

FACTORS AFFECTING ADULT ENROLLMENT IN  
ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: FOR-PROFIT  
VS. NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS

THESIS

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by

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **FACTORS AFFECTING ADULT ENROLLMENT IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION: FOR-PROFIT VS. NONPROFIT INSTITUTIONS**

by

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This study explored factors affecting adult enrollment in online degree programs offered by for-profit virtual universities relative to those offered by traditional nonprofit institutions. A mixed methods approach was taken to investigate differences in perceived motivations and barriers to participation and the extent to which adults differentiate between nonprofit and for-profit institutions in the context of online programs. The findings indicate a perception among those selecting for-profit universities that a degree from an institution which is “known” is just as good as one from a “reputable” institution,

and differences in how each institutional preference group searched for and evaluated potential programs. It is suggested that future research focus on understanding perceptions of online programs offered by nonprofit colleges.

## I. BACKGROUND

Enrollment in distance education programs has been described by the axiom ‘Educating Rita and Nanook.’ The underlying thought behind this statement is that the chief role of distance education is to reach those missed by traditional colleges and universities, either because of prior educational attainment (Rita) or because of geographic location (Nanook) (Powell & Keen, 2006). There is also a complementary, perhaps well-earned, perception about degree-granting distance education programs that enrollment is no more than a second choice to “the real thing.” With the advent of Internet-based courses that better mimic the traditional classroom environment, however, there is evidence that distance education is becoming increasingly normalized within society. As instructors utilize discussion boards, chat rooms, podcasts, computer-based textbook supplements, and lectures delivered via streaming video, the distinction between distance and local education is becoming blurred (Dunn, 2000), with recent research suggesting that both hybrid and fully online courses result in stronger performance outcomes than courses delivered solely via face-to-face instruction (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009). The popularity of this modality is also evident. In 2004-2005 distance courses were offered by over 60% of all public and private postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Likewise, the demographics of distance learners have changed in recent years, with enrollment data indicating that these students are local residents spread across a wide range of ages and prior education

backgrounds. While the benefits for those bounded by geographic location no doubt exist and will continue to be a factor, there is increasing evidence that this subpopulation comprises a shrinking proportion of all distance education students.

Today, the typical student enrolled in college-level distance education seems to be an odd cousin of both Rita and Nanook. These students, overwhelmingly, are adults who have had some prior participation in higher education. They are likely to be financially independent, have a full-time job, and have responsibility for the care of children or other family dependents. They attend part-time, fitting their education around work, family, and social commitments. Flexibility in access is a factor, but may be defined more in terms of time and convenience than geography. This often is cited as the hallmark of online coursework, as the asynchronous or self-directed nature allows students to participate not only from any location, but at a schedule that meets their individual needs. Students also self-select for this mode of delivery by their computer literacy and access. It seems that this is an important consideration for two reasons. First and most obviously, it acts as a filter. While computer use would appear ubiquitous it remains highly stratified by socioeconomic class. Those with a bachelors degree are 30 percent more likely to have internet access at home than those with only a high school education (Horrigan, 2009). Those who do not have regular access or are not well versed in computer use are more likely to view traditional community college courses and vocational institutions as their alternative. Second, the average age of participants in distance education today intersects with the first generation of digital natives. This adds layers of motivational consideration to what is known about the distance education seeking population.

Not only are these more mature student numerous, they are the fastest-growing population in higher education. While the number of 18 to 24 year-olds enrolling in post-secondary institutions increased 78% between 1970 and 2000, the number of students over the age of 25 increased 190% (Snyder, Dillow, & Hoffman, 2009). Despite this explosive growth, however, four-year colleges and universities have been slow to respond to accommodating this population. Simply put, the education of adults largely has been considered an altruistic goal relegated to the periphery of postsecondary systems and, to date, has been non-threatening and uninteresting to major institutional players (Powell & Keen, 2006). The prevailing philosophy continues to be that adult students seeking postsecondary-level education should be directed towards continuing education programs. There are, however, two fundamental problems with this attitude. First, the term *continuing* assumes that there was some prior completed educational experience that these students are in effect accessorizing. With a freshman dropout rate of almost 30% and less than one-half of college entrants graduating (National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, 2009), this is not the case for a growing number. Second, the demands of the twentieth century economy demand that we re-think lifelong learning. Davis and Botkin (1994) provide a useful summary of this trend:

When America was an agrarian economy, education for young people between seven and fourteen was sufficient to last 40 years of a working life. In the industrial economy, the age range of students expanded to between five and 22. In the information economy, the rapid pace of technological change means that education must be updated throughout our working lives. People have to increase their learning power to sustain

their earning power. Lifelong learning is the norm that is augmenting and in some cases displacing school-age education. (p. 16)

Simply put, the knowledge economy of modern society requires more education from workers, and the average number of years spent in any one occupation has decreased dramatically. As professional life changes occur, it is natural that adults leaving one occupation should consider options other than the one they were originally trained for, or embark upon substantive continued or re-education in order to compete with younger applicants for the same position. The ability to do so quietly and without interruption to an existing job has obvious appeal.

Adults seeking for-credit coursework and professional certification historically have found a 'home' at community colleges. In a contradiction to the conventional wisdom, however, a close look at the data suggests that an increasing number of adult students are not going to public two-year and community colleges. At these institutions between 1995 and 2004, the number of for-credit students between the ages of 25 and 39 declined by 11%. Over the same period, the number of those students enrolled in private, for-profit colleges increased by 253% (Nunley, 2007). While this statistic loses some of its impact once one considers that the number of for-profit colleges was relatively low and had limited enrollment in the mid-1990s, it does beg a curious question. If for-profit institution enrollment has outpaced two- and four-year institution enrollment so dramatically over the past decade, where did the segment that is attracted to for-profit institutions come from?

Judging from a review of several major institutions' web sites, it is quite possible that, at least from a marketing standpoint, distance education appeals to some adults who

feel that they are not welcome at traditional four-year colleges and universities. Web sites feature pictures of teenagers, and admission requirements involve actions that are readily accommodated within the high school system but require additional effort and cost for those beyond graduation. At most institutions, if students are not continuously registered for each long semester they must apply for readmission; this meets the data requirements of the institution more than the needs of the student, and the prospect of having to endure yet another application and review process may be daunting to some and feel like an arcane, hassle-laden procedure to others. Many virtual universities, however, market specifically to adults, frequently not mentioning consideration of previous GPA achievement, and some even requiring current employment as an admission criterion (Nelson & Associates, 2001). Students are free to enroll at whatever pace suits their individual needs. With the acknowledgement of a person's life accomplishments and no 'academic fresh start' restrictions placed upon the potential student, the marketing savvy of institutions such as the ubiquitous University of Phoenix (<http://www.phoenix.edu>) cannot be ignored when attempting to understand this segment. Faced with an increasingly consumer-driven education market, it may make sense that these students would seek out a program where they feel accepted with less judgment made upon their status or past sins.

Nontraditional student participation in higher education also brings to the forefront two classic questions: (1) who benefits from going to college, and (2) from where should the funding come for participation? While studies have shown the positive benefits of education along various social dimensions, such as higher voting patterns and decreased reliance upon welfare and other government support services among

participants (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998a), many continue to question whether the rhetoric of the benefits of a learning society matches the reality (Holford & Jarvis, 2000). Within the economic context of the early twenty-first century, adult participation in higher education has become pervasive as a means to develop the skills and credentials necessary to succeed in the workforce. For distance education in particular, this effort typically is undertaken by those individuals who fall on the “have” side of the digital divide – that is, regular home access to quality internet services and at least some critical knowledge of how to process the information received. The result is that participation begins to become defined by this population and this purpose. To point, Moore (2000) posits the question: “If education is a means to better employment rather than better citizenship, why should anyone pay for it other than the person who benefits” (p. 1)? One implication of this seems to be that, as society begins to view knowledge as a product to be bought (Geiger, 2004), the normalization of for-profit education may create lessened support for non-traditional student receipt of financial aid. Indeed, students continue to be ineligible for federal financial aid if they are not enrolled in at least six credit hours per semester (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.), which tends to reinforce the notion that part-time participation in higher education is available only for those who can afford higher-interest bank loans and credit charges. A general public perception is that for-profit institution tuition prices run less than those of traditional colleges and universities (Tierney, 2007). A quick sample of the data for 2008, however, shows this to be only slightly true. Across five public, nonprofit colleges and universities in Texas, the average tuition and fees for a B.A. in liberal arts is just over \$50,000, with a relatively small range around that number. The average cost for a part-time evening MBA is

\$42,000, with a low cost of \$13,000 and a high of \$80,000. Across the three largest and most well-known virtual universities, the average cost of a B.A. in liberal arts is just under \$50,000; the average for an MBA is approximately \$35,000. This difference may not be a significant consideration, however, as Broekeimer (2002, as cited in National Postsecondary Educational Cooperative, 2007), in an empirical study of the search criteria used by two- and four-year college-seeking adults, found cost to have minimal salience as a decision factor. This seems to hold across both traditional and online education, as the recent demise of the “50 percent rule” set forth by the U.S. Department of Education stating that institutions were ineligible to access Title IV student aid funds if more than half of their students were enrolled online, has had little impact (Field & Carnevale, 2007).

With the question of cost comes the question of what it is students purport to be purchasing. Whether one believes it to be for better or for worse, there is no denying that regionally accredited brick-and-mortar colleges and universities are no longer the sole providers of postsecondary education. One of the realities associated with the influx of community colleges, career colleges, for-profit institutions, state-approved institutions, and unauthorized religious and secular colleges over the past half-century is that, collectively, they have created a broad variety of meanings associated with the word *degree*. Because all degrees are called the same thing, the task of determining which type of program is appropriate for a prospective student’s needs is understandably confusing. Particularly for those individuals outside of the socio-economic classes typically associated with higher-end providers and white-collar employers, determining which credentials are acceptable for possible future use can be extremely daunting. Even for

those individuals who heed the warnings of various online degree information web sites and news articles to “check the institution for accreditation,” the process of deciphering national versus regional accreditation, let alone the nuances associated with each agency, is made all the more difficult by institutional in-fighting about comparability and standards, the seemingly legitimate names taken on by agencies not recognized by the U.S. Department of Education, and a general paucity of information that is conveyed in a way that holds any meaning to the student. Thus, in order to understand the academic motivations of the public at large, educators and researchers need to look past the bias for regional accreditation and examine what is going on with other types of institutions.

As accredited for-profit distance education becomes more pervasive, Rita and Nanook’s cousin increasingly may view it as a valid option that best meets their lifestyle and their learning goals. Within distance education literature, the flexibility/convenience factor is well-understood and cited in almost every study located, but other *push motivators* undoubtedly exist that incite adult students to explore and enroll in online programs. Powell and Keen (2006) convincingly argue that for a program to attract students it must address both their intrinsic and pragmatic needs, not just one or the other. Growing knowledge bases about how to operate these programs and increasing acceptance among the ‘consumer’ population add to the importance of re-exploring exactly what it is that online education students are actually seeking to achieve and do. The body of knowledge about this population is still being developed but is critical to understand, particularly as institutions fight for financial stability and the learning needs of society become more complex, so that educators may properly address the ethical, financial, and pedagogical questions surrounding recruitment and retention. The majority

of the literature concerning online programs comes from researchers at traditional institutions who invariably use the values of those institutions to frame their view. Given the growing sense among educators that the framework for many online programs may fall somewhere in between those for community colleges and four-year institutions, it makes sense to examine this issue from the adult education perspective.

#### Statement of the Problem

The problem to be considered in this study is that it is not well understood by those in nonprofit higher education what factors other than flexibility and convenience affect adult student enrollment in online degree programs offered by for-profit virtual universities relative to those offered by traditional colleges and universities. The core question asked, in essence, is: do nontraditional students simply find a nontraditional institution appealing, and if so, why? Because traditional institutions primarily offer these programs only at the graduate level, this investigation will focus on the perceptions and attitudes of individuals considering or entering graduate studies.

It is hypothesized that, overall, adult students who enroll in online programs offered by for-profit virtual universities are less likely to perceive a significant difference between those institutions and traditional college and universities than are those who enroll in online programs offered by nonprofit providers. A secondary hypothesis is that for-profit programs are more likely to attract adults who exhibit an activity- or socio-improvement-orientation towards participation, whereas nonprofit programs are more likely to attract those seeking a specific career change or related goal. This project is intended to be a pilot study that provides initial information about these questions, so that more informed questions about these students may be studied during later phases.

## Research Questions

This study is designed to explore the following questions:

- RQ#1: What motives for participation, other than flexibility of location and time, exist among adult students who enroll in for-profit online education programs?
  - Generally speaking, for what reason do students enroll?
  - Which aspects of for-profit institutions do participants prefer over nonprofit institutions?
  - To what extent do adults perceive that for-profit programs make higher education possible by the removal of potential barriers to admission?
  - To what extent do participants perceive that they “fit” with the institution? With their fellow learners? From what information are these perceptions based?
- RQ#2: What barriers to participation at traditional colleges are perceived among adult students who enroll in for-profit distance education programs?
  - For what reasons do adults feel they may not “fit” at a traditional college? With other students? From what information are these perceptions based?
  - To what extent do participants find the traditional college admissions process unappealing or a barrier to application? Are there particular cognitive or non-cognitive admissions criteria that adults perceive as a barrier to entry?
- RQ#3: Generally speaking, do adults differentiate between for-profit and nonprofit institutions in the context of online programs?

- What are participants'/informants' different perceptions about the value of a credential from each type of institution?
- What are participants' different perceptions about what type of person attends each type of institution?
- What are the different perceptions about how instruction will take place at each type of institution? About the value of that instruction relative to one's own life?
- How do adults who enroll in nonprofit institutions differentiate between these types of institutions in a way that is different than those who enroll in for-profit institutions?
- RQ#4: How does an adult student's prior experience with higher education relate to their selection of a for-profit versus a nonprofit institution?

#### Definition of Terms

*Distance education* and *online education*, for the purposes of this study, are used interchangeably, except where explicitly indicated in cited material. An online education program is defined as an offering by any institution, public, private, or for profit, that (a) utilizes an internet-based modality as the primary information delivery system, (b) does not require students to meet in a physical classroom for at least 80% of instruction, and (c) consists of credit courses that are potentially a means to some end, such as a degree or certificate.

The United States government defines a *college* as “an institution of higher learning that offers undergraduate programs that lead to the bachelor's degree in the arts or sciences....the term “college” is also used in a general sense to refer to a

postsecondary institution” (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). In contrast, a *university* represents a broader mission and typically refers to the entire educational institution, including undergraduate colleges, graduate and professional schools, and research centers. These definitions are somewhat idiosyncratic to the United States; in Europe, for example, a college often refers to a trade or vocational school. When considering for-profit institutions, however, a problem is introduced in that suspect to non-existent accreditation practices have led some institutions to use these terms for marketing purposes rather than as representations of mission. Moreover, the amount and type of research produced within some distance education universities is called into question as these providers rarely employ dedicated faculty members. Therefore, for the purposes of this project, the terms university and college are used interchangeably. Community colleges and institutions focused on the provision of associate’s degrees are excluded from the scope of this study.

*A nonprofit institution* is defined as a public or private institution established for the purpose of education. It may operate in a cash-positive manner but does not exist for the purpose of profit generation. *Traditional academia* and *traditional colleges and universities* refer to public or private nonprofit institutions of postsecondary education.

*A for-profit institution* is defined as a public or private corporation that sells educational services to the public for the purpose of profit generation. This category includes vocational institutions and postsecondary certificate- and degree-granting institutions. For the purposes of this study, only those institutions offering graduate degree programs will be considered.

*A virtual university* is defined as a web-based environment which models the process of education. Such institutions may be nonprofit or for profit, and may have national accreditation through the Distance Education and Training Council, regional accreditation through one of the six GAAP-approved accreditation councils, accreditation through a non-GAAP-recognized institution, or no accreditation credentials.

*Continuing education* refers to open-enrollment courses and programs offered either through a traditional college or university, a corporation, a professional organization, or some other entity that serves niche educational, licensing, or accreditation needs in the professional community.

*Lifelong learning* refers to any formal or informal educational activity that occurs after the formal schooling process is completed.

*Adults* are defined as persons 25 years of age or older. No constraint is held on prior educational attainment.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will first review the theoretical framework established in the literature for adult student motivations to participate in higher education, including a discussion of the impact of the internet on academic participation decisions. The second section will consider the literature concerning barriers to participation, with the perceived remedies provided by online education reviewed specifically. The final section will discuss the place of the for-profit university within the modern educational landscape.

### Motives for Participation

Kegan (1994, as cited in Mezirow, 2000) argues that “the two greatest yearnings in human experience are to be included and to have a sense of agency” (p. 11). We want a place where others agree that we belong and to have a sense that we chose to be there. Taylor (2000) points out, however, that where adults once lived their lives in a single community and worked for one company, modern society has created more pressure to examine assumptions about self, others, and society. An increasingly turbulent job market is just one of the factors that remove previously established comfort and force adults to reflect more actively upon their lives. Questions such as “Am I in a job I really enjoy?” domino into deeper inquiry about whether life decisions made previously reflected values simply accepted during adolescence or out of necessity, or if they were purposely chosen by the individual. Taylor notes that this questioning may make adults feel vulnerable. Cangemi (1985) takes this point further and argues that specialization in a single

academic discipline or expertise in a single field provides no assurance of well-rounded growth and development, which may partially explain why adults seek out self actualizing academic activities at midlife.

