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Graduate Students' Beliefs and Perceptions of Student Engagement and Learning Platforms in Higher Education

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Platforms in Higher Education

by
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Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
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Approval Page

This applied dissertation was submitted by Amanda Napolitano under the direction of the
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Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

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Amanda Napolitano

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Date

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Abstract

Graduate Students' Beliefs and Perceptions of Student Engagement and Learning Platforms in Higher Education: Amanda Napolitano, 2017: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education. Keywords: student engagement, graduate students, face-to-face instruction, online instruction, blended instruction, social development, higher education, phenomenology, qualitative research, student experiences

This applied dissertation was designed to understand and explore the experiences of graduate students at a public four-year higher education institution in the southeastern region of the United States. This study utilized an interview based phenomenological qualitative study design approach for data collection and analysis. Committees in the field of higher education reviewed and approved the interview protocol. The research study and data analysis were conducted in the Spring Semester of 2017. The researcher employed semi-structured interviews that were guided by ten protocol questions. Transcription accuracy, credibility, and trustworthiness were established through diligent adherence to university protocols. The collected data revealed themes that supported the researchers' understanding of graduate students' perception of engagement and experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings.

The qualitative research study provides in-depth insight for future enrollees and program development. The selected institution's IRB and Nova Southeastern University's IRB granted permission to conduct the study. A phenomenological approach was used to maximize exploration of graduate students' perception of engagement and experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended graduate level classroom settings. Ten protocol questions guided the semi-structured interviews. Subsequent to the scheduled 60-minute interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to describe the meaning of several individuals' perceptions. The most prevalent theme that emerged was a lack of meaningful social interaction, or student engagement, in online formats. Once the data had been analyzed, recommendations for future research were provided to support the needs of a graduate student population on university campuses.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Higher Education shapes the lives of many Americans and scholars worldwide. Along with having a critical role in academia, the higher education system has also created a presumption of the college lifestyle. It holds true that certain elements of undergraduate and graduate programs are comparable, yet there are many key factors that delineate an extensive difference between the two tiers. First and foremost, age and experience are evident disparities between the two categories. Graduate students tend to be much more responsible and skilled than their undergraduate counterparts, which directly influences the academic environment (Jung, 2015). This factor is a result of age and time spent in their field of study. Secondly, graduate students are expected to thrive in an advanced environment that is exceedingly more independent and self guided than their undergraduate counterparts. Having the ability to navigate ones own scholastic progress without dependent use of guidance or enrollment counselors is a basic expectation of graduate students. Lastly, graduate students experience an atypical sense of campus life. Unlike their time spent in undergraduate studies, graduate students are inclined to reside in off-campus housing while working full time and commuting to class, or opting to take advantage of distance learning. Holiday breaks are known to be consumed with fulfillment of adult responsibilities; the ability to explore and partake in student life is over shadowed by work related duties and meetings with professors or colleagues (Instructional Design, 2015).

Over time, the education system has evolved to accommodate the diverse community of students it serves. In lieu of the ever-evolving term "student", face-to-

face, online, and blended learning courses now provide students with multiple ways to reach the goal of degree attainment or an intrinsic pursuit of knowledge. The 21st century learning model incorporates technologies, takes advancements into consideration, and aims to meet individual needs (Jung, 2015). Face-to-face learning is defined as instruction that occurs in person, in real time between teachers and students (Hidden curriculum, 2014). Online education is defined as instruction being delivered via Internet (Hidden curriculum, 2014), and blended education is defined as the practice of using both online and face-to-face teaching methods (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Today's contemporary society has transformed the way higher education is perused, namely in the field of graduate studies. Various pathways to student learning have emerged, and modern, adult students have reframed the idea that instruction takes place within the confines of a classroom setting. Consequently, a range of educational aspects has been delved into deeper when studying this new culture of learning.

One of the greatest predictors of graduate student fulfillment has been cited as their level of student engagement. Student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education (Hidden Curriculum, 2014). Aurora University (2011) defines instructional modalities as different methods of instruction intended to suit all learners. Recent studies examining large numbers of online students suggest that satisfaction rates for online and blended learning students may be lower than students taking advantage of the traditional face-to-face method (Crews & Butterfield, 2014). In accordance with the concerns surrounding learning in an online setting, McGinley, Osgood, and Kenney's

(2012) case study revealed the presence of quality gaps in various methods of instruction. A primary concern with online and blended education was cited to be whether or not students feel it has the ability to encompass higher order thinking skills, a cornerstone of purposeful learning.

Allen and Seaman (2014) reported that a vast 7.1 million higher education students are enrolled in online courses. The online student population growth rate has spiked to 6.1%, which represents over 400,000 students taking at least one type of e-course. However, academic leaders have voiced conflicting points of view when conveying their opinion of overall course contentment. Positive perceptions of online and traditional formats rose from 57% to 74% in 2013, but with many eminent disparities (Allen & Seaman, 2014). The National Center for Education Statistics (2012) disclosed that 22% of graduate students are enrolled exclusively in distance education courses, 7.8% of students are enrolled in some but not all distance education courses, and 70.2% are not enrolled in any distance education courses. Moreover, The Student Satisfaction Inventory, otherwise known as the SSI, affirmed that student engagement, an element that avenues of online learning has reportedly lacked in, is a critical component of student satisfaction. Student engagement is two fold; in order for a learner to be fully engaged they must devote time and effort to their studies, while taking part in purposeful activities. The second feature relates to how universities organize research, curriculum, and learning opportunities. Providing opportunities for students to be active participants in their education is directly linked to the fulfillment of student needs (Student Satisfaction Inventory, 2014).

The issue explored in this study is the experience of Master's level graduate

students registered in face-to-face, online, and blended courses and the level of impact student engagement imposes on them. Essentially, the presence of a social-relational experience has been recognized as a key factor in student satisfaction within higher education; this dissertation explores which learning format best fulfills such needs. The problem researched in this study is how student engagement impacts varied learning platforms. There is a growing demand for accessibility offered by online learning, however, learners are not immersed in an environment that cultivates student engagement, which is prevalent in face-to-face course formats.

Phenomenon of Interest

Phenomenology holds that each individual thinks uniquely (Smith, 2003). In this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher aimed to explore Master's level graduate student experiences within face-to-face, online, and blended learning. By means of participants perceiving the phenomena in varied ways, multiple realizations will be represented. Gaining an improved understanding of graduate students' perceptions will support a paradigm that is dependent upon participant contribution, an integral component of change in practice (Hall & Villareal, 2015). Prior studies have discovered that a greater sense of community is perceived in face-to-face than online courses and hybrid, yet fail to exhibit how increased student engagement influences students' perception of the course (Ritter, Polnick, Fink, & Oescher, 2010).

Background and Justification

The metropolitan public university is a scholastic home to 31,067 undergraduate students, 45% of which are male and 55% of which are female. Combined with graduate students, the university serves nearly 48,000 students total (U.S. News & World Report,

2016). The urban campus that sprawls over 1,562 acres ranks as one of the largest public universities in the nation. The study institution is comprised of three separately accredited institutions by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (U.S. News & World Report, 2016). Among many other accomplishments, the University earned recognition as being in the top tier of research universities, classified by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; a distinction held by only 2.3% of all universities (U.S. News & World Report, 2016). It prides itself on offering a dynamic learning environment, which fosters collaboration, encourages creativity, inspires innovation, and propels success.

This study focused on Master's level graduate students within the College of Education at one of the three campuses, noted as Campus A for the purpose of this study. The College of Education, Campus A is comprised of 559 Master's students, 39 professors, 28 Associate Professors, and 16 Assistant Professors. The student headcount trend has been steadily decreasing since the Fall semester of 2011, which boasted 783 students. The Fall semester of 2012 declined 638 students, Fall 2013 638 students, Fall 2014, 568 students, Fall 2015, 532 students, and Fall 2016, 461 students. The first increase in headcount since 2011 was between 2016 and 2017 (University of South Florida, n.d.). The amount of students taking online and face-to-face courses has varied a great deal from 2011 to present day 2017. The average variation falls within 35% of students favoring one delivery system to the other. Each year has shown differences between student preferences; yet online learning has been the more popular option on average (University of South Florida, n.d.).

Deficiencies in the Evidence

There has been a great deal of research dedicated to general online versus face-to-face learning with undergraduate students, whereas few studies have focused on blended versus face-to-face learning; exclusively centralized around student engagement in graduate programs. This qualitative phenomenological study explored graduate students' experiences of academic engagement in online, blended, and traditional classrooms within higher education. Research has shown that individuals benefit from a social-relational experience but it fails to illustrate how that need is translated into scholastic prosperity (Hoertitz, 2013). Additionally, research has attributed dissatisfaction in online courses to technical difficulties, a feeling of isolation, a relative lack of structure, and a general lack of support, but has neglected to shed equal light on the new approach of blended learning (Crews & Butterfield, 2014).

Audience

The intended audiences for this study were students, professors, and administration. This study contributed to the field of education by sharing student experiences and perspectives of engagement across the spectrum of various instructional modalities, thereby revealing if it is necessary for a psychological investment in learning to be present. The studies audience of students, professors, and administrators will also discover how social interaction and engagement play a fundamental role in the development of cognition. First, students will be provided with a source dedicated to exploring the importance of engagement throughout their studies. Secondly, professors will gain insight on how various learning modalities influence levels of student engagement and the outcome they have on a courses' popularity. Lastly, administrators

will benefit from a student-centered perspective of how different elements within higher education, such as student engagement, directly relates to the positive or negative feedback their institution receives.

Definition of Terms

Blended Learning. The practice of using both online and in person learning experiences when teaching students (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

Face-to-face Learning. Any form of instruction that occurs in person and in real time between teachers and students (Hidden Curriculum, 2014).

Graduate Student. A full-time student who is continuing their education in a College of Education Master's program, for the purpose of this study.

Online Course. A course that delivers more than 80% of its content online, with the absence of face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

Phenomenology. The study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Smith, 2013).

Qualitative Study. A systematic subjective approach used to describe life experiences and give them meaning (University of Missouri, n.d.)

Student Engagement. The degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education (National Survey of Student Engagement, n.d.).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore graduate students' perception of engagement and experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended

classroom settings within higher education. Allen and Seaman (2008) reported that 644,000 graduate students across the nation were enrolled in either online or blended courses. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Education (2012) highlighted the fact that 876,552 graduate students choose to take at least one, if not all, of their classes in an online environment. Based on the rising enrollment statistics, exploring graduate students' experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended learning courses will provide invaluable insight for future enrollees and program development.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The review of literature identified sources that studied various delivery formats within higher education. These resources laid the foundation to explore the link between graduate students' level of student engagement and their perceptions of face-to-face, online, and blended courses. The research offered sound data and applicable information pertaining to graduate students' viewpoints of their multi-platform university experience.

Theoretical Perspective

The link between student engagement and learning platforms at the graduate level was explored through a phenomenological lens. Phenomenology refers to a person's perception of meaning (Manen, 1990). The author deliberatively chose this theoretical perspective to align with Creswell's (2009) research, which stated that phenomenology is instrumental in identifying the underling meaning in human experiences, as they relate to a collective occurrence. An emphasis was placed on taking interest in understanding the participants' experiences and the meaning they make out of those experiences. Subsequently, dimensional perspectives and individual understandings were accessed, thereby attaining a significant description of the human experience based in specific circumstances.

Social Development Theory

Lev Vygotsky's Social Development Theory stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Bruner, 2015). Vygotsky's work highlights community playing a central role in the process of making meaning. Wertsch (2008) affirmed that Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, a component of the

Social Development Theory, relates to higher mental functions. According to the theory, one's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving differs from the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with peers (Vygotsky & Rieber, 1997). Relating to phenomenology, Vygotsky's research was centered on the phenomenon of human development (Smagorinsky, Hansen, & Fink, L. 2013). The central facet of his approach to learning is conducting activity in meaningful practices through contributing to one's involvement with people and the academic tools (Smagorinsky et al., 2013). This theory, illustrated below in *Figure 1*, lends itself to analyzing the link between graduate students' experiences with face-to-face instruction, distance education, and blended courses, as it relates to their level of student engagement.

According to the Social Development Theory, social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition and indicates that consciousness and cognition are the end product of social behavior (Instructional Design, 2015). The theory originally developed by Lev Vygotsky, 1978, also asserts language is the main tool that promotes thinking, develops reasoning, and supports cultural activities such as reading and writing. Furthermore, it has been cited that students perform more favorably in a collaborative, stimulus- rich learning environment (Sobota, 2014). Despite such findings, online higher education classes have rapidly increased in popularity. The Sloan Consortium's 2010 *Survey of Online Learning in the United States* distinguished that online course enrollment increased by nearly one million students between 2008 and 2009. Data strongly suggests that universities can expect a continued interest in online class offerings. Considering the significant impact online education has had on higher

education, it's ability to sufficiently produce an overall learning experience equivalent to a face-to-face delivery method remains a main concern. Although Vygotsky recognized that learning could not be separated from a social context, a students' perception of learning is argued to be as crucial as the actual learning outcome. These perceptions affect learning experiences, pedagogical outcomes of a course, and the acceptance of online classes within higher education (Platt & Yu, 2014).
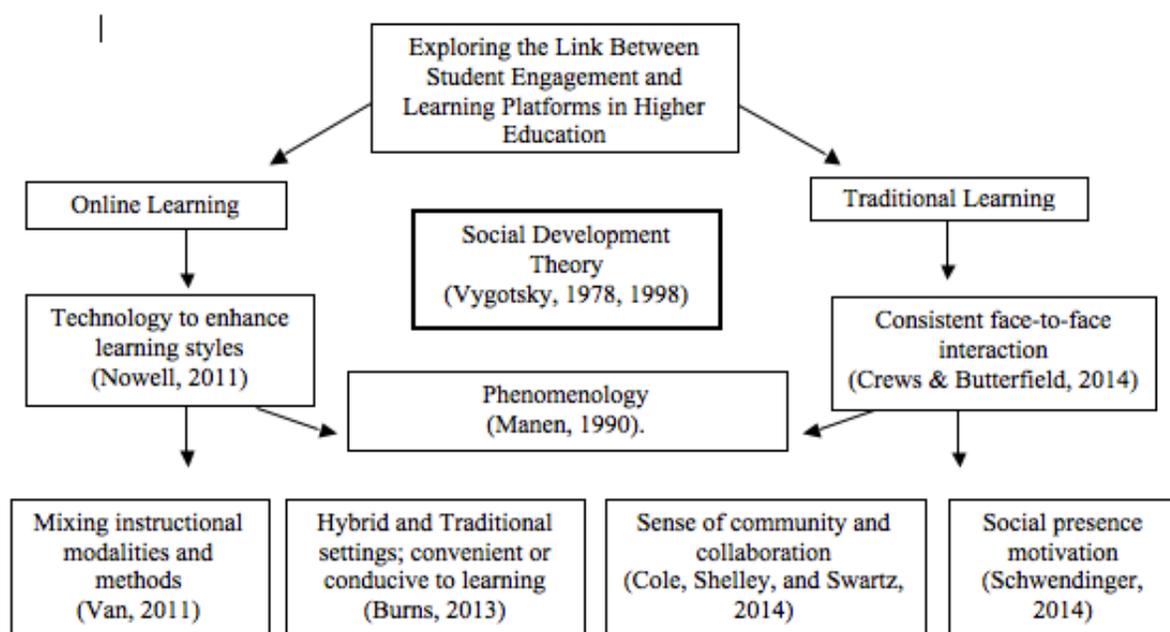
Figure 1. Literature Map.

Historical Context of The Study

Ambitions, levels of individuality, and ideas of students energize a university. The field of education is constantly evolving, which caters to the fact that learning is a lifelong pursuit. In order to stay relevant, higher education is tasked with the obligation of constantly innovating and reviving itself, ensuring that the system thrives and recaptures its historical grandeur. While higher education as a whole has evolved from

its colonial roots, the diversification of a college scholar has remolded the dynamics of the current day, twenty first century student body.

