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Perceptions of Business Private Sector Employers on the Employability of Distance-Only Institution Candidates in the United States: A Case Study

Tanacha Gaines

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Perceptions of Business Private Sector Employers on the Employability of Distance-Only
Institution Candidates in the United States: A Case Study

by
Tanacha Gaines

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial
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Approval Page

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Statement of Original Work

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Tanacha Gaines

Name

November 30, 2023

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Abstract

Perceptions of Business Private Sector Employers on the Employability of Distance-Only Institution Candidates in the United States: A Case Study. Tanacha Gaines, 2023: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: distance education, online education, business industry, private sector, employability.

The applied dissertation was designed to understand the perceptions of private-sector employers regarding the selection of candidates from distance-only higher education institutions. Guided by signaling theory as a framework, the study explored the mismatch between institutional, student, and employer expectations of skills and readiness for the labor market. Research into the employability of students and the acceptability of their distance-only degrees in the business sector could be informative as to whether the investment of students and their families provided fruitful employment opportunities. The literature showed an increase in enrollment for online learning, legislative expectations of higher education with the lack of structure and guidelines for distance education institutions to systematically assess their programs for the proper report to the government, mixed preferences by employers for candidates from distance-only institutions, and salient themes that indicated favorable skills and experiences for undergraduates such as experiential learning and communication skills. The research question informed data collection: What were the perceptions of business private-sector employers in the United States regarding the employability of candidates from distance-only higher education institutions? Bracketing and reflective journaling ensured that bias was acknowledged and removed from the influence of analysis. Findings from data analysis provided categories and themes associated with the central research question. One salient theme was that experience was a key factor when reviewing employee candidates from distance-only Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). Another theme was that the acquisition of the degree and the surrounding knowledge acquired were secondary to the necessary real-world experience, soft skills, and hard skills for navigating business or corporate environments.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) of 2008 seeks improved program integrity and quality in higher education. It includes expectations that institutions "provide an eligible program of training to prepare students for gainful employment in a recognized occupation" (HEOA, 2008, p. 86). While not fully defined in the HEOA, the gainful employment (GE) rule and definition were established by the Department of Education (Federal Register, 2014). In this rule, the Department of Education outlined compliance to guide institutions or programs in reporting and sustaining GE program operations. However, the GE definition was not consistently applied (Fountain, 2019). As evidence of this, and according to data provided through the U.S. Department of Education (2022a), in 2017, more than 800 programs did not comply with GE standards. In 2019, with the standing presidential administration's rescission of the 2014 GE rule (Federal Register, 2019), accountability for the student debt-to-income ratio was further hindered. In a January 2022 primary address on America's education system, Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona called out new efforts to strengthen the Gainful Employment Rule, ensuring students have good job opportunities and create career pathways (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). The context of the announcement alone indicated that the lack of a guarantee of gainful employment continually impacts students and their families financially. The population of focus for this paper is students in distance education that policies, processes, and practices may impact - or lack thereof - to ensure employment and earnings.

By the HEOA definition, online education falls under distance education. It is

based on online technology and includes any case where the instructor is not physically with the student during instruction and interacts with students synchronously or asynchronously (HEOA, 2008). This mode of delivery has grown in popularity, as Seaman et al. (2018) illustrated. They found that undergraduates in 2016 accounted for the highest population of students taking distance courses, five times higher than graduate-level students. Seaman et al. also found that among the 140 distance-only institutions, the highest enrollment concentration is over 87% in just the top 25 online schools. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics, students enrolled in exclusively online courses increased by 3.2 to 8.6 million from 2018-2021, with representation from the 4-year undergraduate class increasing from 1.5 million to 4.7 million for the same time frame (NCES, 2021). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers noted a decrease in overall enrollment for colleges and universities in 2020 as schools closed their doors and individuals grappled with safety and health decisions (Felson & Adamczyk, 2021; Johnson et al., 2021; Thomas & Allen, 2021). Despite this decline, and because of the closing of face-to-face instructional opportunities, online opportunities for learning presented flexibility and variety that acclimated more teachers and learners to this mode of delivery than before (Johnson et al., 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020). This data confirms increased interest and enrollment of undergraduates in distance education offerings which highlights the importance of support for the success of new members to the workforce.