Generally speaking, motivation is defined as the guiding force that guides, maintains, or directs behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000), and has been said to be driven largely by one's emotions (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). Within the academic context, Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) describe intrinsic motivation as an indication that a student's participation in a task is an end in and of itself, and extrinsic motivation as participation in a task as a means to some end. They assert that the interests driving extrinsic motivation often are "'caught' from external stimuli and 'held' only as long as the external stimuli are present" (p. 145). This type of interest might be displayed by a student who enrolls in a course in hopes of financial security or social acceptance. Students may react to extrinsically motivated activity with resentment or disinterest, or they may display willingness based on an inner acceptance of the value in that task (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In contrast, the interests driving intrinsic motivation are individual rather than situational, and tend to be relatively more stable over time (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007). An example of intrinsic motivation might be an adult who decides to continue studies towards their dream job after being forced to leave college several years ago. As older students are more likely to fit learning into their lives "in a more multidimensional way" (p. 142), it is possible that students may endorse different levels of both types of motivation at the same time (Pintrich, 2000).

### *Houle's Typology*

Almost a half-century ago, Houle (1961) put forth a typology categorizing the motivations for adult learning that arguably remains the single most influential study in

the area today. He identified three subgroups of motivational factors: goal orientation, activity orientation, and learner orientation to participation. At the risk of oversimplifying, these can roughly be described as enrollment to pursue a specific goal, enrollment for purposes that have little or no relation to the content, and enrollment for the sake of learning (Rezabek, 1999). A key point is that these categories may represent only a person's primary motivation for participation, and there may be other lower-level needs that are satisfied through participation and fall into one of the other categories. Many researchers have attempted to test Houle's typology and have developed other categorization schemes, but Boshier (1976), upon reviewing several of these, concluded that Houle's characterization scheme is elegant and makes subjective sense. These studies predominantly used some variant of the Educational Participation Scale or the Reasons for Educational Participation Scale.

Historically, adult participation in higher education has been viewed as primarily falling into the goal orientation category – those persons seeking work re-training or continuing education to further their careers, with an emphasis on practical, immediate-use skills rather than theoretical or academic knowledge. In recent years, however, studies have found that adult students are reporting with higher frequency that they enroll in postsecondary programs not for improved employability but general knowledge (Pusser et al., 2007). According to Houle's typology, these students could be characterized as having a learner orientation towards education: those who are curious, constant knowledge seekers and “possess a fundamental desire to know and grow through learning” (Cross, 1981, p. 83). The suggestion that they seek to grow through learning implies that these are persons seeking some level of self actualization. Cangemi (1985)

posits that movement towards self actualizing behavior is the purpose of higher education, and characterizes this as a contextual process consisting of two components: knowledge acquisition and interpersonal relationships. His study found that students increasingly view the purpose of postsecondary institutions as relating exclusively to the former, while faculty and administrators place greater importance on the latter.

In a meta-analysis of adult higher education participation studies, Cross (1981) found that “a surprising number of adults (over one-third) are frank to admit that escape is, for them, one reason for pursuing education” (p. 93). Cross describes these individuals as lacking other social outlets, which is a consideration that may take on increased importance when examining modern adult activity choices. In a landmark study, McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brashears (2006) concluded that there appears to have been a large social change over the past two decades regarding how connected individuals are to their community and how many confidantes they keep in their social network. They note that there has been a vast decline in the number of persons with whom people discuss matters of importance, and describe a full one-half of the American population as socially isolated or at significant risk for complete social isolation. Interestingly, they found that whereas higher levels of education used to be associated with a sharp decline in social isolation, that trend is much less evident today. This finding correlates with Levine and Cureton’s (1998) report that student affairs officers describe college students as loners more often than in the past. These trends suggest that adults may look for academic programs to fulfill both intellectual and emotional needs.

#### *Possible Future Selves*

While many adults undoubtedly enroll in college to achieve a specific professional goal, it seems that many adult learners enter academia also as a deliberate

means of realizing a new self-image. The notion of possible future selves is predicated on the notion that an individual's self-representation for the future will dictate their behavior in that domain (Leondari, 2007). Academic participation generally is perceived as a valid strategy by which to achieve life and career goals, and thus holds high perceived instrumentality. Jansen and Wildemeersch (1998) point out that this may be true to a fault, as society tends to have false assumptions that rewarding career opportunities always exist for those who are qualified. An important consideration in this is that self-image and value judgments are learned socially (Brookfield, 2000). Particularly in a modern era where consumerism often reflects an upscaling of lifestyle norms (Schor, 1999), exposure to information, role models, and peers often helps facilitate personalized imagery (Babineau & Packard, 2006). Thus, understanding the context in which attitudes are created is vital towards understanding of the chosen actions.

In their study of adult re-entry community college students, Babineau and Packard (2006) reviewed the notion that possible selves serve as motivational guides for adult students, contending that because adult participation in college is not easy the decision to do so must require some transformation in or at least substantive reflection upon identity. They identified four identity processes that students were openly pursuing through their education: (1) reclaim past, (2) reject past before constructing new, (3) construct new, and (4) expand current. The category representing the fewest number of participants (less than 12%) was "reclaim past." Babineau and Packard describe this group as learners who started college, put their plans on hold due to marriage, children, work, etc., and then at some later point in time decided to resume those plans. That this was the lowest frequency category is interesting, as this is a common descriptor of nontraditional

students. Another common descriptor, those wishing to expand upon their current knowledge/identity, also represented less than one-third of participants. This suggests that conventional wisdom about what nontraditional students are seeking to accomplish does not necessarily hold. The most common process described was “construct new.” Babineau and Packard describe this group as learners who previously attended college “but had unspecified career ideas about why they were in college” (p. 119). Tinto (1987) points to this unresolved uncertainty as a leading cause of the high college dropout rate. Moreover, some researchers suggest that these prior negative educational experiences carry over and create adult learning identities that are “contradictory, volatile, and fragile” (Crossan, Field, Gallacher, & Merrill, 2003, as cited in O’Donnell & Tobbell, 2007, p. 313), implying that previously established education identities necessarily play a role in new academic-seeking decisions.

#### *The Unique Appeal of Online Education*

Babineau and Packard (2006) point to several researchers who contend that adults tend to reevaluate their lives at midlife, and in doing so they tend to strive for continuity or consistency in identity. Cross and Markus (1994) assert that if something is novel or requires extensive structuring by the individual, they are less likely to make decisions that may lead to the alternative future self. Moreover, the most powerful predictor of adult participation in higher education is the presence and amount of previous participation (Anderson & Darkenwald, 1979), and as such it stands to reason that the *type* of institution a person once attended might play some role in re-entry decisions. For example, an adult who once attended a four-year university may have a difficult time imagining themselves continuing their education at a community college or at an institution with a majority population of traditional-age students. Virtual universities,

however, capitalize upon this notion and market specifically to working adults (Garrett, 2008). For those who did attend college previously, the fact that they actually have prior experience means that their past college-related selves are more developed in nature, and thus they may be more likely to build upon them (Ibarra, 1999, as cited in Babineau & Packard, 2006). It comes as little surprise, therefore, that the area of highest growth in online education is graduate education (Flower, 2003).

Perhaps the best place to look for psychological descriptors of those who are attracted to online education is in those who are the most versed in using online tools in a college setting – modern traditional undergraduates. Edmundson (2008) describes these students as nomads who “perpetually wish to be somewhere else, and a laptop reliably takes them there – if only in imagination” (para. 20). He posits that, to this group, to settle on a single decision is a letdown, while constantly moving and leaving open multiple possibilities brings about happiness. This may provide an interesting perspective on possible future self research, as the implication is that, as opposed to attempting to achieve a specific goal, activity is undertaken such as to open new possibilities. When examining adults who are searching for some change in their life, this certainly seems to be a valid consideration.

Recent studies, however, have found an inverse relationship between student age and preference for online coursework (Dabaj & Basak, 2008). Older adults are more likely to view the internet as a tool to accomplish a task, such as paying a bill or researching information (Emanuel et al., 2008), which suggests that older participants in online education may be more likely to have a goal-related orientation to learning. In contrast, those who grew up surrounded by digital media view the internet as just another

information receipt channel, and thus may be more likely to participate for other reasons. Younger adults are also more likely to desire to use the internet as part of any course because it provides some consistency with other aspects of their lives. In terms of evaluating potential academic programs, this relates to Cross and Markus's (1994) identification of a need for consistency when making life decisions. It seems reasonable to suppose, therefore, if a potential learner views an online program as being akin to an academic MySpace it may be less of a leap for them to opt for that form of participation versus a face-to-face program. This notion, however, does contrast Clark's (1994) finding that motivation to learn via a particular medium is more significantly influenced by self-efficacy perceptions than by the medium per se.

Robinson and Doverspike (2006) assert that a combination of positive attitudes, subjective norms towards online courses, and a high degree of perceived control leads to stronger intentions to enroll in online coursework. This combination of factors means that while "students' attitudes and subjective norms toward an online course may be relatively negative compared to their preference for a traditional course" (p. 67), the perceived ease of use and possible social and professional outcomes may outweigh that attitude. Their study was based upon the decision theory model set forth by Azjen (1991), who described attitudes and subjective norms as a means of creating intentions and, eventually, decisions. Here, it seems useful to consider Mezirow's (2000) argument that reflection takes place within a community, and it is through the process of reflecting upon not only our own assumptions and expectations (subjective reframing) but also those of others (objective reframing) that we create the set of information from which to draw in

decision making. For these reasons, marketing and the perceived social acceptability of online learning become key motivational considerations.

### *Impact of the Internet on Participation Decisions*

Unfortunately, very little research exists on the impact of the internet on institutional perceptions and academic decision making. In a recent marketing study, Adams and Eveland (2007) cite surveys that show potential students typically review three or four different web sites when ‘shopping’ for degree programs, and assert that web pages are a critical way to communicate ‘big idea’ concepts and help those potential students formulate an image of the organization and its services. Lending importance to this notion, Bers (1987) characterized the decision of nontraditional students to attend college and where to attend as occurring at the same time. For this reason there are some who suggest that admission departments need to devote one-third to one-half of their full admissions budget to the web site (*Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education*, 2007). In particular, the National Postsecondary Educational Cooperative (2007) found that a separate web site dedicated to adult students was an important information source for older students, particularly for those of middle-income.

Handel (2007), however, describes four-year college and university web resources for admissions procedure information geared towards adult and transfer students as vague to non-existent. This lack of information implies that the academic-seeking public has an increased likelihood of viewing higher education in the manner put forth to them by the online programs that do explicitly market via the internet, which Geiger (2004) describes as knowledge as a product to be purchased rather than an experience to be undertaken. Research has shown that online education is sometimes viewed as “an alternate,

abstracted, more intellectual world” (Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002, p. 352), and one that simply does not work as well for younger students (DiBiase & Rademacher, 2005). While non-traditional students now comprise the majority population in postsecondary education (Pusser et al., 2007), the ‘working adult’ component of online program marketing messages remains powerful (Garrett, 2008). Virtual universities that do not have a physical location are known to use pictures of academic-looking buildings on their web sites just as often as traditional institutions. Moreover, studies have found that nonprofit institutions generally do not use their web sites to leverage competitive advantages in accreditation and quality of education over for-profit institutions in language that is meaningful to potential students (Adams & Eveland, 2007). These trends may reinforce perceptions of virtual universities as not only a legitimate option, but one that serves adults only.

### Barriers to Participation

The notion of barriers (or deterrents) to participation is central in most theoretical formulations of participation in adult education, at least in part because it is useful in distinguishing the attitudes of participants from non-participants (Valentine & Darkenwald, 1990). Among these, Cross’s (1981) model of *situational*, *institutional*, and *dispositional* barriers to adult participation in higher education is well-established and used extensively throughout distance education research. This project would be well served to use this model as a template through which to explore these issues.

#### *Situational Factors*

Situational factors are described as access barriers such as family, work, social commitments, and geographic distance, and, unsurprisingly, are commonly referenced in the majority of studies. Convenience – defined as the time and day that preferred courses

are offered – frequently has been noted as the top college selection criterion for adult students, followed by location (Levine & Cureton, 1998; National Postsecondary Educational Cooperative, 2007). There is evidence to suggest, however, that the situational circumstances of different types of students have blurred and may no longer be a significant point of differentiation. The overwhelming majority of two- and four-year college students are over 25 years of age. Over one-half are financially independent and attend school part-time; many work part-time while enrolled and are responsible for dependents of their own (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002). Many of the characteristics used to describe nontraditional students – delayed college enrollment, need for financial aid, employment more than 20 hours per week – can now be used to describe the majority of college students. For these reasons, nonacademic factors increasingly affect the lives of younger students in the same manner as nontraditional adult learners (Pusser et al., 2007).

Flexibility often is cited as the hallmark of online coursework, as the nature of those courses typically allows students to participate not only from any location, but at a schedule that meets their individual needs. In a recent study of graduate students, Braun (2007) refers to online education as “a sort of refuge and rescue for some students” (p. 64), and participants in his study agreed that the flexibility of an online course and the ability to do coursework at home were significant reasons for opting for that form of participation over a hybrid option of the same program. In an empirical study, however, Kim (2004) found that online program participants who cited no real time- or place-bound constraint offered these same reasons as their primary motivation to initiate participation. Emphasizing the point that place-bound students are not the only

individuals enrolling in online education, Carnevale (2007b) reports that only 27% of online students live in a different geographic area than the institution offering the program in which they are enrolled. Pentina and Neeley (2007) argue that online students are no more pressed for time and in need of flexibility than regular daytime students, and that “promotions of “anytime-anyplace” may not be the decisive argument in students’ choice of online education” (p. 61). Moreover, Garrett (2008) posits that so many schools are now offering online programs that the “flexibility/convenience/adult learner message has become commoditized” (para. 3). These findings emphasize the need to look beyond situational factors when examining the reasons students enroll in online education.

### *Institutional Factors*

Institutional barriers refer to the procedures and perceptions put in place by institutions that prohibit participation, both those that are set intentionally and unwittingly (Rezabek, 1999). For instance, the college admissions process often is described as a tense, even fearful experience (Hoover, 2007). Adult learners in particular have something real to lose in the classroom, and put their self-esteem and ego on the line when they try out new academic behavior (Zemke & Zemke, 1984). Applications for admission to a nonprofit college or university program typically are due at least six months prior to the anticipated start date. Weber and Chapman (2004), however, argue that “any delay in the outcome of a decision must necessarily entail uncertainty about what the outcome will actually be” (p. 105). This consideration may very well contribute to the appeal of for-profit programs, as admission decisions often are made the same day a student applies (Tierney, 2007). Furthermore, Geiger (2004) describes how, by keeping courses short, convenient, and career-focused, these institutions explicitly minimize the

opportunity cost for potential students, making the decision to apply easier. Marketing studies have confirmed this as a point of differentiation, finding that students in traditional face-to-face programs have higher perceptions of performance and financial risk than do students enrolled in online degree programs (Pentina & Neeley, 2007).

This category also may include factors such as the perceived academic and social fit of the student with the institution, a concept popularized by Tinto (1987) and used frequently throughout educational persistence research. A 2007 report from the National Postsecondary Educational Cooperative reinforces the continuing importance of this criterion, finding that students choose colleges “with campus cultures and student bodies that are perceived to match their own self-image of where they belong along both sociodemographic and academic dimensions” (p. 13). Within the context of application to a traditional college or university, Barton, Ariail, and Smith (2004) assert that the act of writing a statement of purpose or acquiring letters of recommendation forces applicants to construct a relevant connection between their personal self and their perception of the institution or program. It perhaps comes as little surprise, therefore, that several online education providers require applicants to submit a work history as the primary component of their application package (Gose, 2007), as it establishes an obvious and relevant connection to the ‘working adult’ message they project. This begs into question whether the intentionally open-ended missions of traditional colleges and universities serve as an institutional barrier.

Gose (2006) provides an intriguing account of using internet search engines to locate online degree programs and then following through as a prospective student to determine not only how quickly he would hear from a real person, but whether that

person appeared to be a sales representative or a traditional admissions counselor. His investigation was limited to nonprofit institutions, though the findings may provide some insight for for-profit institution recruitment practices; no studies could be located that investigated the difference in recruitment practices between different types of institutions, nor could any be located that examined whether students can tell or care about the difference. Of the six institutions contacted, only one representative worked at a traditional university campus. The others were “enrollment advisors,” most of whom worked in Florida for web and recruitment service companies. Gose describes these persons as reading in part from a script and unable to answer specific questions about access to faculty and calendar start dates. Responses to all initial inquiries came via either phone call or email within 24 hours. Further observations include that all representatives except the one from the traditional university quoted prices as per credit hour, “perhaps in an attempt to make them sound more affordable.” The traditional university representative also was the only person to suggest that graduate entrance examination scores would be used as part of a competitive admissions process.

### *Students vs. Consumers*

Flower (2003) contends that college today is an egalitarian enterprise, perceived by students not as a privilege but as a right. “Terms such as *providers* and *consumers* would have seemed strange, if not anathema even a decade ago” (Tierney, 2007, p. 17), but are common in the postsecondary program planning vernacular today. As a result of this attitude, students approach enrollment decisions much like they would any other consumer transaction. Discussing the results from a survey of nontraditional students, Levine and Cureton (1998) analogize the relationship students want with a college to that

they want with a bank, with the focus being on convenience, quality, service, and cost. They argue that the trend over the past decade of students spending less time living and socializing on traditional campuses has led to those institutions being viewed as places where the principal activity is instruction. “Student organizations have limited appeal, and social life has moved off-campus. A college degree, it seems, can mean more to students than college itself” (Levine & Cureton, n.d., as cited in Flower, 2003, p. 165). Particularly for adult students who may be entering college for the second time as a means of improving their skills and knowledge (or, more likely, their resume) in order to remain competitive in the workforce, this consideration becomes particularly salient. This presents an interesting conundrum, however, as the institutions that seem to be most admired by the general public -- nonprofit research universities -- focus their resources on providing increased services for full-time, traditional students. Such practices can result in misconceptions about who might or should attend college (Tierney, 2007).