The scene of American higher education has undergone dramatic change since its initial formalization. For example, a considerable amount of workforce training takes place in college. A majority of high school graduates now follow some sort of educational path after graduation; a trend that has substantially rose overtime. According to Baum, Kurose, and McPherson (2013), there are now more undergraduate students enrolled in community colleges than in public universities. Additionally, out of the students attending private universities, approximately one third of them attend a for-profit institution (Baum et al., 2013). Academic disciplines are available in an array of disciplines and formats. Curriculum has been revolutionized; the scope of change highlights significant differences from the early 1960s.

Research by Driscoll, Comm, Mathaisel, and Dennis (2013) suggests that during the beginning of the 20th century, less than five 5% of 18-year-old Americans attended college. Granted, there were fewer than a thousand colleges and universities established at the time, of which only a slim 38 of them offered doctoral degrees (Driscoll et al., 2013). Illustrating the enormous physical and ideological growth since 1911, the United States migrated from an education system that included a small percentage of the population to a system of higher education that accepts all high school graduates and functions as a centerpiece of the nation's socioeconomic and political nucleus (Driscoll et al., 2013).

A theme that pervades throughout the nation's history is that higher education is the heart of democracy and economy. In order for students to support and thrive in

higher education, they must be able to rely on their university to deliver meaningful tools for success (Driscoll, 2013). The combination of people, support, technology, facilities, tools, and materials create student sustainability. As an industry, higher education continues to grow. Thelin (2011) stated that in the early twenty-first century, total enrolment in over 3,000 institutions increased to 16 million. Ensuring that students maintain trust in the system is an immense determinate of the way America shows support towards higher education.

With today's learner being exposed to such a host of technologies, student engagement has become increasingly difficult to obtain. Teachers and professors are faced with the task of actively engaging students through implementation of web-based applications, thereby creating a 21st century educational experience. Classroom expectations have evolved over time. Contemporary betterment has surpassed the confinements of four walls and rows of desks and gained unlimited access to educational materials. While the current generation is more tech-savvy than previous learners, educators have expressed concern regarding students being present learners, who are truly in tune with the learning process. According to Thiele and Mai (2014), life has changed in the past decade because of three revolutions in technology: (1) the spread of broadband (2) the rise of mobile connectivity and (3) the emergence of technological social networks.

The Internet has evolved from a search tool to an interactive medium (Thiele & Mai, 2014). Studies have shown that creating interactive, web-based activities using Web 2.0 technologies is an important aspect of the student-centered classroom, allowing for enhanced engagement and learning of course content (Thiele & Mai, 2014). Courts

and Tucker (2012) cited that online resources and technology based applications allow educators to serve students quickly and efficiently, in a manner which the 21st century student is most inclined to be familiar. Offering scholars avenues to real world based skills while sharpening collaboration techniques and tapping into creative ways to synthesize content and express ideas serves the changing profile of students.

Graduate Level Learning Platforms

The twentieth century welcomed a new perspective on the student experience. Over time, Higher Education evolved from following a policy that was strictly academic, giving little consideration to students as individuals, to offering an array of courses through delivery methods that best suit each type of learner. Suddenly, the focus of higher education was shifted to educating the whole student (Schuh, Jones, & Harper, 2011). Looking at subgroups within an institution, graduate students differ from undergraduate students in a number of ways. Undergraduate students often have research inexperience, a less evolved commitment to academic priorities, and lesser maturity levels. Graduate students, however, are prone to be more self-driven and are well aware of expectations, skill sets, and ethics. Graduate students are also likely to have better developed time management and self-disciplinary skills.

Equipped with the understanding to gain meaning from distance education, graduate students often favor this avenue due to its support of alternative learning styles that are not possible in a traditional classroom. Nevertheless, researchers and practitioners still argue that the most effective components of traditional learning may not be as effective when delivered in an online format. (McGinley, Osgood, & Kenney, 2012). Cercone (2008) gathered that high quality e-learning could not exist in the

absence of social interaction and peer collaboration, connecting knowledge to past experiences, offering immediate application of learned material, a climate of self-reflection, and self-regulated learning. Learner centered principals are stressed when seeking out favorable perceptions about online learning. Constructivism and sociocultural theories must also be applied to distance instruction to yield an acceptable level of student engagement.

As indicated by research, satisfaction with the educational process must be compared to the pedagogy's effectiveness (McGinley, Osgood, & Kenney, 2012). Students who report that they were engaged and satisfied with their courses have been proven to reach academic success. A landmark study conducted in 2009 compared student engagement learning, and satisfaction in both face-to-face and online settings. It was found that the traditional face-to-face students reported slightly higher gains in higher order thinking, as well as higher levels of engagement and overall satisfaction than their online respondents (Rabe-Hemp, Woollen, & Humiston, 2009). The growing focus on deep learning principals requires exploration, reflection, and production to establish a framework for cognitive advancement and purposeful student engagement (McGinley, Osgood, & Henney, 2012).

The Paradox of Choice

With online instruction growing in popularity, students are provided with an assortment of delivery methods to choose from that best suit their personal preferences. Mastel-Smith and Lake (2015) found four themes that emerged during the selection of learning platforms: (a) online experiences, (b) similarities and differences between online and face-to-face teaching, (c) online presence, and (d) organization of material. Online

experience is twofold; this category lends itself to the faculty's online teaching record and feelings about e-learning. Findings revealed that students are interested in faculty's personal teaching philosophy, technology background, communication style, teaching methods and views on student engagement. Students were also shown to be interested in the amount of content that will be covered in online courses when compared with face-to-face courses, flexibility, and expected level of independence (Mastel-Smith & Lake, 2015).

Similarities and differences between online and face-to-face instruction can vary tremendously. Students were reported to believe that communication is a valuable asset in all forms of instruction, but were most interested in what form of communication would be used when looking at distance courses. Depending on Skype, Blackboard, Collaborate, phone conferences, email correspondences and discussion boards, students formulated their opinion on whether or not the selected method would be acceptable for their level of comfort (Mastel-Smith & Lake, 2015). Teaching methods were also flagged as an area of significance. Types of assignments, frequency of meetings, and management system tools were all deemed as areas of concern. Students found it necessary to research whether or not assignments, quizzes, exams, and data analyses differed from online and face-to-face instruction. When doing so, they evaluated the content and assessed feedback from previous course enrollees (Mastel-Smith & Lake, 2015).

Online presence entails the use of student engagement practices. Students are curious if the faculty recognizes that they must be engaged while learning. After discovering low levels of student engagement woven into the course, some students

would reportedly opt out of the online platform because they are aware that a weakness of theirs is establishing self-structure. On the contrary, other students may use this to propel them because they knew prioritizing life demands was a strength of theirs. For some, the online presence is an ideal environment because it acts as an equalizer. Providing a sense of anonymity, certain students may feel that they are responding in a preferred environment (Mastel-Smith & Lake, 2015).

Organization of the material encompasses time and many course demands. Students view their availability as a priority; hence, they must ensure that classes are offered at time that would fit their evolving schedule. Students proclaimed that they valued and appreciated the flexibility that e-learning offers. Yet, students also expressed concern about faculty availability. In both online and face-to-face courses scheduling time to meet with professors with a reasonable amount of availability was said to be a coveted aspect of instruction. Some students shared that online courses are more time consuming than face-to-face courses. Others defended the practicality of online delivery methods and stated that unlike face-to-face courses, course information can be accessed twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Although communications are achieved in numerous ways, the classroom community was unanimously an imperative component (Mastel-Smith & Lake, 2015).

Student Format Preferences

Crews and Butterfield (2014) investigated and identified student preferences for both face-to-face and online related learning. Changes in education have traditionally evolved slowly, but new developments in information technology have increased this rate of change. There has been a notable increase in student enrollment for online courses

throughout the past decade (Crews & Butterfield, 2014). While the convenience of an online delivery method is enticing, some students are not suited for such a delivery system. Hassan, Abiddin, and Yew (2014) noted such disparities and investigated methods of learning that encourage the highest level of student involvement. Results determined significant differences in metacognitive awareness strategies used in online learning formats versus learning that takes place in a classroom setting.

Although modern universities have drastically evolved over time, many of the pedagogical approaches that are still in common use have changed little since early times (Crews & Butterfield, 2014). Hassan, Abiddin, and Yew (2014) defined online learning as the experience where teachers and learners are separated physically, only connected through an online network system where educational contents are shared and virtual communication occurs within students, teachers and staff. What has been described to change is the technology used to refine and improve the delivery of instruction. The e-based delivery system is also described using the terms distance learning, web-based education, and virtual education. Many researchers have investigated the importance of online learning, yet the significant impact traditional classroom delivery has on learning cannot be overshadowed by current technological trends (Hassan et al., 2014).

Despite the popularity and advantages of online learning, there are still weaknesses inherent in asynchronous delivery. Some of the reasons cited for problems in online courses include: technical difficulties, a feeling of isolation, a relative lack of structure, and a general lack of support (Crews & Butterfield, 2014). The blended method was created to address such issues, mixing modalities of blended and on site course work. The Crews and Butterfield (2014) study revealed that students value active

learning and interaction during face-to-face meetings; including peer interaction through small groups and discussion. This is consistent with Vygotsky's Social Development theory, which postulates that learning is an active process involving both a socio-cultural context. In today's competitive society, modern students are expected to be technologically savvy. Online learning does fulfill the component of imbedding technology into education, yet still has an array of drawbacks. The most prominent disadvantage an absence of physical interaction between the teachers and students (Hassan et al., 2014). It has been found that online learning is valued, but interaction is what creates a meaningful experience for students (Hassan et al., 2014).

Tseng and Walsh (2016) sought to investigate students' experiences and perceptions in blended and traditional courses to shed light on disadvantages of online learning. They found that motivation remains a key factor when developing innovative instruction. Significant findings were cited in the areas of confidence and satisfaction, illustrating that those two elements are crucial components of student satisfaction. Likewise, Diebert (2015) stated that adult learner motivational characteristics are (a) motivation stems from a feeling of adaptive self-efficacy opportunities that they feel competent in, (b) being in control of one's own learning increases motivation, (c) motivation levels are increased when higher levels of learning opportunities are sensed, (d) motivation varies by the learner's interest in the topic, and (e) students gain motivation by identifying specific and measurable goals. Blended learning and face-to-face learning reportedly cater to the five motivational characteristics more so than distance courses, thus making them more desirable options.

Graduate Students' Perceptions of Learning Environments

Environments that report the most successful student engagement ratings encourage active and collaborative learning, interaction with faculty, strong participation, diverse experiences, and higher order thinking (Pike, Kuh, & McCormick, 2011). Yang, Cho, Matthew, and Worth (2011) confirmed that these elements are significant because they support student engagement and result in students perceiving the value of the course to increase as a result of heightened interest in the course itself and harnessing a greater sense of classroom community. Such factors define an experience and mold a students' mindset. This affects their motivation, which is a direct path to their overall satisfaction.

Although a sense of community is inarguably important, it does not entirely determine the motivational outcomes of a course. In a vast 2010 study 126 graduate students were surveyed about their personal experiences with sense of community. The students were enrolled in either face-to-face or hybrid courses; exclusively e-learning environments was not part of the study. Ritter et al., (2010) discovered that students in the hybrid courses scored a sense of community lower on the survey, and interestingly the variation did not affect their perception of the learning experience. Boling et al. (2012) contended that finding and asserted that a majority of online courses were text based with limited opportunities for interaction, which was counterproductive for graduate students. The study shared how dynamic, interactive, and supportive elements of a course energized a learning community. The Ritter et al., (2010) and Boling et al. (2012) studies has inspired recent research to explore graduate students' perceptions of engagement and how they parlay into student satisfaction.

Studies of this nature are important to continue, seeing as they inform course

design and provide insight on varied learning platforms. With graduate courses offered

in face-to-face, online, and hybrid formats, technology may still positively contribute to

each and be a component of the respective courses. However, the studies above found

that non-traditional graduate students may be anxious or uncomfortable with the

integration of technology. These feelings of discontent may produce anxiety that

negatively affects student perceptions and student satisfaction (Bolliger & Halupa, 2012).

Bolliger and Halupa's research led to the discovery that their graduate student

participants found satisfaction within their online courses. They found them to be

demanding and anticipated engagement with their online peers. In this particular study,

the online delivery method did not prove the e-learning format to be a significant factor

in determining the motivational level of graduate students.

Importance of Modality

Students are in the role of information seekers; hence, cyber learning and face-to-

face learning alike must be formatted as an active learning experience. Appealing to a

variety of academic demands, online courses are challenged to provide learners with

media rich modules that are engaging and provide a multitude of ways to contribute to

the virtual classroom (Wiechowski, & Washburn, 2014). In order for educational

modalities to effectively reach the student, they must have transformational potential,

offer opportunities to embrace technology, encourage a community of integrity, and

support active and meaningful learning (Poon, 2014). Strengthening the learning

experience improves student satisfaction.

Continuing to explore the magnitude of classroom delivery importance, Bunn,

Fischer, and Marsh (2014) sought out to determine if a difference existed in student

enjoyment and participation between an online and face-to-face course class taught by the same professor. The development of technology has been transformational in the field of education. With the Internet being recognized as an integral aspect of most individuals' daily lives, technical breakthroughs and cultural impacts have shaped the realm of modern scholars. Albeit, through survey analysis, it was concluded that students perform better and find more enjoyment in the face-to-face format than online (Bunn et al., 2014). Cole, Shelley, and Swartz (2014) reaffirmed the importance of delivery methods by reflecting on a three-year study of online and blended learning satisfaction. Consistent with prior research, Cole, Shelley, and Swartz (2014) concluded that a consistent find throughout the study was that in order to build a sense of community, interaction is key. In both studies, participants cited that traditional courses with communication and feedback between instructor and student establish a more collaborative and cooperative environment. It was speculated that communication in face-to-face courses often includes nonverbal cues that may reduce cognitive effort and ambiguity, thereby making the course more receptive (Bunn et al., 2014). Cole, Shelley, and Swartz (2014) supported that assertion through discovering that fostering student satisfaction through using online blended models did not produce the equivalent level of student engagement as face-to-face courses did. The reoccurring missing component in both studies was interaction between students and instructors, in addition to peer-to-peer interaction.

Crawford, Barker, and Seyam (2014) touched on the fact that hybrid and online learning was once thought of as an innovative solution to meet the demands of a growing student body on a shrinking budget. Conversely, their study showed that distance education students didn't fare as well academically compared to their traditional peers.

Overall student engagement suffered, thereby causing a new dilemma of disinterest. Siu-Man, Ting, and Gonzalez (2013) shared similar findings from their quality of interactions study. A vast amount of professions place emphasis on interpersonal skills such as nonverbal cues, active listening, and hear-and-now immediacy, which are difficult to practice in a virtual environment (Siu-Man, Ting, & Gonzalez, 2013). The 2013 study also discovered that in face-to-face classes, core ideas revolved around positively enhanced learning experiences, whereas majority of student survey responses from the hybrid class had a negative slant, citing "difficult format" and "technical problems" (Siu-Man, Ting, & Gonzalez, 2013). Faultfinding reviews of virtual classrooms generate limitations for expanding modalities in higher education.

Impact of Student Engagement

Student engagement has been linked to measuring success in terms of student satisfaction (Fredrickson, 2015). When seeking to improve student outcomes, universities often turn to student engagement feedback due to its strong correlation with academic achievement. Fredrickson (2015) reported that universities are encouraged to incorporate high impact educational practices, such as a strong sense of collaboration, which have been associated with student engagement and retention. Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) updated the Seven Principals of Good Practice when they emphasized the importance of active learning strategies for both online and face-to-face learners. Due to the fact that student engagement is one of the primary components of effective instruction, identifying what is most likely to engage students is critical to their success, as well as the university's success (Fredrickson, 2015).