Upon graduation, students from distance-only institutions potentially branch off into public and private sectors to compete for employment in the job market, with candidates from traditional delivery institutions being among the competition for work.

The interest here is the competition between distance education and conventional education students vying for employment in the business sector. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment in the Professional and Business Services industry increased by 3,462 between 2010 and 2020 and is projected to increase by 2,019 in the next 10 years (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). This data pairs increased enrollment into distance institutions with the potential increase of graduates entering the business industry workforce.

Unfortunately, some empirical research indicates employer inclination and preference for traditional over distance-only education candidates (Braun et al., 2020; Deming et al., 2016; Engel, 2016; Grossman, 2017). Further, other researchers found that for-profit institutions offering primarily online courses had low outcomes for student employment and earnings (Cellini & Turner, 2019), highlighting the negative impacts of low accountability for student success. These data and findings present the potential disadvantages of distance-only offerings and student enrollment in distance-only programs and institutions. Also, the challenges faced by students from distance-only institutions on entering the workforce are evident compared to students from traditional institutions.

Phenomenon of Interest

When considering enrollment into distance programs and institutions, the availability of employment for graduates is essential to assess because, as indicated by policy and current efforts surrounding the Gainful Employment rule of 2014 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b), there is still a need to ensure that graduates completing their degrees are afforded employment opportunities that allow them to pay their

educational debts. More specifically, the employability of distance education students in the business private sector is of interest. A cursory review of LinkedIn profiles (2021) for 5 of the top 20 largest U.S. private companies, according to Forbes (Forbes, n.d.), revealed that the 15 most attended higher education institutions listed had a disproportionate absence of the top 50 U.S. distance-only offering institutions, as documented by Seaman et al. (2018). Instead, the most frequent schools listed were traditional and private campus institutions. In an “Entry Level Campus Recruiting Map” page hosted by one of the top 5 observed private U.S. companies that serve the business industry, there was no indication of recruiter representation for distance-only institutions. There were a couple of public state schools represented that offer online campuses. Still, those distance programs were not listed along with their corresponding leading campus schools as targets for recruiting (Price Waterhouse Corporation, 2021). Moreover, another of the top 5 observed private U.S. companies that serve the business industry dedicates a web page to its successful University Program that is used to develop and mentor talent through its partnership with select universities (Deloitte, 2022). The universities listed on the web page are all business schools and programs from traditional public and private institutions, with some offering an entire distance education program for MBA.

These observations are preliminary and not conclusive. At the same time, these observations show a preference for supporting, recruiting, and hiring undergraduate candidates from traditional institutions over distance-only institutions. Because this research focuses on employment, interest surrounds the consideration of undergraduates from distance-only institutions for entry-level to mid-level jobs. This paper attempts to

understand the perceptions of private-sector employers regarding selecting candidates from distance-only higher education institutions.

Background and Justification

Along with the government, educational institutions, faculty, and students, workforce employers are also higher education stakeholders. Current literature shows that, in various fields, researchers are interested in outcomes and perceptions of distance programs compared to traditional programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels. For example, in some studies on recruiter and employer acceptability of candidates in the United States, hiring personnel preferred an applicant's acquisition of a degree by traditional delivery methods over the online delivery method (Adams, 2016; Engel, 2016; Richards et al., 2018; Roberto & Johnson, 2019). However, Naresh and Rajalakshmi (2020) found other studies where the recruiter or employer's perceptions toward online programs are only sometimes negative. Some consider the institutions' reputation and other factors in hiring decisions (Naresh & Rajalakshmi, 2020). This concern also has international implications where researchers have investigated online or distance education as a popular and necessary mode of delivery (Chebl & el Rayess, 2017; Naresh & Rajalakshmi, 2020).