Flower (2003) further argues that these attitudes have brought “a marketplace orientation to the campus,” where a professor may be viewed as a “vendor for his or her particular skills and knowhow, which students perceive themselves to be purchasing” (p. 12). Tierney (2007) notes that students in traditional face-to-face coursework increasingly demand to know why teaching assistants and not full professors are the ones in charge of instruction. Interestingly, some of the larger virtual universities recruit world-class researchers to develop course materials and record lectures, and then pass off the entirety of mediation of instruction and evaluation of student learning to an array of instructional designers and facilitators (Brabazon, 2002; Paulson, 2002). Thus, while some potential enrollees may perceive that they will have access to world-class knowledge in virtual

university programs, the actual context in which it is delivered denies access to the persons actually possessing that knowledge. While some adults seem to understand upon registration that there may not be an instructor (Kim, 2004), others have pointed to this misconception as a contributing factor to attrition (Clay, Roland, & Packard, 2008). This general lack of interaction between students and instructors is corroborated by Payne, Appel, Smith, and Hoofnagle's (2006) finding that distance education students perceive that their instructors would not be able to provide appropriate reference letters for potential employers because the only opinion they likely have of them is a grade.

### *Value of Online Credentials*

Marketing studies have confirmed that the most important factor that would convince individuals to enroll in online programs is a sense of the value of the degree ("Rising internet in online education," 2006). Levine and Cureton (1998) report that although students "do not believe that a college education provides a money-back guarantee of future success, they feel that without one, a good job is impossible to obtain" (p. 10). Some researchers assert that employers are becoming more accepting of online credentials (Howell, Williams, & Lindsay, 2003; Mulrean, 2005), while many others argue that the degrees students earn online are not as marketable as those earned via traditional means (Bejerano, 2008). Carnevale (2007a) reports that hiring managers feel applicants with online degrees may lack communication skills and "that real-life, problem-solving, pressure-is-on type of experience" (p. A29). He also notes that this may be a factor of the industry or the hiring manager's background, as some employers may positively view online education as an environment that requires an individual to be self-motivated and determined. This is perhaps a vital consideration for the future, as,

increasingly, that hiring manager may possess an online degree themselves. Some employers suggest that how a certificate or degree was earned may not be significant for entry-level positions, but that, at least in some professions, classroom experience is critical to proper training and the lack of that experience may begin to show itself as a deficiency once promotions and managerial-level positions are considered (Adams & Eveland, 2007). Overall, the general consensus seems to suggest that online degree holders are at a disadvantage when seeking employment.

This bias appears to be more important within traditional academia. Adams and DeFleur (2004) found that, all other credentials being equal, a graduate school applicant who had earned their bachelors degree online was less likely to be recommended for admission. Only 7% of administrators at public institutions and eleven percent at private institutions indicated that they would be willing to consider admission for such applicants. Adams and DeFleur (2005) later reviewed the acceptability of doctoral degrees earned online as a credential for obtaining a faculty position and found that 98% of search committee chairs at both public and private nonprofit institutions preferred candidates with a degree earned via traditional face-to-face methods as opposed to comparable candidates with an online degree. The concerns cited included the potential for scholastic dishonesty in online coursework, general disbelief that graduate-level courses could be taught online, a perceived lack of appropriate mentoring, and distrust for the potential collegiality of individuals who were unused to the social interactions in a university environment. Degrees earned by completing courses online were perceived as not of sufficient rigor, and administrators described those candidates as “the ones that get thrown out right away” (p. 83).

Adams and Eveland (2007) assert that it is important to note that the reputation of the granting institutions makes a difference in whether the degree is perceived as acceptable. For individuals seeking to add a credential to their resume, a reputation or brand affiliation undoubtedly is a consideration. Some refer to this as an idea “tied up emotionally in people’s minds...about their own status and identity,” (Rolfe, 2003, p. 39) that “tells the world who you are and what you stand for” (Kurz, Scannell, & Veeder, 2008, p. 31). This may be an important point of differentiation between perceptions of for-profit and non-profit institutions. Carnevale (2007a) reports that “if people are familiar with the institution, they are not going to look at how the degree was obtained,” and the real issue arises “when a student attends a university that is only known for online education” (p. A28). Furthermore, he notes that graduates of online programs from traditional colleges can apply for jobs without an employer ever realizing that their coursework was completed online. Within academia, Adams and DeFleur (2005) found that postsecondary administrators at traditional institutions have reservations about the quality of the faculty teaching at for-profit institutions, as those institutions “will be looking for the cheapest way to deliver the product” (p. 80).

Overall, Pentina and Neeley (2007) assert that the greatest difference between online and traditional students is their perception of risk. Their findings, however, suggest that online programs are perceived as the higher risk environment. Students who select traditional face-to-face programs may perceive an equivalent online program as unsatisfactory towards fulfilling their learning objectives or not being worth the time and tuition. This implies not only a concern for the quality of the course but the outcome that will be received by participation, which, given the general lack of marketability of online

degrees, certainly seems valid. This disparity may also indicate that students with different motivations for participation may have different perceptions of what constitutes risk-taking educational behavior.

### *Dispositional Factors*

Dispositional factors represent the psychological and interpersonal barriers to participation. Qureshi, Morton, and Antosz (2002) suggest that online programs may cater to students who lack the self-confidence to enroll at a traditional campus. Generally speaking, most adult students have feelings of inadequacy or intimidation upon returning to college (Keith, 2007). Richardson and King (1998) had similar conclusions, finding that negative stereotypes about the learning ability of adults seem to be shared by a good many adult learners themselves. They describe this lack of self-confidence as resulting in a collective level of anxiety among adult students, and note that “although this scarcely counts as demonstrating the validity of those stereotypes, it could lead adult students to behave in ways that tend to confirm those stereotypes. In other words, this situation might well constitute a self-fulfilling prophecy” (p. 70).

Given the ‘second chance’ perceptions associated with distance education, it stands to reason that internal attribution, such as one’s own perceived self-efficacy for learning, may play a significant role in those students’ choice of higher education program and institution. Indeed, many students enroll in online courses because they believe they will be easier (Adams & Eveland, 2006; Bejerano, 2008). While stopping short of assigning causality, Powell and Keen (2006) address the perception that distance education is at best a substitute for ‘the Real Thing’ and assert that if it is in fact a second choice to the traditional, romanticized view of education, by implication it guarantees a

perception of inferiority. This view is corroborated by administrators who argue that the perception of inferiority must be considered as part of university-level distance education program planning (Kleiber, 1996), as well as the sheer volume of studies attempting to discover if the quality of wholly online education matches that of a traditional classroom (Young, 2000).

Carney-Crompton and Tan (2002) suggest that adult students self-select to participate in higher education by virtue of their high self-efficacy, capacity to commit to a long-term college program, and strong intrinsic motivation. Distance education, however, would seem to cater to persons who do not necessarily fit this model. Numerous past studies on learner attrition in distance education suggest a general lack of intrinsic motivation to be the major contributing cause (Bonk, 2002; Visser, Plomp, Amirault, & Kuiper, 2002; Zvacek, 1991). Qureshi, Morton, and Antosz (2002) hypothesized that online education may appear less stressful to participate in and better organized as compared to the face-to-face mode; among their suggestions for future research was a more thorough examination of student motivation to initiate that includes such constructs as personality types, attribution theory, and self-efficacy notions. These suggestions are reasonable, as online education may uniquely accommodate certain students who feel uncomfortable in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment. While online coursework can seem a very “cold” emotional climate for some learners, such as extroverts who crave the “theater” of people in a room arguing, clarifying, disagreeing, and encouraging each other in learning (Brookfield, 2006), it can prove an ideal home for more introverted students who prefer the feeling of distance from the lecturer and the absence of company, and overall learn well in this setting (Offir, Bezalel, & Barth, 2007).

Finally, Levine and Cureton (1998) report that students today, relative to previous generations, generally “fear intimacy in relationships; withdrawal is easier and less dangerous than engagement” (p. 11). Even traditional on-campus students are described more often as “living their lives in ways that allow them to avoid venturing out if they so choose” (p. 13). This provides context to the findings of McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Brasears (2006) regarding the decline of close ties in an individual’s social network, and suggests that whereas distance education used to be perceived as a way of obtaining access to a class, it now may be perceived, at least in part, as a way of avoiding a classroom (Carnevale, 2007b).

#### *Other Factors*

Darkenwald and Merriam (1982) propose *informational barriers* as a fourth category in Cross’s typology. These barriers refer to the lack of information regarding programs, their content, and the processes and procedures associated with enrollment. To a large degree, this is a variation of institutional barriers, as it reflects the problems an institution may have in marketing programs for adults within an organization designed to support the needs of traditional students. For traditional colleges and universities that view online programs as an added revenue stream and outreach mechanism, however, this seems to represent a unique and important factor for consideration. Several authors make the argument that, in the Internet age, the problem is not so much one of access to information about programs as it is the language through which that information is presented. Adams and Eveland (2007) assert that students interested in online programming represent a fundamentally different market segment than the one which whom most institutions are accustomed to interacting, and should critically examine all communications material accordingly. Mabry and Hardin (1987) argue that because adult

learners lack recent experience in the classroom and understanding of college routines, the problem for them may be that “everything from the vocabulary to the administrative structure of the academic environment is new and foreign” (p. 3).

Also included in this category is information about support services offered by the institution. As a whole, adult students do not have the academic network that exists for traditional students. They are less likely to seek assistance from faculty, and generally do not have as wide or as strong a network of classmates to call upon for advice or assistance (Mabry & Hardin, 1989). Moreover, unlike face-to-face programs, online students typically do not interface with advisors. Clay, Roland, and Packard (2008) argue that the adjustment required to adapt to the online environment goes beyond simply the academic, as many students, despite department efforts to provide information, “simply do not understand that they would never see an instructor; that the course would be time consuming and require time management; and that they would have to take proctored exams” (p. 97). This correlates with research indicating, for face-to-face courses, the syllabus is the largest single determining variable towards the success and reaction to a course (Wasley, 2008), and suggests that information presented on program web sites for prospective students serves purposes that extend far beyond marketing and administration.

#### *The Implications of Persistence Data*

Perhaps the most telling source of factors affecting online program enrollment is the high dropout rate. Some studies have found that up to 70% of students who begin online programs do not finish them (Strickland, 2008). One possible explanation for this is that students have misconceptions about the experience. Marketing studies have

confirmed that students use both their desired and predicted experiences to judge the actual service received (Prugsamatz, Heaney, & Alpert, 2008), implying that there may be both emotional and rational elements to consider. Bers (1987) interviewed nontraditional students who reported that they felt unprepared for and overwhelmed by the amount and kind of academic work required. In studies specific to online programs, Nash (2005) and Mason (2006) found workload to be the most frequent student complaint. Reinforcing this point, Lorenzetti (2005) asserts that adult students in particular are only interested in the minimum requirements to pass a course. She questions whether this is a lack of ability, poor organization, or simply a lack of motivation: “somehow there lurks a suspicion that lack of time has become a crutch, a convenient scapegoat for avoiding the effort involved in engaging with learning” (p. 125). It is known that the ability to self-direct learning is a factor valued by adult learners (Ausburn, 2004) and a skill required for success in online programs (Bonk, 2002). The evidence suggests, however, that online instruction frequently does not encourage self-direction (Kim, 2004). It seems, therefore, that while students may enroll in online programs to avoid academic rigor, they may discover that a different kind of rigor is required to succeed.

Bonk and Dennen (2003) argue that responding to the individual motivational needs of learners is difficult in online programs due to the general lack of interactivity. Morris, Finnegan, and Wu (2005) and Tello (n.d., as cited in *Instructional Interaction: Key to Student Persistence?* 2004) both suggest that the use and frequency of use of interactive communication tools accounts for approximately one-third of the variance in long-term online course persistence rates. Tello found that asynchronous discussion

boards contributed not only to student desires for convenient participation but also to a student's ability to organize information visually. He suggests that courses that utilize synchronous chat and email may not be as effective, at least in part, because those modes of communication scatter information into discrete bits that are not tied to the context of the whole. It stands to reason, therefore, that students who participate in asynchronous discussion may be more successful for both pedagogical and practical reasons, may leave with more positive attitudes about those courses, and thus may be more likely to participate in other online courses. This reinforces the importance of considering learner motivation as a primary component of online program planning and instructional design (Bonk, 2002).

A final factor contributing to persistence to be discussed here is the ability of instructors to shift to the online environment successfully. In their quantitative study on trends in teaching online, Kim and Bonk (2006) found that facilitation and moderating skills are considered most important in online courses, with subject matter expertise coming in second. Instructors report that students are evaluating them more purely on structure and how quickly and extensively they provide feedback (Liu, Kim, Bonk, & Magjuka, 2007). Easton (2003) observes that because online courses are so well suited for collaborative learning, the instructor frequently plays an essential social role, with responsibilities including building a learning community, helping students work in groups, and establishing a culture for productive interaction. Brabazon (2002) takes role distinctions further and suggests that all of the 'secondary' roles historically taken on a teacher – mentor, judge, referee, ego-booster, reference library – perhaps become more pronounced by default in online courses. Given the immense number of responsibilities

that fall on the shoulders of an online instructor, Grosjean and Sork (2007) liken the process of faculty recruitment to a courtship ritual and argue that not all brick-and-mortar instructors are capable of making the transition to the virtual classroom, nor should they be forced to do so. This may be a key point of differentiation for institutions that specialize in online education, as these factors are all integral components of hiring and evaluation practices.

### Nonprofit vs. For-Profit Programs

Several researchers have found that older learners are more likely than younger, less well-established adults to select a program that departs from the traditional (Cross, 1981; Novak & Mather, 2007). As there appears to be an inverse relationship between student age and preference for online coursework (Dajab & Basak, 2008), however, it may be that “traditional,” at least within this context, may relate more to perceptions of nonprofit versus for-profit institutions. In other words, an older adult may not care about the difference so long as they get what they want. Unfortunately there exists a paucity of research on whether potential learners understand or care about the difference between nonprofit and for-profit institutions. In the only literature located on the subject, Abbou (2008) concluded that most people do not know about the financial status of providers, and, in the absence of that information, make decisions based on their social networks and prior familiarity with a given provider. The implications of this in light of increased internet-based social networking and increasing advertising dollars from for-profit organizations is perhaps self-evident.

### *The Rise of the For-Profit University*

For-profit colleges and universities are the fastest-growing segment in postsecondary education. Until recently very little has been known about these

organizations and their impact, and even less has been known about their students as less than half of these organizations do not collect or report enrollment data (Epper & Garn, 2004). Those that do, however, are difficult to ignore. In 2004 the University of Phoenix online campus became the college with the largest enrollment in the country; in fall 2005 total enrollment was reported at over 117,000 students, more than double the enrollment of the second highest school on the list (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). The exponential growth in this area has drawn public focus to *diploma mills*, defined as unaccredited entities offering college credit for little or no academic work (*Distance Education Report*, 2006). These organizations hurt legitimate distance education by association and have led to increased inquiry into for-profit institution accreditation claims and sales practices. The Apollo Group, Inc., the parent company of the University of Phoenix, recently lost a lawsuit in which the company was found to have kept secret from shareholders a 2004 U.S. Department of Education report that criticized the university's practice of offering incentive pay to admission counselors that secured enrollments (Blumenstyk, 2008). Kinser (2005) is careful to warn, however, that the overall lack of information about for-profit organizations has inappropriately resulted in the generalization of institutional case studies to the entire sector. While the University of Phoenix provides a useful example for inquiry, it is not representative of the for-profit sector as a whole.

Tierney (2007) views for-profit colleges and universities as simply the most recent manifestation of the continuing evolution of higher education institutions. As he describes, colleges were originally designed to provide religious education to the wealthy. The large public land-grant universities of the early nineteenth century

developed to address the growing call of working class citizens for access to higher education. At that time, “a student attended to become cultivated and well-rounded; only later in the nineteenth century did a student begin to go to college to train for a profession, and, still later, a job” (p. 137). It was from these needs that state colleges and community college systems grew into prominence, each serving a new category of students. Distance education had existed in various forms throughout this time, but typically consisted of programs less than one year in duration and the end point, if any, was a vocational certificate, not an academic degree (Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998b).

The timing of the rise of online education and corporate for-profit organizations is described in the literature as largely coincidental (Breneman, 2005). The growing ubiquity of computer use throughout the 1990’s and the development of course management software resulted in the internet becoming the leading resource in delivering distance education (Holloman & Warren, 2005). Virtual colleges and universities were created amid the high-tech boom of the mid-to-late 1990s (Epper & Garn, 2004), built by entrepreneurs who recognized that an increasing proportion of both white- and blue-collar job holders had completed some education and were the ones most likely to invest in further education over the course of their working lives (Tierney, 2007). Indeed, most proponents of online education do not advocate it over traditional instruction; rather, they view it as “a vehicle that can support students who typically may not have considered continuing their education” (Braun, 2007, p. 85). As public financial support of higher education became more diluted across a larger number of students, investment and venture capital enthusiasm for the internet and its applications across the knowledge

economy increased (Breneman, 2005). As traditional institutions found themselves pressured to provide continued resources to traditional undergraduates, for-profit institutions represented an entrepreneurial way of responding to the growing need of postsecondary-level education for adults. Breneman argues that the dot-com bust leveled the playing field somewhat in this area and, in recent years, economic pressures have forced all institutions – public nonprofit, private nonprofit, and for profit – to behave more aggressively in the competition for financial resources and for students.