According to Chickering and Ehrmann (1996), the following components dictate

the learning environment: faculty and student contacts, timely and exhaustive feedback, cooperation and reciprocity among peers, and the use of active learning techniques. Since distance courses have less opportunity for face-to-face interaction by nature, it is suggested that organizing courses around collaborative projects that provide reflection over a period of time while requiring student interaction to promote active learning. Winsett, Foster, Dearing, and Burch (2016) affirmed that students must be cognitively engaged in class and out of class when completing independent work in order to affectively understand the presented material and demonstrate mastery of knowledge. One way to meet the criteria of creating opportunities for engagement is to increase the amount of social learning that takes place within a course.

In Winsett, Foster, Dearing, and Burch's (2016) study 88 business management students were sampled to determine the affects that group discussion, group projects, and general interaction had on dimensions of student engagement. Prior to conducting the study, the researchers recognized that the more time a student spends putting a particular concept to use; the more likely it is for the student to obtain mastery of the content. Thus, student engagement is an essential learning component. Students associate engagement with active participation (Winsett, Foster, Dearing, & Burch, 2016). Consequently, student engagement may never be attained if one is not prone to be collaborative or the instructor fails to properly communicate expectations and instructions.

Hoover and Whitehead (1975) raised interest in experimental learning when they stated that the process involves more than cognitive learning that is standard in higher education. Experimental learning was defined as learning which exists when a participant cognitively, affectively, and behaviorally processes knowledge, skills, and/or

attitudes in a learning scenario characterized by increased levels of active involvement (Hoover & Whitehead, 1975). Experimental learning was coined by Klob (1984) who proposed the following six characteristics of experimental learning (a) learning is a process, not outcome; (b) learning is a continuous process grounded in experience; (c) learning requires the resolution of conflicts; (d) learning is a holistic process of adaptation to the world; (e) learning involves transactions between an individual and their environment; and (f) learning is the process of creating knowledge as a result of social knowledge and personal knowledge. Over the years experimental learning has earned the prestige of being one of the most powerful teaching and learning tools (Winsett, Foster, Dearing, & Burch's, 2016).

Social Learning

Bandura (1977) pioneered an aspect of social learning through explaining it as knowledge and understanding that is best undertaken through collaboration with others as opposed to individually. Simply put, social learning is acquiring knowledge as a group. The process involves observing how others act, noticing the consequences, and modifying one's own behavior accordingly. Bandura (1977) believed that students must first be active learners in order to take advantage and properly benefit from social learning. Perkins (1999) addressed how social learning is valuable by applying the method to conceptually difficult knowledge. Perkins (1999) also suggested that students learn ritual responses and quantitative problems, but their faulty beliefs could resurface on qualitative problems and outside of the classroom context.

While effective, social learning may also result in high achieving students becoming fearful of not achieving a level of feedback that they are accustomed to as a

result of other group members who lack the expertise to execute tasks of a certain rigor. Moreover, interactions within the group can either skew or shape dynamics between members, and extroverts may be burdened with the task of completing the work single handedly. The additional time and effort it takes to create active and social learning may be frustrating to instructors and students, as explained by Walker (2011). However, Perkins (1999) offered a remedy for this reoccurring issue by developing the following four conditions that instructors should manage, and students should learn and model: (a) attention, focus on the task, (b) retention, recall information learned, (c) reproduction, put learning into action, and (d) motivation, use reinforcement.

Student Satisfaction

O'Driscoll (2012) described student satisfaction as the favorability of a students' subjective evaluation of the various outcomes and experiences associated with education and campus life. It can also be described as an attitude derived from their evaluation of provided educational services. Winsett, Foster, Dearing, and Burch (2016) indicated that acquiring student satisfaction is vital for higher education institutions. Research shows that institutions will benefit from developing relationships with students and creating quality student life initiatives, which both contribute to the personal contentment levels of each student.

Extending upon delivery methods correlated to student satisfaction, Hale, Mirakian, and Day (2009) took a deeper look into student satisfaction in online courses and traditional classroom instruction. The student surveys revealed that online students were less satisfied with perceived self-knowledge gains, application of course material, and ability to express personality (Hale et al., 2009). Interestingly, Burns (2013) set out

to assess the perceptions of 41 graduate students enrolled in face-to-face, online, and blended courses to find that traditional students may have suspicions about the social aspects involved in online courses and that online students have had positive experiences, though the online courses are not always up to their expectations. Moreover, online participants relayed that although their scores were somewhat similar, they feel as if the face-to-face students had a greater overall learning advantage due to being provided frequent opportunities for application of knowledge, critical thinking, and increased oral skills resulting from high levels of instructor and peer interaction (Hale et al., 2009). A shared similarity between the studies was that both traditional learners and online learners perceive online learning as convenient though not necessarily conducive to their learning.

While analyzing the data from Burns (2013) and Hale, Mirakian, and Day (2009), two major themes were evident in the face-to-face learning category: social aspects of learning and discipline. Ninety-three percent of participants chose to take their courses in the traditional face-to-face format rather than as an online course because they preferred to be in a classroom setting. Sixty-four percent reported that they felt more connected to the program by attending traditional classes (Burns, 2013). On the contrary, more than half of the responses from the online groups in each of the studies indicated that they chose the online format due to "time constraints, which made them look into online classes". Overall, it was found that most students, whether they had taken online courses or not, perceived online courses to be most convenient and traditional courses to be most conducive to their learning style.

As universities deliberately veer from a lecture and tutorial model, the transition period allows for numerous developmental possibilities. Students are becoming more

geographically and demographically diverse, thereby allowing modalities such as e-learning and blended learning to offer possibilities for collaborative teaching (Poon, 2014). High levels of student satisfaction are the hallmark of course validity. Evidence from the studies above advises that delivery models make a notable impact on the overall student experience.

Importance of Collaboration

Two key studies were identified to elaborate on barriers and motivators of adult learners in order to better understand how a variation of modalities impact student satisfaction within higher education. In the Kimmel (2014) study, 41 graduate students completed a survey about their perceptions of online courses. When interviewed, participants shared that the main reasoning behind enrolling in E-classes were geographic location, personal family commitments, work related schedules, lack of child care services, financial travel limitations, and non-traditional students reported a fear of going back to school. Bruff, Fischer, McEwen, and Smith (2013) also shed light onto perceptual differences. Their study used graduate student interviews to gain a unique point of view on the trending issue of e-learning and blended format courses. Much like the Kimmel's (2014) findings, while online learning has had great success in accommodating students and raising retention rates, it was not found to be conducive to the overall learning experience in this given study.

Participants in both studies shared similar viewpoints and openly revealed that their reasoning behind taking online courses was a practical approach. Cost benefit, time restraints, location restrictions, and interest in course work were motivators to choose an e-learning format. The researchers found through further questioning that students felt as

if online learning is beneficial for personal reasons, but is a major contributor to the decline of an active learning culture. Kiviniemi (2014) added to the data by introducing the blended learning model. The study explored the relative effectiveness of blended learning courses compared to distance education and traditional face-to-face configurations. Through rated and extended responses, students illustrated the notable difference course components make, in regard to student satisfaction. A statically significant increase of student performance and overall perception was prevalent in the blended learning format Kiviniemi (2014). Furthermore, a remarkable 83% preferred the blended learning approach to distance or face-to-face learning. Linardopoulos (2012) extended such findings into questioning how employer's perspectives can correlate with curriculum. Although findings of the Kiviniemi (2014) suggest that that blended learning approaches have the power to improve perceptions associated with variations of online education, Linardopoulos (2012) magnifying how meaningful social interaction is irreplaceable.

The study described select employers perceptions of online education. Although e-learning has become a widespread viable option, which allows employers to offer advanced opportunities to their employees, there is still an underlying negative connotation associated with distance learning. Results of the study visibly indicated that a traditional graduate is more likely to be hired, or seriously considered, than their counterpart with a degree earned online or in a blended setting (Linardopoulos, 2012). Data exposed the exceedingly low comparison rate. A candidate obtaining an advanced online degree was only preferred by 2% of the study participants, whereas the candidate whom earned a blended degree preferred choice of only 11% of the study participants

(Linardopoulos's, 2012). Such numeric values seem to diminish the significant increase of student performance and overall perception Kiviniemi (2014) attributed to blended learning. Additionally, Linardopoulos's (2012) participants forewarned students to be selective when choosing how to earn their degree. As this study depicted, there has proven to be an overwhelming preference for candidates whom obtained a degree via face-to-face method, rather than through a distance learning or blended setting. The participants disclosed that their concerns for hiring an individual with an e-learning degree falls under the categories of such programs lacking academic rigor, personal interactions, accountability, authenticity, and perceived lack of student commitment. While Kimmel (2014) and Kiviniemi (2014) introduced many positive aspects of varied learning modalities, Linardopoulos (2012) concluded that as technology continues to become infused within the education system, it is crucial that its status is accurately projected and correctly recognized.

Synthesis of Findings

Bastedo, Altbach, and Gumport (2016) advised that American higher education would benefit by drawing inspiration from the motto of Scripps College: *Incipit Vita Nova*, meaning "A new life begins". In the 21st century, educators and policymakers are tasked with the innate responsibility of ensuring that the higher education instructional programs places an emphasis on true, meaningful learning of subject matter without being shortchanged for a temporary pursuit of skills (Rotherham & Willingham, 2009). Universities and colleges are in the midst of an unprecedented time of reform. The respective leadership teams and students alike are adapting by gradually evolving to address unforeseen challenges, project viable options for unanticipated hurdles, and

understand how crucial the change process is to success. This movement sparked the thinking that higher education is in the business of developing minds, as well as students themselves. Supportive technologies support synchronous cooperative learning, however, pedagogical implications such as a reduced sense of student engagement may be detrimental to the needs of different learners (Roseth, Akcaoglu, & Zellner, 2013).

Identification of Gaps and Limitations in the Literature

Research showed distinct differences between technology-based courses and the long-established face-to-face courses, namely discrepancies stemming from convince verses conduciveness to the learning environment. However, there is a lack of studies focusing on all three learning platforms; face-to-face, online, and blended simultaneously, in relation to how student experiences are impacted by their perception of engagement. Young and Duncan (2014) articulated that such prominent differences between the online and traditional class setting indicate the need for faculty developing instructional skills that work equally as well in both environments so that students are engaged, satisfied, and well connected with their colleagues and professors. Be that as it may, no specific instructions were offered to reach that goal. Despite the increasing number of offered online courses, Berk (2013) declared that there are five criterions for identifying "best practices" in course structure: student to student and student to instructor interaction, instructor support and mentoring, content delivery quality, course content in entirety, and course structure (Berk, 2013). Apart from identifying best practices, there are fewer than 20% of institutions in the United States that have at least one full-time employee who is responsible for evaluating the distance-learning program (Pew Research Center, 2016). Research has not clearly identified how the students'

perception of engagement relates to their experience in the course, on any of the learning platforms.

Further Research

Additional research is required to better understand student perceptions. There is a deficit of investigations devoted to exploring how students' perceived level of engagement impacts their experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended courses. The graduate student experience is directly related to student engagement and perceptions of course experiences in a variety of formats, yet the connection has been left uncharted.

Institutional change paves the pathway for other major initiatives. Such efforts have positively altered campus cultures by building more collaborative communities for students, faculty, stakeholders, and staff alike. In order to effect change, there is a responsibility of planning for the desired change, developing approaches, and seeing that processes transforms into the desired future. The knowledge gained through these initiatives places an emphasis on many variations of academic advancement. Aspects of one university's framework have the power to serve as a guide for other institutions. For this reason, it is crucial that additional research is conducted to gain further insight on students' perceptions about their earning in varied learning environments, how their level of engagement impacts their course satisfaction, how quality instruction can be uniform in each delivery method, and how interaction can be boosted when paired with technology (Graham & Jones, 2011). Powerful changes can be infectious; when enacted, individuals can enact university innovation.

Unique Contribution of the Intended Research Study

The ambiguities surrounding varied learning platforms have not been addressed

by concentrating on the experiences of graduate students and their perceived level of engagement. Allen and Sherman (2013) projected that out of the vast 6.7 million students enrolled in online courses during the 2011/2012 academic year, undergraduates comprised an estimated 80% of the population, which numerically equates to 5.3 million undergraduates, and only 1.4 million graduate students. Since 2012, graduate student statistics have increased, and so have the number of students taking online courses. The Department of Education provided statistics that illustrated 876,552 graduate students taking either some or all courses online during 2013 (U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences [IES], 2014). As the online rate for graduate students grows, so does the need for relevant studies.

A majority of research found on graduate students has been quantitative, limited to pre-existing, impersonal surveys that focus on the program of study rather than the learners and their experiences. Through focusing on student perceptions of engagement as they relate to experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended learning, this research can provide insight for instructors, students, higher education leadership, and program development/evaluation. The participant pool of graduate students adds another unique contribution to this dissertation study. Graduate students who have taken at least two semesters online in either a blended or distance-learning format warrant particular analysis due to the fact that they have proven themselves to be scholastically stable, and take fewer, yet more in depth courses than their undergraduate counterparts (Broome, Halstead, Pesut, Rawl, & Boland, 2011). Likewise, Holtslander, Racine, Furniss, Burles, and Turner (2012) affirmed that graduate students have been found to place a greater importance on what is learned, as they often have implications beyond academic studies,

which may add or detract from their student engagement.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

Research Question 1. What are the experiences of graduate students within face-to-face, online, and blended learning as determined by a 60-minute one-on-one interview?

Research Question 2. How do levels of student engagement impact one's perceptions of a course as determined by a semi-structured interview?

Research Question 3. What roles do instructional platforms play as they relate to a positive student experience, as determined by phenomenological inquisition?

Chapter Summary

Given progressive technological development, harnessing student engagement has become a difficult task. This chapter relates to the history of education and significant variables that students experience within Higher Education. The literature review suggests that learning platforms dictate the level of student engagement and alter students' perceptions of the academic environment. The researcher strives to offer sound data and applicable information pertaining to graduate students' viewpoints of their multi-platform university experience. Modern learners are provided with more scholastic avenues to navigate than their predecessors, and with the gift of choice also come unforeseen impediments. Institutions of higher learning should be cognizant of the impact that delivery methods have on engagement levels to best serve their student body.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

This chapter characterizes methodology procedures used to address the research questions. The researcher used a phenomenological approach for this qualitative study to maximize exploration of graduate students' perception of engagement and experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended graduate level classroom settings at a four-year university in the southeastern part of the United States. The researcher placed great emphasis on following specific protocol procedures during the participant recruitment process. Semi-structured, comprehensive interviews were used to discover pivotal experiences. Collected data was transcribed and analyzed; findings were reported. An exploration of graduate level perceptions and experiences relating to engagement in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings were anticipated to result in a broadened awareness regarding insight for future enrollees and program development. Through rigorous review of the literature, the results determined that there is a notable lack of studies focusing on all three learning platforms; face-to-face, online, and blended simultaneously, in relation to how student experiences are impacted by their perception of engagement.

A qualitative approach was the most appropriate research design for this study. Creswell (2012) affirmed the notion that researchers do not yet know variables of a research problem under the qualitative premise. Whereas literature provides prior research and diverse information about the phenomena of interest, missing variables are obtained from the participants themselves. Creswell (2012) elaborated on qualitative researchers, explaining how they collect data in a natural framework sensitive to the

participants and environment under study and analyze such in a manner that is inductive, thereby establishing patterns and themes. Open-ended questions were used to ensure in depth discovery of participants' perceptions, with the goal of identifying emerging themes from the study. The researcher believed that an enhanced understanding of how students' perceived level of engagement impacts their experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended courses would inaugurate modernization of university structure.

Participants

Creswell (2013) held that the units of analysis within a phenomenological study are the individuals who have shared the experience. As such, the graduate level participants from the College of Education served as the study's units of analysis. Qualified participants took at least one course in each delivery method, face-to-face, online, and hybrid. Palinkas et al. (2015) explained how purposeful sampling is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. Benoot, Hannes, and Bilsen (2016) elaborated on Palinkas's account by sharing that information-rich cases are those which extract a great deal about the issues of central importance echoed throughout the study; thus the term purposeful sampling. This method allows for in-depth understanding, the antagonist of mere empirical generalizations.

