right medication, and it turned out I had a kidney stone, a huge one that caused the all-body infection. I mean, I was fine on Friday, other than being exhausted...so I spent two weeks in the hospital and by the time I came home I had missed some of my chemotherapy. I had to finish, I had intravenous drugs, my son had to come over three times a day and put them through the chemo port I had.

The whole-body infection delayed cancer treatments and led to additional time in the hospital. Karen's younger son, who helped with chemo treatments, pressured her to drop the program entirely. "He was like, 'you are doing too much. You need to give something up. You either need to retire or you need to stop going to school, but you need to give something up.' He was adamant about that." Instead of dropping out of school altogether, Karen decided to extend her stop-out. She sat out the summer 2021 semester too, because "I needed to make sure that he wasn't right before I went on."

During the spring semester, because of exhaustion, treatment, and the pandemic, Karen was longing to get away. "I wanted to get out of town...to go to my summer house because I knew it would be safe there...and there's a lake and I have a boat. I just wanted to rest, relax, and get out of town." The extended stop-out provided time for Karen to miss school. "I thought about it quite a bit. I missed not learning and not actually studying and doing it, but at the same time, when I was feeling so miserable, I really didn't care." When she started to feel better, she continued to think about school. As she watched her friend's daughter take a summer class, Karen realized she missed school, but she knew "I made the right choice. I know I did."

Jessica talked more about the conflict of time and money. She reported, "having two small kids, it's a stressful time. I really had felt I gave everything I had for that course, and then

when I didn't get the grade I wanted, it was like, do I really want to invest an entire year of school into one class?" She spent a week or so asking herself what she really wanted and wondering "what if I don't get a passing grade the next time, I take it? Am I going to dedicate a year and a half to this course? Is that absolutely crazy?" The desire for financial reimbursement was strong and caused Jessica to reflect further. She knew that if she stopped out and used that time to immediately retake the course, she stood a chance at reimbursement. She and her husband talked. They felt financially stable enough to handle the cost, if necessary, "but almost \$2,000 isn't nothing...but I wouldn't say that was the make-or-break scenario, but it was definitely something pushing me to complete it."

When asked if they considered leaving the program entirely, all participants reported "yes." Karen said she "agonized probably a couple of weeks before I made the decision." When she returned for fall 2021, Karen was still on disability at work and therefore would have to cover the full cost of her course. She contemplated another semester away, but ultimately decided to enroll and pay out of pocket. "I had this drive that said, 'I want to get this degree, I really like these courses.' Even if I never use it, I'm enjoying taking them and doing it." She stated, "It was a tough decision, basically because I wasn't healthy yet. That was the main reason I thought about not going back...but it worked out fine, so that's a good thing."

Jessica said, "I didn't want to not finish, but at the same time, knowing I could be done with the program and focus more on other things was enticing." She visited with her campus coordinator and learned how her path to graduation would look after her stop-out, "and it still looked fine" so she decided to remain in the program, to retake the course during her stop-out and push forward.

Karen and Jessica felt external pressures and internalized the worry and stress. Jessica spoke about feeling the pressure of time, or of “letting too much time pass.” Both Karen and Jessica disliked the delay toward graduation, but ultimately both worked through the challenges and reenrolled in courses following their stop-outs.

### **The Covid-19 Pandemic**

The third subtheme of the external influences on adult learners was the Covid-19 pandemic. The world reached the end of the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic in the spring 2021 semester. The pandemic was in full swing prior to the stop-outs of the participants in this study. The work and schooling worlds changed. During this time, the participants in this study were enrolled in a fully online program, one designed to be fully online prior to the pandemic. The pandemic was not the reason for any of the participants’ stop-outs.

Before 2020, Karen and Jessica reported to offices for work each day. When asked how the pandemic impacted their graduate coursework, the participants felt the pandemic had little impact on their actual schoolwork. However, all participants had moved to remote work, and each reported a sense of relief at working from home. Moving to remote work made life, including graduate school, a little easier. It was a silver lining.

Jessica reported that the pandemic:

has almost helped, which I know sounds weird because I’ve been home and working from home and those little life things like getting laundry going during the day and feeling like that’s done at night. So, after I put the kids to bed, you know the dishes are already done and the laundry’s done, so I could work on schoolwork for another hour.

The opportunity to be home and handle daily tasks opened up more time for school. On day one of our interview, Jessica commented that she had opted to stay home, so she didn’t have to get

dressed up and drive into the office. Jessica shared that her family had to quarantine once which proved to be challenging, but with the help of grandparents and flexible employers they made it through. Her children were not school aged and therefore had no online learning of their own.

Karen had similar sentiments about the pandemic and her new remote-work life, stating, “it made school much easier because I was working 45 hours a week, and then I had a half-an-hour commute each way and now I’m working from home.” She enjoys the flexibility afforded to her through remote work and being able to capitalize on the extra minutes between meetings or when meetings end early. “Now I can run down and put a load of laundry in the washer...instead of small talk in the hallway.” Karen described her home office as the place where she does both school and work, and throughout the day she can make notes about school if she has a few extra minutes. She lives alone and did not share any Covid-related challenges.

Karen and Jessica both have the opportunity to remain remote, and both look forward to maintaining their current schedules. They both spoke often of the value of flexibility at work. They each felt freedom in working remotely, and both felt they accomplished more school, work, and life by working at home.

### **Finding: Individual Student Characteristics are Key**

The third finding of this study was that individual student characteristics were key to how students engaged the stop-out and return processes. Internal motivations to pursue an advanced degree are a big piece of the persistence puzzle. This individual characteristics finding has three subthemes: (1) internal motivations, (2) ownership, autonomy, and empowerment, and (3) intentionality and resolve. The perspectives, motivations, and commitment of participants played an important role in the decision to reenroll after a stop-out. The participants brought forth a subtheme of intentionality and resolve — they collected information and made calculated

decisions, and, in the end, they were able to accept the unexpected stop-out and the way in which their path changed without losing sight of their end goal.

### **Internal Motivations**

The first subtheme of individual characteristics was internal motivations. Adult learners can be motivated in many ways. The participants in this study were intrinsically motivated. Their primary reasons for pursuing graduate degrees were driven from within; they were not going to receive a promotion or a raise upon degree completion. The participants had two motivations in common: (1) they “just always wanted” a graduate degree, and (2) they saw the opportunity to apply what they learned. Additionally, Jessica was motivated by the opportunity to gain credibility and remain current in her field, whereas Karen expressed a true joy of learning.

Within the first five minutes of our interview, Karen stated explicitly, “I always wanted a master’s degree” and Jessica agreed: “I always knew I wanted my master’s.” It was clear the advanced degree was a personal goal and something each participant had thought about and wanted for a long time. Karen wanted a master’s degree for many years, but her life circumstances did not allow her to pursue it sooner. She and her husband divorced while her sons were young, and she was responsible for their care. Jessica expressed a desire for the credibility and respect afforded to those in healthcare communications who hold master’s degrees, “especially working in healthcare communications, we would sign our name and credentials.” She spent time communicating with researchers in one of her job roles and she felt the credentials behind her name carried a lot of weight.

Karen referenced on several occasions being surrounded by “education-oriented” people, noting her ex-husband had earned a Ph.D. and that several family members earned advanced degrees also. She said, “education has always been really important,” which is evidenced by the

educational savings accounts she started for her grandchildren and her pride in being able to help save for their futures.

It was clear that Karen enjoys the process of learning and places great value on the experience of learning. Throughout our conversation she made comments about learning, all kinds of learning:

It doesn't have to be out of a book...you can learn to quilt or craft or to do a sport...but learning something new is important. I think that has a lot to do with why I decided to do it at age 63 because it's important to just keep learning.

Clearly, Karen found joy in learning. She spoke fondly of the faculty in her program and the variety of backgrounds they brought. "They all have a different view on what this career is really about." She liked the variety of classes and assignments stating, "they have all been different, which is one of the things I really like." She hopes to use her degree to help others, but as she reflected on her journey she said, "If I can't (use it) that's not the end of the world. I've got my money's worth just in what I've learned for my own personal finances." This outlook shows the deep passion Karen has for learning, the joy she gets from sharpening her mind.

For Jessica, content refresh and remaining current in the field was one of the reasons she decided to apply to graduate school. She reported, "I was really ready for a refresher and a deep dive back into everything." When she began her master's program, Jessica felt a stronger pull for a content refresh. When she left the communications department, she realized she was remaining in the program for her own interest and benefit. She was pleasantly surprised when the course she took right after changing to the regulatory department was applicable to her new role. "I was really pleasantly surprised how I was able to pull that (course info) back into my current career." Seeing the applicability of the course content in her regulatory role was motivating for Jessica. It

allowed her to communicate with the scientists she encounters at work and to “really understand what they’re saying.”

Karen expressed a desire to use her master’s degree to help others. She recognized that she had applied much of what she learned in her own life to her own finances, but she has a desire to continue that into service for others. Her hope is to someday work with a nonprofit providing financial advising to people at a lower cost.

The participants in this study were modest, but as they became more comfortable, I sensed a bit of pride in each of them. They were excited to be accomplishing this goal, and they were proud of the work they were doing. Karen reported a similar conversation with her older son. He was glad she was pursuing her dreams and encouraged her. She talked about surrounding herself with educated people. Many of her friends are teachers, and she gravitates toward those engaged in the education field. Jessica sensed pride from her husband and family members. As we wrapped up our conversation she said, “I think it sounds cool that you worked full-time, and went back to school, and had a baby, and birthed another one. Then got through it all.”