In 2019, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) issued a Recruiting Benchmarks survey report (NACE, 2019). They shared the characteristics employers value when choosing target schools. Past recruiting experience with the school was ranked the top characteristic, with 90% of respondents. The quality of individual programs was also an essential characteristic at 89%. The reputation of the school (78%) and location (76%) were also considered important to employers. To use these valued

characteristics to illustrate the possible skewed advantages of traditional and disadvantages of attending distance-only institutions, the following point stands out: 90% value past recruiting experience – however, as observed with two prominent business firms, recruiting appears preferential toward traditional institutions. Of interest is whether gainful employment is equally possible in the business sector while company recruiters have focused on target institutions.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

While the literature available provides some insight into employer perspectives, there is limited literature on the specific hiring practices and perceptions of recruiters, human resource leads, and hiring managers in the private sector of candidates from distance-only institutions. Engel (2016) studied hiring decisions in public and private accounting areas for professionals with online degrees, recommending future research on differences in other employment settings and professions. With the GE rule under further review (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b) and considering the expectation of students to see returns in the job market stemming from their distance education experience, hiring practices and trends need closer inspection.

More recently, Future Learn conducted an employer survey to assess whether the COVID-19 pandemic has changed employer sentiment (Kogan, 2021). Findings indicate employers prefer online learning more favorably, although some reservations may still exist depending on the industry. Based on the survey, 35% of the 1000 U.S. hiring managers surveyed believed that the Business and Information industries benefit the most from online learning. Also, 62% of employers felt the need to rethink the hiring process applied to applicants with online degrees. However, this survey was not based on an

empirical approach and did not specify whether the hiring managers were from the public or private sectors. There was no delineation of what industries they represent. Exploring the juxtaposition of the business private sector and candidates from distance-only institutions seeking employment can address gaps and limitations in research.

Audience

Research in this area will benefit students considering professions in the business and private sectors. Also, research may help distance-only Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) strategize developing or improving programs and communication, internship, and outreach efforts in the job market. Organizations seeking talent in the business industry who have not yet utilized talent from distance institutions may also leverage this research.

Definition of Terms

Distance Education

Synchronous or Asynchronous delivery of instruction using technologies (i.e., internet, broadcast, audio, video, etc.) between a separate student and instructor (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008).

Distance-only

A higher education college or university that only operates online and offers degrees and programs that are earned and delivered exclusively through distance education. (College Scorecard, 2022).

Employability

A person's chance of acquiring employment in the labor market (Presti et al., 2022).

Employer

An organization or person that pays people to work for them (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.). In this paper, we refer to the employer as a person responsible for or tasked with acquiring new workforce talent in an organization. Includes the firm, recruiter, human resource, or manager.

Stakeholder

A person or organization is involved in a project or system in which they have an investment (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, n.d.). Referred to in this paper as students, educational institutions, and employers.

Traditional Institution

Delivers courses with 0% online interaction or facilitation (Roberto & Johnson, 2019). In this paper, it entails a higher education college or university with a physical location(s) operating predominantly from that location. It offers degrees and programs that are earned and delivered predominantly in person.

Traditional Degree

A degree acquired from a traditional institution (Roberto & Johnson, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study aims to understand the perceptions of private-sector employers regarding selecting candidates from distance-only higher education institutions for job placement in the United States. The employee candidate in the United States may face a variety of individuals acting as gatekeepers before getting hired, from recruiters to human resource personnel to hiring managers. With well over 100 distance-only higher education institutions in the United States alone (Seaman et al., 2018), workforce

placement and gainful employment for college graduates from these institutions will be just as scrutinized by the U.S. Department of Education as traditional institutions when it comes to policy for higher education funding. Therefore, research into the employability of students and the acceptability of their distance-only degrees in the business sector can be informative to whether the investment of students and their families provides equitable employment opportunities.