Participants were recruited from the selected institution of study. An invitational email (Appendix A) was sent as the first stage of recruitment correspondence. The researcher's standard measure for participant selection required each potential participant to meet the following prerequisites; (a) he or she must be currently enrolled as a graduate student within the College of Education at the subject institution, (b) be classified as a

degree seeking student, with either full time or part time status, (c) at least 18 years of age, (d) completed coursework within an online, face-to-face, and hybrid setting, and (d) signed a study consent form (Appendix B). The next recruitment phase requested students to contact the researcher if interested in contributing to the study. Once the participants were verified, each member was assigned a surname to conceal their identity; full protection of privacy was imbedded within every step of the study. Likewise, each interaction, communication, and meeting was recorded in chronological order, abiding by the Interview Protocol (Appendix C).

Instrument

The semi-structured interviews were guided by 10 protocol questions. Facilitating discovery through generation of qualitative data is designed to be the primary purpose for each question. The expectation is to have a set of protocol questions fully prepared for the interview, but to let the interview be guided by the schedule rather than dictated by it. Chan, Fung, and Chien (2013) articulated that the interviewer is free to probe interesting areas that arise from the interviewees' interest or concerns. This method encourages the researcher to ask focusing; not leading questions about the participants experiences and ensures broad coverage of issues (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013).

Dowse and Keatinge (2014) suggested that varied data sources equate to credibility. Hence, published research, documents, interviews, direct observations, and participant observations will be used to conduct the study. Sixty-minute interviews were planned to allow for ample discussion. The researcher used an audio recorder to document the open-ended interview with each participant. Verbal communications were

collected for the purpose of precise transcription and the ability analyze collected data subsequent to the completion of scheduled interviews.

Research Design

In the interest of exploring graduate students' perception of engagement and experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings with fidelity, the researcher anticipated that the involved administration, faculty, and school personnel would support the furtherance of this study and student success within all capacities. Unlike quantitative studies dedicated to this topic, which focus on measuring statistical differences among delivery methods and evaluating course outcomes, this study unveiled how students themselves describe their experience in a multi-delivery, graduate level environment. Intending to follow guidelines of phenomenological inquiry, overarching research questions were created to streamline the investigation's focus. Dowse, Vander Riet, and Keatinge (2014) debated the concerns of transparency during the process of qualitative data collection. Responding to analogous concerns through his literature, Creswell (2013) stated that abiding by distinct protocol is a proven method to increase confidentiality, reliability, and the expansive nature of case study research. Designed to guide the researcher in compiling exhaustive data, three questions will serve as a blueprint for the study.

Procedures

Qualitative phenomenological research approach. Derived from Edmund Husserl's philosophical position that the starting point for knowledge was one's experience of phenomena, this approach expands upon conscious perceptions that arise from a life experience (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013). Waters (2016) described qualitative

phenomenological research as reporting a lived experience of a phenomenon. Lester (1999), an educational consultant, researcher, and systems developer provided a springboard for current studies through his phenomenological inquisition. He illustrated the approach's purpose as identifying phenomena to what degree they were perceived by the individuals in a given situation. Generally translated to gathering deep meaning through inductive methods such as interviews, discussions, and participant perspectives, phenomenology is specifically concerned with studying an experience from the unique perspective of an individual. The researcher compiled this study's phenomenological research through the use of interview analysis. Recognizing the gravity of a minimal structure and maximum depth interview design, the researcher was cognizant when striking a balance between focusing on research related feedback and undue inadvertent influence by way of specific questioning. Lester (1999) also cautioned future researchers to establish good quality rapport and empathy with participants, as it is crucial to obtaining depth of information, given that the participant have a personal stake in the issue and may be more sensitive to topics discussed.

In an attempt to distill participant's perceptions, the researcher used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to describe the meaning of several individual's perceptions. Aligning with Edmund Husserl's notion of rejecting the view that empirical science is the gateway to seeing understanding, Jonathan Smith introduced IPA to allow rigorous exploration of social experiences (Fade, 2004). Jeong and Othman (2016) explained that IPA is concerned with examination of lived personal experiences, the meaning according to participants, and how they make sense of the experience. IPA favors the selected semi-structured phenomenological interview model using interviews

as the method for data collection by virtue of unveiling gray areas, which structured formats would not adequately include (Fritz, 2016).

The first step in this research process was obtaining written consent from the Nova Southeastern University's (NSU) institutional Review Board (IRB). Written consent was also needed from the study institution's IRB office. The principal intent of an IRB was to ensure voluntary participation, informed consent, freedom for subjects to withdraw from research studies, minimal risks to the subjects, appropriate qualifications of investigators, and appropriate study design (Vick, Finan, Kiefe, Neumayer, & Hawn, 2005).

Once IRB approved, the researcher was then able to begin participant recruitment. The parties were enlisted according to the selected institution's protocol of student-initiated involvement. Under this rule, participants could not be directly solicited to take part in the study; they were required to contact the principal investigator to express interest, and then become involved. To launch the process, a department chair within the College of Education sent the invitational letter to professors within the college who taught graduate level courses. From there, students were able to contact the researcher personally. Once students volunteered to participate in the study, the researcher provided them with an informed consent form, which required a signature to symbolize an agreement to privacy conditions, anonymity, and the 60-minute interview schedule. Meetings were contracted to take place at the main library or College of Education building on campus. Audio recordings chronicled the semi-structured interview, which were transcribed at the end of each meeting.

Data Collection. The data collection process began in the Summer Semester of

2017. Designed to conclude by the Fall Semester of 2017, no stage of research was carried out before both approvals were verified. The first step in this process was to gather information from the study institution needed to assess the College of Education's graduate program. After contacts were made, the second step was to recruit five to 10 students through an email that was sent from a Department Chair to select professors who instruct courses pertaining to the study. Once the initial email was sent from respective professors, participants were then instructed to contact the researcher; the final participant roster was then confirmed.

This qualitative phenomenological study is dependent on student participation to serve as a source of evidence. A signed consent form was provided to each participant before any interview is conducted. Their signature represented an agreement to the conditions of privacy, anonymity, and the scheduling of a 60-minute interview with a possible follow up meeting. The interviews were conducted in conference study rooms at the main library or in the College of Education building on campus. Initial documentation of the semi-structured interviews was initiated by audio recorded during the time of each interview, which were transcribed after each meeting. Email was anticipated to be the best communication to document each step. Thus, the researcher confirmed each participant's contact information in case additional data was needed for clarification during the coding process.

Data Analysis

The research analysis consisted of two sets of data sources. The first source of data was obtained from the contact documents retrieved from the subject institution. This set included institutional policies and email communication related to Master's students in

the College of Education. The researcher utilized the documents presented by the subject

institution to better understand their availability and access to participants. The second

source of data was obtained from transcribed semi-structured interviews with the

graduate student participants.

The researcher manually coded the interview transcripts to achieve maximum

validity. Corbin and Strauss (2008) found that coding schemes are an essential

component of analysis and interpretation within qualitative interview data. The coding

process entailed analyzing each interview transcript in sentences or groups of sentences

that reflected single ideas. Codes were assigned to reflect those ideas or concepts and

served as a reference point (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The analysis is expected to result

in a comparison of responses that connected thought patterns and allowed categories to

emerge. *Figure 2*, below, illustrates the hierarchy of coding.
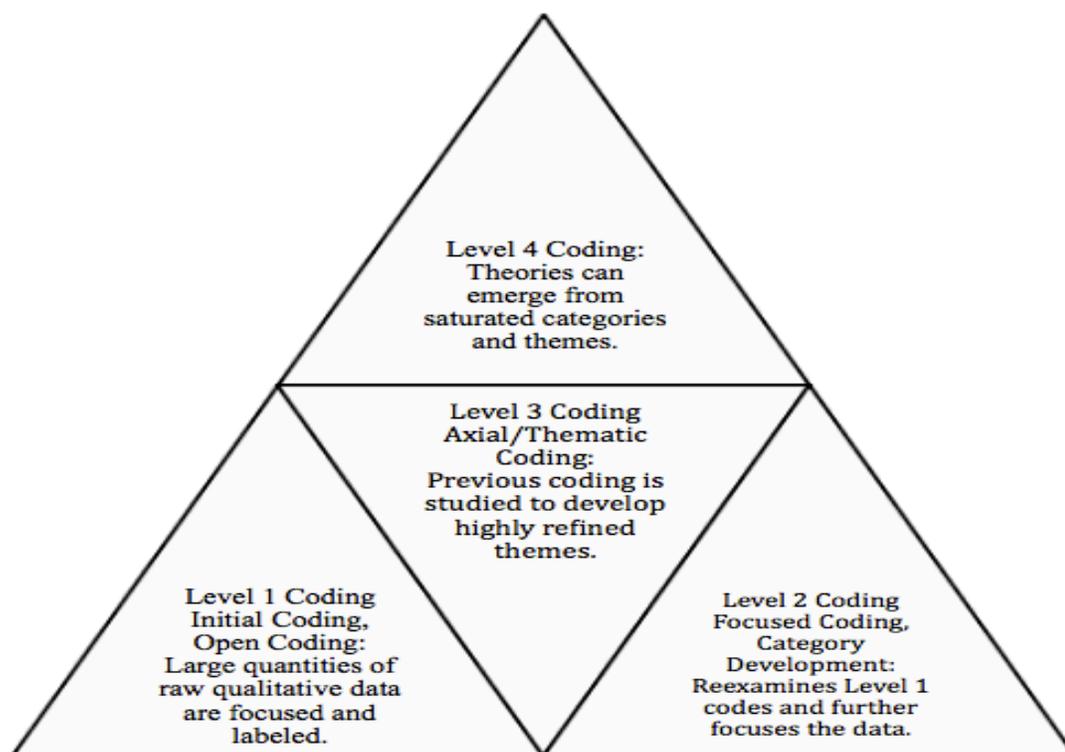
Figure 2. Hierarchy of Coding.

Ethical Considerations and Potential Bias

According to Creswell (2013), a common misconception amongst researchers is that ethical issues only surface during data collection. They arise during several phases of the research process, and become more sensitive to the needs of participants, sites, stakeholders, and publishers of research. In order to cross-reference ones way of thinking and cultivate ethical sensibilities, Piantanida and Garman (2009) suggest considering the following: (a) strictly abide by the university's requirements and procedures for internal review of dissertation proposals, (b) seek out resources available to help understand internal review procedures (c), collaborate with professors and colleagues to prepare oneself for understanding the principals of qualitative and interpretive research (d), accept that ethical issues may arise during the course of the study, which must be confronted with swift corrective behavior, and (e) attempt to predetermine the differences that lie between the researcher and interviewees, in addition to how they should be addressed.

The researcher continuously addressed subjectivity to ensure that all emerging themes were free of pre-conceived opinions. As it is unethical to exclude certain groups to achieve a particular outcome, all Masters students in the College of Education who meet the criterion of completing face-to-face, online, and hybrid courses were extended an invitation to participate in the study. Being as transparent as possible, the participants were also informed that they have the right to leave the study at any time or refuse to participate. If they decided to leave or not participate, no penalties would be experienced. If a participant chose to withdraw, they would be informed and agree that any information collected before the date of departure from the study would be kept in

the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study and may be used as a part of the research. Participants signified agreement with the study by signing a consent form, which stated that the study had been explained to them, the document was read, any questions pertaining to the study were answered, questions may be asked in the future, and participants are entitled to a copy of their consent form.

Trustworthiness

Creswell (2013) recommended that researchers engage in two validation strategies to authenticate the data. In order to comply with suggested protocol, the researcher chose three randomly selected participants to verify the accuracy of written analysis. In doing this, the selected participants provided feedback on views and themes they examined through the study. As a second form of validation, the researcher used peer review. A fellow colleague with proper credentials and an earned doctoral degree provided honest and insightful feedback on the methodology process.

Guba and Lincoln (1985) argued that the member check process is the most critical component when establishing research credibility. Their statement was supported by the following points: (a) it provides stakeholder groups from whom the data originated with an opportunity to assess the provided information, (b) allows for the correction of errors, addition of additional information, verifying records, summarizing data, and confirmation of data points, and (c) ensures robust and reliable research. Once the results of a study have been compared with other studies with similar examination focal points, knowledge is increased (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Chapter Summary

A qualitative phenomenological methodology was selected for this study because

it is the best technique to facilitate responses to the research questions. The data collected related to graduate students obtaining their Master's degree within the College of Education at the institution of study. The researcher used coding to analyze data collected from participant interviews. The collections of speech to text recordings were transcribed and research procedures were followed in detail. The researcher placed great value on ethical considerations, establishing trustworthiness, and dismissing potential bias. Preliminary analysis focused on the collection of participant data. Secondary analysis focused on emerging themes and trends of the participant population.

Chapter 4: Findings

Overview

This chapter discusses findings of the qualitative, phenomenological study. Graduate students' perceptions of engagement and experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings within higher education are described and reported according to observed themes and relationships among essences. Research question one was addressed by interview questions two and four, research question two was addressed by interview questions three and five, and research question three was addressed by interview questions six, seven, eight, and nine. Alase (2017) affirmed that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is an approach that amplifies the lived experience of each participant, where the researcher extracts a deeper meaning of such events. In order to synthesize data, the researcher must exhibit close interpretative engagement. The researcher will naturally lack full and complete knowledge of the participants' preconceptions, therefore, reflective practices and a cyclical approach is required for the interview process (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Accordingly, Smith et al. (2013) declared that IPA researchers represent a dual position; the researcher is making sense of the participant, who is making sense of a given variable.

A total of 10 interviews were conducted by means of purposeful sampling. Making informed decisions about sampling is essential for producing high caliber research synthesis. Master's level participants from the College of Education were recruited via e-mail and graduate message boards at the institution of study. This specific type of research produces results that are not only descriptive, informative, and evaluative, but also connective (Suri, 2011). Creswell (2013) added that purposeful sampling allows for

selection of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about the central phenomenon. In conjunction with knowledge and experience, Creswell (2013) illuminated the importance of availability, willingness to participate, and the aptitude to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate, expressive, and reflective manner. Before each interview the researcher explained that the participants would receive a consent form that outlines the procedures, directions, and ethical requirements for the study. It was emphasized that participation is voluntary and reminded volunteers that that they may withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, the participants were ensured that all records and documents with their name would be confidential and under no circumstances would they be identified in any publication of this dissertation. The participants' signature also signified acknowledgement that their involvement would not entail any direct benefits, however, their valued input will contribute to the field of education by sharing student experiences and perspectives of engagement across the spectrum of various instructional modalities, consequently revealing if it is necessary for a psychological investment in learning to be present. Interviews were guided by the following 10 protocol questions:

1. Describe what inspired your decision to attend this university.

2. What are your experiences with collaboration in online, blended, and traditional face-to-face courses?

3. What affect did such collaboration experiences have on your perception of the courses?

4. How would you describe your experiences with student engagement in online, blended, and traditional courses?

5. What affect did such student engagement experiences have on your perception of the courses?

6. How did using an e-learning environment impact your perception of collaboration with professors and colleagues?

7. How do you perceive yourself and your behavior in an e-learning environment, as opposed to a face-to-face environment?

8. Which learning platform do you feel facilitated the highest level of student engagement?

9. How important do you perceive the three course platforms to be as they relate to a positive student experience?

10. What additional student engagement methods pertaining to offered courses would you envision to enhance the graduate student experience?