### **Ownership, autonomy, and empowerment**

The second subtheme of individual characteristics was ownership, autonomy, and empowerment. As the participants in this study shared their stop-out experiences, it became clear they were independent learners — they took responsibility for themselves and their learning. The ownership they felt over the program could be heard in their stories. Karen and Jessica recognized the squeeze on their lives and reached out for help. They took the initiative to ask for their options when they realized something had to give. For Karen, she was resolved in her decision to drop-out; her health was not going to allow her to move forward in the spring 2021 semester. She contacted her campus coordinator to say, “I need help. How do I get out of this?”

Jessica did the same. She connected with her campus coordinator and expressed concern. She learned about her options and referenced that conversation with her campus coordinator more than once during our interviews. To further empower herself, Jessica connected with her professor to get more information about her grade and her options. Finally, she connected with the financial assistance department at work to understand the rules around reimbursement. Once she had all the information, she was able to evaluate. Jessica took ownership of her situation. She asked for information and felt empowered to make the best decision for herself: “Knowing there was a plan B and knowing that it was established, and my professor had said that there had been people previous to me who had done that option” helped her make the decision to stop-out and retake the course immediately.

Karen spoke about the coursework challenging her in a good way — she liked being pushed by the content to stretch her mind. Her original plan was to continue school through her cancer treatments. “Once I started (treatment) I was off work, so I was resting around the house, so I had time to work on school when it started back up in January.” Eventually her health and the all-body infection won out and she needed to stop-out.

I just kind of knew that I couldn’t continue...I might have been able to finish if I hadn’t gotten the infection, but I knew it wasn’t going to be up to my standards...that I’d probably just get a C and that’s not me. I mean, I’m going for A’s every time.

Karen was committed to excellence and set high expectations for herself. She knew she was not well enough to have the capacity to reach her goals so as time went by, the exhaustion led her to choose a stop-out.

Jessica demonstrated her commitment to learning and the ownership she felt when she described how she approaches school, work, and life. She plans ahead, using the class syllabus to



note important deadlines and to check the readings. She said, “some weeks I don’t have as many meetings or work obligations so I could really probably put in 20-25 hours in those weeks, and then some weeks I’m barely squeezing out three hours of coursework.” She compares her school and work schedules to plan how she will accomplish all the tasks. Jessica also talked about learning to multitask school with her responsibilities as a mother. She mentioned listening to lectures while making playdough for her son’s class and reading articles while rocking her children.

Participants referenced the hybrid work schedule as a source of empowerment. Being at home, with the added flexibility of hours and the lack of commute, opened opportunities to successfully navigate school and work. Jessica stated, “Truthfully, having the option to be on site or not...is conducive to why I’m probably able to continue the program.” She also talked about her new role in the regulatory department, being focused on output more than a structured work schedule, allowing her more freedom and flexibility to complete coursework. Participants demonstrated excellent time-management skills. They were juggling multiple major responsibilities and keeping up with their obligations. As Karen shared: “I just turn this way and work on my personal computer, I turn back the other way and I’m working on my regular computer...plus working from home you can set your own schedule.”

Finally, participants demonstrated ownership over their graduate programs when explaining why they continued to enroll and to push forward even after stopping out. Jessica said, “I think it’s just self-accountability. I don’t like to fail at anything.” She went on to describe her master’s program as “a personal goal and something that I just didn’t really feel like I could let go of.” The internal commitment helped her continue even when things didn’t go according to plan. Karen shared similar words, “I had this drive that said, ‘I want to get this degree, I really

like these courses. Even if I never use it, I'm enjoying taking them and doing it." The desire to reach the goal was strong for participants. They took initiative to collect information and took responsibility for making their own choices. Karen said, "you're learning on your own, so be responsible and get it done." This perspective was shared by participants.

### **Intentionality and Resolve**

The third subtheme of individual characteristics was intentionality and resolve. As the participants in this study reflected on their stop-out experience, they each described their decisions with confidence. Each participant was intentional in making choices, in choosing to enroll, to stop-out, and to continue with the program. Additionally, each participant reflected on her experience and expressed resolve and acceptance of the path she had taken.

When asked about choosing their respective programs, Karen and Jessica showed intentionality. Karen selected a fully online program knowing "there's no way I could attend classes with the job that I have." Jessica also knew fully online was a critical component and evaluated her options when seeking a place where she could feel comfortable. She consulted with friends and coworkers who earned their master's degrees as she was searching for the right fit. Once admitted, Karen was intentional in how she began the program. "I started off with retirement, and I picked that for a specific reason, because it was (A), something I was interested in, and (B), it was something I knew a lot about." She enrolled in just one course to see how it would go, "because I have a full-time job that's more than 40 hours a week." Karen later provided her rationale for course selection. As she returned from her stop-out, she selected an elective course that "I felt would not be as intense." Her steps were calculated, and she worked to set herself up for success at each turn.

Jessica talked about revisiting her timeline with her campus coordinator. They discussed how a stop-out would impact her time to graduation, and she decided she could do it. Jessica was concerned about letting too much time pass and was thankful for the chance to immediately revisit her challenge course. “One of my fears was to completely revisit it later because I felt the knowledge that I did get was still pretty fresh...I was scared to take a couple of semesters before taking the course again.” The opportunity to capitalize on her stop-out time by retaking the course was an intentional decision by Jessica. She chose to push forward immediately rather than allowing time to pass and complacency to set in. She stated, “I felt like I’d already lost a semester and wasn’t progressing as quickly as I had hoped when I started the program.”

Karen was also very aware of her timeline and the delays she encountered. She said, “I really wanted to be done by now...it was supposed to be a three-year commitment, and it turned out to be much longer.” Though her plans had been delayed, Karen acknowledged, “I made the right choice, I know I did.” Both Karen and Jessica expressed disappointment in delayed timelines. They didn’t like that things weren’t going to plan, however, they each came to a place of acceptance.

Karen was very reflective toward the end of our conversation. She told me, “It was definitely a journey, and I’m glad it’s over, but I’m also not sorry it happened” when talking about her cancer experience. She continued, saying, “having to stop school was probably the thing I hated most. I didn’t want to stop but it became clear to me one day when I was laying on the couch, trying to read the current assignment.” Her tone and expression made it clear: she was okay with her path. She was certain she would finish the program and she knew she was doing it first and foremost for her own benefit. Jessica talked about the “right timing” of reenrolling in a class that happened to be very applicable to her new role in the regulatory department being a big

piece of making it all work. “I think that got the wheels turning even more, because I was like, okay, it feels like this is still relevant to my job.” From there she continued to enroll each semester and at the time of our interview was anticipating graduating within the year.

Karen and Jessica both expressed a sense of peace. Neither was in turmoil of the past; instead, they had each moved forward. While “life happened” and they needed to stop-out, they remained intentional in their decision making and they chose to find acceptance of their stop-outs rather than being upset by them.

### **Researcher as Participant: My Narrative**

As both the researcher and a participant in this study, I have separated my narrative from the two student participants. What follows is my story and how it relates to each of the findings and the participants of this study.

#### **Support from Faculty and Staff is Important**

Faculty and staff play an important role in the student stop-out experience. I have had an overall positive experience with my program. Many of my peers are also employed in higher education already. For example, the program is designed so that classes meet at either 4:30 or 7:00 pm, which allows for the bulk of the workday to take place before courses. Several of the courses in the program are offered online, which creates additional flexibility.

#### **Interactions with Faculty and Staff**

The departmental staff are friendly, and the faculty are understanding of the working student’s struggles. I was not aware my program had a dedicated support staff person. That being said, everyone was helpful and generally answered my questions in a timely fashion. I do not feel a close relationship to them as my “need” for them has been relatively minimal throughout the

program. I think my independence comes from a combination of my personality, but also my familiarity with the department and the university.

The majority of faculty in my program are in-tune to the life and schedule of working professionals and most have been willing to work with life obstacles when they arise. My academic advisor is interested in me as a person, and I sense that she wants me to succeed in the program. I have her personal cell phone number, and I know I can contact her when I have questions regarding my academic journey.

The interactions with faculty and staff in my program have been positive; I have been able to get my administrative questions answered. Being that my master's program was housed in the same department, I always felt very comfortable. In addition, my job working on campus provided me with an "insider" feel regarding the university. To be fully transparent, I did not notify anyone when I stopped making progress in summer 2022. As I mentioned, I avoided everything about my dissertation that semester. It feels like it was a subconscious decision. I don't recall actively thinking, "I'm not going to do anything related to graduate school this semester." Instead, I just kind of stopped.

### **Quick and Simple Processes**

The process I valued most was the ability to quickly reenroll. In the fall, after deciding I was ready to reenroll, to push hard, and try to finish, I was thankful for a quick reenrollment. I spoke with my academic advisor and established my commitment to work hard. I tried to enroll and was met with an error message; I was too late. I emailed my advisor, and she directed me to the department office. Within 24 hours the enrollment permission had been applied and I was able to enroll in the research credit I needed. In that moment of hurry, I was grateful there were not extra hoops to jump through.

## **External Influences on Adult Learners Have Impact**

The people surrounding an online graduate student have a great deal of influence on that student. The support from my family, friends, and colleagues was instrumental in my journey.

### **Support from Family, Friends, and Work**

My husband, Alex, has been incredibly supportive of my academic endeavors. When I told him I wanted to pursue my doctoral degree, he jumped right on board. The vast majority of individuals I worked with at Great Plains IDEA held doctoral degrees, and I wanted to be on the same playing field. Alex understood the financial and time commitment I was making, and he encouraged me to chase my dreams.

When I silently stopped out in summer 2022, Alex noticed. He was patient with me. He didn't say much through the summer months, but when I mentioned needing to enroll and then casually followed up with "or maybe not," he reacted. He was kind, yet firm, telling me, "Amanda, you have come too far to quit now. Quitting is not an option." He continued to gently tease me, telling me that now his job was to "make sure you show up for your meetings and get it done." He even made a point to stop by the house and wave at me through the window when I had my first meeting back with my academic advisor (he knew I was worried about that meeting). He has been consistent, which helps on the days that I want to drag my feet. He's carving out time to help with school pickup and drop off for our son to maximize my writing hours. He has always been my biggest fan, but especially in the months since my stop-out.