### *The Role of Target Marketing*

With this increased competition among providers, marketing has become an essential element of modern program planning (Cafferella, 2002). Historically, information about potential higher education opportunities has been a one-way proposition; pamphlets, television, radio, and even word-of-mouth all *push* information at us. The web has fundamentally changed how people receive information because it is two-way, both push and pull (Brown, 2000). This is important because of the simple truth that the more people know about available opportunities, the more they will participate (Cross, 1981). As private entities, for-profit institutions have access to different types of funding and thus can support this function on a unique scale. One-half of for-profit education groups are publically traded, with the largest spending hundreds of millions of dollars on sales and advertising (Tierney, 2007). One report estimates the monthly advertising spending of the Apollo Group, Inc. as \$19.7 million (“For Profit Boom Continues, Despite Enrollment Shifts”, 2006), and in 2006 they were identified as the seventh-largest online advertiser across all industries, spending more than Dell Computers and General Motors (Goldenstyk, 2006). This not only speaks to the size of

the potential market of adult learners, but also reinforces that, as a for-profit business, those advertising dollars are being supported by savvy and well-researched marketing strategies.

The use of target marketing by these organizations may be central to this analysis, as most traditional colleges and universities employ a single broad-based mass marketing strategy to attract potential students, only interacting with those who apply and are admitted (Lewison & Hawes, 2007). In contrast, for-profit institutions differentiate their product as being specifically for working adults (Garrett, 2008). Organizations typically employ this strategy when they believe potential consumers care more about specific features rather than simply the lowest price (Porter, 1980). Lewison and Hawes (2007) assert that, while demographics historically have been popular segmentation bases for good reason, the notion of students as individuals has become a trend that demands more carefully crafted market segmentation strategies. They suggest a behavioral segmentation scheme that emphasizes consumer motivation. Their conceptual model identifies three types of educational buyers: (1) quality buyers who want the best and are willing and able to pay, (2) value buyers who look at quality-to-price ratios, and (3) economy buyers who will accept marginal quality if price and convenience needs are met. These groups are then placed against four motivational types of learners, which roughly correspond to those identified in Houle's typology: (1) career learners seeking increased compensation, career satisfaction, or social class advancement, (2) socio-improvement learners primarily seeking self-actualization, (3) leisure-learners who view education as recreation, and (4) ambivalent learners whose primary motivation for participation is "to satisfy someone else, to identify possible interests, to gain direction, or to avoid other life experiences" (p.

18). This framework may prove useful when examining the motivational considerations of both for-profit and online program enrollees versus those at traditional institutions. For instance, for-profit programs geared towards career relevancy may do a better job of attracting career learners who are looking for applied knowledge. Likewise, an ambivalent learner with more extrinsic motivation to participate may enroll in either a for-profit or nonprofit online course in order to keep up some sort of appearance with minimal personal effort.

One does not have to look hard to find critics of virtual universities. Flower (2003) hits the nail on the head and asserts that criticism from traditional campuses exists because for-profit organizations “go against the grain of what colleges and universities have always been” (p. 176). Courturier (2005) argues that the influx of for-profit and online universities and the subsequent competition among all higher education providers is eroding the social contract between higher education and the public, pushing institutions to focus on self-interest rather than a commitment to serving public needs. Often, technology in general is given blame, with some arguing that the speed at which academics are expected to work is detracting from the reflective dimension inherent to quality scholarship (Young, 2005). Brabazon (2002) contends that too many people confuse the implementation of new software with learning, with online education often being a poor institutional excuse for crowd control. Geiger (2004) argues, for the segment of the educational consumer market seeking career-enhancing credentials, these institutions may provide “a credible service to clientele that are not well served by traditional institutions,” but also expresses concern “they can also be guilty of commodifying, or trivializing, knowledge, and of pedaling credentials of dubious worth”

(p. 9). Geiger's particular concern is that as these institutions grow and seek new markets in which to expand, they are not confining their model to the working adult market niche. This blurring of the lines between nonprofit and for-profit education, therefore, may be the primary point of importance for this study.

### Summary

It is evident from the literature that the pressures of modern society and economy are a major source of discontent for adults and act as a trigger for academic participation. Individuals create images for their possible future self and use academia as a conduit through which to attain that image. Reasons for participation can range from attainment of specific career goals to alleviating loneliness. What remains unclear, however, is how internet use generally affects adult perceptions of higher education and their participation decisions.

There is a bevy of evidence to suggest that the situational factors that formerly served as unique barriers to adults participating in higher education now apply for the majority of college-seeking students, implying that consideration of institutional and dispositional barriers may take on increased importance. Chief among institutional barriers is the growing demand of students to be treated as customers. Adults in particular, because they have a frame of reference and generally are more aware of how their money and time is spent, want to see convenience and value in all aspects of a college experience. Online-specific providers successfully limit some informational barriers to participation because they do not have the concurrent burden of supporting face-to-face instruction; their web sites and the instructors that comprise their faculty reflect this difference. Also, findings have shown that individuals tend to select

institutions which most closely reflect their own self-image. Non-traditional students, however, are more inclined to be intimidated by or have low self-efficacy for academics, which may account for some of the appeal of distance education.

The concurrent rise of for-profit institutions within the education landscape and online education as a legitimate method of instruction has been described as largely coincidental, although each clearly has been affected by the other. Because of their financial and organizational structures, for-profit institutions are able to be more entrepreneurial in responding to the growing demand for higher education among adults. The growing ubiquity of degrees earned online has drawn new focus from nonprofit providers to these institutions, with many concerned about the business and social implications of their continual growth and acceptance within society, the costs to quality scholarship, and possible negative effects on credentials earned from traditional providers.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This primarily phenomenological study also used mixed methods in the form of descriptive statistics in an attempt to (a) establish general adult perceptions about for-profit versus nonprofit academic institutions, (b) determine which institutional and informational factors play the most significant role in adults' decisions to choose online programs offered by for-profit institutions over those from nonprofit institutions, (c) determine the extent to which social or psychological fit with an institution factors into those decisions, and (d) determine if the motivational construct of participants varies between types of institution. This chapter discusses the rationale for each method of inquiry, the research procedures, development of the research instruments, and methods of data collection and analysis.

#### Selection of Inquiry Method

As an initial inquiry, a descriptive study was appropriate prior to embarking on any further detailed analysis of the component factors and their interrelationships (Fraenkel, 2006). Also, the research questions represent practical problems for traditional colleges and universities attempting to implement online programming. Thus, a mixed methods approach was selected in the hope that diverse forms of data may best inform the problem (Fraenkel, 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003).

### *Quantitative Research*

Quantitative research operates under the assumption of objectivity, and that reality can be discovered through rational observation (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Fraenkel (2006) characterizes this form of research as useful when attempting to establish relationships between variables or explain the causes of those relationships. In particular, survey research is ideal when one wishes to obtain “data to determine specific characteristics of a group” (p. 12) that may be generalized across a population. Also, survey methods are useful in that they can provide a large amount of information across a large sample size with relative ease. As described by Gary and Airasian (2003), descriptive statistics allow the researcher a meaningful way to describe many pieces of data with relatively few indices.

The quantitative portion of this study consisted of a brief questionnaire that asked participants to describe their perceptions regarding programs offered by various postsecondary education providers. The goal was that collected data would provide a framework of descriptors regarding both general public and current (or recent) learner perceptions about each type of institution. The inclusion of a limited number of open-ended question meant that some small amount of qualitative data were collected within this portion of the study.

A limitation of quantitative research is that some of the contextual nuance that drives participants’ responses may not be adequately captured. Speaking directly to typologies of deterrents to participation that are based upon quantitative study, Valentine and Darkenwald (1990) assert that the heuristic value of such data for program planning is obvious, but that “the ultimate value of the work is largely unrealized, in that it leaves

the dimensions ‘hanging in the air’ and fails to re-anchor the derived dimensions back into the population of potential learners that provided that data” (p. 30). Likewise, Darkenwald and Hayes (1988) argue that attitude scales are sometimes poor predictors of behavior for continuing education. This was the primary argument supporting the inclusion of qualitative methods for this study.

### *Qualitative Research*

Qualitative research is grounded in the notion that “the world is made up of multiple realities, socially constructed by different individual views of the same situation” (Fraenkel, 2006, p. 15). Such research self-consciously includes the experience of the researcher, who collects and uses a variety of empirical materials to make connections among lived experience, larger social and cultural structures, and the problem at hand (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). Creswell (2003) describes five forms of qualitative inquiry: narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case study. While any of these approaches plausibly could have been used to achieve the goal of this project, phenomenology made the most general sense. Creswell defines this form of inquiry as one which “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 57), and allows researchers to discover the essence of a behavior. Similarly, Holstein and Gubrium (1998) note that the relationship between perception and the objects of the perception is not passive; as such, phenomenological methods take the view that “human consciousness actively constitutes the objects of experience” (p. 138).

The qualitative component of this study consisted of semi-structured interviews with current or former online program participants from each type of institution. This was

driven by the notion that meaningful insight could be gathered through direct conversation with individuals who actually have made such participation decisions. Individual interviews were selected over a focus group interview because individuals may be uncomfortable discussing their personal reasons for choosing a particular institution among a group of strangers; in other words, the interaction among participants was unlikely to yield the best information (Creswell, 2003). Likewise, it was acknowledged that individuals may not wish to go on record regarding potentially difficult aspects of their lives. While situational factors affecting participation were not the focus of this study, they were discussed during interviews as a means of generating a more comfortable atmosphere for participants regarding their reasons for attending college.

A limitation of this approach is that the resulting data may be so contextually unique to the individual that generalization across a broader population is not feasible (Fraenkel, 2006). A frequent criticism of phenomenological study is that results are easily influenced by the personal biases of the researcher, compromising the validity of the data. Furthermore, researchers often are unable to verify the truth of collected statements (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). These factors provided further support for the mixed methods approach.

#### Procedures

The researcher acted as the primary developer and implementer of this study. As planned, the project took place over the course of approximately six months. Delays were encountered due to the extensive amount of time it took to secure and schedule interviews, although the time required was accommodated through pre-project

contingency planning. In the interest of not extending participation beyond a period that would prohibit consent, attempts were made to hold the initial contact-to-interview period as tightly as possible.

The estimated cost for this study was \$120 to \$250. The cost of a basic mp3-type audio recorder is \$100; the researcher already was in possession of such a tool, so this cost was negated. Twenty dollars per month was allotted for the cost of survey hosted by *Survey Monkey*. In the period immediately preceding data collection, however, the availability of the *mrInterview* tool through the university was brought to the researcher's attention. While use of this tool did add to the project timeline, cost of use was zero as the researcher is a student within the College of Education, which was the ultimate decision criterion for use of this instrument. Finally, subjects were recruited without monetary remuneration. As will be discussed later in this report, this approach was not as successful as intended.

#### *Bias control*

Creswell (2003) cautions that researchers need to understand in what ways their own personal biases and understandings are reflected in the study. In this case, it should be noted that my background likely introduced bias in several ways. At the time of data collection I was enrolled as a graduate student at a nonprofit institution and had not considered any for-profit alternatives. In a former university-level appointment, I spent several years working with students enrolled in an online degree program at a nonprofit institution; a few of the associated faculty members also provided content for similar for-profit programs. For these reasons I likely am more optimistic than the general academic community regarding the potential efficacy of online learning. As part of my current

appointment, I hire instructors to teach online courses and receive several applications from graduates of virtual universities every week; these applications, largely, are ignored. Although this relates primarily to the credentialing requirements of the institution, the supporting rationale for rejection often extends beyond simply from where they received their degree. My awareness of participation in for-profit programs at the undergraduate level is limited to secondhand knowledge.

Several individuals were asked to review survey and interview questions prior to distribution to evaluate for possible perception bias. Likewise, faculty guidance was sought throughout the data analysis process, particularly for the qualitative portion, in order to mitigate these biases. Survey deployment via the web was selected to create a natural, anonymous setting for participants, as well as to increase external validity. Introductory verbiage and instructions stated only that the intent of the survey was to collect public opinions regarding different types of colleges and universities. Initial data collection was structured such that responses could be extracted without the researcher knowing with which group each response set was associated, creating at least an initial single-blind study environment.

Within the questionnaire, while the two types/providers of online programs were of primary interest, face-to-face programs were included as a control; it also provided an option for those individuals who otherwise might be non-respondents. Furthermore, this information provides an interesting point of comparison through which to determine whether perceptions regarding online programs offered by traditional colleges and universities correspond more closely with for-profit online programs or the face-to-face programs of those same nonprofit institutions.

### *Subject Selection*

Survey participants were selected using convenience sampling, with the intent of including current or former students from each type of institution, as well as adults not presently enrolled in a postsecondary program. The participant pool was determined by matter of association with intermediaries who agreed to assist with the project. As the goal of the questionnaire was to gather data through which to formulate descriptive statistics on general public perceptions, it was of benefit for distribution to occur in as wide a manner as possible. Determined through consultation with faculty advisors, an appropriate  $n$  for this portion of the study was approximately 50. Through a stroke of good fortune, almost three times this number of individuals responded within a period of ten days.

Interview participants were identified and contacted by intermediary parties who consented to assist with this project. Criterion sampling was used to ensure that all participants studied had lived the same general experience (Creswell, 2003), in this case, enrollment in an online, graduate-level degree program. Ideally, these persons should have enrolled in a for-profit online program in pursuit of a graduate degree, with at least one informant enrolled in a nonprofit online degree program. Per agreement with faculty advisors, a minimum of three and a maximum of five interviews were to be conducted. While the subject count was met, in the form of two for-profit program participants and two nonprofit program participants, data collected from the for-profit participants was somewhat shallow, particularly relative to the other group. As a phenomenological study this, obviously, presents some issues. While multiple attempts were made to solicit additional subjects, all outreach attempts that would have remained within IRB-approved

guidelines were unsuccessful. The impact of this result will be discussed further in later sections of this report.

### *Instrumentation*

All instruments used in this project were developed by the researcher, under the review and guidance of faculty advisors. Several existing instruments, including the Education Participation Scale and the Student Readiness Inventory, were considered for use but ultimately judged to be inappropriate or too broad in scope for the purposes of this project. A cursory review of existing theses and dissertations also was made in an attempt to discover an appropriate instrument, with no useful results.

### *Questionnaire*

A questionnaire format was selected for the quantitative portion of this study to acquire data from the largest number of persons in the simplest manner possible. The instrument that was developed (Appendix A) consists of four main components, described below.

*Section One.* Demographic information was collected to allow for potential stratification of the data. For simplicity of analysis, these factors were limited to age, income level, and prior educational experience. Age was selected as a subject pool filter; the results, however, showed that all respondents identified themselves as being over 25 years of age. Gender and ethnicity-related questions were considered, but ultimately not included because the literature did support a need for stratification along these dimensions for the pertinent population segment. Communication to participants included a brief explanation of purpose, a guarantee of confidentiality, and other disclosure information as required by the IRB.

*Section Two.* The second section was intended to establish which type of institution each respondent most closely associate themselves with and why. Options provided for the various types of institutions included: an online program from a large nonprofit university, an online program from a for-profit virtual university, community college, a trade school, and a face-to-face program offered by a traditional college or university. This question was asked at the beginning of the questionnaire for two reasons. First, placing it directly after the demographic questions improved the chances of participants viewing it in an objective manner. Second, placing it prior to the questions that ask participants to consider their opinions about various types of institutions reduced the chances of those considerations producing a response that the participant felt should fit with their own self-image. An option of multiple-choice or original response was provided for participants to use in answering the “why” query. The multiple-choice list included items that directly relate to some of the major situational, institutional, and dispositional factors of participation as identified in the literature review, such as perceived affordability and flexibility of class meetings, time from application to first class start date, and perceived difficulty of coursework. The last option on the multiple-choice list was “Other,” and participants were permitted to write in a brief explanation of what they felt was not represented on the pick list.

*Section Three.* The third section began with a question that asked participants to select as many items as they wished from a provided list of statements with which they associate the term *for-profit university*. This was to provide a baseline of how respondents generally differentiate those institutions from nonprofit institutions, and to clarify that differentiation from that of the researcher. The remainder of this section asked

respondents to select how strongly they agree with statements that make various comparisons of online education relative to traditional face-to-face education, as well as for-profit institutions relative to traditional colleges and universities. Combined, the intent of these questions was to acquire some insight into perceptions regarding virtual universities. Queries included a combination of institutional and dispositional perceptions such as not to overly draw the focus on one aspect over the other. Items included: which type of institution is better equipped to provide online education, the overall value of the ending credential; quality of instruction; rigor of instruction; rigor of the admissions process; institutional acceptance of adult students; cost; the relative academic aptitude of students; and relevance to potential real life application. The positive and negative imagery presented by these statements was even and the order of questions made random. Two items were worded both positively and negatively in order to increase validity. At least one situational factor – cost -- was included intentionally, as it was assumed that respondents would view such items as being more neutral and thus might lend a more balance opinion about the questions asked. Also included were two items that compare online education to community college and continuing education; these were intended to serve as confounding options, though the responses provided some useful insight.