Background of Participants

A total of two males and eight females from the College of Education at the institute of study were interviewed in a one-on-one setting. The students represented a diverse background of ethnicities and paths taken in their academic past. Although the participants differed in many aspects, they shared a commonality of developing unique experiences through varied leaning platforms during their Master's program. The researcher transcribed the digitally recorded 60-minute interviews after each meeting, which took place between the months of June 2017 and October 2017. As a whole, participants approached the protocol questions with an optimistic outlook and delivered thoughtfully constructed responses. Strong themes began to emerge as each individual interview concluded and the next one began, though distinctive details were present in all

cases. See *Figure 3* for gender participation.
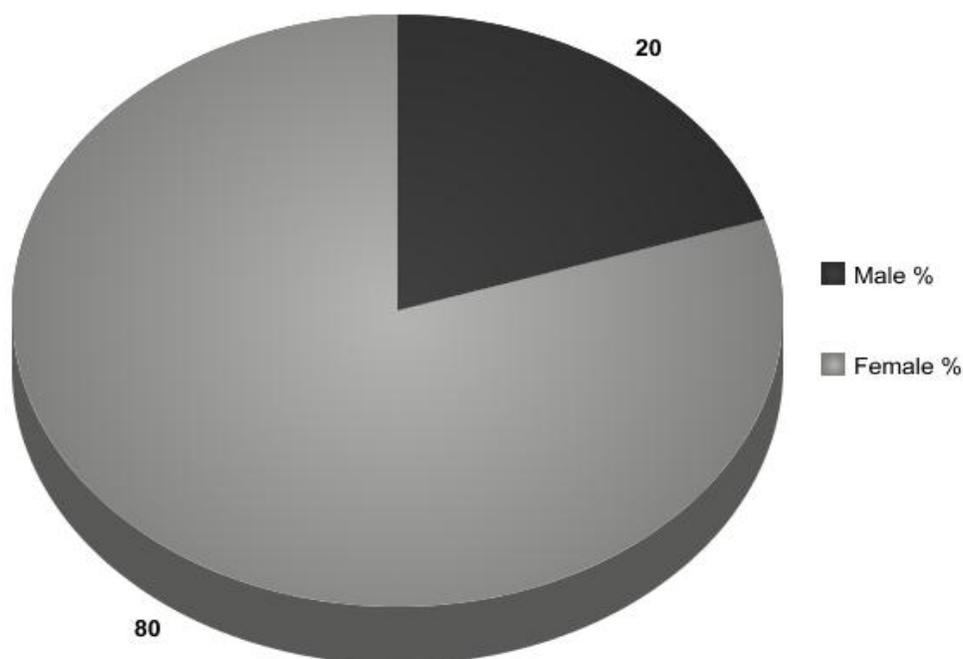
Figure 3. Study Participants by Gender.

Once data collection procedures concluded, results were compiled to analyze

findings. The data was organized into events, stemming from the protocol questions, and

themes, stemming from participant responses. To protect the confidentiality of each

student and follow procedures outlined by the Institutional Review Board, participants

were assigned codes spanning from PAR1 to PAR10. PAR1 is a male student in the

Student Services program who took a two-year break after earning his Undergraduate

Degree before beginning Graduate School with a goal of furthering his education in the

field. PAR2 is a female student who moved to the United States to peruse her dream of

earning a Master's Degree from the Department of World Languages and eventually use

her knowledge to empower international learners. PAR3 is a female student who came to

the university as part of the Pathway Program, where she is able to receive additional English Language support while earning her Graduate Degree from the College of Education. PAR4 is a female student and legacy of the school, with both of her siblings graduating from the same university, she continued the tradition and extended it to the graduate level. PAR5 is a female student in the College of Student Affairs who only heard about the program through word of mouth recommendations, yet was impressed enough to apply and accept the Offer of Attendance. PAR6 is a female student who changed careers and is now earning her MA Degree in Counselor Education. PAR7 is a female student who recently moved to Florida specifically for the College of Student Affairs Master's Program. PAR8 is a female student working on her second MA Degree, the first was in English, and the second is a Masters of Arts in Teaching Degree as an Advising Major. PAR9 is a female student and a working, single mother who needed a blended program option to balance academic and personal responsibilities. PAR10 is a male student who is earning his Masters of Arts in Teaching, with a major in Social Studies, from the same institution where he earned his Undergraduate Degree in Political Science. See *figure 4* for participant demographics.

Student Demographics
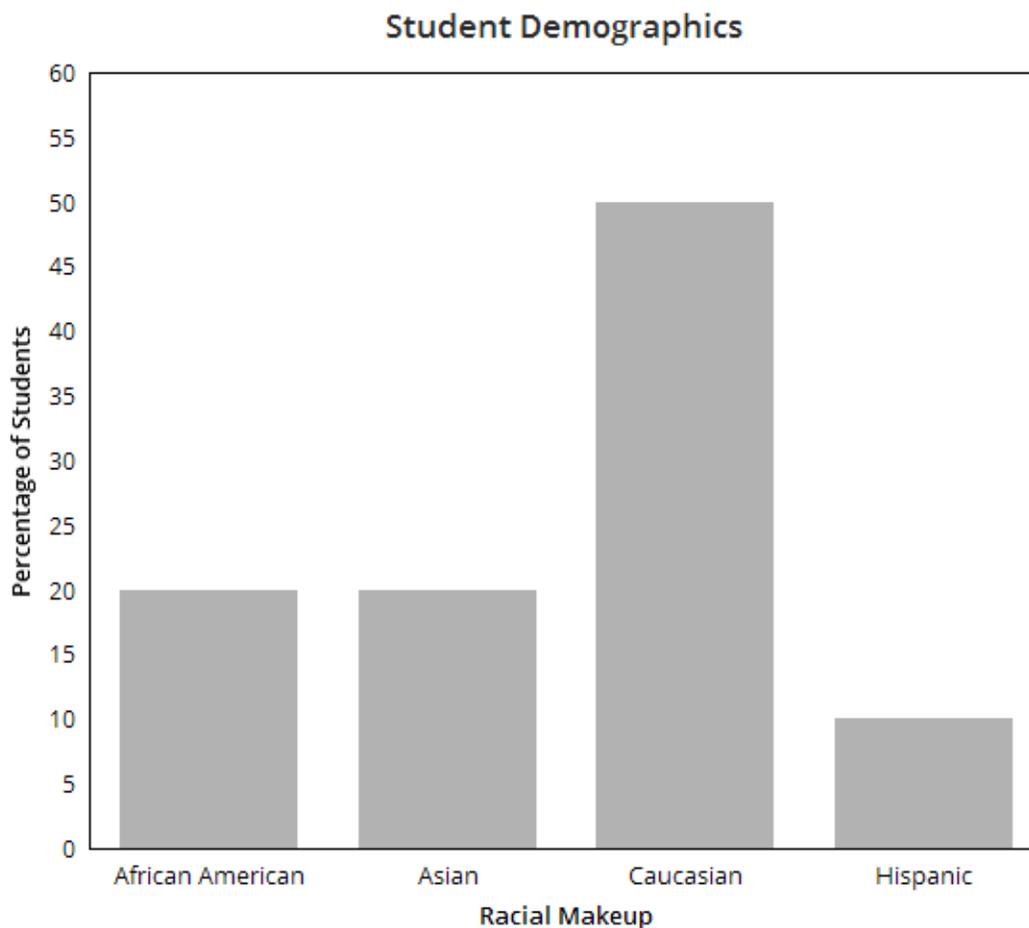
Figure 4. Participant Demographics.

Interviews and Analysis

Events and themes were used to interpret and analyze the collected data. They were identified from characteristics of the phenomena being studied. The researcher used phrase repetition, relationships among experiences, shifts in content, and key words in context to discover events and themes. Results are displayed in Tables one through 10.

Question 1. Describe what inspired your decision to attend this university.

PAR1 stated "I attended this university from 2010-2014 while earning my Undergraduate Degree and enjoyed my time here as a student, I have a personal connection to Florida, loved the diversity on campus and the fact that it is an institution which represents everyone."

PAR2 stated "I like that it is a big university because I would be able to interact with large audiences. I also appreciate the fact that there are tutoring options for foreign language students and the fact that there are a great deal of international students on campus."

PAR3 stated "The main purpose of attending this university is the Pathway Program. This program allows me to learn academic English and earn my Graduate Degree at the same time."

PAR4 stated "Growing up I was the youngest of three. I often went up and stayed with my sister who went to school here and became familiar with area. I fell in love with not only the campus, but also the city."

PAR5 stated "This university was a popular choice for many people that I knew. Once my friend was accepted into the program, I committed soon thereafter."

PAR6 stated "I changed careers and came to this university specifically for their Education program and school counseling reputation."

PAR7 stated "I decided to attend this university because of my program's reputation in the College of Student Affairs. I had a mentor who attended this program for their Master's Degree also. I wanted a change of environment, so I decided to move to Florida."

PAR8 stated "I chose this school because of the location, and because I already finished another Master's Degree here in English. I am now earning my Masters of Arts in Teaching, with a focus in Advising."

PAR9 stated "This university has a solid reputation, and the proximity to my work and home made it an ideal choice. The program I am perusing has the majority of classes

as an online or blended option. As a single, working mother, this is necessary."

PAR10 stated "Tampa is my hometown. I had originally attended another university in Florida for my Freshman and Sophomore years of college but decided to transfer here to complete my Bachelor's Degree. I ended up taking a break for a couple years before I went back to finally finish my Bachelor's in Political Science. I chose to attend this university for my Master's Degree (MAT) because I'm not willing to relocate to another city to attend another university, I already earned a degree from this institution so I figured I'd have an easier time being accepted, and the degree program gave me a perfect chance to take what I already had (Bachelor's in Political Science) and use it for what I wanted (a teaching degree/Master's Degree). So basically proximity, convenience, and familiarity." Table 1 represents the results of Question 1.

Table 1

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 1

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Attendance	Strong nation wide reputation and favorable location.	"This university has a solid reputation, and the proximity to my work and home made it an ideal choice."
Familiarity	Positive prior experiences.	"I chose to attend this university for my Master's Degree (MAT) because I already earned an Undergraduate degree from this institution."
Programs Offered	Varied programs and courses in the College of Education.	"I decided to attend this university because of my program's reputation in the College of Student Affairs."

Question 2. What are your experiences with collaboration in online, blended, and traditional face-to-face?

PAR1 stated "I love that online courses have collaborative aspects because I don't enjoy working independently. I thrive in more of a creative than concrete environment. My talent lies in creation, while others may be strong in executing tasks. Blended courses are more tailored to individual preferences due to the scheduling of classes. Face-to-face courses have major advantages such as the ability to read body language and a heightened sense of accountability. It has been a privilege to watch colleague in my cohort grow and evolve over time. "

PAR2 stated "Online and blended classes are difficult because I can not see the professor directly. Face-to-face classes allow me to interact with the professor in person, which is especially important when there is a language barrier. Collaboration makes me nervous, I feel better when I can pair up with international students in the classroom, but have been getting more comfortable with speaking with others."

PAR3 stated "I've had very little experience with any collaboration in online courses. There has not been much true group work. However, traditional classes have provided the opportunity to discuss ideas together and work as a team on projects, which also helps as a language Pathway Program student."

PAR4 stated "When I first started my program, online and blended classes seemed to be the easier route to take and I tried to take as many as possible. After my first year I realized that even though they seemed easy, I was not learning the material in ways that would benefit my future. Having a course that I could take each week face-to-face with a professor helped hold me accountable for my learning. I liked collaborating

with other students and a professor in class more than I did online. My online courses did not seem to have much collaboration. Even though we had online discussions, I felt that I was not truly collaborating with my peers. We were not working together to achieve a goal and if we were, it seemed to be harder for us to collaborate than it would have been to just do the assignments alone."

PAR5 stated "I have not had a great experience with online courses, including a blended format. There has been little meaningful interaction with classmates and professors. There has been more emphasis placed on deadlines than collaboration. I haven't had that negative experience in face-to-face classes, which have encouraged students working towards a common goal."

PAR6 stated "I took classes online that I don't even think should be offered in that format. Heavy content courses don't translate as well in online or blended courses like they do in a traditional format where collaboration is physically part of the structure".

PAR7 stated "In my face-to-face courses, all of our assignments were posted on Canvas for professors to grade and give feedback with. In the online and blended classes I took during the summer, all materials and communication with the professor and my peers was done online, but deadlines were given far enough in advance where I didn't feel under pressure."

PAR8 stated "To me, online classes are impersonal. I don't feel a connection with classmates, professors, or the material as much. I also fell behind in blended courses due to the lack of collaboration and unspecific expectations. Face-to-face classes means accountability, and an environment that encourages learning from peers, which works."

PAR9 stated "Collaboration as far as class discussions or helping classmates have not been experienced online. When you speak to a person face-to-face, there are nuances and easiness in dialogue that I have not yet experienced online; however, when the conversations are online, I am able to go back and review. Socially, I prefer face-to-face. Academically, it is a give and take because there have been times that I appreciated a peer's written response as I could reread and not have to lose certain points due to memory."

PAR10 stated "In the MAT program, a lot of the core classes are based online. Only one online class explicitly required collaboration with another student as part of a graded assignment. I thought it was ridiculous. There had not been an in-person orientation and I didn't know any of the other students. Was I supposed to pick a partner based on whose name I liked best? I ended up sending out a mass email and just partnered with a classmate based on who had also not selected a partner yet.
I have also taken a required core class that I strongly felt should be offered in-person. I didn't collaborate with any peers in the beginning but soon discovered that one of my classmates from my third in-person class was also in my online class, so we collaborated on assignments/studying for the second half of the semester. My face-to-face classes involved a lot of collaboration. The assignments were very individualistic and creative so several classmates and I would discuss via Canvas email what we were doing or whether or not we had any areas of confusion. After my first semester, I made sure to always have someone that I knew from face-to-face classes in all future classes to collaborate with by sharing notes, bouncing ideas of one another, and discussing problems or confusion we encountered." Table 2 represents the results of Question 2.

Table 2

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 2

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Online Courses	Low levels of collaboration.	I took classes online that I don't even think should be offered in that format. Heavy content courses don't translate as well in online or blended courses like they do in a traditional format where collaboration is physically part of the structure."
Blended Courses	Comparable to online courses, share similar collaboration setbacks.	"I fell behind in blended courses due to the lack of collaboration and unspecific expectations."
Face-to-face Courses	Highest level of collaboration.	"Face-to-face courses have major advantages such as the ability to read body language and a heightened sense of accountability."

Question 3. What affect did such collaboration experiences have on your perception of the courses?

PAR1 stated "Collaboration helps facilitate course content. Content is furthered through interaction. I get more out of courses that offer collaboration with other students."

PAR2 stated "Public speaking causes me to be nervous, but casual conversation does not. I'm more reserved in online classes because collaboration seems to be forced. When academic conversation is open in traditional courses I enjoy the class more."

PAR3 stated "Collaborative learning in traditional courses helped me to have an in-depth understanding of educational theories and teaching pedagogies. Some classmates who have practical experience were willing to share their valuable experience

and stories."

PAR4 stated "Because I did not collaborate as much during online courses, I found them to be a little more boring than traditional classes. I felt like the courses were almost pointless and I was rushing through my weekly work to be done with the course. My traditional face-to- face classes seemed more exciting. I loved collaborating with my peers in class, I learned more."

PAR5 stated "The reason why I have a positive perception of collaborative experiences in online courses is because I created my own collaboration network through people I knew in face-to-face courses. If not, I would have had an entirely different outcome."

PAR6 stated "I felt as if online and blended courses should have been more collaborative. Online work became a chore, which negatively effected my perception of the course."

PAR7 stated "I enjoy submitting assignments on Canvas through my face-to-face classes because I think it's easier with getting feedback and I can keep myself organized. Also, with the ability to put dates on all of the assignments they show up on my to-do list. It was easy to keep myself accountable. Plus, it syncs with email, so I get all the communication I need about class work."

PAR8 stated "I took my required Professional Writing course online and it resulted in a "B" average due to lack of examples, collaboration, and interaction. In face-to-face courses, which I prefer, the discussions allowed me to absorb more information."

PAR9 stated "Collaborative group projects yield a good result, which I have not had in any online classes yet."

PAR10 stated "I have a strong preference for in-person classes. It is easier to ask questions in person rather than by email. I feel like I learn more. Also, when it comes to peer collaboration that requires brainstorming, there is no substitute for sitting across a table with pencils and papers and throwing ideas out there." Table 3 represents the results of Question 3.

Table 3

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 3

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Positive Experiences	High levels of collaboration = positive perception.	"Collaborative learning in traditional courses helped me to have an in-depth understanding of educational theories and teaching pedagogies."
Negative Experiences	Low levels of collaboration = negative perception.	"Online work became a chore, which negatively effected my perception of the course."