My family (parents, in-laws, sisters) are part of my support system too. They helped pick up my son from school when I needed extra time to focus. They ask questions about my progress and listen to me when I just need to talk. They also make positive comments like "you're so close!" and "I'm proud of the work you're doing." It's certainly not necessary, but it's nice to

know they are in my corner. As my son has grown (he's eight now) I've shared my academic journey with him. His first reaction was "so you're still a kid because you're in school!" As we talk about our days at the dinner table, he hears about the progress with my dissertation, and I even share some of the challenges with him. I am hopeful that he will see my example and when school feels hard for him, I hope he understands it's okay for it to be hard but that it's also important to keep trying.

My colleagues were supportive too. Several of my colleagues have doctoral degrees, and I appreciated the opportunity to hear their experiences and share mine with them. I did from time to time worry that my office colleagues thought school consumed my time at work, so I made extra effort to keep the two separate as much as possible during the workday. Nobody ever made a comment, but I created that worry in my head. During my tenure at Great Plains IDEA, I worked under two directors, both of whom were incredibly supportive. When I needed time away from work to write preliminary exams, it was granted. When I asked to use the office space in the evenings and on the weekends for homework and writing, it was granted. For me, the external influences in my life were nothing but encouraging.

### **Stressors, pressures, and obstacles**

While I was silently stopped out, the pressure I put on myself was great. The guilt of doing nothing loomed like a storm cloud over my shoulder. Even when I was having fun and fully present with my family, there was a nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach. I knew I should be coding data and writing. I allowed my fears of not being good enough creep into my head and those thoughts were the lightning bolts of that storm cloud. Every time I thought about revisiting my data, the lightning bolt of doubt would strike, and I would turn away. There were

days I was able to pretend I was finished with school (*finished* sometimes being graduated, and sometimes being dropped out). I would fantasize about the relief I felt from being done.

I too felt torn between finishing and dropping the program. I had an ongoing internal dialogue about the pros and cons of each. I imagined telling my family and friends that I decided not to finish. I told myself I was a grown woman who could choose to stop. All the while knowing I'd be letting myself down most of all. This was something I wanted, something I had wanted for a *very* long time. I knew I wanted to be finished, I just wasn't sure I wanted to go through the process of finishing. A small voice in my heart knew I wasn't going to quit, but boy did I sure think about it.

The bulk of my stress was internal, I put the pressure on myself. Alex was there, firm and kind, but never in a negative way. It took some time, but then I decided I wanted to dig deep and finish my dissertation. Once I committed, I was all in. I was ready to knock it out and to finally cross off this bucket list dream.

### **The Covid-19 pandemic**

My experience with the pandemic was like the participants in this study. Moving to remote work eliminated 1.5 hours of drive time to and from the office every day. It allowed me to keep up with the small home tasks between meetings, and I liked having access to my entire pantry for lunch! I am now working for our family business and stay home to work.

My son was in preschool in March 2020 and remote learning did not occur for his class. When he started kindergarten in August 2021 his school was masked, but in person. We did not experience the remote learning challenges faced by many families. My family contracted Covid for the first time in August 2022, before school started for the year. We have been spared many of the work/school challenges created by the pandemic.



## **Individual Student Characteristics are Key**

Individual student characteristics are a critical component of reenrollment after a stop-out. The desire and commitment to achieving one's goal is very much up to the individual.

### **Internal motivations**

The desire to be "Dr." has been around since I was in high school. I remember thinking it would be so cool to earn a Ph.D. Being surrounded by friends and family members who have advanced degrees was motivating for me too. Many of my cousins, my sister-in-law, and my mom have master's degrees. My sister has just been admitted to an online graduate program. I will be the first in my family to earn a Ph.D., which has served as an additional motivator throughout my program.

I was working with department chairs, deans, and other university administrators on a daily basis. I wanted the credibility of having my Ph.D. This research study began from a desire to apply what I learned to my professional work. While serving as a campus coordinator for Great Plains IDEA, I interacted with students who stopped out. I became curious about how to best serve these students. My master's thesis sought to understand why students drop classes, and my doctoral research seeks to understand the stop-out experience. I want the findings from this study to be applicable for online graduate programs.

I enjoy learning. I am curious, and I like to understand things. I am drawn to podcasts about business and then talking through those ideas with my husband. I've learned to make sourdough bread, and I enjoy the process of baking and learning to perfect a recipe. All of these things have served as additional motivators for pursuing my doctoral degree; when I finish, I'll be able to learn something new!

### **Ownership, Autonomy, and Empowerment**

Writing my dissertation has required a great deal of autonomy. Since my stop-out, I have spent time each Sunday planning out my writing schedule. I try to keep meetings and outside commitments to a maximum of two days per week. Blocking time for coding and analyzing data was important so I didn't lose my train of thought in the middle of the process. Once things got moving, I became protective of my dissertation time. I maintained a schedule of blocking at least three days per week for coding, writing, and editing. I made a point to share my writing schedule with Alex, and we worked out plans for making sure our son had what he needed. I also kept my family updated on my schedule. I learned that if they knew I was supposed to be writing, they wouldn't reach out randomly throughout the day. On my writing days, my support system worked to ignore me as best they could. Their lack of communication helped me to stay focused, especially when I wanted to be distracted.

Since I did not reach out prior to stopping out, when I decided to return, I took responsibility; I owned it, and I asked for help moving forward. When fall arrived and I decided I was ready to refocus, I did reach out. I visited with my academic advisor several times in the early part of the fall semester to make plans. Additionally, the graduate school needed information from me. My advisor and I scheduled a meeting to ensure I was completing the graduate school requirements correctly.

When thinking about why I decided to reenroll and persist I could relate to the two participants of this study. I don't like to fail; I was raised to give it my best and to finish what I started. I have vivid memories of my parents telling me, "You don't have to do it (whatever it is) forever, but you have to finish this year/season/round." So even though I wanted to imagine I was okay to drop my program, my heart knew I didn't want to quit and that I wouldn't allow it. Alex's support and encouragement certainly helped me remember the advice from my parents.

## **Intentionality and Resolve**

For me, I chose to write a master's thesis knowing I wanted to pursue a doctoral degree. I was intentional when making that choice to "practice" writing. I wanted the experience so when the time came the dissertation didn't feel so foreign. I was equally intentional in my stop-out. I had a strong desire to focus on family and to enjoy the summer with my son. I didn't communicate it well, but I was intentional in choosing my priorities.

As I processed the data from the other participants in this study, I was able to reflect on my own journey. My target graduation has moved several times — I've slowed to a snail's pace, and I've picked up speed. The path has certainly been winding, but it's a journey I am proud to be on. I have a newfound peace surrounding the writing experience and while I am more than ready to finish, I also know it will all happen in good time.

## **The Relationship to Margin Theory**

The findings of this study support Margin Theory as a valid consideration for the persistence of adult learners. Margin Theory addresses the capacity adults have for taking on additional responsibilities (McClusky, 1970). The formula laid out by Margin Theory is that margin is a function of the relationship of load to power (McClusky, 1970). In other words, the capacity (margin) adults have for additional responsibilities can be identified by considering the amount of load (responsibilities and obligations) an adult has in comparison to the power (resources and supports) she has available.

The load on Jessica's plate was primarily from her family and her full-time job. When she began her graduate program, Jessica was married and had one child. At the end of her first year in the program, her load increased when she and her husband welcomed a second child. Shortly thereafter, she changed departments at work; while she maintained a full-time job, it was

a job she enjoyed more than the previous one. The tipping point for Jessica came when she realized she was not going to pass her fall 2020 course. She had enrolled for spring 2021, but the need to successfully complete the fall course caused her power-to-load ratio to tip. She chose to stop-out for the spring 2021 semester to complete her challenge course before moving forward.

Karen worked a “more-than full-time” job, which was the primary demand of her time. When asked about other commitments, she talked about spending time with her sons and grandchildren. She also had a good friend with whom she liked to travel. When the bulk of the demand was work, she had the capacity to pursue graduate coursework. She tested her capacity when she was first admitted by enrolling in just one class that first semester. “I wanted to see how it was going to go,” she said. She was in tune to her load; she knew the summer semester was short and she had personal travel plans that would interfere with school, so she enrolled in just one class again. After two semesters of success Karen opted to enroll in two classes — she felt confident in her capacity (margin) to manage school, work, and her personal life. She reported, “I took two classes because I really wanted to be done; it was supposed to be a three-year commitment.”

When Karen was diagnosed with cancer, she believed she had the capacity to continue with coursework, so she enrolled in one class for the spring 2021 semester. She planned to take time off work, which lessened her load (and thus, demands on her time). As treatment progressed and fatigue set in, Karen recognized that she did not have the capacity to remain enrolled in her spring 2021 course. She dropped the class and stopped out. The imbalance of power and load grew too great, and she needed to reset. For Karen, the struggle to balance the additional load (treatment and recovery) resulted in the need for an additional semester off. Regaining her

capacity to manage everything took longer than she anticipated or wanted, but she remained committed to her goal stating, “I will finish this.”

My load was a combination of work and family (demands). I was working more hours to help cover short staffing in my office, and the guilt I felt around my family was immense. I didn't feel like I was doing justice in any one area of my life. The first crack in my capacity was the extra demands at work, followed by internal pressure to do more and be all the things to everyone. One year later, I resigned from my job. The aftershocks and stress of trying to adjust to a new normal kept my load heavy. Finally, in summer 2022, I silently stopped out.