This chapter introduced the study and identified the research problem, the background and justification of the problem, and the purpose of the study. Pertinent terms were defined and introduced for reader alignment with the language used in this study. The next chapter will review current literature and salient themes related to topics on acceptance of online and distance education.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The inquiry of perception, acceptance, and employment opportunities for distance-only students compared to traditional students is grounded in Spence's (1973) signaling theory. Whether through traditional or distance education, there are general expectations for college graduates to complete their programs and acquire some return on their investment (Higher Education Act, 2008; Federal Register, 2014). Employers assessing candidates from a distance or online programs have varying perceptions of the value of their credentials, with a trend and preference toward candidates from traditional institutions (Braun et al., 2020; Deming et al., 2016; Engel, 2016; Grossman, 2017). Within the framework of signaling theory, major categories, such as employability, information asymmetry, acceptance of online and traditional deliveries, and experiential learning, support this literature review.

Theoretical Framework

The inquiry of employer perception of distance-only candidates is grounded in signaling theory. Signaling theory was initially developed in a landmark study by Michael Spence (1973). The theory was primarily used to study employment as an investment made under uncertain conditions due to the lack of the possibility of immediate verification of the employee's qualifications. Signaling theory was selected as the theoretical framework for this study because exploring employer perception includes efforts to understand how they interpret signals surrounding the people they will consider for hire.

Employers cannot directly observe all qualities or the productivity of potential candidates. They only have access to information the candidate provides, such as

education, school attended, work experience, if any, and credentials. These attributes or signals are controlled by the signaler (candidate). In contrast, the recipient (employer), who relies on these signals and observable/tangible indicators (age, presence, verbal and communicative abilities, etc.), is left to make an informed decision. The candidate's employment relies on the employer's perceived value and assumptions based on the available information. Education, skill, career competency, and credentials are a few possible identifiers of employability, productivity, and potential earnings (Deming et al., 2016; Okay-Somerville & Scholarios, 2017; Presti et al., 2022; Roberto & Johnson., 2019; Van Belle et al., 2020). Any number of items can stand out as signals for an employer during the decision process that influence their motivation to move potential employees to the next step.

As an illustration of influences on employability, Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2017) surveyed university graduates in the UK. The researchers assessed how approaches to employability based on position, social background, possession of human capital, and process of career self-management were compared against two cohorts of graduates that transitioned from college to the labor market. Two hundred ninety-three students participated in the measurement of social background, educational background, work experience, career exploration, networking, perceived employability, and objective employability (job offer, employment status, etc.). Findings confirmed that networking increased job opportunities, and educational background and credentials strongly influenced employment quality and employability more than social background. The study revealed that actual or objective employability was likely and possible through

student self-management efforts and the existence of a specific educational background credential.

Heinz and Schumacher (2017) used research to examine employee candidates' cooperativeness as signaled through a resume. Another study by Van Belle et al. (2020) indicated that items on a resume served as signals to inform the characteristics of the candidate, such as maturity. Van Belle conducted a vignette factorial survey where 242 professionals from Flanders, Belgium, were provided with job vacancies and the requirements of the five employee candidates they were assigned to evaluate for fit. Participants were only offered vignette factors (with varying levels) as information for the potential hires: gender, delay in study duration, honors obtained, student work experience, and extra-curricular activities. Participants chose among several statements - some toward the signal of human capital, social capital, trainability, or attitude - that related to their sentiment regarding the candidates using a Likert scale. The findings indicated that students who participated in work had a higher chance of being invited to the next step in the hiring process. Such findings reiterate the existence of signaling theory and the use of the asymmetrical information provided to employers by potential employees.

The theory of signaling is derived from information asymmetry. In information symmetry, one party in an economic or communication transaction has more information than the other (Campion et al., 2019; Koivunen et al., 2019; Weller et al., 2019); e.g., the candidate is privy to their skills and capabilities while the employer cannot be entirely sure at the time of screening or the interview. Employers sometimes make assumptions in the absence of information and leverage what they have available, such as education

credentials and screening or interview information, to drive the decision process and determine wages for new hires. For instance, Heinz and Schumacher (2017) cited studies where evidence of volunteering positively impacted salaries for job applicants in different countries. With no visual confirmation or observation of actual performance and productivity, the asymmetrical information provided influences potential employee success outcomes.