Question 4. How would you describe your experiences with student engagement in online, blended, and traditional courses?

PAR1 stated "I'm not a fan of online classes because I think they are low engagement. I'm not stimulated in ways conducive to my learning style. Of course there is access to educational content, but without a personal component. Student engagement experiences also depend on the professor's pedagogy style. Courses that are authentically discussion based allow for the most student engagement because there is an ability to grow through experiences of others."

PAR2 stated "Engaging with peers allows you to understand their thought process. I prefer classes where peers are willingly open to sharing experiences, which

I've only found in face-to-face courses."

PAR3 stated "I prefer learning from traditional courses because they provide students with more opportunities to engage in the class. For example, classmates can communicate with each other and get feedback from their peers or professors immediately."

PAR4 stated "Although online and blended courses had student discussions each week, I felt I truly was not interacting with my peers. We had to comment on others' posts, but most of the time I never read the comments left on my post. My traditional courses held me accountable for hearing feedback on my thoughts. I actually was able to hold a conversation on the subject rather than write a simple one sentence comment to someone."

PAR5 stated "Traditional courses are designed as cohorts in my program. There is an extensive amount of student engagement present due to collaborative projects, a heavily discussion based structure, comfortable round table discussions, and an open setting. These advantages made the time spent learning enjoyable. I even leaned more from my colleagues than I did from my professors at times. I have not had anything close to that in an online or blended classroom environment."

PAR6 stated "Face-to-face courses equate to student authentic engagement, online and blended courses equate to disingenuous discussion board based classes with forced discussion and commenting assignments. A true perspective isn't gained from others. I learn more from the textbook in those classes."

PAR7 stated "I think I am more engaged in face-to-face classes, just because I like to see the face of people who I am engaging in conversation with. When

conversations are held over discussion boards, it's more difficult for me to make inferences about people's non-verbal communication."

PAR8 stated "Online and blended courses don't seem to encourage student engagement. In my experience, they have been based off of discussion posts and responding to classmates' posts. The communication eventually falls apart and the learning process disintegrates."

PAR9 stated "I believe blended is the hardest; some peers are sitting next to me while others are in a chat room. It is sometimes easy to forget to read the comments from my online peers as I become engaged with the peers in the classroom. Online-based classes in general are the overall hardest. There is no hiding behind a chatty peer or nodding vigorously when a great comment is made. Every person must post and the commitment to the class or the lack of preparation is obvious. Traditional classes are the most fun and the easiest."

PAR10 stated "Student engagement is, in my experience, much easier in traditional courses. I've taken online classes and had to remind myself three months into the course what the professor's name was. In person classes are always preferable. That is not to say that some professors don't put in the effort to encourage student engagement. Some require posts to discussion boards with two to three mandatory replies to the postings of peers. Still, it's not the same as face-to-face interaction." Table 4 represents the results of Question 4.

Table 4

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 4

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Online Courses	Low levels of student engagement.	"I've taken online classes and had to remind myself three months into the course what the professor's name was."
Blended Courses	Comparable to online courses, share similar student engagement setbacks.	"Although online and blended courses had student discussions each week, I felt was not truly interacting with my peers."
Face-to-face Courses	Highest level of student engagement.	"Courses that are authentically discussion based allow for the most student engagement because there is an ability to grow through experiences of others."

Question 5. What affect did such student engagement experiences have on your perception of the courses?

PAR1 stated "Online courses have consisted of seven to ten minute recorded lectures that were very cut and dry. There was no connection and no investment. In face-to-face courses there is immediate feedback via conversation. Academic thoughts and opinions are shared, the Socratic method is used, and classmates are vulnerable, a critical component of deep learning. Blended courses seemed like a diluted version of face-to-face courses, with the lip service of online learning."

PAR2 stated "Student engagement enhances critical thinking. Growth often comes from going off topic and exploring new theories. I learn well from open dialogue. Most of my classmates are teachers, so I get realistic feedback. These positive experiences in face-to-face courses shape my perception of the course".

PAR3 stated "It is a good strategy for me to share thoughts in an open dialogue format in the classroom and build a positive relationship with classmates, that makes the

class enjoyable."

PAR4 stated "For online classes, my perception of the course was more negative due to the lack of student engagement. I felt like the courses were easy and almost a waste of my time. I never really tried to do well in these classes because there wasn't a lot of buy in."

PAR5 stated "I'm much more engaged in a face-to-face setting because I rely on colleagues from a motivational perspective. The high level of accountability produces a sense of satisfaction, which meads to a positive perception of the course. Online classes leave me with no desire to increase my level of participation."

PAR6 stated "In online and even blended courses the low levels of student engagement result in a negative effect on my perception of the course. I find myself only doing work to complete the assignments rather than delving into the material."

PAR7 stated "I enjoy classes where I am able to engage more with other students and the faculty in a positive way. When I am able to constantly share ideas and thoughts with my classmates, I feel like I am able to learn more about the topic."

PAR8 stated "High engagement face-to-face classes cause me to be invested in the course and passionate about the subject matter. It's a two way street, where most colleagues are fully present. Online and blended courses seem to result in low investment, low return output. My behavior in those classes is more talk oriented; I'm completing assignments for a grade and not much more."

PAR9 stated "In an online based course, the lack of genuine engagement from peers tends to make me feel isolated. In a traditional class, it can be seen when your peers are not answering because they are just as confused, but in an online class, those

cues are missing."

PAR10 stated "First of all, I'm painfully aware that the reason why this university and other universities are pushing 100% online classes is because it's cheaper than in-person classes. Meaning it's cheaper for the University, those savings are not, passed along to the student in the form of lower tuition costs. Secondly, I find myself not taking online courses are seriously as other courses. There are some exceptions, of course. My Secondary Social Sciences required core courses were entirely online and those courses were the gatekeepers to the entire program. So I took those courses as seriously as I had to in order to get a decent grade. On the other hand, those classes all had annoying irrelevant quizzes that I stopped bothering to study for about halfway through the semester. The quizzes were worth 10% of the grade and I made the conscious decision to accept a "B" in the class rather than bother watching the pointless videos. If the class had been in person and I had actually gotten to know the professor or my peers I doubt I would have been so comfortable blowing it off. I'm actually a little competitive in academic settings so I try harder when I have to see the professor or my classmates."

Table 5 represents the results of Question 5.

Table 5

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 5

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Positive Experiences	High levels of student engagement = positive perception.	"High engagement face-to-face classes cause me to be invested in the course and passionate about the subject matter."
Negative Experiences	Low levels of student engagement = negative perception.	"In an online based course, the lack of genuine engagement from peers tends to make me feel isolated."

Question 6. How did using an e-learning environment impact your perception of collaboration with professors and colleagues?

PAR1 stated "A collaborative component is key, and it feels forced in e-learning environments. I'm naturally academically motivated, but not in this setting. I'm completely invested in the learning process and eventually want to earn my Ph.D, however, I find an e-learning environment to be robotic, mechanical, and cold."

PAR2 stated "I act more reserved in an e-learning environment. When not actively encouraged to participate collaboratively, I tend to sit back. I like to feel comfortable with the professor and feel like there is open dialogue."

PAR3 stated "Although the e-learning environment seems to be a trend in higher education, it doesn't always allow professors and colleagues to communicate and discuss issues as they would in person."

PAR4 stated "Canvas helped keep me up to date on all my assignments. I can't say anything negative about the e-learning environment that the university provided. Without the e-learning environment, I don't think I would have any collaboration with my peers and professors in online-based classes."

PAR5 stated "The e-learning environment caters to checking off a "done" box. I enjoyed having the time to complete some work independently but I'm not invested in the material like I am in collaboration heavy face-to-face classes."

PAR6 stated "Professors didn't seem as ready to have discussions that lead to a deep understanding of the content. It was more of an assignment based environment that was being supervised."

PAR7 states "I don't feel very engaged with my colleagues or professors in an e-

learning environment. I feel as though I don't know my classmates because I don't have ability to match a face to the name, making it very difficult to make professional connections."

PAR8 stated "The e-learning environment produces an unnatural interaction. To even start a basic conversation you must reach out with specific content."

PAR9 stated "Social gestures such as smiles, nodding, and eye contact are encouraging and when the content is difficult, these gestures can be uplifting. Obviously, these things are missing in an e-learning environment. I had a learning curve and have had to rely more on intrinsic motivation in an e-learning environment."

PAR10 stated "One effect of all courses being administered through the e-learning environment of Canvas is that I find myself disappointed in professors who don't fully utilize it. For example, this semester I'm taking a course with a professor who is a remarkable. He is an uncontested expert in his field and his courses require a lot of thinking and effort on the students' behalf. However, he happens to make absolutely no use of Canvas. It's kind of disappointing. One of the students in the course took it upon himself to start a discussion board on one of the subjects early in the course but it never really caught on." Table 6 represents the results of Question 6.

Table 6

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 6

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
E-Learning Environment	Not a replacement for face-to-face interaction.	"A collaborative component is key, and it feels forced in e-learning environments."
Perception of Collaboration	Little to no reliable collaboration.	"The e-learning environment caters to checking off a "done" box."

Question 7. How do you perceive yourself and your behavior in an e-learning environment, as opposed to a face-to-face environment?

PAR1 stated "In a face-to-face class I'm engaged, sitting straight up in my seat. I'm attentive, alert, and am challenged by interaction with others. The more time people take to connect, the more course material is understood. We can't accurately upload thoughts and feelings via Wi-Fi, as expected to do in e-learning environments."

PAR2 stated "Too many discussion board assignments can be time consuming. When it gets to be overdone, people disengage. I become lost in the conversation and it becomes nearly impossible to navigate your way to a clear understanding."

PAR3 stated "In terms of convenience, an e-learning environment is helpful. For example, I'm taking Chinese courses that are based in Beijing online this semester. But I don't feel like I absorb as much of the information in an e-learning environment as I do in a face-to-face environment."

PAR4 stated "In online courses, I'm not prone to putting as much effort in. I think they are easier and therefore don't require as much time or dedication. I estimate that I spend half the time working on my online classes. As far as face-to-face learning goes, I spend a good amount of time working to master the content. I also collaborate more in class and tend to network more."

PAR5 stated "I'm much more introverted in online courses. I'm not pushed out of my comfort zone. In some ways that environment plays to my strengths, but doesn't result in much growth."

PAR6 stated "Face-to-face environments encourage free thought. E-learning environments produce formal and ridged expression of thoughts."

PAR7 stated "I feel as though I am just a name to a number in an e-learning environment where as in a face-to-face environment, I am a person with a name and with a valued opinion."

PAR8 stated "In a face-to-face environment learning outcomes are met through explicit discussion and elaboration. My behavior in an e-learning environment responds to assignments like they are a chore."

PAR9 stated "My first e-learning environment was difficult for me as my entire academic career, prior to the Master's I am pursuing, had been in a face-to-face environment. I found that I had to become a better student in an e-learning environment, which is not a bad thing. I think for students who are not motivated or cannot tap into self-motivation, e-learning environments can lead to dropping out."

PAR10 stated "I've always thought I express myself better in writing than I do orally so I personally think my online persona is the same as the 'real me', only a touch more witty and charming. When it comes to getting to know my classmates, I can tell you that it is night and day between in-person and online-only classes. I'm usually the first person to break the silence in a classroom but I will hesitate, or simply decline, to reach out to colleagues I don't know via email/Canvas chat. The reason for being less sociable through email/Canvas is that I don't foresee it being rewarding." Table 7 represents the results of Question 7.

Table 7

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 7

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Behavior in an E-Learning Environment	Negatively altered.	"We can't accurately upload thoughts and feelings via Wi-Fi, as expected to do in e-learning environments."
Behavior in a Face-to-Face environment	Aligns with one's natural behavior in an academic setting.	"In a face-to-face environment learning outcomes are met through explicit discussion and elaboration."

Question 8. Which learning platform do you feel facilitated the highest level of student engagement?

PAR1 stated "Face-to-face, one hundred percent. It is essential for engagement and my own personal learning style".

PAR2 stated "Face-to-face learning. Collaborative group projects are especially helpful for international students. While still perfecting my academic English, I need that support to fully comprehend the content. I enjoy immediate positive feedback that is received from peers and professors during discussions."

PAR3 stated "Face-to-face facilitates the highest level of student engagement."

PAR4 stated "Face-to-face courses helped me reach the highest level of student engagement. I felt more willing to collaborate, ask questions, and read the texts when I knew I had a professor who would provide immediate, personalized feedback. I learned better when I was able to physically sit and listen to a professor and my classmates."

PAR5 stated "There is no comparison, it's face-to-face. Online and blended learning environments lend themselves to becoming distracted in your own environment and generate less than authentic dialogue. I like to build relationships with professors

and colleagues. I feel large lecture halls are even more engaging due to the in person

interaction."

PAR6 stated "Face-to-face, absolutely. Without hesitation, I can say student

engagement was the highest with that format."

PAR7 stated "I believe face-to-face learning facilitated the highest level of

student engagement."

PAR8 stated "Face-to-face courses resulted in high levels of engagement. They

sparked intrinsic motivation. Expectations were clear and I learned from the experiences

of professors."

PAR9 stated "Currently face-to-face facilitates the highest level of student

engagement; however, I feel that this may change as the digital natives move into higher

education coursework."

PAR10 stated "In-person, traditional courses, hands down. If given the choice, I

will choose the traditional course every time. As a matter of fact, in the course/professor

reviews for courses I've taken online, my comments have always included some form of

comment referring to the fact that it should be offered in person. If a university requires a

class for a degree, that university should ensure the class is offered in-person. That is my

opinion. There is an aspect of traditional courses that I think is overlooked by those who

make decisions in higher education. As somebody working on a Master's Degree in

education, you can be sure I'm using every single in-person class to get to know my

potential-future-colleagues and to network with others in my profession. That effort has

already proved itself to be successful." Table 8 represents the results of Question 8.

Table 8

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 8

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Online Learning Platform	May have potential in the future, but does not currently have high levels of student engagement.	"Currently face-to-face facilitates the highest level of student engagement; however, I feel that this may change as the digital natives move into higher education coursework."
Blended Learning Platform	Grouped in the same category as online learning by participants.	"Online and blended learning environments lend themselves to becoming distracted in your own environment and generate less than authentic dialogue."
Face-to-face Learning Platform	Ranked as the highest level of student engagement.	"Without hesitation, I can say student engagement was the highest with a face-to-face format."

Question 9. How important do you perceive the three course platforms to be as they relate to a positive student experience?

PAR1 stated "The three course platforms could be conducive to different people. For example, students who are also teachers need flexible class schedules and meeting times. But I still believe that students learn best in a face-to-face environment. It produced more meaningful growth, especially from my experience in a cohort setting. Relationships equal engagement."

PAR2 stated "How a class is presented means everything, particularly for international students who are timid about reaching out to others. It's important to have that sense of community build into the classroom environment."

PAR3 stated "The learning platforms are important because they are likely to dictate the experience a student will have in that course."

PAR4 stated "I think face-to-face courses provide a more positive student

experience when it comes to learning. I love going to class and look forward to them each week because I know I'll be actively engaged."

PAR5 stated "I think an online or even blended platform can minimize the likelihood of having a positive student experience in the given course. They have been task oriented with little to no participation. Naturally occurring discussion is nonexistent. In face-to-face platforms students are able to establish a relationship with their professor and colleagues; I think that is critical for success and an essential part of the higher education experience."

PAR6 stated "In face-to-face courses I'm outgoing and willing to participate, contributions are not forced. That is a positive student experience."

PAR7 stated "I think that student retention and student experiences are formed by the level of positive reinforcement and feedback that they receive in the classroom. When students take online classes, they don't get that personalized level of feedback, in some cases they don't even know what their classmates or professors look like."

PAR8 stated "The face-to-face platform has a strong ability to positively impact students. In blended platforms, I only saw the professor in person during exam times. Fully online platforms resulted in an unfavorable student experience because there is a total lack of personal connection."