Jessica spoke about her resources which included a supportive husband, her campus coordinator, and the tuition reimbursement program at work. As she shared her story, it seemed that her parents, in-laws, and sister were additional contributors to her power for managing the demands on her time. She spoke often about planning out her coursework so that it fit into her work and life schedule. Her ability to manage her time and self-direct was another of her resources to manage the demands. “It takes initiative to actually go look at what's coming (in class).” She used her time-management skills to propel her forward in the program. The pandemic became a power source for Jessica as her office moved to remote work, which afforded her more flexibility. Working remotely, she was able to check off little tasks at home, such as laundry, allowing for more time to focus on school at the end of the day. Karen shared similar feelings about the pandemic and working remotely; she was thankful for the lack of commute and the opportunity to manage her home during the workday.

I too have power (resources) in my corner. The extreme support from my husband is primary. I had blocked some of the other resources; I'd quit asking for help from family and I

wasn't sharing as much. When I returned to my dissertation, I decided to better utilize my supports and asked for help. I kept them posted and I've been able to regain capacity.

The participants in this study had to make decisions, and while they probably did not make a list of their load vs. their power, they did determine a stop-out was best for them. Choosing to stop-out does not mean failure, but rather it is a recognition of the individual's margin and the need to maintain a healthy capacity for all of life's obligations.

### **The Participants and Adult Learning Theory**

Adults seek learning experiences for three primary reasons: (1) to achieve a goal, (2) for the sake of engaging with other learners or the content, and (3) for the joy of learning (Houle, 1961). Adult learners bring professional and life experiences to the classroom, and they expect to apply course material to their personal and professional lives (Knowles, 1970). The usability of knowledge is highly valued by adult learners (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Adult learners are self-motivated and independent; they take responsibility for their learning and prefer a collaborative approach (Knowles, 1970). The findings of this study support Adult Learning Theory as a foundation for understanding and working with adult learners in online graduate programs.

The desire for an advanced degree "because I always wanted it" was a sentiment all participants in this study shared. They each had the bucket list goal to earn advanced degrees, were committed to achieving that goal, and ultimately pushed through even after needing to stop-out. Karen was also motivated by learning for the enjoyment of learning. She spoke several times about the value of learning, whether it be traditional education, or a new skill set, she felt continuing to learn throughout life was important. She said, "I do think it's important, and I've

always thought that learning was important.” She demonstrated her commitment to learning by opening educational savings accounts for her grandchildren.

I was primarily motivated by the goal of wanting my doctoral degree, followed by the opportunity to use it in my work at Great Plains IDEA. Achieving my goal, being the first person in my family to earn a doctoral degree, and being able to add the credential after my name was all exciting to me. The idea of learning something that could be applied in my daily work was very motivating. Understanding what online, adult students need and how to better serve them has been a long-time goal. My hope is that this research can lead to practical strategies for administrative professionals and to ultimately improve the student experience.

Jessica found satisfaction in the usability of the course content. One of her motivations for applying to graduate school was to “take a deep dive back into the content.” She referenced a desire to remain current in the field on more than one occasion. She felt graduate school allowed her to better communicate with the researchers at her office. When she changed roles and moved into the regulatory department, she doubted if the courses would even apply to her new role. She reported being pleasantly surprised when her next course addressed regulations in healthcare. She was able to apply course content directly to her new role, and she liked being able to share what she was learning with her new manager.

Karen also found satisfaction in the application of course material to her life. She used the content from her courses in her personal life, she made financial decisions regarding her retirement based on what she was learning in class. She said, “I’ve got my money’s worth just in what I’ve learned for my own personal finances.”

The participants in this study were independent learners who took responsibility for their learning. They did not assume a top-down approach where they needed to wait for an authority

figure (professor, staff person) to provide information or direct them to the next steps at every turn. Jessica said when things got tough, she felt like her internal drive kept her going. “It’s just self-accountability. I don’t think anyone around me would necessarily care all that much if I didn’t complete it.”

Digging down and pushing forward when things were hard or slow was helpful to me too. Carving out time for focused writing helped me when I returned to my dissertation. Time management was one of Jessica’s assets, she planned ahead and carved out time to finish readings and assignments. She talked about multitasking when she could, saying sometimes she would listen to lectures while making playdough for her son’s class. Karen also took ownership of her learning; she was careful when enrolling in courses, choosing workload that fit with her recovery. The participants exemplify the tenants of Adult Learning Theory — they are motivated internally, they have specific reasons for pursuing graduate degrees, and they are independent.

### **Summary**

This research aimed to understand the experiences of students who stop-out from their online graduate coursework and why they persist after a stop-out. These contribute to a body of literature seeking to understand student stop-out behavior. Adult Learning Theory provided a foundation for understanding the values, wants, and needs of adult learners. Three findings were identified: (1) institutional and programmatic factors influence persistence, (2) external influences impact persistence, and (3) individual characteristics are key factors of persistence. Participants’ experiences demonstrated the validity of McClusky’s Margin Theory (1970) and provided justification for deepening our understanding of margin, load, and power for adult learners in the context of a stop-out. These three participants provided an in-depth look at the student stop-out experience and persistence.



For each finding identified, the data revealed a need for consistent, clear, and simple processes from institutions and programs. The examination of the experiences of these participants indicated simplicity as an important component in supporting adult learners. The data also revealed a strong emphasis on students' individual characteristics when considering persistence after a stop-out. Their internal drive, outlook, and perspective indicated a likelihood of persistence. Finally, the data supported the idea that external factors may influence student enrollment behavior.

Adult learners sometimes need a stop-out from their coursework, but stopping out does not mean dropping out. There is a lot to be learned from the stop-out experience and the factors that influence students to persist beyond a stop-out. These student participants provided the primary data for this study. Enrollment records and enrollment data provided support to the student narratives. I identified three primary findings and multiple subthemes emerged within which are connected by Margin Theory, which addresses learner capacity by considering the relationship of load and power. Adult Learning Theory provided the foundation for understanding the participants and their world. The first finding was that institutional and programmatic factors influence persistence; the second, that external influences impact persistence. The third finding was that individual characteristics are key factors of persistence. These findings support the body of literature around learner persistence, Adult Learning Theory, and Margin Theory. In Chapter Five I discuss how these findings intersect with the research questions. I will also discuss the limitations of this study and implications for future research.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion**

This chapter reviews the purpose of this study by revisiting the research questions. Then, it highlights how the findings connect to the research questions and contribute to the literature. I acknowledge the study's limitations, discuss the implications for practice, and identify opportunities for future research.

### **Discussion**

The goal of qualitative research is to understand the experiences of its participants from the participants' perspectives. The theoretical framework for this study was symbolic interactionism, which is the belief that people develop meanings for things based on their social interactions with them (Blumer, 1969). The epistemology of this study was social constructionist, which believes that everything is subjective and dependent upon an individual's interpretation to be real (Crotty, 1998). Ultimately, the perspective of the participants is their reality, and my goal as researcher was to understand the stop-out experience through their reality.

This case study sought to dive deep into the stop-out experience and to bring forth a wealth of knowledge based on the stories shared by participants. Participants for this study were identified through criterion selection. The participants were admitted to master's degree programs in the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA). They were enrolled in classes for the spring 2021 term, but then dropped their classes and stopped out for the semester. Students had to reenroll in classes to be eligible. The specific criterion was set to ensure the stop-out experience occurred (i.e., a break in enrollment followed by reenrollment at a later date) and to help understand the motivations for reenrolling in coursework. After several attempts to expand the participant pool and because I experienced a stop-out of my own, it was determined that I would become a participant in the study.

This research sought to develop an understanding of the adult online learner who stops out during their graduate studies and ultimately reenrolls. The stop-out phenomenon is not uncommon, but it is under researched (Schulte, 2015). When considering the stop-out experience and its individuality, Sosso & Wise may have said it best: “Most (graduate) students expect to be tested academically, but few anticipate personal challenges and how the personal can disrupt academic goals” (2022, p. 330).

Understanding the stop-out experience for adult online learners will expand the body of research and inform practice. Two research questions and one supporting question framed this study. The analysis of the data resulted in three primary findings, explored in depth in Chapter Four. Given the nature of qualitative research, findings are intertwined with multiple research questions. This section revisits each of the research questions followed by a response in light of the findings of this study.

### **What Do Adult Online Learners Experience During A Stop-Out?**

The data revealed that the stop-out experience itself, the actual time when the student is not enrolled in classes, is very individualistic. What the student experiences during the stop-out depends on why they stopped out. For one participant, the stop-out was used as a time to undergo cancer treatment and recovery. For another, the stop-out was used as a time to retake a failed course. For me, the time was spent focused on family, combating doubts in my abilities to conduct doctoral research and, ultimately, avoiding school altogether. The actual stop-out time and what occurs during those weeks is as unique as the reason for stopping out. That being said, there are shared feelings among the participants in this study.

Participants recalled agonizing over the decisions to be made, about choosing to stop-out and about when to return to classes. The conflicted feelings were resolved through conversations

with friends, family, and administrative staff. At different times during the stop-out, participants considered dropping their program entirely but never did. They shared a sense of responsibility to finish. Some felt concerned about the delayed time to graduation. The participants recalled feeling behind and wishing they hadn't derailed their plan of study. As the participants reflected on their stop-out, they realized they had made peace with their stop-out. There was a sense of resolve and acceptance. The participants experienced a renewed commitment to finishing their degree programs. Their stop-out fueled the drive to finish the program. They were able to reflect on the journey and felt as if their path had been the right one.

While each student's stop-out was unique, the stories shared revealed three common values: flexibility, information, and simplicity. Participants referenced these three values over and over again. Regarding flexibility, participants appreciated that online programs provided flexibility that in-person education could not. Their online program allowed each to continue living in their geographical locations without relocating for graduate school. It allowed them to continue working their full-time jobs, and to maintain their current personal lives. They valued the flexibility of the online classroom in that they could engage with course material as it fit into their schedules. They referenced flexible faculty, who understood the busy schedules of adult learners and accommodated conflicts when possible.