The general framework of signaling theory covered in this study applies to all settings where employers follow a decision-making process to screen and hire potential employee candidates. Job seekers come from many avenues. This includes experienced individuals already employed, seeking to advance or change their work environment. It also includes individuals new to the job market seeking work for the first time. Included in either of those levels, individuals entering the job market following a college education can be among the candidate pool. Furthermore, that candidate pool can consist of college graduates from different types of schools, including traditional and distance education institutions. The signaling framework used here is directed toward the latter in understanding employability.

This study aims to understand the perceptions of private-sector employers regarding the selection of candidates from distance-only higher education institutions. In this paper, the approach to searching for literature is provided first. The second section covers literature on college graduate expectations, employability, and readiness, including specific attributes of business graduates as indicated in the business industry. The third section assesses the literature on recruiter perceptions of distance candidates. The last section synthesizes the major themes from the literature, provides the premise for

the purpose statement, and explores research questions and methods.

Search Approach

The literature review was initiated using scholastic search engines provided through the available university library such as ERIC (ProQuest) and ERIC(EBSCO). Relevant terms were used as inclusive criteria: acceptability of online degrees, business industry, college completion, distance education, employability, employment program, entry-level, higher education, hiring practices, job placement, perception of online degrees, performance-based funding, private sector, student success, and undergraduate. All results were filtered to exclude publications dated beyond the last five years. The criteria that were established allowed for an adequate supply of material to explore literature aligned with college graduate employment and employer perceptions of distance education.

College Graduate Completion and Expectations

Student motivation for attending college or post-secondary courses can vary, and those reasons can impact the likelihood of completion and success (McPartlan et al., 2021; Milovanska-Farrington, 2020; Ovink et al., 2018). Milovanska-Farrington (2020) listed several reasons indicated by participants for attending college. Some of the motivations for attendance included parental pressure, desire to earn higher wages, lack of a job, and to get away from home. Researchers (McPartlan et al., 2021) examined the role of motivation in student selection of online and face-to-face courses at a southwest university in the United States. Over 700 students provided a rationale for their online choice, including flexibility, being forced online due to lack of full face-to-face courses, competing personal responsibilities, the high cost of face-to-face programs, and learning

preferences. The rationale for face-to-face choices included learning preferences such as self-regulation.

In investigating how students become undermatched for schools they consider, Ovink et al. (2018) pointed out factors such as cost and geographic location, among other non-academic preferences in student college selections. Essentially, even when eligible for more selective colleges, over 45% of students were under matched. Approximately 80% of those eligible for very selective colleges were under matched. Essentially, the undermatch was attributed to students opting for schools in closer proximity to home instead of the more selective colleges; to some degree due to the selective colleges being further away, low parental income, or the availability of lower cost options at colleges closer to their homes.

This research demonstrates how the availability of quality higher education can impact graduate earning potential. Suppose part of student selection of schools is based on such circumstances as proximity, convenience, and cost, which drives them to opt out of more selective schools with potentially better workplace outputs. In that case, the mere attendance of an institution has a powerful influence on their future. Critical to this paper is employment following the completion of undergraduate courses in distance-only institutions. This section opens the topic of completion and success as well as factors outlining higher education expectations of students and their inherent employability and readiness for the workplace.

Completion and Success

The shift in lifestyle and society toward advancements in technology, economic challenges, and competitiveness of the nation have driven the workforce to demand

higher-level skills and professional expertise (Gapsalamov et al., 2020; Sá et al., 2021), leaving some adults in the position to maintain updated knowledge and education to stay competitive and competent in areas such as digital literacy (Sá et al., 2021). For example, Sá et al. (2021) pointed out that education in digital competency was not only necessary for the sustainability of society but for established competencies for professional and personal success. Sá et al. conducted a qualitative content analysis on databases with collections of content on digital education and sustainability. With over 200 documents coded and analyzed, the salient themes of digital society and literacy emerged. The results emphasize that the production of services and goods involves digital activities and facets of communication and mobilization. The authors suggest that such competencies are important, critical educational opportunities in and out of school and are necessary to maintain technological equity, inclusion, and readiness in society as well as in the labor market.