PAR9 stated "Face-to-face is difficult for me personally because I don't have much time and need to focus on getting the degree. That platform necessitates juggling commute, work, childcare, etc. I appreciate that online platforms recognize those points; I have only had positive experiences in such classes thus far. My peers have been has dedicated as I. The feedback and collaboration have been helpful and robust. I have no

complaints. I find that the students in blended course platforms are more accessible than those online and I wonder if the online students are getting the same experience as I or if they are being somewhat left out."

PAR10 stated "If the goal is to cram as many students through the college for the least amount of money, then I'd say online platforms are probably the way to go. The traditional face-to-face platform is preferable and in my experience, superior. That being said, traditional courses which make generous use of an online communication method, like Canvas, as a supplement to the in-person classroom is the best of the best." Table 9 represents the results of Question 9.

Table 9

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 9

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Online Learning Platform	Leads to a negative student experience more often than not.	"When students take online classes, they don't get that personalized level of feedback, in some cases they don't even know what their classmates or professors look like."
Blended Learning Platform	Dissatisfactory student experience due to low engagement.	"In blended platforms, I only saw the professor in person during exam times."
Face-to-face Learning Platform	Meaningful learning created a positive student experience.	"Students are able to establish professional relationships, that is an essential part of the higher education experience."

Question 10. What additional student engagement methods pertaining to offered courses would you envision to enhance the graduate student experience (see Table 10)?

PAR1 stated "Online classes could be enhanced by having an option to digitally join the class with a face-to-face screen option from any device. Blended courses could

be enhanced by being more than a discussion board with required comments, which most are. Face-to-face instruction could increase student engagement methods for an overall better graduate experience by means of professors creating and implementing courses that encourage engagement through professional development."

PAR2 stated "More practical, field based assignments relating to hands on experience and less written reflections could enhance the graduate experience."

PAR3 stated "Actual collaboration seems meaningless without knowing who you are collaborating with. It can be difficult to do group projects as is, but if personal connections aren't being made through the effort, a majority of the positive graduate experience is lost."

PAR4 stated "More interaction with professors is always a plus for online classes, and adds to the professional graduate experience. Having professors email us and leave feedback helps us learn and want to learn, especially if being face-to-face isn't an option."

PAR5 stated "Collaborative work for assignments such as papers or essays does more harm than good. It creates tension with the group dynamic, which eventually detracts from time spent learning. I digest much more content when content is discussion based. I would love to see more student associations created to benefit the collaborative environment and enhance the graduate experience."

PAR6 stated "Being exposed to more material that is directly related to the field of study would enhance the graduate experience. Being immersed in the environment that your studies pertain to is a benefit for Master's level students."

PAR7 stated "I think online courses with a Skype option where all students and

professors are required to be present and share ideas or opinions about coursework would be a beneficial way to keep students engaged and maintain graduate level rigor."

PAR8 stated "An emphasis on project based, creative learning strategies, and collaborative work rather than tests or exams."

PAR9 stated "For whatever reason, graduate students tend to isolate themselves in their work. Online opportunities to connect with peers and build professional relationships would be helpful.

PAR10 stated "I would love more content-area electives that translate to marketable professional development skills." Table 10 represents the results of Question 10.

Table 10

Identified Themes in Protocol Question 10

Event	Theme Identified	Participant's Quotes
Additional Student Engagement Methods	Ability to build professional relationships.	"Online opportunities to connect with peers and build professional relationships would be helpful."
Enhancement of the Graduate Experience	Expand marketability for the job market.	"Being exposed to more material that is directly related to the field of study would enhance the graduate experience."

Themes of the Study

Perception of engagement experiences in online courses. Participants shared that online courses generally fail to promote effective collaboration, pose difficulties due to an absence of face-to-face interaction, often follow a bland discussion and response format that leaves little room for creativity, place a greater focus on completion rather than content mastery, and rarely elicit authentic forms of student engagement.

Nonetheless, two participants suggested that student engagement in online courses is what the individual makes of it, because it may be the only platform that applies to them. Many graduate students have full time careers and juggle responsibilities such as raising a family and finding a work-life balance. In those situations, attending afternoon or even evening classes may not be a viable option.

A majority of participants expressed dissatisfaction with engagement experiences in online courses. Two out of ten participants reported having a positive experience with collaboration in online courses. Zero out of ten participants reported having a positive experience with student engagement in online courses. One out of ten participants reported that using an e-learning environment positively impacted their perception of collaboration with professors and colleagues. Ten out of ten participants reported that their behavior is adversely altered in an e-learning environment.

Perception of engagement experiences in blended courses. Interestingly, participants seemed to mentally group their online courses and blended courses together. Many responses to the protocol questions included verbiage that placed online and blended courses in the same category. Even if this thought process is rational due to the electronic delivery of information, feedback didn't include opinions such as "a blended platform incorporates the best of both worlds, online and face-to-face learning" as one may hypothesize. Instead, feedback reflected a comparable, even exaggerated level of discontent.

Zero out of ten participants reported having a positive experience with collaboration in blended courses. Zero out of ten participants reported having a positive experience with student engagement in blended courses. Zero out of ten participants

reported that a blended learning platform facilitated the highest level of student engagement. To support this data, participants articulated that the two primary downfalls of online and face-to-face courses are a lack of relationship building and time management issues. Students felt as if those two obstacles merged together and formed the blended learning platform; they were still encountering each deficit.

Perception of engagement experiences in face-to-face courses. Every participant communicated wide-ranging feelings of contentment with face-to-face courses. As the interviews concluded, an overarching theme of satisfaction was identified. Participants shared that face-to-face courses have preeminent advantages over their counterparts in the form of accountability, motivation, networking, collaboration, engagement, and learning gains. Students recognized the value of online courses, but stated that face-to-face learning still outweighs e-learning; convenience cannot replace tradition.

In contrast to online and blended learning, ten out of ten participants reported having a positive experience with collaboration in face-to-face courses. Ten out of ten participants reported having a positive relationship with student engagement. Ten out of ten participants reported that a face-to-face learning platform facilitated the highest level of student engagement. Students acknowledged that higher education is moving towards e-learning platforms rather than away from them, but provided significant evidence to oppose that notion.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented data collected during ten one-on-one, semi-structured, comprehensive interviews conducted between months of June 2017 and October 2017.

The data collected resulted in themes of graduate students' lived experiences in the College of Education. The identified themes led to discovery of pivotal experiences across varied learning platforms. Each student openly shared their perception of engagement experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings. Participants displayed enthusiasm that their involvement in the study would benefit future enrollees and program development.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview of the Study

This chapter describes a summary of the research study along with implications of the findings and their importance to higher education. Meanings, understandings, and relevance of the study are represented through six sections: anticipated outcomes, limitations of the study, delimitations of the study, implications of the findings, recommendations for future research, and a conclusion. This study provided a deeper insight into the phenomenon of graduate level student engagement across various delivery formats.

Rapid advancement in information and communication technologies impacts society as a whole (Eryilmaz, 2015). Thereupon, influence and transformation is brought to higher education. Due to technological progression, an increased understanding of graduate students' experiences and perspectives of engagement across the spectrum of various instructional modalities is greatly needed. This study's data revealed that it is necessary for a psychological investment in learning to be present and also discovered how social interaction and engagement play a fundamental role in the development of cognition.

Huang (2016) documented that universities predict students select online courses because they boast integrated convenience or blended courses because they offer advantages of both face-to-face and online models, but disclosed that these assumptions and methods do not necessarily cater to the needs of all learners. In an attempt to address the diverse needs of graduate students, post-secondary institutions are increasing distance-learning opportunities (Ruth, & Conners, 2012). To ensure an equivalent quality

of instruction, it is crucial to identify best practices and create online education that is as effective and fulfilling as the traditional, preferred, face-to-face format (Butcher, Epps, & Cleaveland, 2015).

Anticipated Outcomes

The expected outcome of this research study will provide an understanding of graduate students' scholastic needs to enhance the higher education experience for future enrollees and improve program development. Recognizing areas of inadequacy would address specific necessities of adult learners that are required to be successful in their academic program. Stakeholders and the graduate population would benefit from this information. First and foremost, students will be provided with a source dedicated to exploring the importance of engagement throughout their studies. Secondly, professors will gain insight into how various learning modalities influence levels of student engagement and the outcome they have on a course's popularity. Finally, administrators will be equipped with the knowledge to better serve their institution from a student centered perspective of how different elements within higher education, such as student engagement, directly relate to the feedback with which their school is provided.

Themes derived from the evaluation process proved that students perceive engagement experiences to vastly differ in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings; evidence that supports the need for this research study. Data collected from the ten semi-structured, one-on-one interviews suggested that graduate students would collectively benefit from enhanced e-learning delivery methods. Students that are enrolled in online classes experience challenges that their face-to-face counterparts do not encounter. After completing the data analysis process, the most prevalent theme that

emerged was a lack of meaningful social interaction, or student engagement, in online formats.

This student population represents a group of experienced, highly motivated individuals. In order to establish a state of equality among instructional formats, online learners require support to aid in their retention, just as traditional face-to-face students do. According to Calhoun, Green, and Burke (2017) the act of immersing oneself in the social practices of a graduate program encourages the creation and adoption of perspectives common to that community. Accordingly, it is rational to propose that graduate student perceptions and experiences are developed through a combination of relationships built amongst colleagues and the breadth of meaningful course content. Participants shared that increased levels of student engagement made possible by exposure to more field-based assignments that translate to professional marketability and improved networking opportunities would benefit the student body and institution at large.

Limitations of the Study

The research was limited to interviewing graduate students in the College of Education who met specific course completion criteria. The researcher crafted ten open-ended questions, which were approved by the Institutional Review Board. However, the participants were restricted to those questions due to the semi-structured nature of the study. In that, the researcher was barred from asking direct questions during the interviews. Provided responses were also confined to a 60-minute time frame. Additionally, the researcher would have been interested in interviewing faculty members to capture different perceptions of student engagement in face-to-face, online, and

blended classroom settings. By excluding the perspectives of faculty members, the researcher was limited to the data collection of graduate students in the College of Education.

Another limitation of the study was participants' time constraints. All participants had careers and personal lives that they worked hard to balance. Coupled with their class schedules and academic obligations, there was little time left to fit in outside elements. The researcher was contacted by a particular category of potential participants who showed a high level of interest in the study, but were ultimately hesitant to agree to the research parameters due to an implied time commitment. Allotting a prolonged amount of time for participants to rearrange their schedules may have alleviated this complication.

Delimitations of the Study

A characteristic that limited the scope and defined the boundaries of the study was time management. The approval of the research study extended late into the spring semester. Students were prepping for exams and many were preparing for spending the summer off campus. These reasons prevented many students from participating, as data collection did not begin until late summer, early fall. Another reason for participants declining to participate was their physical location. The institution of study has four campuses, not including virtual campuses or satellite locations abroad. The researcher elected to focus on the main campus because it contains the College of Education's largest population. Still, many students had to decline their invitation to participate due to distance and scheduling conflicts.

The largest delimitation of the study was having a natural disaster take place in

the middle of data collection. Hurricane Irma had a devastating impact on areas surrounding the university. Institutions across the state were closed for over a week and local residents were urged to evacuate. As a result, four out of ten participants dropped out of the study. The abrupt setback was unexpected and it altered the projected completion date.

Implications of the Findings

The implications suggested in this chapter are based upon the results of the interviews and three central research questions in this study. The following research questions were addressed.

Research Question 1. What are the experiences of graduate students within face-to-face, online, and blended learning as determined by a 60-minute one-on-one interview?

Research Question 2. How do levels of student engagement impact one's perceptions of a course as determined by a semi-structured interview?

Research Question 3. What roles do instructional platforms play as they relate to a positive student experience, as determined by phenomenological inquisition?

The research questions were used to explore and understand experiences of graduate students in the College of Education at a public higher education institution within the state of Florida. Responses from a total of 10 participants varied according to their scholastic background, range of practice, age demographics, and exposure to course material. While each response was tailored according to the participants' individual opinions, all participants implied that face-to-face learning produced the highest levels of student engagement and created a positive student experience.

Research question one affirmed that participants feel as if the institution provides learning platforms for a diverse group of adult learners and promotes inclusion for all students. Nevertheless, it was also asserted that graduate students are a distinctive population with developed maturity levels who value and desire expressive collaboration; they should be met with appropriate instructional techniques. Students reported having the highest level of collaboration in face-to-face courses and shared similar responses of low collaboration for online and blended courses. Particularly relevant to the advantage of face-to-face learning is harnessing mindfulness, or mental focus, concentration, and attention, which are likely to deepen student learning (Molinari, Freshman, & Rae, 2015). The researcher gathered that online learning's most dominant impediments revolve around an absence of face-to-face interaction, which sparks natural discourse. It was repetitively shared that online collaboration efforts give rise to staged synergy and eventual frustration. Similar comments were also applied to blended learning, where students admitted that the format added another level of confusion to class expectations. According to the participants, face-to-face learning supports students working towards a common goal through intrinsic motivation. PAR1 exemplified this reasoning by declaring, "it is a privilege to watch colleagues in my cohort grow and evolve over time."

The interviews acknowledged that the topic of student engagement yielded comparable results to collaboration within face-to-face, online, and blended learning. Feelings of discontentment with both online and blended formats were conveyed through participant's responses. Contrastingly, feelings of fulfillment were detected in regard to a face-to-face format. Farooq and Matteson (2016) relayed that face-to-face learning actively engages students through real-time discussions about the issues of research and

practice. Students communicated that traditional face-to-face courses stimulate curiosity, maintain or grow authentic interest in the subject matter, embrace the Socratic method, allow individuals to learn from the lived experiences of others, and set the stage for constituting professional connections, whereas online and blended learning did not endorse such advantages. Participants accentuated the point that online and blended courses are often based on discussion boards and responding to posts. Although the approach is meant to mimic a face-to-face environment, the end goal becomes lost in "forced discussion and commenting", as described by PAR6. The open setting of a face-to-face course was said to make learning an enjoyable process rather than a daunting task, learning felt purposeful.

Research question two illustrated how levels of student engagement impact one's perceptions of a course. Responses clearly articulated that high levels of collaboration result in positive perceptions of the course, and low levels of collaboration result in negative perceptions of the course. Participants explained how collaborative efforts are more common in face-to-face learning; thereby causing online assignments to feel like a chore in comparison. Adjectives such as "boring", "pointless", and "forced" were used to describe low collaboration environments. Sung-Hee (2017) stated that learners are aware of active participants in face-to-face courses, and are subsequently motivated to increase their collaborative efforts. On the contrary, engaging students to participate in online environments is not easy because many learners can be apathetic and contribute very little (Sung-Hee, 2017). It was noted that collaboration calls for a more robust understanding of the material, because it is expected that individuals will learn from their colleagues and vice versa. PAR3 voiced, "Collaborative learning in traditional courses

helped me to have an in-depth understanding of educational theories and teaching pedagogies. Some classmates who have practical experience were willing to share their valuable experience and stories." PAR8 provided an example that further justified the significance of collaboration when stating "I took my required Professional Writing course online and it resulted in a "B" average due to lack of examples, collaboration, and interaction. In face-to-face courses, which I prefer, the discussions allowed me to absorb more information."

Honing in on specific aspects of student engagement, students continued to convey the importance of student engagement and how it shapes one's perception of a course. Participants appreciated the immediate conversational feedback that a face-to-face environment provides, in addition to the vulnerability of classmates, cultivated relationships, and the process of sharing genuine thoughts. Adjectives such as "isolation", "low investment", and "confusion" were used to describe low engagement settings. On the contrary, students praised high engagement courses. In that respect, PAR5 stated, "I'm much more engaged in a face-to-face setting because I rely on colleagues from a motivational perspective. The high level of accountability produces a sense of satisfaction, which leads to a positive perception of the course. Online classes leave me with no desire to increase my level of participation." Similarly, PAR7 shared, "I enjoy classes where I am able to engage more with other students and the faculty in a positive way. When I am able to constantly share ideas and thoughts with my classmates, I feel like I am able to learn more about the topic." Responses aligned with Bishnoi's (2017) research that investigated how learners impart new ideas and share perspectives with others when highly engaged, which coincides with the premise that learning is social

in nature.