Participants also valued the flexibility of their employers. They had moved to remote work during the Covid-19 pandemic and had grown fond of the flexibility of working at home. Covid was not a direct cause or direct challenge for any of the participants during their stop-outs. During the stop-out time, one participant lived alone and did not contract Covid. Another participant had non-school aged children, while my family was fortunate to remain Covid free until a year after my stop-out. However, the remote work created as a byproduct of Covid was

something all participants favored. They appreciated the extra minutes between meetings to take care of small household tasks or to catch up on discussion board posts. The participants felt free to manage their work schedules, which created space for creative solutions. Participants adjusted work schedules around family and life commitments, as well as school deadlines. Participants in this study took the initiative to compare work and school commitments to better manage their time and meet all deadlines. Flexibility was mentioned by all participants many times and was highly valued in the busy lives of these adult learners.

Timely information was the second value evident in the stories of participants, especially regarding course dates, access to course syllabi, refund deadlines, and policies. Such information helped the participants feel empowered. As participants' stories were shared, the value of information came into focus. Participants spoke positively about receiving course information early and being able to use that information to plan a path to successful course completion in prior courses. Information and responsiveness aided participants in choosing the Great Plains IDEA program. Their inquiries were met with quick, clear information and helped the participants feel at ease. The participants selected their home universities in part because of the level of comfort they felt with the information available to them as prospective students.

The information provided by campus coordinators and department staff was important to participants, but timely responses equally helped participants feel empowered to make decisions about their academic journeys. The campus coordinators explained the stop-out process to participants in a clear and timely fashion. The options provided by campus coordinators allowed participants to make informed decisions and to feel comfortable taking a stop-out. In my story, the timely response from departmental staff allowed me to quickly reenroll after a stop-out. The information regarding enrollment was sent in time for participants to make plans to reenroll in

coursework at the end of their stop-out. The information received by participants boosted their confidence and helped them to feel in control. Some of the participants in this study were not familiar with a stop-out or its process; it was foreign and made them feel uncertain. Receiving information was valuable and empowering to the participants as it helped them regain confidence.

Convenience was the third value of the participants. Two of the participants received tuition reimbursement from their employers, which simplified access to graduate education. Employer financial support encouraged participants to pursue their goal of earning a master's degree, and participants described the tuition reimbursement process as simple. They valued being able to move through processes with ease and appreciated assistance from their work and academic departments to keep things streamlined. They did not get bogged down in processes.

Additionally, participants described the stop-out process as simple. In the moment, overwhelmed by illness, worry, and stress, the simplicity of process was critical. In my experience, reengaging with the program was easy. An email to my advisor to schedule a meeting followed by a straightforward reenrollment process. The information provided by campus coordinators was timely and straightforward. Students could sit out for a period to handle their individual challenges and then return to coursework. Participants greatly valued the opportunity of a break in enrollment to get back on track before continuing with additional coursework. It was a convenient solution to their complex challenges.

Adult learners value flexibility, information, and simplicity in their online graduate programs. These things encourage persistence for adult learners and support students who need a stop-out.

## **What do adult online learners experience during a stop-out that motivates them to return?**

Based on the stories of the participants in this research, the students' internal characteristics are the leading motivator for reenrollment. Participants in this study took responsibility for their learning; their internal motivations and individual characteristics were the most important factors of persistence. Above all else, the participants held themselves accountable, and they felt a strong sense of responsibility toward their learning. The participants were internally motivated to pursue graduate education, they had set a goal to earn an advanced degree, and they were committed to achieving that goal. They were proud of being in graduate school and seemed to like how it made them feel, especially the pride their friends and family showed them. Additionally, participants wanted to be able to apply course material to their lives. The practical application of schoolwork to the workplace encouraged participants to push forward, to continue striving toward their master's degree. The ability to apply learned material provided a justification to the students as well. It gave them the opportunity to validate their learning. The anticipated status and credibility of holding an advanced degree was appealing to some participants and served as an additional motivator.

Not only were the participants internally motivated, but they were also intentional. Their stories revealed individuals who were planners and careful decision makers. They collected information and made the choice to choose their goal over and over again. As the participants described choosing their academic programs, it was evident they were intentional in choosing the program that best fit their needs. When it came time to enroll in classes, participants were intentional in the courses selected and the number of credits taken. As the participants gained momentum in their programs, they intentionally chose to take on more. When it became clear

they needed to stop-out, they were intentional in collecting information and making the choice to stop-out. During the stop-out, participants were intentional with their time and thought about school. As they returned, they were again intentional in looking at their new graduation timeline and choosing return courses. The internal drive to keep going was the number one factor in persistence for the participants in this study, but the intentionality with which they advanced should not be discounted. Their awareness and clarity around decisions stood out in their stories.

Participants relied on their support systems to help them process their decisions. As the semester transition neared, participants made decisions about reenrollment. The family and friends they consulted influenced their enrollment decisions. One participant extended her stop-out because of pressure from her son. The participants used their support networks as a sounding board to help make decisions. While support networks were consulted, all participants felt the final decision was theirs alone. The motivation to reenroll was internal. The participants in this study were pursuing graduate education for their own satisfaction. The desire to earn the degree, to say they did it, outweighed external pressures. The internal motivation could be heard in the voices of the participants and was evident in their stories.

The second research question framing this study will be addressed in the next section.

### **How does the student's prior enrollment experience influence the decision to return to coursework after a stop-out?**

The participants in this study expressed satisfaction with their academic programs. The Great Plains IDEA participants liked the organization of the program, the opportunity to learn from faculty at multiple universities, and trusted their campus coordinators. When asked about their experience with the program, all participants responded with positive remarks. They enjoyed their classes and respected the teaching faculty. They appreciated the variety of faculty



backgrounds and liked hearing from other working adults in the classroom. The campus coordinator was revered as a trusted source and a one-stop-shop for information. The participants recalled reaching out to the administrative staff when they had questions.

Participants collected information before making decisions. They used their resources, especially their campus coordinators, to learn about options, to make decisions, and to move forward. They were pleased with the responsiveness of their campus coordinators and credited them with keeping the stop-out process simple. One participant talked about her campus coordinator as a sounding board for processing options. She spoke often about “talking with my campus coordinator.” Based on the data in this study, the positive experiences with their academic programs allowed students to feel confident in stopping out and later returning to the program. The administrative staff helped participants see a path back to their programs. The level of comfort the students felt with their respective universities and programs likely kept the door open for an easy return to coursework.

The participants in this study demonstrated similar worries and individual characteristics. The stop-out experience is unique to each student, but there are common feelings about the stop-out experience. The interactions with campus coordinators, faculty, and programs may carry a heavier weight when it comes to reenrolling after a stop-out. Students with positive experiences may be more likely to reenroll in courses.

### **An Unasked Question: What is the Silent Stop-out?**

When I was added to this study as the third participant, a slightly altered experience came to light. I am calling my stop-out experience a *silent stop-out*. In Chapter Four, I shared that I was enrolled in research hours but was not active. I silently stopped out. From the outside and “on paper,” I appeared to be making progress on my doctoral research, when in fact, I was not.

Research literature indicates that doctoral students are under higher levels of stress and need consistent support from their programs according to (Alfermann et al., 2021). University students at all levels invest a great deal of time and money into their educational goals (Alfermann et al., 2021; Chamandy & Gaudreau, 2022). “Nearly half of those [doctoral students] at risk of dropping out questioned their competence” (Alfermann et al., 2021, p. 246). This statement resonates with me. I absolutely doubted my skills as a student and at times my skills as a human. The dissertation process is not to be taken lightly; the internalized pressure was a very real experience for me. I didn’t want to drop-out, but I questioned myself to no end. All of that hesitation and questioning led to a silent stop-out. I didn’t want to be perceived as quitting or failing, so I enrolled, but I was paralyzed. I couldn’t see the path forward for a period of time, so I sat still. I was silent. I should have asked for help, but I found I enjoyed pretending I was done. I was hiding from my reality. Alfermann et al. encourage structured support from supervisors and academic programs to support doctoral students through their programs (2021). Family is a key factor in supporting doctoral students (Breitenbach et al., 2019).

In my experience, the gentle but firm encouragement from my husband played a critical role in my decision to reenroll and persist through the dissertation process. My family (parents, sister, in-laws) were constant sources of encouragement, even if they didn’t fully understand my goals or project. Their consistency was a place of comfort. Compassion and understanding from families provide doctoral students with much needed support through their academic journey (Breitenbach et al., 2019). For me, my family gave me grace through time. They helped with childcare, they accepted “no” when I was invited for social activities and felt I needed to work on my dissertation.

Investigating my own experience as a doctoral student who silently stopped out led me to an unasked question. What is a silent stop-out? What does the experience of a silent stop-out tell us about doctoral students? These are big questions, worthy of additional research.

Understanding the perspectives of doctoral students who take a silent stop-out can inform advisors and administrators. Finding ways to support student persistence during the research phase of an online program may aid in retaining and graduating students.

### **The Findings in Relationship to Literature**

The findings in this study support existing literature on student stop-out. This study assists in filling a gap in retention research as it provides an in-depth look at the experiences of students who stop-out. Expanding the literature on student stop-out may impact retention practices and will inform practitioners working with students who stop-out. Many students who stop-out are often mistaken as drop-out students (Tinto, 1993; Woosley et al., 2005).