*Section Four.* The fourth and final section was intended to elicit data that might establish if there are different concepts of social fit at different institutions. Participants were asked first to select as many items as they wished from a list of statements that they feel best describe each of three types of institutions: traditional colleges, online programs from nonprofit colleges, and online programs from for-profit colleges. Next, they were asked to select as many items as they wish from a list of statements that they feel best

describe the *adult students* who attend each of type of institutions. In order to facilitate imagery and produce more realistic responses, the survey presented these institutions as real world options. Traditional colleges were represented by a large, well-known university (Ohio State University); nonprofit online programs were represented by a nonexistent online MBA program from a smaller but still identifiable university (the Online MBA at Texas State); and for-profit programs were represented by the University of Phoenix. Ohio State was selected because it has the largest total enrollment across public universities, and also because it is not local and thus less likely to correlate with preconceived notions about that particular institution. The MBA program was selected because those programs represent the highest number of enrollments in nonprofit online education. Texas State was selected because it differs from Ohio State in size, is likely to be at least somewhat known to participants, and plausibly could offer an online MBA program but does not actually have one. University of Phoenix was selected for its relative ubiquity.

*Initial Pilot.* An initial pilot of some components of this instrument was conducted using the Ask MetaFilter website (<http://ask.metafilter.com>), to which 64 responses were received. Regarding perceptions of for-profit institutions, these responses were almost exclusively negative. Of amusing but informative note is that, during the first week following initial question posting, advertisements for two different virtual universities were located at either end of the associated web page. This indicates that respondents met the target marketing criteria for those institutions and thus were an appropriate audience for this investigation. A few multiple choice response options were modified as a result of this pilot test.

### *Semi-Structured Interviews*

Interview prompts for the qualitative portion of this study (Appendix B) were developed by the researcher. Whereas the intent of the questionnaire was to acquire general descriptors regarding attitudes about the various types of institutions/programs and those that may participate in them, the interviews were used to develop a more detailed picture of the motivations for participation, the thought process students go through when selecting an online program, and how well their initial perceptions of that institution match the reality they have witnessed as a participant.

The interview protocol followed the guidance provided by Creswell (2003), including five open-ended questions with ample space between questions to note responses. Follow-up probes were written near each associated question to serve as a readily available reminder during interviews. Additionally, reminders to review the purpose of the study with the interviewee, as well as closing comments thanking them for their participation, were noted.

### *Data Collection Process*

A visual depiction of how data were collected, analyzed, and integrated is provided in Figure 1. The approach was sequential, though more by default than design due to the limiting resource of a single researcher. Qualitative data first was introduced through open-ended questions within the questionnaire, and, ultimately, comprised a small amount of the total data collected. All questionnaire data were analyzed prior to start of interview data collection, although the results did not inform the prompts for those interviews. Ultimately, the descriptive statistics acquired from the questionnaire informed and provided context to the interview findings.

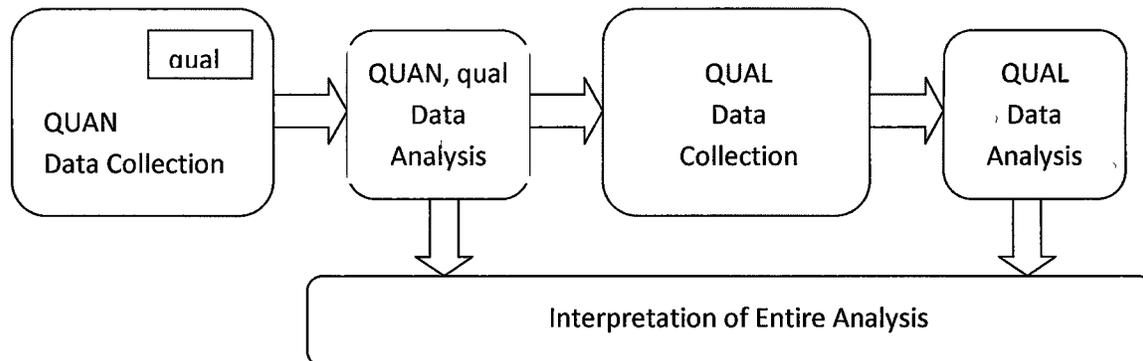


Figure 1. Data Collection and Analysis Strategy.

### *Questionnaire*

The questionnaire was set up using *mrInterview*, selected due to its cost and capacity to support various data retrieval and sorting options. Distribution occurred via an embedded URL in an e-mail, forwarded by intermediaries. No password was required for access and completion was not tracked. Intermediaries were asked to contact the researcher when instructions were provided in order to establish a baseline start time. As pre-determined, two weeks following distribution the researcher closed the survey from access and extracted the raw data.

### *Interviews*

Prior to the interview, participants were provided an informed consent form for signature. Representative samples from various research universities were located and used for reference in developing this form, which emphasized the participant's right to anonymity and included a description of the specific steps the researcher would take to protect the participant's identity and responses. The researcher confirmed understanding

with informants prior to interview start. Also, per Creswell's (2003) suggestion, pre-interview conversation included a review of the purpose of the study, the anticipated length of the interview, and plans for the results.

All data were collected over the internet at pre-established times via an online chat tool. Although options were provided for in-person meetings with informants who resided local to the researcher, the online option was preferred by all parties. Acknowledgement that the chat session would be recorded was confirmed with informants prior to beginning. Written notes used false names in order to protect participants from inadvertent exposure. In all printed copies of the transcripts, names and personal identifiers were removed, and informants were assigned numbers for the purpose of tracking and analyzing the data.

#### Data Analysis

This section reviews the approach taken to extract, organize, and analyze data from the quantitative and qualitative components of this study. Upon completion, the data sets were compared for commonalities and unique points of distinction.

#### *Questionnaire*

For the questionnaire, the section containing demographic descriptors was extracted and reviewed first. This measure was taken for the sole purpose of identifying and discarding any responses from individuals who do not meet age criteria. The mean and standard deviation were determined for each item. This step was taken to identify any unusual majority among these descriptors, and to provide a sense of how certain demographics for the sample population may correlate to the other primary data.

Next, data from the third and fourth sections of the questionnaire were extracted and reviewed. The goal of this part of the analysis was to determine general public perceptions regarding virtual universities relative to traditional institutions. In particular, of interest was whether perceptions of an online program offered by Texas State correspond more closely with that of Ohio State University or the University of Phoenix. For each question, a basic count of each response was tallied and placed into a frequency distribution. Those items worded both positively and negatively were compared for correlation and the result noted. The Likert scale response items were placed into rank order and the mode responses noted; no attempt was made at interval-level measurement and characterization as it was not assumed that the space between intervals is equal. A brief narrative describing emerging response trends then was created, including the researcher's reaction based on expectations.

#### *Differences in Attitudes Based on Behavior*

Finally, data from the second section (Question Four, current institutional preference) were extracted. This section was left to the end in order to prevent the introduction of any bias. The total percentage of respondents selecting each option was noted. Written responses to the "why" question were added to the list and noted as participant-provided responses.

Individuals with an espoused preference for an online program offered by a traditional college or university were grouped and labeled as Category A; individuals with an espoused preference for an online program offered by virtual university were grouped and labeled as Category B, and individuals preferring a traditional in-residence program were grouped and labeled as Category C. The three groups then were used to

categorize responses for the other sections of the questionnaire. The resulting statistics describing the differences in attitudes and espoused preferences between the groups were represented as simple frequency of response comparisons. Items of significance, particularly those that stood out relative to expectations, were noted in the resulting narrative.

As this instrument is original to this project and has seen only limited pilot testing, a comparison of espoused institutional preferences and the later selection of positive statements regarding those institutions was given particular note. While establishing the construct validity of this instrument is not the intent of this project, at least some limited review was warranted. It was understood and noted in the findings that because many participants had already made an enrollment decision for one type of program over another, validated feelings about themselves as associated with their program may be a confounding variable.

### *Interviews*

All names were changed in order to preserve anonymity, and identifiers in the data that are not pertinent to this analysis were removed. This researcher is the sole person with access to personal identifier information.

The data analysis methods for the qualitative portion of this study were informed primarily by Creswell (2003). Upon collection, all transcripts were reviewed several times to obtain an overall feeling for them. Conversations were reviewed for information that may either reinforce or contradict the survey data. Transcripts then were reviewed for significant parts of the conversation or phrases that identify each person's motivating factors for program enrollment and general perceptions about each type of institution; this

process is what Creswell refers to as horizontalization of the data. Any data relating these notions to the individual's self-concept or specific barriers to participation were given particular attention.

The resulting data then were divided into several themes, using the following guidelines:

- Motivational constructs were divided among Lewison and Hawes's (2007) market typology. While similar to Houle's typology, this system distinguishes between goals of improved general employability and obtaining a degree for a specific type of employment, allowing for a more discrete assessment.
- Reasons for participation were divided among Cross's (1981) typology of situational, institutional, and dispositional factors.
- Perceptions about each type of institution were divided into positive and negative comments.
- Level of and satisfaction with previous experiences in higher and continuing education were noted for each group.
- Perceptions of social fit relative to the institution selected were noted for each group.

While these represent the primary intended codes the researcher looked for in the data, other points of unique interest made themselves apparent. Upon completion of this process for each participant, items were compared across participants in order to identify commonalities or themes that help to establish why adults enroll in for-profit online higher education. The resulting narrative is a textural description of the lived experiences

of these individuals, and includes verbatim examples. As anticipated, sufficient information was not available by this methodology to produce a body of information that could produce a structural description.

## IV. RESULTS

The core question asked in this study was: Do nontraditional students simply find a nontraditional institution appealing, and if so, why? A mixed methods approach was taken to investigate the perceived motives and barriers to higher education participation that exist among adult students who enroll in for-profit virtual universities, the extent to which adults differentiate between nonprofit and for-profit institutions in the context of online programs, and how a student's prior experience with higher education may or may not relate to their institutional preference.

This chapter first reviews the data from the survey component of this study. Next, interview data are reviewed. Finally, the two components are compared for commonalities and differences.

### Survey Findings

A total of 137 people responded to the survey. As a whole, respondents could be described as older and affluent relative to most non-traditional college students. The mode age of respondents was between 40 and 49. Fifty-four percent reported an annual family income greater than \$100,000. The mode income level for those with an espoused preference for an in-residence program was \$75,000-100,000; the mode for those with an espoused preference for an online program (both nonprofit and for profit) was \$100,000 or greater. An unintended but important demographic point of interest is that a full 75%

of respondents noted that they were in possession of a graduate degree. While this may indicate that this population has more fully formed opinions regarding higher education than the general public, it may also indicate a strong bias towards the type of institution they chose to attend.

When asked what type of institution they would be most likely to enroll in at this point in their lives, 56% of respondents indicated a preference for a traditional, local college or university, while 31% indicated a preference for an online program offered by a traditional institution. Only 4% cited a preference for an online program offered by an institution specializing in distance education. Those who had previously participated in online coursework were 10% more likely to prefer the online program and were almost three times as likely to cite flexibility as an important factor supporting their choice. A breakdown of the factors supporting program format preference is provided in Table 1.

Overall, both online groups were most interested in a flexible program that would meet their goals in the fastest manner possible. While the same could be said of the overall adult population, those interested in online education, unsurprisingly, value these factors to a greater extent. Those espousing a preference for a nonprofit online program valued flexibility 37% more than the overall population, and those preferring a for-profit online program valued speed to completion 29% more. Notably, those preferring the for-profit institution did not select any option associated with possible intellectual, experience, or social fit, while to those preferring the nonprofit institution it was at least a minimal decision factor. Also of interest is the finding that those preferring a nonprofit online program were relatively unconcerned about program costs, while those preferring a for-profit online program were the most concerned.

Table 1. Factors Affecting Adult Student Institutional Preference.

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Total</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>Espoused Program Format Preference</i>		
		<i>Online Nonprofit</i> <sup>b</sup>	<i>Online For-Profit</i> <sup>c</sup>	<i>In-Residence Nonprofit</i> <sup>d</sup>
<i>Flexibility</i>	54	91	60	43
<i>Fastest way to achieve goals</i>	51	59	80	35
<i>Has desired class offerings</i>	47	31	20	71
<i>Meets personal standards</i>	38	25	20	57
<i>Affordable</i>	20	9	60	27
<i>Perceived intellectual fit</i>	16	16	0	22
<i>Perceived experience fit</i>	15	16	0	20
<i>Fit - general</i>	5	0	0	10

*Note.* Values represent the percentage of sample population for the listed group selecting the indicator. The combined *n* for the three preference groups is less than the total survey *N* because not all respondents selected an institutional preference.

<sup>a</sup>*N* = 137. <sup>b</sup>*n* = 42. <sup>c</sup>*n* = 5. <sup>d</sup>*n* = 77.

The opinions of all groups were relatively the same regarding their perceptions of the term “for-profit university.” The highest frequency response was that the term referred to institutions such as the University of Phoenix (64%), followed by vocational and trade colleges (48%) and diploma mills (39%). Only 20% of respondents selected the most accurate response option associated with the institution’s financial structure and mission. In the option provided to write in a response, somewhat surprisingly, 5% of respondents indicated that they believed this term to describe private colleges and

universities, as opposed to state-sponsored institutions. Among those espousing a preference for a for-profit online university, respondents were more likely to characterize the term as “a quick and easy way to get the credential necessary for a career change” and “usually the only option for working adults.”

Next, participants were asked to respond to a series of Likert-scale items intended to measure how strongly they agreed or disagreed with certain statements regarding online education programs, as well as traditional colleges and universities relative to virtual universities. These results are summarized in Table 2; the values represent the Likert mean with 1 equating to a response of “Strongly Disagree” and 6 equal to a response of “Strongly Agree.” Of the fifteen statements, the item to which respondents most strongly agreed was that “traditional colleges and universities are for adults as well as youth.” Also, respondents agreed that online education is a more appropriate modality for continuing education than it is for higher education. In particular, those who had not participated in online coursework previously strongly agreed with this notion.

While the total percentage of survey respondents with an espoused preference for a for-profit university was small--only 4%--some differences in their opinions relative to the group preferring a nonprofit online program should be noted. In particular, this small group of respondents strongly agreed that a degree from a for-profit institution was just as good as one from a traditional college or university; they also had the weakest level of agreement among the three groups that a degree from a traditional university was more valuable. Furthermore, the for-profit group disagreed that the students attending for-profit institutions were any less intelligent than those at a traditional college, and they strongly disagreed that the instructors at the traditional institution were somehow better. They

were, however, in weaker agreement than the overall group that for-profit universities were better equipped to provide online education.

Table 2. Respondent Perceptions of Various Institutional Factors.

<i>Descriptor</i>	<i>Espoused Program Format Preference</i>					
	<i>Online nonprofit<sup>a</sup></i>		<i>Online for-profit<sup>b</sup></i>		<i>Traditional in-residence<sup>c</sup></i>	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Traditional colleges are for adults as well as youth.	5.16	1.18	4.75	0.5	5.47	0.62
OL is effective for providing continuing education.	5.03	1.04	4.5	0.58	4.29	0.89
A degree from a traditional university is more valuable than a degree from a for-profit university.	4.94	0.92	4.0	0.82	4.57	1.48
OL is effective for providing higher education.	4.65	1.41	4.0	1.15	3.67	1.11
The instructors are better at traditional colleges and universities.	4.49	1.09	3.25	1.5	4.29	1.31
Traditional colleges and universities are better equipped to provide quality OL education	3.94	1.03	3.25	1.26	4.0	1.15
It is important for colleges to ask for letters of recommendation as part of an application.	3.81	1.08	3.5	0.58	3.89	1.48
The students at traditional colleges and universities are smarter than the students at for-profit colleges.	3.35	1.25	2.25	1.29	3.27	1.37
For-profit colleges cost less than traditional colleges.	3.06	1.15	2.25	0.96	3.16	1.42
A degree from a for-profit college is just as good as a degree from a traditional college.	2.94	1.31	4.0	1.41	2.98	1.26
For-profit colleges and universities are better equipped to provide quality OL education	2.84	1.18	2.25	0.96	2.6	1.23
For-profit universities are more difficult.	2.38	0.84	2.5	1.29	2.6	1.0

<sup>a</sup>*n* = 42. <sup>b</sup>*n* = 5. <sup>c</sup>*n* = 77.

The final section of the survey asked participants to review a series of positive and negative statements regarding aspects of higher education participation (value of degree, cost, quality, etc.) and the characteristics of adult students enrolled in such programs, and then select which of three institutions listed they felt those statements best described. Tables 3 and 4, below, summarize these findings.

Table 3. Association of External Characteristics with Various Institutions.

<i>Descriptor</i>	Ohio State University			Online MBA at Texas State			University of Phoenix		
	<i>OL NP<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>OL FP<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Trad NP<sup>c</sup></i>	<i>OL NP</i>	<i>OL FP</i>	<i>Trad NP</i>	<i>OL NP</i>	<i>OL FP</i>	<i>Trad NP</i>
Employers would value degree	87	80	93	84	40	57	16	20	19
Is worth the money	65	40	90	87	60	64	13	0	19
Provides quality education	71	40	83	74	40	59	32	60	33
Perceived personal fit	35	20	55	84	40	64	26	60	22
Understands that adults have unique needs	19	20	28	74	60	67	71	60	67

*Note* Values represent percentage of participants within an espoused program format preference group selecting each descriptor.  $N = 137$ .

<sup>a</sup> $n = 42$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 5$ . <sup>c</sup> $n = 77$ .

Comparing the group of individuals espousing a preference for the University of Phoenix against those preferring either a traditional face-to-face program or an online program offered by a traditional, nonprofit university, the factors that stand out as positive associations are perceived program quality and personal fit. Curiously, however,

the for-profit preference group was the least likely of the three preference groups to believe that the program was worth the investment. Moreover, there was no notable difference in their lack of agreement that employers would value a degree earned at that institution. Although perhaps unsurprising given that respondents were unlikely to characterize their preferred institution in a negative way, these findings combine to suggest that those who choose to attend for-profit online universities perceive them as offering readily accessible programs of sufficient quality, outweighing any other institutional factors. This seems particularly important given that over 25% of all respondents associated some level of personal fit with the virtual university. Also worthy of note is that 40% of respondents preferring the for-profit university felt that the admissions and entry process was too lengthy at a nonprofit institution; while this group only represented a small percentage of the total survey population, this finding may suggest a possible participation barrier.