In pursuit of education, students and their families incur debt, as illustrated by federal student loans in the United States that soared from just over an estimated \$500 billion to \$1.57 trillion from 2007 to 2020 (Kelchen, 2021). Using a sample of over 1200 public and private nonprofit colleges, Kelchen (2021) examined factors related to Parent Plus and federal student loan debt for families. Racial background, but not the institutional type (public or private) factored into parent and student debt. Also, while tuition-driven colleges showed higher debt for parents and students, the selective colleges that admitted fewer students showed higher debt for parents but not for students. The study showcases how families incur debt for college education year after year. In alignment with those findings, in 2020 and 2021, over \$110 billion went to students each

year via Title IV programs of the Higher Education Act, according to the Fiscal Year Annual Report for Federal Student Aid (2020; 2021).

With so much investment going toward school, Higher education has been challenged by the public and government to show accountability and promise regarding the financial burden on families to sustain and complete a college education (Dougherty et al., 2016; Dougherty & Natow, 2019; Johnson & Stage, 2018). Dougherty et al. (2016) conducted semi-structured interviews with state policymakers, faculty members, and administrators from several universities in Indiana, Ohio, and Tennessee, where leaders implemented a policy for Performance-based funding (PBF). This type of funding was tied to performance improvement and served as an incentive for institutional motivation to change programs and policies to impact effectiveness and student outcomes. Researchers found that while institutions adapted policies and organizational structures that positively impacted student success, some efforts were not helpful to students, such as selective admissions that disproportionately excluded specific population groups.

To further demonstrate the potential negative impact of PBF policies, Li (2019) discovered that such programs had an adverse or unintended effect on underserved students or students from less selective institutions. Li chose five undergraduate colleges from two states, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, where PBF had been practiced in previous years and equity metrics had been incorporated. Li interviewed 52 administrators with questions targeted explicitly at PBF-driven activities, equity metrics, and their underrepresented student population. Findings highlighted changes in academic standards and increases in selection standards, such as raised entry scores that unintentionally put underrepresented students at a disadvantage of either being accepted to the institution or

succeeding. Because PBF is a state-accountable, public-sector policy, it lends itself to variation and independence of interpretation and implementation, as illustrated in a case study conducted by Gándara (2019). Gándara interviewed over 30 higher education and state administrators and attended 15 higher education proceedings to gather information on the evidence they use in their process of PBF policy design. Though Gándara observed commonalities in the kinds of information and evidence sources, there were notable discrepancies in the chosen sources. There was also a varied use of information and evidence during the policy process by different actors at various stages during implementation.

In addition to or to complement PBF policy, there is the use of High-Impact Practices (HIPs) as established and outlined by Kuh (2008) and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). HIPs were engagement practices recommended to ensure better opportunities for undergraduate student preparation and career outcomes. For the benefit of a clear point of view, the HIPs program has the following 10 practices: First Year Seminars and Experiences; Common Intellectual Experiences; Learning Communities; Writing Intensive Courses; Collaborative Assignments and Projects; Undergraduate Research; Diversity/Global Learning; Service Learning, Community-Based Learning; Internships; and Capstone Courses and Projects.

Roland et al. (2020) conducted a study of first-year undergraduate business students at a large traditional business school. Students volunteered for the implemented HIPs program. Roland et al., adapting their model to support implementation, added the element of observed outcomes measured by completion rates of four or more years. They used participation in the HIPs program and those long-term yearly results as their

measures: participation level, graduation status, self-reported gender, student major, and student GPA. The participation level yielded improvement in completion toward graduation and GPA when compared to students who partially participated or not at all. An unintended limitation of the effort was that underrepresented populations of students experienced smaller gains than their white counterparts; due to many variables outlined in the students, including barriers like work that prevented full participation. While improvements were made, not all students completed or graduated, and the program only highlighted an academic gap among groups.