#### **Retention, Drop-out, and Stop-out**

One of the goals of this study was to contribute to the body of research in retention of adult learners at the graduate level. The participants in this study were adult learners with full-time careers, family, and community obligations. Researchers have argued in favor of a different perspective on retention when it comes to adult learners (Hydarov et al., 2013; Zellner & Moore, 2011). The traditional fall-to-fall retention calculations are not reflective of online program enrollment patterns. Recognizing the flexible start times for online programs is one way to create a more accurate picture of retention of adult, online learners. Martinez (2003) suggests that progress from one part of an educational program to the next is retention. The participants in this study experienced a gap in their enrollment and were ultimately retained in their programs, which aligns with the research of Martinez (2003). The students made progress toward degree

completion. They reenrolled after a stop-out and therefore can be considered retained. One participant stopped enrollment for two consecutive semesters before reenrolling. The reenrollment indicates retention of the student.

Sometimes students who stop-out are mistaken as dropouts, possibly because the student did not notify anyone of the need to stop-out, or maybe because the stop-out occurred during the semester that retention rates were being calculated (Stratton et al., 2008). Some institutions require continuous enrollment and therefore a stop-out is always considered a drop-out (Hydarov et al., 2013; Zellner & Moore, 2011). A pause in enrollment is temporary and thus the term stop-out is more appropriate than drop-out. Drop-out indicates an exit from the program rather than a pause because the student does not reenroll in subsequent terms (Schulte, 2015). One of the great challenges for programs is to capture the intention of the student. The participants in this study contacted their campus coordinators to report their stop-out. It was clear each student planned to return to coursework once their lives allowed.

The stop-out experience alters the time to degree completion but does not necessarily alter the intentions of the student to complete the degree (Woosley et al., 2005). The participants in this study expressed a strong commitment to finishing their degrees — they spoke often about meeting their personal goal of earning a master’s degree. The educational commitment was described by Woosley et al. (2005) as the steadfast resolve to complete. The participants in this study demonstrated their intention to finish. One participant stated, “I will finish this degree, even though it’s going to take longer than I planned.” That kind of commitment is indicative of persistence. The individual commitment and internal motivation among the participants in this study was revealed through their stories and comments about longing to finish the program.

Woosley et al. (2005) found that student experience with the institution was a significant predictor of reenrollment. Students who expressed satisfaction with their institution were more likely to reenroll in courses after a stop-out. The participants in this study shared positive experiences and feelings toward their home universities and their programs. The support they felt and their interactions with the institution is a predictor of reenrollment. A simple process encourages persistence as well. The participants in this study valued simple and clear processes. They appreciated the explanations they received from their campus coordinators regarding the stop-out process. Creating a simple path to reenrollment is a recommendation for retaining stop-out students (EAB, 2015b; Hoyt & Winn, 2004; Woosley et al., 2005).

The findings of this study contribute broadly to the retention conversation and especially to the body of research around student stop-out. Researchers have called for additional study of the stop-out experience and the factors leading to continued enrollment.

### **Persistence**

The findings of this study support the research around student persistence. The three primary themes revealed through data analysis are aligned with the discussion of persistence literature found in Chapter Two. Thistoll and Yates (2016) suggest a triality between the student, the institution, and the external environment that influences persistence. Persistence is not defined by the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), but it warrants further discussion as persistence describes factors contributing to the completion of academic goals (Park & Choi, 2009; Hart, 2012). Persistence is especially evident in the stories of students who experienced an obstacle along their path to degree completion leading them to stop-out. The hiccup of stopping out creates its own set of challenges aside from the actual reason for stopping

out. Students who persist through a stop-out and continue to move toward their educational goals are worthy of further discussion.

**Institutional and programmatic factors.** This study identified three primary themes all situated around the factors of persistence discussed in Chapter Two. The first group of factors are institutional and programmatic factors. These are the ways in which the institution and program can influence and encourage students to reenroll after a stop-out. The interactions with faculty and staff were positive influences on student persistence in this study. The participants felt comfortable with their campus coordinators, they trusted the information they received from them, and reached out quickly to staff when they needed help. The campus coordinator is a dedicated support person, available to answer questions for Great Plains IDEA students. Providing this central support is recommended by many researchers to best encourage online learners (Aversa & MacCall, 2013; EAB, 2015a; Su & Waugh, 2018; Zellner & Moore, 2011).

In addition, this study found that adult online learners value simple and convenient processes. The participants shared an appreciation for the convenience of the stop-out process. The process did not require multiple layers of permission or paperwork. Instead, the students simply needed to communicate their wishes to campus coordinators. The participants in this study indicated the simplicity was helpful as they were dealing with other stressors at the time of making the decision to stop-out.

The greater body of research addresses course supports, such as interactions with faculty and peers (Milman et al., 2015; Muljana & Lou, 2019), program-level orientations, and student services as important factors of persistence. The participants in this study did not identify these factors as important to their persistence through a stop-out. Although course interactions, orientations, and student services were not prioritized by the participants in this study, those

factors should continue to be researched to determine their role in persistence through a stop-out. The stories shared by the participants in this research focused heavily on the responsiveness of support staff and convenience. Faculty interactions were addressed by participants as positive and encouraging but were not as central to the stop-out experience. This makes sense as the stop-out and reenrollment processes are administrative in nature.

**External influences on adult learners.** External factors to persistence are those beyond university and individual characteristics (Thistoll & Yates, 2016). They include a student's job, family, friends, community, and professional organizations, all of which influence the learner. Sometimes external factors are encouraging and other times they deter students from persisting. The external factors of persistence have a strong influence on drop-out decisions (Conceicao & Lehman, 2012; Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003; Willging & Johnson, 2009).

The participants in this study generally experienced support from the external influences in their lives. However, one student reported pressure to drop-out of school from her son. He was concerned she was doing too much and encouraged her to either drop-out or retire from her job. Ultimately, she chose to extend her stop-out because of this pressure. She took the additional time off to determine if she in fact wanted to drop-out of the program. During the extra time away, she missed school and chose to return to her course work. In my experience, my external support (my husband), was instrumental in my decision to persist.

The participants in this study spent most of their time with family or working. It makes sense that factors external to the institution would weigh heavily on their decisions. Support systems, comprised of family and friends, may not act as cheerleaders but provide support by helping with childcare, asking about school, and listening when the students were making

enrollment decisions. The external influences in the lives of the participants allowed them the space to make enrollment decisions and to push forward when they were ready to reenroll.

**Individual student characteristics.** The individual characteristics of students are internal factors influencing student persistence. These may be inherent skills such as motivation, determination, and grit. They might be learned skills, such as time management and organization. Retention models tend to include individual characteristics as a component of retention (Park & Choi, 2009; Rovai, 2003; Tinto, 1993).

Findings indicate that individual characteristics are key to student reenrollment after a stop-out. The participants were committed to their educational goal, they were determined to finish even in the face of challenges, and they showed grit. According to Cross (2014), grit is a measure of perseverance and passion for long-term goals. They wanted, even longed for, their master's degrees. The students described themselves as "always wanting" to earn a master's degree. Their employers were not pushing them toward graduate education, nor were their families or friends. The external forces — work, family, and friends — provided support, but they were not *the reason* participants enrolled in an online graduate program. These participants committed to graduate education in spite of existing obligations, not because of them. Participants in this study took ownership over their learning, which is another indicator of persistence (Crede & Borrego, 2014; Shaw et al., 2016).

The ability to hold oneself accountable for reading and class assignments shows ownership over learning. One student described learning to multitask her mom and student responsibilities. She found ways to listen to lectures while in the kitchen preparing a meal or making playdough for her son's class. Students who are proactive in planning their studies and are skilled at time management are most likely to persist (Budash & Shaw, 2017).



Students who report a sense of learning, accomplishment, and pride may be most likely to persist in an online master's degree program (Yang et al., 2017). This finding aligns with this study. Students in this study were looking forward to their courses, they were able to apply the knowledge they learned in the classroom to their personal and professional lives. The participants reported feeling proud of what they were doing.

One participant talked about it being cool that she was able to maintain her career, expand her family, and manage graduate school all at the same time. She was proud of the work she was doing. Another participant was able to apply course material to her personal life and felt she was bettering herself for the future. She was excited to help others when she completed her degree. These sentiments indicate individual characteristics leading to persistence. This study supports the existing literature around individual characteristics influencing student persistence. The findings of this study indicate that individual characteristics are a critical component of student persistence. The student's internal drive and commitment play a huge role in pushing a student forward.

### **Margin Theory**

Margin Theory provides a lens for considering the capacity an adult learner has for education. According to Herod (2012), "McClusky's model 'captures the fluidity and complexity of adult participation in learning'" (p. 29). Margin (capacity) is the function of the relationship of load to power (Herod, 2012; Hiemstra, 1993; McClusky, 1970). When the power available to the student outweighs the load, there is margin, or capacity, for additional commitments. Load is described as the set of demands on the individual; these are the learner's commitments and obligations (McClusky, 1970). Demands are internal and external to the student and can include work, family, and organization commitments (Herod, 2012). Power is described as the set of

resources available to the student to help manage the demands (Herod, 2012; McClusky, 1970). Examples of power include time-management skills, access to childcare, and tuition reimbursement from work. These resources help offset the pressure of the demands, thereby creating margin, or capacity, to take on additional responsibilities (Biney, 2022). Low margin may be an indicator of high stress or illness, according to Merriam & Bierema (2014). For this study, participants reported high stress levels and illness as reasons for stopping out.

The findings of this study supported Margin Theory. The participants reached a tipping point, the load became greater than the power available to them. The added load caused by illness, stress, and self-doubt weighed heavily on the participants. The imbalance of load and power caused the students to stop-out from their studies. During the stop-out period, the students were able to address some of the load issues, regroup, and then, they reenrolled in courses. The findings of this research support Margin Theory as an explanation for student stop-out and reenrollment.