In contrast, those preferring the nonprofit online program cited the program cost benefit as the factor most closely associated with the online MBA at Texas State, with 87% of respondents agreeing the program was worth the financial investment. Degree value to employers and perceived personal fit ranked next, each receiving 84% agreement, with program quality and institutional understanding of adult students following with 74% agreement. Notably, the nonprofit online preference group had at least 74% agreement that Texas State met the criteria of all positively worded questions in the survey. The groups preferring Ohio State or University of Phoenix, however, had substantially lower levels of agreement that their preferred institution met the criteria for at least two of the positively worded questions. This high level of agreement with

multiple statements suggests that students who prefer a nonprofit online program look for an institution that meets their needs across a greater number of dimensions than do students who prefer either a traditional or for-profit online program.

Also of interest is how respondents characterized an online MBA program at a traditional university relative to just the traditional university with no mention made of program or delivery method. Understanding that the survey did not control for possible institutional brand preference (based on either the specific institutions or a national versus regional university), overall, respondents felt that programs designed specifically for adult students were somehow different than those more broadly offered by the same institution. For instance, over two-thirds of respondents indicated a belief that a traditional university takes too long for a student to be admitted and begin classes, while less than one-third perceived the same problem with an online MBA program offered by a traditional institution, again suggesting a possible participation barrier. Likewise, 69% felt that the nonprofit online MBA program understood that adults had needs unique from the youth at that school, whereas only 25% believed the same of a nonprofit institution as a whole. While the majority of respondents identified most closely with the online MBA program, they were less likely to believe that this type of program would provide the same quality education as a more traditional, face-to-face program.

The questions relating to the adult students who attend these institutions brought forth the largest differences in perceptions between groups. Regarding perceptions of social fit, each group selected their own institutional type and format as having the best perceived personal fit. Each group, also, held the strongest level of agreement that the adults attending their preferred institutional type were looking to move into a specific job

or career, suggesting that the individuals in each group best understand a certain type of institution or program as the best potential means of meeting their own career goals.

Those espousing a preference for a face-to-face program were more than twice as likely to believe that adults attending a traditional institution may not have been very successful earlier in their academic careers; those preferring an online program generally disagreed with this sentiment. Most notably, over 90% of respondents preferring the traditional institution felt that those attending the University of Phoenix were likely to have had weak academic backgrounds.

Table 4. Association of Adult Student Characteristics with Various Institutions.

<i>Descriptor</i>	Ohio State University			Online MBA at Texas State Univ.			University of Phoenix		
	<i>OL NP<sup>a</sup></i>	<i>OL FP<sup>b</sup></i>	<i>Trad NP<sup>c</sup></i>	<i>OL NP</i>	<i>OL FP</i>	<i>Trad NP</i>	<i>OL NP</i>	<i>OL FP</i>	<i>Trad NP</i>
Did not do that well in college previously	6	0	12	16	20	24	90	60	93
Looking to move into a specific job/career	29	20	41	61	40	76	77	80	69
Will likely complete degree	45	20	55	80	40	84	45	40	31
Probably only considered this school	26	40	41	26	20	29	64	20	48
Probably a lot like me	42	20	64	84	20	69	29	60	17
Need to fill a hole in their resume	13	20	19	39	40	64	84	80	78
Possibly didn't have much of a social life	16	20	29	29	60	26	45	60	46

*Note.* Values represent percentage of participants within an espoused program format preference group selecting each descriptor.  $N = 137$ .

<sup>a</sup> $n = 42$ . <sup>b</sup> $n = 5$ . <sup>c</sup> $n = 77$ .

Perceptions regarding students attending the online program offered by the traditional brick-and-mortar university varied among descriptors as to whether they related more closely to the traditional or virtual university. While these students were perceived to be more in alignment with those attending the traditional university in terms of previous academic performance, they were perceived to be more similar to those attending the for-profit university in that they likely are attending primarily to fulfill a credentialing need and prepare for a specific job. Of interest is that students attending the online MBA program at Texas State were viewed as the most likely to have investigated multiple program alternatives, indicating that such programs may have the hardest job of the three in converting potential students into enrolled students.

A final point of interest is that one-half of all respondents indicated that those entering for-profit universities may have unfulfilled social or activity needs. In particular, those espousing a preference for a for-profit university most strongly agreed with this statement. Given that traditional institutions are more likely to fulfill such needs through face-to-face social encounters, class meetings, professional organizations, and alumni groups, this suggests a possible perception within this segment about the potential “safety” of online interaction. To the other groups, this may indicate a social perception about certain types of internet users and either their critical thinking skills or outright preference for online interaction.

## Interview Findings

From the interviews conducted, four themes emerged that are relevant to this study: motivation for participation; displayed level of academic savvy; perception of cohort group relative to the other group; and focus on reputation and brand.

*Motivation for participation.* There was an obvious divide between for-profit and nonprofit participants as to whether the decision to enroll in graduate study was driven by local or global considerations. All informants agreed that, for them, attainment of a master's degree was necessary from a professional standpoint. Both for-profit informants cited the credential as necessary for advancement and improved compensation within their current companies. While one mentioned that he enjoyed the mental challenge of being back in an academic environment, he admitted that he enrolled "for the job and the money that will come with the degree." Neither individual provided any indication that they were looking beyond their current employer or career path. Both nonprofit informants, however, cited the same barrier but in relation to outside opportunities. Their responses also indicated a more personal, ego-driven dilemma underlying the decision to return to school.

First and foremost, I needed a challenge again, both personally and professional. After working 15 years and reaching high levels in my career, I still lacked intellectual stimulation. I had also begun to experience (for the first time in my career), a lack of opportunity because I didn't have a graduate degree. That plateau is hard to deal with, especially when you feel like your experience and character should speak for themselves after so long.

The other nonprofit informant conveyed a similar dilemma.

When I worked as an engineer for a big corporation, it didn't matter where your degree came from. Once I moved into consulting, however, people began to look at my "pedigree" more closely. It became all about your level of education and where you went.

Motivations for attending college as an adult beyond just the professional benefits were cited by informants in both groups, although more data would be necessary to generalize each response as characteristic of one group over the other. A woman from the for-profit group said that she enrolled, in part, to set an example for her children: "somehow, when parents attain a certain education level, the children naturally follow the same path without question." This person also believed that most adults attending college were "motivated by money and their academic achievement compared to their peers." In stark contrast to this statement, a woman from the nonprofit group cited her most compelling motivation as a need for intellectual stimulation.

More than anything, I wanted to learn again, in an environment that encouraged discovery and discourse. In corporate life, those environments were disappearing. I wanted to be around creative, innovative thinkers who shared a love of learning.

Nonprofit participants were not initially seeking an online program, but rather selected one because it had the most appealing curriculum. In at least one case, an online program was the only option for the field they were interested in studying. Also, this person was not interested in “just academic content” but was looking for incorporation of real-life problems and was “skeptical that a place like [University of] Phoenix really would be able to offer something like that.” For-profit participants, in contrast, were focused on the flexibility provided by the format. Both had started at other institutions (one in-residence, one distance education via satellite and recordings) but ultimately found an online program more suitable to their needs. In this regard, it is worth noting that both for-profit informants mentioned balancing an education against the needs of young children as a challenge, while neither nonprofit informant mentioned any similar situational constraints. The for-profit institution-attending individual who had started an in-residence program found that the combination of work and school took him away from home too often, while the one who attempted the satellite-based program had issues with the schedule. She cited “lots of midnight oil burning” to which she was unaccustomed, and frustration that she would only be able to complete two or three courses in a year. Comparatively, her view of the online program was that she “could cruise through easily.”

*Displayed level of academic savvy.* For the purposes of this study, *academic savvy* is defined as those qualities an individual possesses or has learned that (a) allow them to identify and appropriately use successful study behaviors, or (b) examine situations critically. Here, for-profit participants appeared to show some naïveté in their attitude towards higher education relative to what one would expect of those engaging in

graduate-level study. For instance, in response to a question about how the online experience differed from what they imagined it might be like, one for-profit institution-attending student replied:

It's been very different than what I imagined. I *hate* writing papers and there is a lot of it when taking online courses. I would have at least two and sometimes three papers to write every week. That was *not* something I expected.

This same person also noted the lack of connection to their classmates as a challenge.

Back then [in undergraduate] I had friends I could study with and people to help me get through. Now, it's like just me against the school. If you can't keep up, there's no one there that wants to help you. It can be rough some days.

As this individual cited team projects as a component of the curriculum, on the surface this attitude would appear to be representative of someone who either did not proactively seek assistance or did not receive any when requested. In general, the sense provided by both for-profit informants was that their studies were primarily an individual effort, which was what they expected and, to some degree, wanted.

In contrast, the nonprofit participants were looking explicitly for a community of learners to join. As one remarked, "I needed to belong in the program and have a sense of community." One informant was pleasantly "surprised...at the strength of the bonds" created among their classmates, while the other noted that her biggest frustration with the

format was the inability to casually converse with instructors and classmates during breaks and after class: “Those are the kinds of connections you can use in your career for years to come, and you really just can’t establish those online.” Both nonprofit informants spoke of the value of alumni bases and going into education with a “networking mentality.” In contrast, the for-profit informants had a comparatively short-term view of things, focusing solely upon immediate needs and benefits.

*Relative perception of cohort group.* There were notable differences in how for-profit and nonprofit program informants perceived each other and the coursework they were taking. Most noticeably, the for-profit group did not perceive there to be any differences between themselves and any other adult student attending a different type of institution. They generalized adults enrolled in online coursework as busy professionals, possibly with family commitments, and did not see any other points of differentiation. As a related aside, one informant even looked to his workplace and claimed that he worked with people “that earn better money and get more respect, and the only difference between them and me is the degree.” The nonprofit group, in contrast, had a decidedly different opinion. They viewed the for-profit participants as “lower-level workers” looking for “a degree, not necessarily lifelong learning,” that would bring them immediate gain with their current employer. They also saw for-profit participants as possibly having greater financial constraints.

Financial considerations would rate higher in the decision-making process for the degree programs, as would image. I think the decision to attend a virtual university is often one of necessity. If a large time or monetary commitment is

required, that may be difficult for many students....I think the for-profit institutions are intended for more practical or vocational coursework. People generally sign up for classes there to learn new computer skills, take a class or two. My impression is they then decide to pursue degrees.

In parallel to their image of themselves as students relative to others, the for-profit informants did not believe that online coursework offered through a traditional brick-and-mortar institution was any different than what they had experienced. One looked at the question only in terms of format, citing likely commonalities in paper writing and team-based projects. The other considered curriculum and asserted that the courses had to be relatively equal, because “nobody is going to take classes or content that is obsolete.” The nonprofit informants, however, looked a layer further and believed there to be important differences between the two types of programs. Namely, they felt “the intensity and intellectual rigor are far less” in for-profit programs, and that the experience was fundamentally different due to “much less personal interaction with profs and classmates.” They viewed for-profit institutions as having a “cookie cutter approach” that worked well for someone who needed a skill set in order to receive a promotion, such as “an engineer quietly trying to get an MBA.”

*Brand name and institution reputation.* Finally, all informants agreed that an institution’s reputation and brand name were important, but there was variance between the two groups within this notion. Both for-profit informants were emphatic in their agreement that, had a nonprofit online option been available from a known, reputable college, they would have preferred that program.

I would have went with the traditional college online because of the name. Especially in this kind of job market it means more to graduate from a known traditional college than to have attended a college that is strictly online. When recruiters are looking at resumes no one knows about online schools. Maybe even most of them think it's too easy and not something that is really earned. With a well-known school, regardless of classes being online or face-to-face you have the college's name and reputation backing you.

The other for-profit program respondent agreed with this notion, and also conveyed an interesting notion regarding program flexibility within a single institution.

Yes, I absolutely would have gone with the big name college if they had the online option. You could start with that, and then if you changed your mind midway through the credit could be easily applied to a traditional degree. Also, I feel like a traditional college masters program will be a better recognized degree. However, I just do not have the capacity to attend class physically due to my work schedule and family commitments. But the diploma is going to be issued by an online college which is accredited anyway and recognized by all major firms in the U.S.—so long as there's that, it's okay.

Despite their espoused preference for a traditional college, both for-profit program informants admitted that prior to enrollment they only investigated a few local

colleges and the one virtual university. This contradiction may have several implications. First, it suggests a difference in how the college search is conducted. Both for-profit informants looked at specific institutions for an option that would work with their schedule, rather than searching for online programs in their desired field and then investigating institutions. For these for-profit students, their search was based on what was local or heavily advertised. Both nonprofit informants, in contrast, displayed the reverse behavior in that they searched for possible programs within their field of interest, and then looked at the various institutions. This led to broader searches, with both citing programs outside of their local area.

I wasn't initially comfortable with an online program and wasn't seeking one. I did look at a few programs that combined distance learning with some residency; those were primarily in Europe, and there was one at Duke. I liked the idea of having a face-to-face foundation to support the challenges of distance learning, particularly with if they were going to be global teams. Ultimately, though, I wasn't interested in going to school for school's sake. It had to be a program that suited me, whatever format it ended up being.

The other nonprofit student provided a similar perspective.

Once I knew what I was interested in, I looked around. The type of curriculum I wanted was only available online or through some mixed part-online, part-on campus scenario. It became apparently very quickly that I was looking at a niche

field that wasn't widely available. It only took a short search to confirm that my options were limited to a small handful of places.

Both nonprofit individuals, also, mentioned investigating the professors, the curriculum, and their potential peers, suggesting that they evaluated institutions on factors such as quality and fit with personal standards and goals. More specifically, they were looking for a group of "experienced, mid-career professionals" who "shared similar commitments." One individual--a professional who travels extensively both for business and pleasure--acknowledged the possibility of working in "global teams," suggesting that information about the various places students in the program reside may have held some weight in her decision.

The contradiction in search patterns by those attending for-profit institutions further suggests that a difference exists between what is espoused as preferred and what is acceptable. Specifically, nonprofit participants insisted that an institution be "reputable," while the for-profit participants were satisfied with "a known college." This is a subtle but important distinction. The nonprofit informants "absolutely would not have chosen" a virtual university and did not "like the reputation University of Phoenix has." As one remarked, "Appearances do matter for graduate education, and that includes the choice of institution." That appearance, however, may depend upon what aspects one is looking at and for what purpose. One nonprofit informant confirmed that when she worked for a large corporation it did not matter where one's degree came from. Given that both for-profit informants in this study are employed at large, international

corporations, it is conceivable that acceptance of the degree by their own employer could be interpreted by extension into general acceptance by the corporate community.

#### Commonalities and Distinctions

The quantitative and qualitative components of this study informed each other in several ways. First, both data sets support the notion that the reasons for which an individual may or may not consider a for-profit university are, respectively, predominantly practical or personal. In the case of those who do enroll in for-profit universities, the quantitative data suggest that such individuals highly value program flexibility and speed to completion, may have been less than successful earlier in their academic careers and, primarily, are interested in filling a hole in their resume. The qualitative data, for the most part, corroborate these ideas. The situational barrier of family responsibilities drove these individuals' desire for program flexibility; as it is likely that many nonprofit institution-attending adults have young children and families to support as well, however, this may more accurately indicate that family responsibilities are not something these individuals are willing or able to sacrifice.

Relative to other distance education programs, at least one interview informant perceived the speed to completion much faster at the for-profit university. The other for-profit informant explicitly was looking to fill a hole on his resume, as indicated by a comment that possession of a graduate degree was the only difference between his and higher-paid co-workers' qualifications. Previous academic success, at least on the surface, was not supported by the qualitative data as both for-profit informants mentioned successful undergraduate academic behaviors and outcomes. That said, however, one nonprofit informant characterized for-profit participants as "lower-level workers," which

would seem to indicate that perceived sociodemographics may play a role in determining social fit for some potential adult students. While it is clear in the case of for-profit participants that graduate education was viewed as a solution to a practical problem (such as the need to meet minimum job requirements), the qualitative data provide insight into the notion that nonprofit participants may view graduate education more as a remedy for more personal issues (ego, experience, and character are deemed no longer sufficient for professional purposes).

The survey and interview data also provide an interesting view on how online education is perceived as a tool for lifelong learning. As stated in the literature, lifelong learning has become a necessity in the modern economy. Survey respondents were neutral in their agreement that online programs are effective for the provision of higher education, although they strongly agreed that it can be effective for the provision of continuing education or learning that does not culminate in a degree. To point, one of the non-profit interview informants agreed that the only reason she would consider a for-profit program was if her motivations were strictly personal interest and for lifelong learning. She provided the example of her interest in travel having led her to investigate a few online travel agent certification programs, but that for “more serious pursuits, like a Ph.D.” she would prefer the brick-and-mortar school. This implies that perceptions of academic fit between a given program and its proposed end use factor into participation decisions.

Survey data showed that people perceived those attending an online program offered by a brick-and-mortar college to be just as likely as those attending a for-profit online university to be filling a hole in their resume or seeking a specific job. This may

indicate a general public perception of online education as a practical way around certain obstacles. From the qualitative data, however, nonprofit online program participants described a different conception of lifelong learning, focused around a desire for intellectual stimulation. These persons did not simply want a degree, but a program that matched their interests, standards, and expectations. From the survey, over one-third of respondents cited the availability of desired courses and personal standards as important decision criteria.