Likewise, Johnson and Stage (2018) investigated avenues of student success and graduation rates through the 10 high-impact practices. The researchers questioned the linkage between those practices and program completion. Johnson and Stage examined 101 four-year colleges in the United States that deployed high-impact practices. They compared those colleges to institutions that engaged in minimal to no high-impact practices. The results of their research revealed that there was no significant difference in student success and completion rates.

Whatever the criteria or assigned curriculum and programs established by an institution of higher education (IHE), literature on PBF and federal policy and other regulations (HEOA, 2008; Federal Register, 2014; Federal Register, 2019; Ward, 2019) indicate that there is focus on their intention and efforts toward student success. The United States 90/10 rule regulates for-profit colleges and universities (FPCU). The rule limits revenue for these institutions to 90 percent from Title IV funds (Ward, 2019). Ward (2019) collected data and variables from college and USDE systems to assess institutional violations of the 90/10 rule and the impact on outcomes (cost of attendance,

number of degrees and certificates awarded, a portion of awards under two years, number of Pell Grant recipients, last year institution is open, and race of students). Institutions that violated the rule showed significant signs of closure following the violation. The rule may have some effect on sifting out predatory institutions or those that cannot function financially without federal funds and are not equipped to provide quality outcomes for the students.

Though there are successes, there is inconclusive consensus on the most effective or consistent approaches to implementing policies and regulations. Nonetheless, when students fund their way through their programs, the question of their employability and readiness to contribute to the labor force comes into play. Their ability to become gainfully employed and pay for their education remains a crucial piece of higher education policy and discourse (Gándara & Jones, 2020). For instance, in their analysis from a review of 14 hours of U.S. congressional hearings to reauthorize the Higher Education Act through markup of the PROSPER Act bill, Gándara and Jones (2020) observed concern and deliberation between legislators for the student population as a whole and specific demographic and socioeconomic groups. Although deliberations ended in disagreements and differentiated levels of concern on some points raised, Gándara and Jones noted that there was a partisan expression of empathy toward student borrowers. The member sentiment following the deliberations included members labeling student borrowers as struggling or trapped. All stakeholders for student success showed the intention for better outcomes and appeared aware of the need for institutional and legislative improvements.

Employability and Readiness

While colleges determine when a student has met the criteria to complete a program, they will have assumptions about their employability or readiness to perform in the labor market (Caballero et al., 2021; Krikorian et al., 2021). In pursuit of examining college graduate perceptions of employability, Caballero et al. (2021) conducted a mixed-methods study that included a literature analysis of employability skills and a quantitative, descriptive analysis of 1203 university students in their senior year. Qualifying attributes that students perceive as supporting their readiness for the labor market were networks, their perceptions of job opportunities, self-confidence in finding a job, and confidence in their university. Caballero et al. (2021) found that graduates applied less importance to skills and knowledge as factors in their employability, pointing out that students may conclude that “they could acquire and improve them as they have done throughout their degree in extracurricular activities” (p. 13).

Additionally, Krikorian et al. (2020) found that of over 90 junior and senior accounting college students surveyed, the work ethic was top among 47 skills/attributes that they perceived as most important for their employability in the U.S. followed by professional attitude, problem-solving, critical thinking, oral communication, and accounting software skills. When students were provided an opportunity to assign a level of priority, there was a mismatch between what they deemed as necessary for employment and how they viewed the progression of these skills throughout the education path at their institution. Also, students saw academic preparation as an attribute with less priority in their program. This personal perception can align to some degree but also conflict with the actual demands of the labor market, where skill gaps and the issue

of employability have been popular topics (Anderson & Tomlinson, 2020; Caballero et al., 2021; Griffiths et al., 2018; McGunagle & Zizka, 2018).

To establish employable skills for unified use by the workforce and education, the U.S. Department of Education (2021) funded the development of the Employability Skills Framework in 2012. This framework includes a breakdown of three groupings: (a) applied knowledge, (b) effective relationships, and (c) workplace skills. Workplace skills include communication skills, resource management, technology use, systems thinking, and information use. There is no point-by-point consensus on what defines employability, but there is some overlap in the research literature with what USDE provided.