### **Adult Learning Theory**

Adult Learning Theory is the idea that adult learners bring a specific set of wants and needs to the institution and the classroom (Knowles, 1970). Adult learners have more outside responsibilities than traditional-age students (Cohen & Greenberg, 2011; Pappas & Jerman, 2011; Offerman, 2011; Aslanian et al., 2019). Online graduate programs are ideal for mid-career professionals seeking to advance themselves or to remain current in their field. Additionally, adult learners seek practical application of course material (Willis, 2021). They often express a desire to blend their professional and educational selves, meaning they want to share their life experiences in the classroom, and they expect course material to be applicable to their lives (Knowles, 1970; Willis, 2021). The participants in this study sought content application, their

stories depicted individuals seeking to improve themselves at work. One participant changed roles within her company and was relieved when the content of her next course aligned with her new role. She found additional motivation to continue the program when she could apply the knowledge directly to her work. This study was born from my goal of improving the experiences of the students I worked with in my job. The research questions were selected to help answer the challenge of supporting students who stop-out.

There are three kinds of adult learner motivations that were identified using the adult learning theory lens (1) goal-oriented, (2) activity-oriented, and (3) learning-oriented (Houle, 1961). It is most likely that adult learners are motivated by some combination of these orientations (Houle, 1961). Through the analysis of this data, the participants in this study fit into these orientations.

The goal-orientation is focused on achieving a goal and is common among adults pursuing further education (Houle, 1961). The participants in this study had personal goals of earning a master's degree to allow them to expand their careers and to build credibility. The activity-orientation describes learners who choose a learning activity for the sake of engaging with others in the process (Houle, 1961). The learning-orientation, or cognitive interest motivational orientation, describes learners who are engaged for the purpose of gaining knowledge and for the joy of learning (Francois, 2014; Houle, 1961). The participants in this study expressed a desire to refresh and dive deep into the content area of their programs, and they expressed a true enjoyment of learning.

Adult learners are autonomous; they take responsibility for their learning and are independent learners. They enroll in educational programs when it feels valuable to them (Francois, 2014; Knowles, 1970). They want to ensure the program will meet their needs and

help them advance. The participants' stories revealed intrinsically motivated students who set out to achieve a specific goal. They saw value in earning a graduate degree and decided to enroll. The independence of adult learners reflects a certain level of ownership and self-accountability on the part of the students.

However, support from the institution and program is still an important factor to the success of these students. Research finds that adult learners value responsiveness and interactions with faculty and staff (EAB, 2019b; Offerman, 2011; Willis, 2021). The consistency of campus coordinators and the simplicity of process enabled the participants to navigate a stop-out experience and reenroll in courses.

This study is significant in that they help fill the gap in the literature by providing a qualitative view of the stop-out experience. The stories shared by the student participants deepen the understanding of the student experience. The findings align with the factors of persistence and are woven together by Margin Theory through the lens of Adult Learning Theory.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study offers insight for future practices for supporting students who stop-out. Three participants shared their personal stop-out experiences, leading to three recommendations for academic programs: (1) identify central student support personnel, (2) implement communication and reenrollment plans, and (3) acknowledge the silent stop-out. The implications for practice are intended for administrators and administrative personnel in online graduate programs.

#### **Identify Central Student Support Personnel**

The participants in this study were enrolled in online graduate degree programs sponsored by Great Plains IDEA. The alliance has three guiding principles; one is especially

relevant for practical application: simplify student navigation. The simplification of student navigation is critical for online graduate students. Adult learners have a multitude of commitments and need a one-stop shop for administrative questions and issues. The multi-institutional component of the alliance inherently creates a level of complexity for students. The alliance implemented the campus coordinator role to help circumvent that complexity. The central support personnel should be identified by online programs as the student services expert for students.

The central support personnel understand the policies and processes of the university and serves as a guide for students, a first stop for student questions. Administrative personnel should not be expected to have all the answers, but instead, serve as an information broker, sending students to the right place to get the information they need. For example, administrative personnel know enrollment deadlines, drop and refund dates, and policies associated with dropping at the university, as well as a basic understanding of financial assistance and scholarships. Perhaps more importantly, they can refer students to the right person in the Office of Student Financial Assistance when their students have appropriate questions. In sum, students enrolled in online graduate programs are not on campus and, in many ways, the central support person is their representative/advocate, ensuring the student has help navigating the system from a distance.

The campus coordinator has a best practice role in the Great Plains IDEA alliance. These are individuals who provide a safe place for students to ask questions, they provide encouragement and support for students, and they are consistent. Within the alliance, campus coordinators send central communications to students such as enrollment reminders. The participants in this study shared positive feelings toward their campus coordinators; they

referenced them often and appreciated the support they received from them. When asked about their satisfaction and experience with their program, participants expressed gratitude for their campus coordinators. They appreciated their assistance when things were tough and when students were making a big decision. The campus coordinator provided quick responses and immediate assistance to these participants. A dedicated support staff is a best practice identified by researchers (EAB, 2015a; Fairchild, 2003; Zellner & Moore, 2011). This study encourages online graduate programs to consider creating a central support person, similar to that of the Great Plains IDEA campus coordinator.

### **Implement Communication and Reenrollment Plans**

Online graduate students benefit from concise and consistent information. Academic programs should communicate, be intentional, and keep things simple. Students value a connection to program personnel who can answer their questions and guide them through a process. Mid-career professionals choosing to pursue an online graduate program need simplicity. When students are seeking information or assistance, it needs to be easy to follow. Where possible, Graduate Schools and institutions should seek to streamline and simplify student processes. Reviewing policies to ensure they are aligned with the needs of adult learners will assist in retaining stop-out students. For example, extending the time allowed for degree completion would encourage students who stop-out to persist. Additionally, making information accessible will encourage persistence. Participants indicated an appreciation of responsive administrative personnel. They relied on the information provided by program administrators and used those individuals as helpers when deciding to stop-out. The institution, faculty, and staff can encourage student persistence by providing simple and consistent communications and process.

In addition to clear communications, programs should consider creating reenrollment plans with stop-out students. The Education Advisory Board recommends creating a reenrollment plan for students who choose to stop-out (2015a). When students communicate the decision to stop-out, administrative personnel should attempt to make a plan with that student for reenrollment. For example, they should find a time to reconnect and discuss enrollment deadlines during the stop-out period. Leaving the stop-out student with a plan to reconnect later in the semester demonstrates investment in the student.

The participants in this study appreciated the knowledge of their program personnel and used the support staff as a first point of contact. The campus coordinators were the individuals to remind participants of the enrollment period. It seems there would be value in going one step further to make plans with the student to reconnect during the stop-out. Reconnecting with the student during the stop-out will keep the student engaged with the program and will demonstrate the commitment the program has for the student and her success. Intentional engagement with stop-out students may encourage persistence. It will also allow the student to provide updates to the program. For example, one of the participants in this study opted to extend her stop-out through the next semester. Checking in with the student would provide an opportunity for continued communication. The program could better track students who stop-out if an intentional communication plan was in place.

### **Acknowledge the Silent Stop-Out**

Academic program personnel are limited by the information they receive from students. When students silently stop-out, the communication flow stops, making it difficult for staff to support students. The acknowledgment that silent stop-outs exist may be a step in the right direction. Developing awareness of the silent stop-out may aid program personnel in identifying

students who have silently stopped out. Student orientations could include information about the silent stop-out with opportunities for students to speak up if they are feeling frozen.

Structured communication plans with students may also aid in identifying and supporting silent stop-out students. Advisors or the central support personnel can develop a check-in timeline to ask students about progress, their concerns, and challenges. Perhaps by reaching out in an individualized and structured manner, students will speak up regarding their fears. Ensuring that students have access to a central program, staff person may provide the support they need to persist. Additionally, creating a communication plan with students to check-in may provide the structured support they need to push forward. As with any stop-out, the silent stop-out seems to be beyond the control of the program and university. The program should consider measures for providing opportunities for students to ask for help and to speak up regarding the need or desire to stop-out.

### **Limitations**

The study's limitations are as follows: It included but a small number of participants, initially two students, resulting in three interviews. One participant was interviewed twice, which provided the opportunity for member-checking. The second participant was interviewed only once as she did not respond to requests for a second interview. After several attempts to expand the participant pool, the researcher was added as the third participant to expand the dataset. The small number of participants limits the breadth of possible experiences with student stop-out. Additionally, male and minority perspectives are missing from this study as all participants were Caucasian females. The participants represented different age groups, which did add to the richness of the data. The participants were reflective of the Great Plains IDEA student population in that the majority of students are female. Using Great Plains IDEA students may be viewed as a



limitation in that most online graduate programs are not inter-institutional and therefore the experiences of these students differ from the general population because of the nature of the alliance. The researcher, and third participant was a doctoral student, not enrolled in a Great Plains IDEA program which may broaden the perspectives slightly.

My personal experiences with Great Plains IDEA creates a researcher bias. I was employed by the organization for more than 10 years. I served as campus coordinator for one of the member universities and eventually held the title of lead campus coordinator, where I provided support to campus coordinators at all of the partner universities. I am intimately familiar with the organization and with that insider experience brings bias. I have a passion for student services, and I believe in the idea of a central support person for online graduate students.

It should be noted that I am a first-time qualitative researcher, and I was learning throughout the study. My need to learn the process was another limitation. A more experienced researcher may have conducted interviews in a more natural manner, creating more conversation and room for ad-hoc follow-up questions. The opportunity for a second interview with one of the participants allowed me time to reflect on the first interview, to summarize my interpretation of the participant's story, and to identify places to dig a little deeper. I felt encouraged after the second interview; it felt smooth, and I felt I had a more holistic picture of the student's experience. At the closing of the second interview, the student expressed an enjoyment of revisiting her story and hearing it recapped by me. A second interview with the second participant would have increased the richness of data.