Perceived intellectual rigor and its relation to program quality were described in both the survey and interview data. Overall, participants agreed that the level of instruction was of higher quality at traditional colleges and universities and virtual universities, generally, were easier. To point, one interviewee previously had enrolled in a distance education program offered by a large, traditional university and said that she found the experience too difficult (although this may have related as much to the format as to the institution). A full one-third of survey respondents believed that at least some for-profit online universities provide a quality education. Only 60%, however, believed the same for the online MBA program from a traditional university, compared to 76% for the large, nationally-recognized university. While further tests would be required to establish how much of this difference relates to the format of the program versus the name-brand of the institution, this would seem to imply that, for those who are satisfied with the reputation of the institution, a for-profit online program may be an acceptable alternative.

Across all respondents, the reputation of the institution was deemed to be very important. Survey respondents strongly agreed that a degree from a traditional university

is more valuable than one from a for-profit university, an assertion confirmed by all interview informants. One interview informant, however, suggested that “image” may rate highly in the decision-making process of those who attend virtual universities. In other words, it may be that appearances are as important to such individuals, just at a different level or in a way different from those who would not consider such a place for their study. This, also, may say something about the power an institution with a relative monopoly on the online higher education market, for-profit or nonprofit, may lend to general public attitudes. In relation to nonprofit institutions, a program being conducted online as opposed to in residence appears to hold only as much importance as the individual attributes to it. One of the nonprofit informants, for instance, mentioned that people were sometimes curious to learn how an online degree program worked at a nationally-known university, but that she had to emphasize the program’s rigor and interactivity “so that it is not perceived as a correspondence program.” This effort for clarification would be appear to be reasonable, as survey data indicate that less than two-thirds of respondents believed that employers would value an online degree earned through a brick-and-mortar institution.

While not addressed specifically as part of the interviews, a common perception arose regarding the cost of for-profit institutions. One nonprofit informant, when asked to consider the perspective of those who elect to attend for-profit universities, said that she believed “financial considerations would rate higher in the decision-making process....if a large monetary commitment is required, that may be difficult for many students.” This would fit with other observations of for-profit university attendees being “lower-level workers” and thus, presumably, belonging to a lower income socio-

demographic group. From the survey, however, 50% of those espousing a preference for a virtual university fell into the highest income bracket. Survey respondents who had not previously participated in online coursework moderately agreed that for-profit colleges cost less than traditional colleges. Those who had taken online coursework, however, somewhat disagreed with this notion. This would seem to indicate that pre-program information regarding the cost of participation holds a high degree of importance, as the reality of the cost may not match the initial perception. Alternately, it may be that those familiar with online coursework are more familiar with the actual costs relative the general public.

Finally, survey data provided some interesting results regarding the perception that those attending certain programs were likely to have considered only that institution prior to enrollment. Over 50% of respondents believed this to be true for those attending a for-profit university. In the interviews, all informants indicated they had investigated multiple institutions. Both for-profit participants had even previously attended other colleges; that said, however, both only examined local options and the one virtual university upon making their decision to move to a different format. Both nonprofit participants conducted rather broad searches, providing support to the survey findings as the group most likely to consider multiple options.

#### Summary

Survey and interview data were collected in an effort to explore the non-situational factors and general public perceptions that may affect enrollment in a for-profit virtual university relative to a nonprofit program. Overall, the survey showed that program flexibility, speed to degree completion, and perceived costs were the most

important variables to those preferring a for-profit institution. These individuals also have high levels of perceived personal fit with the working adult focus of such institutions, may have unfulfilled social needs, and are more likely to perceive for-profit program and instructional quality to be equivalent to a similar online program offered by a traditional university. Respondents preferring a nonprofit online program also valued program flexibility and perceived personal fit, but had different conceptions about program quality at the various types of institutions. These individuals, also, were more likely to take a greater number of factors into consideration when making academic decisions.

The interview data provide support for most of these notions. For-profit program informants had short-term workforce goals and valued speed to and ease of degree completion over other considerations. These informants appeared underprepared for the rigor of graduate study, did not see themselves as part of a community of learners, and did not perceive there to be any differences between themselves or program quality relative to the students and programs of a similar nonprofit online institution. In contrast, nonprofit program informants had broader participation goals, including longer-term workforce goals, and valued a greater variety and number of institutional factors as part of their decision making process. These informants looked explicitly for a program that would attract students with intellectual and experience profiles similar to themselves with whom they could interact and network. Moreover, they saw differences in the intellectual rigor and curriculum structure between the two types of institutions, and perceived that students attending for-profit institutions might not be their equal in terms of motivation, financial status, and commitment level. While the reputation of an institution was deemed important by all informants, each group based their interpretation of what was acceptable

for them upon different criteria. The for-profit group cared only about acceptability by their current employer, while the nonprofit group took a more critical view at how a degree from a particular institution would be perceived by all potential future employers. Finally, differences emerged in the search patterns for potential academic programs. The for-profit group based their search on geography, investigating only those institutions which were local to their area. This stands in contrast to the nonprofit group, who based their search upon field of interest and explored more geographically dispersed options.

## V. CONCLUSION

The main problem considered in this study was that it is not well understood by those in nonprofit higher education what factors other than flexibility and convenience affect adult student enrollment in online degree programs offered by for-profit universities relative to those offered by traditional colleges and universities. Survey and interview data were used to investigate the perceived motives (RQ1) and barriers (RQ2) to higher education participation that exist among adult students who enroll in online degree programs, the extent to which adults differentiate between nonprofit and for-profit institutions in the context of online programs (RQ3), and how a student's prior experience with higher education may relate to their institutional preference (RQ4). This chapter first discusses the findings of this study, particularly as they relate to the literature. Research sub-questions, as described in Chapter One, are presented following each primary question. The limitations of this study are then reviewed. Finally, implications for research and practice are addressed and recommendations for future research in this area are suggested.

### Research Question One

*What motives for participation, other than flexibility of location and time, exist among adult students who enroll in for-profit online education programs?* Overall, the findings reinforce the notion of for-profit online program students as having a consumer

orientation to education. Their goals are short-term and workforce-oriented, with participants believing that a rewarding end will justify the means. To individuals selecting a for-profit program, a degree is not viewed as a potentially transformational experience but rather a box that must be checked, lending support to Geiger's (2004) assertion that many students view knowledge as something that may be purchased rather than an experience to be undertaken. Because of this attitude, such students are focused primarily on speed to completion (Levine & Cureton, 1998), the minimum requirements necessary to complete (Lorenzetti, 2005), and perceived program ease (Adams & Eveland, 2006; Bejerano, 2008). While students attending for-profit institutions have an espoused preference for a traditional program and are concerned about the institution's brand and reputation, evidence was found to support Robinson and Doverspike's (2006) hypothesis that perceived ease of use and possible professional outcomes from a for-profit program may outweigh an individual's preference.

*Generally speaking, for what reason do students enroll?* The adults who contributed to this study enrolled in for-profit institutions as a means of solving a practical career problem. They were looking for a quick means of resolving that which stood between them and advancement with their current employer, lending support to Levine and Cureton's (n.d.) supposition that obtaining a college degree may mean more to students than the experience of attending college. This type of motivation stands in contrast to that of the nonprofit online program informants in this study, for whom the experience was entered into as a means of resolving some mid-career ego-driven dilemma, with the online format simply being the best alternative within a limited number of options for their field of interest. These students were looking to shift their

career path and had reached a professional plateau where the absence of a graduate degree was as much of an unwritten hindrance as it was an explicit one. They were not looking for the degree to help them acquire a specific job, but rather for it to open career doors that would otherwise be closed. Moreover, they found elements of the college experience, such as intellectual stimulation and the potential professional benefits of networking with fellow students, instructors, and alumni groups, to be as valuable (if not more so) than the degree itself. The data from the nonprofit group support Edmundson's (2008) assertion that online education may be undertaken to open new possibilities more so than as a means of achieving a specific goal.

Overall, the findings for the nonprofit online program group indicate a conception of lifelong learning in adulthood that has personal aspects, rather than strictly practical, which would align with Houle's (1961) learner orientation to participation. They also corroborate the notion of some adults having a more intrinsic, multi-dimensional motivation towards college study (Bye, Pushkar, & Conway, 2007; Cross, 1981; Pusser et al., 2007). In contrast, the for-profit online group provided information more in line with extrinsic motivation and Houle's goal-orientation to participation. From a marketing perspective, this would place the nonprofit participants in Lewison and Hawes's (2007) quality education buyers segment, and the for-profit participants in the economy buyers segment.

*Which aspects of for-profit institutions do participants prefer over nonprofit institutions?* The data indicate that speed of course progression and the general availability of the desired program in an online format were the strong attractions of a for-profit online institution relative to a traditional university. Particularly notable as

informants in this study previously had attempted nonprofit programs, for-profit institutions provide an opportunity for those who otherwise would not persist to completion in a face-to-face or another form of distance learning.

*To what extent do adults perceive that for-profit programs make higher education possible by the removal of potential barriers to admission?* The potential for admission by the institution was dismissed as an important decision criterion, although the speed to program start was shown to be a potentially positive factor of the for-profit model. Two-thirds of all survey respondents felt that the application-to-program start time is too lengthy at traditional institutions. Less than one-third of this same group, however, believed the same to be true for an online program.

*To what extent do participants perceive that they “fit” with the institution? With their fellow learners? From what information are these perceptions based?* Over 70% of informants perceived that the providers of online education, both nonprofit and for profit, understand that adult students have unique needs relative to traditional students. This compares to only 40% of survey respondents agreeing with this notion in relation to a nationally-known traditional institution (with no mention of program format being either online or face-to-face). This provides further support for Garrett’s (2008) argument that the convenience/adult learner component of online programs has become commoditized, as well as Geiger’s (2004) assertion that for-profit institutions may appeal to prospective students who feel they would be unwelcome at or not served well by traditional institutions.

Overall, perceived social fit was determined to hold more importance for the group of students preferring a nonprofit online program than the for-profit group. Those

enrolling in for-profit online programs are not seeking a community of learners and do not expect (or intend) to interact with their classmates beyond that which is required for curriculum purposes. As one interview participant who was accustomed to working in study groups noted, as he began to struggle with course material, “there is no one that wants to help you.” This supports various assertions in the literature that adult students may be less inclined to seek out and use an academic network of peers and advisors (Clay, Roland, & Packard, 2008; Mabry & Hardin, 1989), and that the availability and frequency of online interactivity may relate directly to student performance and persistence (Morris, Finnegan, & Wu, 2005; Tello, n.d., as cited in *Instructional Interaction: Key to Student Persistence?* 2004).

#### Research Question Two

*What barriers to participation at traditional colleges are perceived among adult students who enroll in for-profit distance education programs?* As shown from the qualitative data, those who attend virtual universities would prefer to attend a nonprofit institution if the option were available. Some individuals, however, do not appear to search for institutions beyond those which are local and readily known to them. Because alternatives that satisfy their situational constraints are not apparent, some adults may perceive that for-profit online universities are the only viable option. This supports Darkenwald and Merriam’s (1982) suggestion of informational barriers as a major factor towards participation decisions. It also stands in contrast to the behavior of nonprofit program participants, who may search nationally (or even internationally) for a program that works for them. Thus, the removal of informational barriers through targeted advertising plays the most obvious role in decisions to attend for-profit institutions.

The situational barriers addressed within this data set were work schedules and family responsibilities. Both informants attending a for-profit institution said they would have preferred to attend a traditional face-to-face program, had these circumstances not been present. While the asynchronous online learning format does alleviate some factors associated with these challenges, it also makes prominent the need for an individual with such conflicts to have a solid personal support system. It may be that those individuals who choose to enroll in for-profit online programs are either unwilling or unable to make sacrifices in those relationships. Some evidence was provided to suggest that the rigor of non-profit programs can exacerbate these situations, while for-profit programs allow for more individual freedom. This is a potential point of interest for future study regarding online program retention.

*For what reasons do adults feel they may not “fit” at a traditional college? With other students? From what information are these perceptions based?* The students in this study who attend for-profit virtual universities perceived themselves to be similar to any other adult student taking courses online. At most, they saw the difference as equivalent to comparing someone who attended Harvard with another person who attended a local college; while the reputation of the school matters for employment purposes, it does not necessarily say anything about the person. This attitude appears to have been derived from social norms established at their place of employment. As one interview informant noted, “When I worked as an engineer for a big corporation, it didn’t matter where your degree came from.” Thus, for the for-profit online preference group, perceived social fit was not a barrier to participation.

### Research Question Three

*Generally speaking, do adults differentiate between for-profit and nonprofit institutions in the context of online programs?* Quantitative data indicate that a small percentage of the college-going population does not understand this institutional difference, lending some support to Abbou's (2008) hypothesis that most people do not know about the financial status of providers. Generally speaking, however, adults do differentiate between for-profit and nonprofit online programs but only in regards to certain criteria. Online programs, as a whole, are perceived as being for adults who are interested in acquiring the credentials necessary to qualify for a specific job. Regardless of institution mission or type, the program is viewed as being very utilitarian because of its format.

*What are participants'/informants' different perceptions about the value of a credential from each type of institution?* Nonprofit programs are more likely to be viewed as valuable to future employers. The students who attend for-profit online universities do agree with this distinction, and would prefer a nonprofit online program were it available in their field of interest. While the reputation of the institution is important, particularly during tough economic times or in a competitive job market, those who enroll in for-profit programs appear to be willing to accept a less-preferred option so long as it is "known" and acceptable to their employer. To this segment, the term *known* represents name recognition by their peers and social class, not necessarily positive recognition of the name as viewed through a critical perspective. This view supports Adams and Eveland's (2007) finding that employers may not care how a degree was earned for entry-

level positions, although it would counter their argument that the degree is given greater examination once promotions and supervisory positions are considered.

*What are the different perceptions about how instruction will take place at each type of institution? About what type of person attends each type of institution? Do adults who enroll in nonprofit institutions differentiate between these types of institutions in a way that is different than those who enroll in for-profit institutions?* This was a key area of distinction between the various preference groups. Survey data indicated that those preferring a nonprofit institution perceived there to be substantial differences in the quality of instruction and intellectual caliber of students at a traditional institution. The latter notion was supported by one nonprofit interview informant, who admitted:

People who graduated from more prestigious schools seem to think that makes them more capable or smarter than those that did not. Likewise, I think that people who get their degrees from traditional universities do not think that highly of people who get their degrees from online institutions.

Those preferring a for-profit institution, however, disagreed with these notions in both the survey and interview data. In particular, for-profit interview informants felt that all online programs were equal as each type of program would have to invest effort into quality and curriculum in order to attract students and maintain accreditation. While the impact of these beliefs has limitations as these students did not look for or find any other online degree programs and thus may not have had a solid conception of the potential

differences, at least one individual had previously participated in graduate-level distance education as an adult and did not perceive there to be a difference.

Survey respondents viewed the admission process for online programs as separate and distinct from the overall process for that institution, namely in terms of speed. Respondents believed that students who apply to an online program may not have been as successful earlier in their academic careers; insufficient data were collected to determine whether this may imply a possible perception that students are not vetted as carefully or that admission standards are lower for online programs. These admission perceptions may reflect the reality of many institutional structures, where distance education programs often either operate through established correspondence program administrative channels where this sort of flexibility already exists or were developed specifically as a revenue-generation source, where standards may have at least the outward impression of being lower than that for the main campus. Respondents also perceived that those managing the online program understand that adult students have unique needs. While this could relate exclusively to the online format it could also be extrapolated by students into thoughts that instructors might be more lenient with deadlines, content might be more practical, etc. This said, however, online programs from traditional institutions were more likely to be rated similarly to face-to-face programs in terms of being worth the cost, value to employers, and quality.

#### Research Question Four

*How does an adult student's prior experience with higher education relate to their selection of a for-profit versus a nonprofit institution?* It seems that what is important for this question it is not so much what type of education an individual had

previously, or even how much academic success they realized, as it is the connection they established to the college after leaving. If, for instance, someone interfaced with an alumni organization, it is more likely that they value the community and personal relationships, and have retained the brand of that institution as part of their own personal image. These individuals, consequently, are more likely to prefer a similar nonprofit institution for any later study. This supports previous findings that adults have a need to maintain consistency in their self-image when making life decisions (Babineau & Packard, 2006; Cross & Markus, 1994). Alternately, if someone has never considered alumni services and networking as a facet of higher education, they are less likely to feel a draw towards a particular type of institution. This may be true irrespective of their prior social involvement as a student, as it appears to be how the person views the potential of a higher education institution within the context of their adult life that determines this distinction.

Finally, of interest is how one's prior experience with online coursework within the context of higher education relates to their perceptions of the various types of institutions. Survey respondents as a whole, for instance, agreed that online education is more efficacious for the provision of continuing education that does not end in any type of diploma or certificate than for the provision of higher education overall. Those who had previously participated in online coursework were more likely to agree that it can be an effective delivery method for higher education. Providing support for this notion, one interview informant noted that her experience with online education had made her much more open to the idea of taking more online courses. Survey respondents who had taken online coursework, however, were also more likely to believe that online programs are

overpriced and not worth the investment. These findings lead to mixed conclusions about how one's prior experience may relate to future academic decisions.

### Summary of Research Question Results

Overall, adult students who enroll in for-profit virtual universities did perceive differences between those institutions and traditional colleges and universities, but not nearly to the extent or in the same way as did those who enroll in online programs offered by traditional brick-and-mortar institutions. Their interpretation of the differences related primarily to an institution's reputation and brand name and did not extend, as did the views of the nonprofit students, to instructional quality, levels of student and instructor interaction, or possible peer norms. Their views also did not factor in considerations such as alumni groups and the potential benefits of personal interaction. Moreover, adult students attending for-profit online universities did not perceive any situational, socio-demographic, or intellectual differences between themselves and the students from the other group.