Research question three supported the premise of instructional platforms playing multiple roles as they relate to a positive student experience. Using an e-learning environment or opting for a face-to-face format immensely impacts the overall student experience. When asked how an e-learning environment impacts students' perceptions of collaboration with professors and colleagues, participants conveyed that it was not a replacement for face-to-face interaction and little to no reliable collaboration was reported. Students found that blended and online courses lent themselves to unnatural interactions, or as PAR1 phrased it, "robotic, mechanical, and cold". PAR6 elaborated on the notion that personal investment in the course seems to decline across the board when expressing how "Professors didn't seem as ready to have discussions that lead to a deep understanding of the content. It was more of an assignment based environment that was being supervised." That feeling radiated throughout the participants' responses. Complaints of not seeing their classmates often, or at all, stemmed from the difficultly of developing professional connections because students hardly have the ability to match a face to their colleagues' name. Social gestures are obsolete, making subtle encouragement nearly impossible to transmit.

Students' perceptions of themselves and their behavior in an e-learning environment and face-to-face environment also fluctuate. Behavior in an e-learning environment was reportedly negatively altered, and behavior in a face-to-face environment was said to align with one's natural behavior in an academic setting. In traditional, face-to-face environments participants described themselves as being attentive, alert, and challenged by interactions with others. They took time to mentally

connect with one another, were dedicated succeeding in the course, and felt as if they were valued members of their cohort or class setting. However, those feelings of positivity didn't transfer over to blended or online platforms. Fascinatingly, participants disclosed that their behavior radically changed in an e-learning environment. PAR4 contributed a prime example of this phenomenon by providing the response, "In online courses, I'm not prone to putting as much effort in. I think they are easier and therefore don't require as much time or dedication. I estimate that I spend half the time working on my online classes. As far as face-to-face learning goes, I spend a good amount of time working to master the content. I also collaborate more in class and tend to network more." PAR2 explained, "Too many discussion board assignments can be time consuming. When it gets to be overdone, people disengage. I become lost in the conversation and it becomes nearly impossible to navigate your way to a clear understanding." In addition to these trends, participants also communicated that they are more introverted online and feel that an e-learning platform encourages ridged expression of thoughts.

When asked which learning platform they felt facilitated the highest level of student engagement, the answer was unanimous. Face-to-face learning was ranked as the highest level of student engagement, online learning was thought to have potential in the future, but currently produces insufficient levels of student engagement, and participants grouped blended learning in the same category as online learning. Appropriately, Akinul, Rahman, and Islam (2017) explained that active learning strategies engage students in critical thinking while promoting deep understanding. Many participants worded their responses in a way that showcased their decisive decision making, such as "Absolutely

face-to-face", "Without hesitation, face-to-face", "Face-to-face, one hundred percent",

"There is no comparison, it's face-to-face", and "In-person, traditional courses, hands

down". PAR10 further supported his response by explaining "If given the choice, I will

choose the traditional course every time." Participants shared that face-to-face learning

sparks intrinsic motivation, provides clear expectations, and provides the physical aspect

of interaction, which students believed to be crucial for meaningful learning.

Participants perceived the three course platforms to be of great importance as they

relate to a positive student experience. It was concluded that face-to-face learning

created a positive student experience through meaningful learning, online learning

created a negative student experience more often than not, and blended learning shared

the same issues as online learning pertaining to low engagement, thereby resulting in a

negative student experience. Participants added that engagement is unthinkable without

relationships. Duţă (2017) found that learning platforms are instrumental components of

student engagement and attainment in the higher education setting. PAR2 highlighted a

similar point by stating, "How a class is presented means everything, particularly for

international students who are timid about reaching out to others. It's important to have

that sense of community build into the classroom environment." PAR6 expressed a

similar view in her response," In face-to-face courses I'm outgoing and willing to

participate, contributions are not forced. That is a positive student experience."

However, PAR9 had a different opinion, which served as the outlier. She explained,

"Face-to-face is difficult for me personally because I don't have much time and need to

focus on getting the degree. That platform necessitates juggling a commute, work,

childcare, etc." While PAR9 felt that student engagement and collaboration were more

beneficial in face-to-face courses, responsibilities dictate how graduate students manage their time; scheduling has an ability to manipulate the student experience.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher recommends more in-depth research and analysis on a proposed initiative that provides internship experiences for College of Education graduate students enrolled in face-to-face, online, and blended courses, across all programs. Participants relayed the importance of having more practical, field based assignments relating to hands on experience and less written reflections. The need of exposure to material that is directly related to an individual's field of study was expressed numerous times by participants. Being immersed in the environment that one's program pertains to was identified as an essential element for Master's level students. This initiative would solve the dilemma of graduate students in the College of Education lacking a means of building professional relationships and developing content-area skills that are transferable to the job market. A solution that address preparation concerns is graduate level internships for students in the College of Education.

Shows, Killough, Jackson, and Lui, (2015) defined internships as formal programs that provide practical experience for students in an occupation or profession. The practical experience, including experiential learning and direct work application is one of the main purposes of an internship. They also help students develop marketable skills that are advantageous in today's competitive job market (Hurst, Thye, & Wise, 2014). Consequently, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (2014) released that internship sites maintained 75% of higher education students who had experience with them after one year of service.

Dobratz, Singh, and Abbey (2015) argued that internships should be incorporated into formal entrepreneurship education programs, for the same reason the researcher believes an internship program would be immeasurably beneficial for graduate students in the College of Education. Providing internship opportunities for graduate students can enhance the student engagement experience and increase chances of timely employment post graduation. Such internships would help students better understand the connection between their program studies and real world experiences, as requested during the interviews. There is a proven need to strengthen students in their alertness to opportunities and ability to utilize their institution (Dobratz, Singh, & Abbey, 2015). This initiative is threefold; the student would directly benefit from a skill and marketability standpoint, an employer would benefit from extra assistance and the ability to observe the student's work ethic without full time commitment, and the institution would benefit from building relationships with the community and possible stakeholders, in addition to strengthening their College of Education.

Although an internship opportunity appears to benefit all parties involves, there are still a population of graduate students who face the same obstacles as did the participants in this study such as PAR9, with family, commute, work, and school obligations. Ruggiero and Boehm (2016) recognized this concern and proposed a virtual internship program that provides opportunities for non-traditional students to gain practical experience regardless of their physical locations and increased responsibilities. Traditional internship programs reinforce academic learning, increase a student's self-confidence, and provide an occasion to establish professional contacts (Ruggiero & Boehm, 2016). Be as it may, non-traditional graduate students are not always afforded

that option. Yet, a bridge between theory and practice is requisite for prompt professional success. The principle of virtual internships is providing engagement with real-world designs and actual participation in professional realities, while gaining the skills in a virtual environment (Ruggiero & Boehm, 2016).

Further demonstrating the need for readiness programs in graduate programs, Marsh et al. (2016) found that agriculture graduate students acquired experiential learning through two consecutive semesters of internships. Interns and their mentors perceived that students improved in most of the targeted skills including written and oral communication, increased critical thinking abilities, and reported higher levels of confidence when competing in the workforce (Marsh et al., 2016). Expanding on that ground, Sumedrea and Tecau (2016) relayed the magnitude of implementing internship programs across all graduate programs to fulfill the ultimate goal of increasing the employability of students. Winslow, Eliason, and Thiede, (2015) added that a critical feature of higher education in higher education is the opportunity to participate in authentic experiences. There is a need for increased harmonization of employment tools in the higher education system. Internship programs provide students with opportunities to put theory into practice and further develop their personal career (Sumedrea & Tecau, 2016). These happenings create a more diverse learning experience and lead to an increased ability to handle complex tasks more easily while improving efficiency and effectiveness in meeting future job requirements (Sumedrea & Tecau, 2016).

Pegg and Caddell (2016) disclosed that understanding the relationship between learning and application is a key concern for educational researchers and policy makers at the local, national, and international level. Institutions should be cognizant of the fact

that internships play an important role in the development of professionals. Requirements for real world experiences vary according to program selection; however, the College of Education could improve its curriculum by providing Master's level students with practical application exercises that allow for greater understanding. Hoyle and Deschaine (2016) found that the internship process increases student perseverance, retention, and degree completion due to involvement and engagement during the course of action. The pedagogy of workplace learning has the potential to address concerns about graduate employability and graduate level skills in relation to perceived business needs.

Conclusion

Higher education institutions have the ability to properly address the graduate student population, yet in some cases, students are not experiencing optimum instruction. The researcher hopes that universities will adopt the same enthusiasm shown by the participants concerning improved levels of engagement in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings. Universities must consider their delivery methods and adjust to the current needs of graduate students. While each individual is unique, this study exhibited commonalities among students and identified themes that can enhance the student experience.

The literature review and gathered data delineated an inequity between instructional delivery methods, as they pertain to perceived levels of student engagement. Integrating the ability to build professional relationships and increase marketability for the job market would greatly benefit the graduate population. The proposed initiative would meet the needs of present day Master's students while simultaneously benefiting

the institution and it's stakeholders. Those dedicated enough to earn advanced degrees

deserve specific pedagogy that is customized to elevate their academic success.

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Appendix A

Invitational Letter

Invitational Letter

Dear Participant:

As a doctoral candidate at Nova Southeastern University, I am writing to invite you to participate in a study that delves into the phenomenon of student engagement across various delivery formats within higher education. I believe this study will explore graduate students' perception of engagement experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings, thereby providing invaluable insight for future enrollees and program development. Your participation would entail a face-to-face interview, lasting no more than 60 minutes. The sample for this study consists of graduate level, Master's Degree participants who have completed a face-to-face, online, and blended course within the College of Education.

As a participant, you will receive a consent form that outlines the procedures, directions, and ethical requirements for the study. Your contribution is extremely valuable. Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw from this study at any time. All records and documents with your name will be confidential and will not be identified in any publication of this dissertation. Your name will not be associated with the research findings in any way. Interviews will be digitally recorded by Dragon Speak© dictation and audio to text dictation, for transcription purposes only. Solely the researcher will have access to the recordings. The recordings will be held in a secure area with a password protection. At the conclusion of the study, the recordings will be destroyed.

There will be no direct benefits to your participation in the study. However, your participation will involve reflecting on your experiences. Your valued input will contribute to the field of education by sharing student experiences and perspectives of engagement across the spectrum of various instructional modalities, consequently revealing if it is necessary for a psychological investment in learning to be present.

If you have questions, please contact me via e-mail at an409@nova.edu. I extend my most sincere thanks for your support and anticipated contribution.

 Sincerely,

Amanda Napolitano, Ed.D, Doctoral Candidate

Appendix B

Consent Form for Participation in the Research

Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled

Graduate Students' Beliefs and Perceptions of Student Engagement and Learning Platforms in Higher Education

Funding Source: None.

IRB protocol #

Principal investigator
Amanda Napolitano M.Ed

For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:
Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790
IRB@nsu.nova.edu

Site: A public Florida University

What is the study about?
The intent of this study is to explore graduate students' perception of engagement and experiences and in face-to-face, online, and blended classroom settings within higher education.

Why are you asking me?
You are invited as a result of meeting the criteria of being a Master's Degree student, who has completed a face-to-face, online, and blended course within the College of Education.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?
If you decide to participate, you will have a one-on-one interview, lasting no more than 60 minutes. You will be asked ten questions while on campus, at a place and time most convenient to you. The ten questions will ask about your experiences in face-to-face, online, and blended courses.

Is there any audio or video recording?
There will be audio recording. I will use a digital voice recorder during the interview so that I can accurately transcribe your responses later. The audio to text recording will be available to be read by the researcher, the IRB, and Dr. Gina Peyton, my dissertation chairperson. The audio to text recording will be transcribed exclusively by me during this transcription. The recording will be kept securely and password protected on my personal laptop computer.

The audio to text recording will be kept for 36 months and destroyed after that time by permanent erasure. Due to the fact that your voice will not be identifiable by anyone who reads the recording, your exposure is very minimal based upon the audio to text recording.

What are the dangers to me?
Risks or inconveniences to you include a possible loss of confidentiality. Due to the use of digital audio to text recordings, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, although the likelihood of the discovery of your actual identity is minimal. Every precaution will be taken to securely store and password-protect all data on the researcher's computer. As for loss of your personal time, I am incredibly grateful for your contribution, and every effort will be made to conduct interviews and follow-ups, if needed, as expediently as possible. Therefore, the interviews should take no more than 60 minutes. Interviews will also be scheduled at your convenience. Participants will be exposed to minimum risk. The researchers will be prepared to address any unforeseen circumstances and problems in order to minimize risk. As far as privacy, no specific questions will be asked about personal history, only questions related to the lived experience of taking courses across varied learning platforms. Communication between the participants and researchers will be encouraged throughout the study by building a trusting relationship between the participants and researchers. Ensuring confidentiality minimizes the likelihood of the participants experiencing risk. The participants will have the researchers contact information if there is a need to communicate at any time. The participants will understand that if there is a need to drop out of the study, no penalty will occur.

Are there any benefits to me for taking part in this research study?
There are none.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.

How will you keep my information private?
First, data will not contain identification information about the participants such as names and contact information. The anonymity of participants will be ensured by assigning pseudonyms to the individuals and removing descriptors that would identify the institution. These pseudonyms will be listed as Student 1, Student 2, . . . Student 5; etc. At the close-out of the study, all of the data will continue to be stored securely and password protected on the researcher's computer (that is, for digital data audio to text) for the University's required period of three years. Upon the conclusion of that time period, any and all traces of digital study data such as audio to
text recordings, transcript drafts, research notes, and the master list will be permanently deleted from my laptop computer's memory. Paper or hard copy data such as printed transcripts, signed consents, as well as any research notes will be incinerated. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless law requires disclosure. Please note that the IRB, regulatory agencies, or Dr. Gina Peyton may review research records. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless law requires disclosure.

What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?
You have the right to leave this study at any time or refuse to participate.
If you do decide to leave or you decide not to participate, you will not experience any penalty or loss of services that you have a right to receive.
If you choose to withdraw, any information collected about you before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the conclusion of the study and may be used as a part of the research.

Other Considerations:
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigators.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing below, you indicate that
- This study has been explained to you
- You have read this document or it has been read to you
- Your questions about this research study have been answered
- You have been told that you may ask the researchers any study-related questions in the future
- You have been told that you may ask the Institutional Review Board (IRB) personal questions about your study rights
- You are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Date: _____   Interviewer: _____

Participant Code:

_____

Script to be read before each interview:

Thank you for taking time to meet with me today to talk about your experiences as a graduate student. The purpose of this interview is to understand the link between student engagement and learning platforms in higher education. I am not evaluating you or your university. Everything we discuss today is confidential. I will be developing a report to document the information you share with me, but no names or institution will be identified. Our interview(s) should take no more than 1 hour. I would like to digitally record the interview with Dragon Speak© dictation, and audio to text format, but your name and the college name will not be included on the transcripts, and the recordings will be kept in a secure location in my office. Please let me know if there is any point at which you would like me to turn off the recording device. Additionally, I will be showing you a copy of this interview for your review. Do you have any questions? You did receive a copy of this document 48 hours prior to this interview in the event you decided not to participate. [Hand out and collect signed consent form]

1. Describe what inspired your decision to attend this university.

2. What are your experiences with collaboration in online, blended, and traditional face-to-face courses?

3. What affect did such collaboration experiences have on your perception of the courses?

4. How would you describe your experiences with student engagement in online, blended, and traditional courses?

5. What affect did such student engagement experiences have on your perception of the courses?

6. How did using an e-learning environment impact your perception of

collaboration with professors and colleagues?

7. How do you perceive yourself and your behavior in an e-learning environment, as opposed to a face-to-face environment?

8. Which learning platform do you feel facilitated the highest level of student engagement?

9. How important do you perceive the three course platforms to be as they relate to a positive student experience?

10. What additional student engagement methods pertaining to offered courses would you envision to enhance the graduate student experience?