The time between data collection and analysis was several months. The time lag means the interviews were not fresh when data analysis began. To compensate for the break between collection and analysis I rewatched the recorded interviews. As I watched the recordings, I made

notes of my observations to help bring the experience to the front of my mind. In addition to rewatching the interviews, I revisited interview transcripts and refreshed my knowledge of the coding process. Once these steps were complete, I immediately began coding data in two cycles.

This study is not without limitations or bias and as is practice in qualitative research. I have done my best to acknowledge the limitations and how I worked to address them where possible. Researcher bias cannot fully be removed from the study, but it can and should be acknowledged as an influence on the study and its findings. In the next section I will discuss the replication of this study and future research opportunities.

### **Future Research**

The need for additional research on adult, online learner stop-out was apparent from the beginning of this study. Existing and more importantly, recent studies were few and far between. While this study contributes to the body of literature around student stop-out, it does not answer all the questions, and additional research should be conducted. When this study is replicated, it should expand the student population beyond Caucasian female students. Broadening the participant pool to include other populations would enhance our understanding of the stop-out experience. Seeking diverse perspectives may uncover additional recommendations for practice that are tailored to a broader audience.

When practitioners understand the experiences and needs of stop-out students, they can better serve them. Research should be conducted using the reenrollment concept presented by The Education Advisory Board (EAB, 2015a). The EAB reenrollment plan suggests working with a stop-out student to create a plan for reenrollment as an opportunity to retain stop-out students. Investigating the implementation of a reenrollment plan would expand our knowledge of the role of the institution and program personnel. It would provide insight to the role

institutions play in persistence and deepen our understanding of how institutional processes and supports impact student reenrollment decisions. Two of the three persistence factor groups — (1) individual characteristics and (2) external factors such as family, work, and friends — are beyond the bounds of the institution. Therefore, the institution should do everything in its power to position itself as a support for students who stop-out. Strengthening the role of the institution, program personnel, and faculty as a source of power (resources) for students may be critical to retaining stop-out students and helping them maintain a balance of power and load.

Additional research should include the student facing personnel who interact with and support stop-out students. Should this study be replicated, it would be worth including student-facing administrative personnel as participants in the study. This would allow for another perspective on the student stop-out experience. These professionals have first-hand experience with the students who need a break in enrollment, they hear the stories of the students, and they provide guidance. Collecting data about the strategies and processes they use will inform future practices for student service professionals. A qualitative study considering the experiences of the central administrative personnel would enrich a study similar to this one.

Finally, future research should focus on the tracking of stop-out students to develop an understanding of their enrollment patterns and choices. Potential research questions may include: (1) What is the typical duration of a stop-out? (2) At what point during the stop-out does the student decide to reenroll? (3) When is the opportune time to reconnect with a student during a stop-out? Digging deeper into these questions may clarify when and how programs communicate with students who stop-out.

Additionally, being able to “tag” students as stopped out for a term would allow programs to reach out during the stop-out to offer support and timely enrollment information to

students. Identifying methods for tracking student stop-out not only serves the stop-out population, but it also enables programs to more accurately report the status of students enrolled in their programs. Students who stop-out and are often counted as drop-outs would be reflected accurately as retained students even though they may not be currently enrolled. This is especially important for online programs, which tend to experience higher attrition rates (Bawa, 2016; Diaz, 2022; Peck et al., 2018).

Stop-out behavior is not uncommon and may be unavoidable. Expanding research to better understand the student experience and learning how to support these students is important. Stop-out students are an opportunity to increase retention (Woosley et al., 2005). This under-researched phenomenon warrants additional attention, especially for the adult, online graduate student. This population is juggling multiple obligations and may be more likely to need a stop-out. Learning more about the stop-out experience will equip institutions and program personnel to better support students.

## **Conclusion**

The goal of this study was to understand the experiences of adult online learners who stop-out during their graduate studies and ultimately reenroll. The stop-out, a period of nonenrollment followed by reenrollment is an under-researched area of enrollment. The study sought to expand the field of research through a qualitative case analysis by digging into the stop-out experiences of two student participants.

The findings of this study shed light on the adult, online student stop-out experience and supported existing literature about student persistence and Margin Theory. The study revealed first-hand experiences of adult learners enrolled in online graduate programs who stopped out and how they persisted. The stop-out is likely here to stay. It is beyond the control of the

program. What is within control of the program is the opportunity to connect with stop-out students, to offer them timely information, and to provide encouragement for their continued study. The findings of this study are just the beginning. Further research into student stop-out will inform best practices for supporting stop-out students.

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Education Advisory Board.

## Appendix A - Great Plains IDEA Approval to Research

October 14, 2021

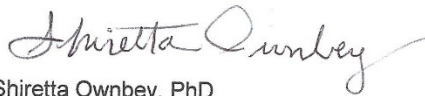
University Research Compliance Office  
Kansas State University  
203 Fairchild Hall  
1601 Vattier Street  
Manhattan, KS 66502

Dear Institutional Review Board committee:

My name is Shiretta Ownbey, and I serve as the Cabinet chair for the Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (Great Plains IDEA). Great Plains IDEA is a consortium of universities working together to offer flexible, online programs to a virtual community of learners. We offer programs in both agriculture and human sciences.

Please accept this letter as the indicator of approval and support for the doctoral research project proposed by Amanda Gnad, doctoral student in the College of Education at Kansas State University. Amanda's research proposes the Great Plains IDEA as the source of research participants. The Great Plains IDEA Cabinet heard a research proposal from Amanda during our February 25, 2021 meeting. The Cabinet supports this research and is willing to allow Amanda to contact Great Plains IDEA students about participation in her study.

Sincerely,



Shiretta Ownbey, PhD

Chair, Great Plains IDEA Cabinet

## Appendix B - Permission to Name Great Plains IDEA



November 16, 2022

Dear Amanda,

Thank you for contacting Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance (IDEA) about permission to name the alliance in your dissertation document. Your work of understanding the experiences of students who stop out and then return to course work by case study is very interesting to us. We welcome you to name the alliance (Great Plains IDEA, Great Plains Interactive Distance Education Alliance, and the like) in your dissertation.

Feel free to reach out with any additional questions. Best of luck in your future defense.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sherri M. Jones".

Sherri M. Jones, Ph.D.  
Chair, Great Plains IDEA Cabinet  
College of Education and Human Sciences  
University of Nebraska—Lincoln  
[sherri.jones@unl.edu](mailto:sherri.jones@unl.edu)  
402-472-2913

## Appendix C - Request for Participation

Hi ,

My name is Amanda Gnadl and I am a former member of the Great Plains IDEA management team. I am also a doctoral student in the counseling and student development Ph.D. program at Kansas State University. My research study is focused on understanding the experiences of adult learners enrolled in online graduate programs who stop out from their studies because 'life happens'. The goal of this research is to better understand how a student experiences a stop out (a break of enrollment) and why they ultimately reenroll in courses.

***I am seeking students who are willing to share their stories about being online graduate students who took a break from courses, but then reenrolled and returned to coursework.***

**What does it mean to participate?**

- Committing to up to three, one-on-one zoom interviews with me (the researcher)
  - Interviews will be one-hour in length
  - Interviews will be recorded
  - You can choose to turn off the video feature
  - Audio recordings of the Zoom will be saved and transcribed
  - Pseudonyms will be used in place of your real name, the information you share is confidential
- I will request access to your academic records:
  - Enrollment history
  - Transcript
  - Program of Study

If you would be willing to share your story with me, please [email me](#) to indicate your willingness. I will then reach out to you with an informed consent document, where you'll learn a little more about your role as a participant in this case study. Should you have questions, we can talk through them and you can decide if you would like to continue with your participation. I plan to complete interviews by March 1, 2022 and will work around your schedule when setting meeting times.

Thank you for considering. Your participation in this research project will be greatly appreciated!

Amanda Gnadl

[asgnadt@ksu.edu](mailto:asgnadt@ksu.edu)

785-554-1029

## Appendix D - Interview Guide

1. Welcome & Introductions.
2. Tell me a little about yourself.
  - a. When/why did you decide to apply to this program?
  - b. What are your goals (career, personal) with completing this master's degree?
  - c. What are your obligations outside of school (work, family, community)?
3. Tell me about your experience with your master's degree program up to your stop-out.
  - a. What was positive?
  - b. What was challenging?
  - c. How do you feel about your program overall?
  - d. Your interactions with faculty/staff?
4. You stopped out for the spring 2021 semester (meaning, you dropped all classes or never even enrolled for the term. Can you tell me what events led you to make the decision to take a break?
  - a. Tell me more about...
5. Who did you consult when making your decision to stop-out? (Advisor? Campus coordinator? Partner? Family? Friends? Work?)
  - a. Tell me about the reaction of these individuals? (Supportive? Not supportive?)
    - i. Did the reactions of anyone above influence your decision?
  - b. If you reached out, did you receive support and helpful information? What was the conversation like when you expressed the desire/consideration to stop-out?
6. Who did you tell when you made the decision to stop-out (Advisor? Campus coordinator? Family? Work? Friends?)

- a. Tell me about the reaction of these individuals?
7. What kinds of thoughts did you have about school while you were not enrolled?
  - a. How often did you think about school?
8. Tell me what happened while you were taking a break from classes? What was the following like:
  - a. Work?
  - b. Family?
  - c. Community?
  - d. Friends?
9. Tell me about any interactions/communications you had with your faculty/staff/program during your stop-out?
10. You decided to reenroll in classes, can you tell me how you came to that decision?
  - a. Was it difficult?
  - b. Who played a role in helping you decide? What was their role?
11. When you decided to reenroll, who did you tell? (Advisor? Campus coordinator? Partner? Family? Friends? Work?)
  - a. What were the reactions of these individuals/groups?
12. How has the pandemic impacted you? (If not addressed before now)
  - a. In school