Both for-profit and online programs attract adults seeking a career change or related goal. At least some individuals attending nonprofit institutions do so in hopes of an opportunity or new life path finding them, while others may have ego-driven goals and also enroll, at least in part, as a means of seeking personal validation. In contrast, the informants in this study who enrolled in for-profit programs did so as the only perceived means of obtaining the credentials necessary to satisfy their immediate career goals. Individuals who would not otherwise consider a for-profit virtual university would be more likely to do so if their motivations were strictly based on personal lifelong learning.

## Limitations

The most obvious limitation of this study is the need for more, and more robust, qualitative data from for-profit program participants. While commonalities were found that suggest distinctions from the nonprofit group, the comments of two individuals cannot be generalized to the hundreds of thousands of adults currently participating in for-profit virtual universities. Moreover, the data that was gathered may have been contextually unique to the respondents and therefore not generalizable to a larger population; a larger sample size would help to mitigate this factor. Multiple attempts were made to contact additional for-profit program participants but none of those connections resulted in data collection. Overall, nonprofit program participants were much more willing to contribute to the project, which may represent a differentiation factor in and of itself. For any future iterations of this project, examination and revision of the methodology is suggested, to include more direct linkage between survey and interview participation, as well as potential monetary compensation to subjects.

Likewise, the small number of individuals espousing a preference for a for-profit online institution in the quantitative portion of this study serves as a limiting factor. While several differences in the attitudes of those individuals relative to those preferring a nonprofit institution were suggested, a greater sample size is required to examine the relative importance of those suggestions.

Use of convenience sampling for the survey component led to a sample population with demographic descriptors that were disproportionately above the average for adult college students. Most notably, the mode income level for the sample is not representative of the mean for this population. Moreover, the relatively high level of

education attained by these persons may have biased their attitudes towards the various types of higher education institutions in favor of the type of institution they attended. It is also possible that respondents contextualized their responses in terms of doctoral study, which, among other factors, limits the ability to connect the findings to those from the qualitative portion of the study.

The survey instrument also served as a limitation of this study. As the instrument was original to this project and received only limited pilot testing, validity is a concern. While establishing construct validity was not a goal of this project, a limited review of responses was conducted to assess potential problems. In this regard, two main concerns arose. First, because the majority of participants were already in possession of a graduate degree and thus had made enrollment decisions for one type of program over another, validated feelings about themselves as associated with their program may be a confounding variable. Second, the survey questions could have been better designed to control for name brand bias either towards or against an MBA degree and a national versus regional university. This was not anticipated as a problem, but may have affected data regarding perception comparisons of a nonprofit institution's online and in-residence programs.

Finally, the general paucity of literature regarding students attending for-profit institutions served as a limitation. While several ideas about this population were suggested through the data collected in this study, the absence of other research makes it difficult to establish the factors that may distinguish these students from those typically studied within the context of online education.

### Implications for Research

First and foremost, it should be acknowledged that what is known regarding adult college students does apply when considering those attending online programs, but this population should not be presumed as possessing the same characteristics as those known or assumed for adult graduate students enrolled in traditional, face-to-face programs. The findings of this study support Adams and Eveland's (2007) assertion that students interested in online programming represent a fundamentally different market segment than the one which whom most institutions are accustomed to interacting. The number of nontraditional student identifiers an individual possesses may be greater for for-profit online program students than for the segment attending nonprofit institutions, and their knowledge of how to navigate and understand the academic system appears to be more limited. Braun's (2007) argument that online programs may be "a sort of rescue and refuge for some students" (p. 64) holds true for the for-profit population in two unusual ways. First, for-profit online universities provide an outlet for adults seeking higher education but unable to locate local options that accommodate their situational constraints. These students are unlikely to search beyond their local area for another such program. In this way, these institutions serve as an informational refuge because of their marketing strategies, perhaps even more so than a situational refuge. Second, for-profit institutions may provide a personal refuge for individuals who cannot persist in a more academically or situationally challenging environment. This study was unusual in that both for-profit program interview informants had originally selected a nonprofit program but switched to the for-profit program because their situational needs were not being met. This factor was unanticipated and thus was not included in the literature review, but it is

reasonable to suppose that because these students have established a relevant connection between their self-image as an active student and their possible future self as an individual with a specific degree, changing institutions to one where they feel they can complete the degree program may provide consistency in identity (Cross & Markus, 1994) and be preferable to quitting outright.

A nuanced definition of lifelong learning appeared through this study. While much of the current literature is quick to note that society and the needs of the modern economy have commoditized the term to the point that it is thought of primarily as workforce education, the “ideal” conception of education leading to broader, more personal satisfaction still exists for some students. In particular, this latter notion is more likely to be present among those reviewing nonprofit institution. While it may take the hope of a potential economic outcome to merit the investment, the motivations for entering may be more personal and complex. Those seeking to further differentiate the motivations of nonprofit and for-profit online students would be well served to further examine and consider this factor. In terms of workforce-related continuing education, insufficient data were gathered to determine if any differentiation in institutional preference strength exists between those seeking a full career change and those simply seeking a better job within their current field, but the information collected suggest a possible division along these lines.

As for-profit virtual universities continue to attract a new population of college-seeking students, the social messages this participation communicates to families and peers merits increased examination. Evidence was presented in this study to suggest that what some individuals want to pass on to their children is the importance of the level of

education one acquires, not necessarily or specifically the place or method through which it was obtained. This presents new and powerful questions to those examining the ways in which parental educational background influences their children. Future research might investigate potential increases in the likelihood of waterfall effects occurring among social groups once an individual has demonstrated that it is possible to earn a postsecondary degree as a working adult at an institution other than a community college. Likewise, as greater numbers of students move forward in the workforce with credentials conferred by for-profit institutions, it will be interesting to watch how shifts in the acceptability of those credentials occur.

#### Implications for Practice

As traditional colleges and universities plan new online degree programs for adults, the importance of target marketing cannot be underestimated. This study confirmed that there are many individuals who simply will not look beyond what is local and obvious. Particularly for individuals who choose to attend virtual universities, the findings do support Bers's (1987) argument that adult students make the choice to attend college and where to attend at the same time, although in a much less powerful manner than the original study upon which the argument was based. What appears to be more accurate is behavior in alignment with Adams and Eveland's (2007) finding that potential students typically review three to four different web sites when 'shopping' for a program, with an emphasis on Carnevale's (2007b) finding that only 27% of online students live in a different geographic area than the institution in which they are enrolled. A lack of local options and a sense that a virtual university is the only available option may be part of the driving force behind the recent promotion strategy being used by the University of

Phoenix in which a series of television advertisements explicitly place a face, name, and story behind each student. If one assumes that a large number of marketing dollars support the direction of those advertisements, it may be reasonable to think that such institutions are finding evidence that aligns with this study's quantitative finding that for-profit participants may not have social fit as a primary decision criteria but still desire a sense that they belong. As for-profit institutions continue to solidify their established brands with working adults, traditional institutions will need to find ways to reach out to that segment and convince them that a for-profit college is not the only option available. That said, institutions should also be aware that the motivations and needs of students who are not geographically local and found the program through a deliberate search process may be dramatically different than some students who do reside locally.

At least one informant in this study suggested that students should be able to move back and forth between online and face-to-face courses as desired within a traditional college program. This and other evidence suggests that adults are looking to be able to take advantage of both worlds. They want the separate marketing and admissions channels and a class schedule that will work for them, but they also want to feel part of the institution as a whole and to be able to take advantage of services at their leisure. This may inform the challenges that recently have been presented to several national universities that were attempting to launch independent online colleges with licensed curriculum and independent accreditation. While their independent nature may have served the political and technological needs of the institution, their separation from the whole possibly outweighed any benefit lent by the name brand in the eyes of potential

students. This also has implications for programs designed around cohort models, or where tuition and fees are calculated without certain student services.

Among the set of those students thoroughly researching potential institutions, the background and qualifications of a program's instructors matter a great deal. As more instructors at traditional colleges and universities retire from full-time work and the demands of research and service, it is reasonable to suppose that many may look to part-time online teaching as an acceptable transition. In this manner, the format is as utilitarian for them as it currently is for the students. This influx of established instructors into various institutions may have the net effect of changing public perceptions of those institutions. Such a shift, however, would present issues to the current business model of large for-profit universities, as described by Brabazon (2002) and Paulson (2002), which may be a benefit to nonprofit institutions.

*Future Direction.* The purpose of this study was to determine what differences in perceptions exist among adults considering pursuit of a postsecondary degree via an online format at for-profit virtual universities and traditional nonprofit institutions. As shown by educational marketing literature, research on how the internet affects the college decision process for adults is lacking and requires further investigation. Specifically, there is a dearth of information regarding from what sources potential adult students draw conclusions about how they may fit with an institution. As the 'working adult' message has been commoditized by for-profit virtual universities to their advantage, nonprofit institutions would need better understanding of how they might communicate this image within their broader mission and goals if they wish to compete for those students. Likewise, it may be possible that perceptions of fit grow weaker as

more geographic distance separates an institution and its potential students. Studies focusing on the marketing strategies and program structure of successful nonprofit online programs would be useful in this regard.

Furthermore, studies are needed to determine how the reputation of a given online program offered by a traditional college or university relates to the reputation of that same institution's in-residence programs. Because these institutions, historically, have relegated distance education to the periphery of their concern, new programs run the risk of being perceived as not a serious part of the whole. Investigation as to which aspects may inform such perceptions is merited. Finally, of interest would be studies investigating the perceptions of current college instructors regarding teaching within a fully online program. Looking ahead a few years, this may prove a critical factor towards determining the perceived credibility and quality of online higher education.

#### Summary

The core question asked in this study was: Do nontraditional students simply find a nontraditional institution appealing, and if so, why? Those choosing to attend for-profit virtual universities do not appear to find for-profit institutions more appealing than traditional institutions, but they, often, are simply unaware that equivalent online programs may exist at traditional institutions. This informational barrier plays a large role in the selection of academic programs by some adults, who may not search beyond that which is geographically local. Those students choosing to enroll in nonprofit online programs do find the nontraditional structure appealing, but are willing to search more broadly in order to find a program that meets both their pragmatic and intrinsic needs.

An important finding of this study was that many adults do not differentiate between for-profit and nonprofit institutions within the context of online programs. Particularly among individuals who do not perceive how an institution may provide professional benefits beyond a degree (e.g., alumni groups, peer networks), the difference does not matter beyond institutional reputation. Furthermore, many adults do not understand the distinctions in mission and financial structure between the two types of institutions. As nonprofit colleges and universities continue to move into the online higher education market, the ability to communicate these differences and the benefits of attending a nonprofit over a for-profit institution in terms that are meaningful to potential students may be vital to their success.

Further research is needed to better understand the for-profit virtual university student population. While many nonprofit institutions may be uninterested in targeting this market segment, this is a new and important group of college-seeking students worthy of investigation. Particularly as notions of lifelong learning continue to evolve as society moves into the Information Age, new conceptions of how higher education may fit into the lives of adults must be considered.

## APPENDIX A

### QUESTIONNAIRE INSTRUMENT

The following survey was designed to provide information for a graduate student research project at Texas State regarding the general public perceptions and attitudes of adults on higher education as it may relate to themselves. Your participation is voluntary and you are free to exit the survey at any time. No personal information that may indicate your identity will be requested, and all results will be analyzed in a way that reviews responses as a whole, not on an individual level. The survey should take less than 5 minutes to complete.

Any inquiries regarding this study or the research findings may be directed to the principal investigator at [eh1173@txstate.edu](mailto:eh1173@txstate.edu). Any concerns regarding participation in this study may be directed to the Institutional Review Board at Texas State.

By pressing “Continue,” below, you are stating that you have read this information and consent to participate in this study.

1. Age:
  - a. 24 or under
  - b. 25-29
  - c. 30-34
  - d. 35-39
  - e. 40-49
  - f. 50 +
  
2. Approximate Annual Family Income:
  - a. Less than \$35,000
  - b. \$35,000 – 50,000
  - c. \$50,000 – 75,000
  - d. \$75,000 – 100,000
  - e. More than \$100,000

3. Previous level of education:
  - a. High school or equivalent
  - b. Some college
  - c. Associates degree
  - d. Bachelors degree
  - e. Some graduate coursework
  - f. Graduate degree
  
4. Assume for the moment that you, at this point in your life, find that you have the desire and need to go to college. If you had to choose one type of college, would you be more likely to enroll in:
  - a. An online program offered by a large, known university
  - b. Community college
  - c. A local college or university
  - d. An online program offered by an institution that specializes in online education
  - e. None of the above
  
5. Why?
  - a. Affordable
  - b. Gives me the flexibility I need
  - c. Has students with my same general level of intelligence
  - d. Offers the type of classes I want
  - e. I probably couldn't get into a better school
  - f. Has students with my same type of experience
  - g. I don't want to have to compete against younger students
  - h. Meets my personal standards
  - i. Fastest way to achieve my goals
  - j. I couldn't say, but it just feels right
  - k. Other (explain)
  
6. When you hear the term "for-profit university", what do you think of? (Check as many as apply)
  - a. Quick and easy way to get the credentials necessary for a career change
  - b. A place for people who couldn't get into a traditional college
  - c. Costs paid through tuition and fees, no financial aid
  - d. Any college that generates a profit
  - e. Marketing scams, "diploma mills"
  - f. University of Phoenix

- g. DeVry, real estate schools, culinary schools, etc
- h. Usually the only option for working adults
- i. A necessary alternative to more traditional colleges
- j. Other (explain)

7. Note how strongly you agree with the following statements, using the scale provided. A response of 0 (zero) indicates that you Strongly Disagree, and a response of 5 (five) indicates that you Strongly Agree. If you think that “it depends”, choose the answer that most closely matches your general perception.

0 = Strongly Disagree

1 = Disagree

2 = Somewhat Disagree

3 = Somewhat Agree

4 = Agree

5 = Strongly Agree

- a. Online education programs, generally speaking, are effective for providing higher education.
- b. Online education programs, generally speaking, are effective for providing continuing education, or coursework that does not end in any sort of certificate or degree.
- c. For-profit colleges and universities are better equipped to provide quality online education than traditional colleges and universities.
- d. Traditional colleges and universities are better equipped to provide quality online education than for-profit colleges and universities.
- e. A degree from a for-profit university is just as good as a degree from a regular university.
- f. A degree from a traditional college or university is more valuable than a degree from a for-profit university.
- g. For-profit universities are more difficult.
- h. The instructors are better at traditional colleges and universities.
- i. Adults shouldn't have to compete with kids for admission to college.
- j. I think it is important for colleges to ask for letters of recommendation as part of an application.
- k. Traditional colleges and universities are for adults as well as youth.
- l. For-profit colleges cost less than traditional colleges.
- m. The students at traditional colleges and universities are smarter than the students at for-profit colleges.
- n. The students at community colleges are smarter than the students at for-profit colleges.

- o. The students at for-profit colleges are more motivated than the students at traditional colleges.
  - p. The education provided by traditional colleges is less relevant for an adult than the education provided at for-profit colleges.
8. From the list below, select as many items as you wish that you feel best describe each of the following institutions. At least one institution should be selected for each item.

	Ohio State University	Online MBA at Texas State	University of Phoenix
Is worth the money			
Is meant mostly for kids coming straight out of high school			
Employers would value a degree earned here			
Takes too long to get admitted and start classes			
Has students that are probably a lot like me			
Is overpriced			
Provides quality education for students of all ages			
Is a place I might be able to get into			
“Gets” that adults are different from kids coming straight out of high school			

9. From the list below, select as many items as you wish that you feel best describe the **adults** who attend the following institutions. At least one institution should be selected for each item.

	Ohio State University	Online MBA at Texas State	University of Phoenix
May have attended college previously, but didn't do that well			
Probably aren't that motivated			
Are looking to move into a specific job or career			
Will likely complete the degree program they started			
Probably did not consider any other colleges, just this one			
Probably are very intelligent			
Are probably a lot like me			
Need to fill a hole on their resume			
Possibly didn't have much or enough of a social life prior to enrolling			

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW GUIDE

Question #1: Could you describe for me the reasons why you decided to go back to college?

- Were there any other reasons -- perhaps something that is personally important to you?
- Where did you get your undergraduate degree? Very briefly, could you describe for me what college was like for you then?

Question #2: Why an online program?

- Did you look at other programs before deciding on this one? How many?
- What was it about this particular program that interested you?
- Have you had any prior experience with any kind of online learning? What kind? What did you think of it?
- Has this experience been different than what you imagined it might be like when you signed up? How so?

Question #3: Did you (or How seriously did you) consider (the other type of institution)?

- Why? (or, Why not?)
- Let's pretend for a moment that (the other type of institution) had this exact same program, content-wise, and both were offered online at the same schedule. All things being equal from that perspective, do you think you still would have selected the program that you did? Why? (or, Why not?)
- Can you describe for me what it is that makes you think that?

- I'd like for you to try to picture in your mind a student that actually attends that institution? Can you describe for me what that person is like?
- Do you think the classes they're taking are any different than yours? How so?

Question #4: So you have (will get) your degree. What do you hope to do with it?

- Do you have a specific plan or thoughts about where you might put your new knowledge and skills to use?
- If you had to guess, how do you think employers will look at your degree? Meaning, do you think they'd think of it any differently than one from the other type of institution?
- Do you see any more formal education in your future, or is this the end of the line?

Question #5: For the purposes of this study, I am also speaking to people who selected (the other type of institution). If you had to guess, do you think those conversations might be different than the one we've been having? How so?

- Why do you think that?

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## VITA

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