Anderson and Tomlinson (2020) conducted semi-structured interviews to examine the labor market expectations of 19 organizations, including those from the public, private, and non-profit sectors in the United Kingdom. Amongst several topics of the inquiry, employers were asked to provide what they considered a top graduate, what they considered degree-related qualifications, what they looked for in hiring candidates, and what they deemed necessary for the transition to employment, along with what they perceived as challenges. Findings showed an inclination for the use of college credentials as a base expectation for employability. However, the actual *stand out* qualities that signaled (Spence, 1973) for readiness and meeting employer expectations turned out to be the following: personal and psychological factors such as resilience, adaptability, confidence, work-related experience, organization fit (networks and connections, behaviors), and an extended back-story such as other experiences and extra-curricular activities. What should be noted here is that employers the majority of these *stand out*

expectations are not immediately observable to the employer upon being screened for hire. If the credentials only showcased academic aptitude, candidates would need to provide other aspects of their learning journey or personal experience elsewhere or through an interview process to ensure the signals were transferred to the employer.

Similarly, McGunagle and Zizka (2018) conducted a case study through interviews and Likert scale rankings of soft skills to assess perceptions and expectations of employers in the United States Airline, Aerospace, and Defense (A&D) industry in receiving STEM college graduates into the workplace. The critical skills identified were communication, team player, and problem-solving. Anecdotally, interviews also revealed desired skills not provided in the initially listed options: real-life applications in class, time management, and active listening. Moreover, Baird and Parayitam (2019) collected data from employers at 50 northeastern U.S. organizations rating skills necessary for graduates prospected for hiring. The highest-rated six skills and competencies were: interpersonal skills and working well with others; critical thinking/problem-solving skills; listening skills; oral/speech communication skills; professionalism; and personal motivation. These researchers shared findings with a common thread of soft and interpersonal skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Engelhart and Mupinga (2020) came to similar conclusions in their survey of over 30 industry advisory committee members in northeastern Ohio. The members were asked to rate the qualities and attributes of new employees. The skills identified by the committed were highly aligned with the U.S. Department of Education's Employability Skills framework that was developed in 2012. The top six skills were: strong work ethic, communication skills (verbal), initiative, problem-solving, detail-oriented, and interpersonal skills (relates well

to others).

Though the USDE Employability Skills framework is an established gauge of skills for comparison, other researchers have tested another framework (Griffiths et al., 2018). Griffiths et al. tested their employability skills maturity framework to explore employability skills for students in the United States. Researchers, citing the lack of clarity in current employability feedback and skills frameworks, leveraged Bloom's Taxonomy to create a leveled skills framework. The research did not call out specific skills. Instead, the study's goal was to call out that lower-order and higher-order skills should be called out and differentiated in employability skills feedback and serve to provide more clarity in skills gaps that employers or universities have recognized or expressed. Researchers also factored in students' self-perception of employability by allowing them to rate themselves and their peers on given competencies.

From the studies covered so far about employability and readiness, it is evident that institutions and researchers have made efforts to develop mechanisms by which employers and IHEs can gauge and align on career pathways. The alignment can also be helpful for students entering the labor market. With their expectation and perspectives on their employability and readiness, having emerging market skills communicated to them and being exposed to applying them would prove beneficial.

Business Education and Industry Expectations. Not in contrast to those general education and employer expectations listed above, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) (2021), with a mission focused on the improvement of business education, set out guidelines for business program accreditation that included a collection of data regarding post-graduate career placement and the ability to demonstrate

that the acquisition of business degrees added value. Standard 4 highlights the need for students to possess skills in current technologies, the importance of experiential learning opportunities for connection with professional experiences, and pedagogy that includes varied delivery modes and class configurations such as online and flipped classes.

Moreover, the National Network of Business and Industry Associations, a network of groups from business and industry sectors, compiled a Common Employability Skills (CES) model (ACT, n.d.). The model identified 20 skills into four categories: personal, people skills, applied knowledge, and workplace skills. The model intended to provide workplace-relevant skills and common terminology for employers, employees, and educators.

Considering there are attempts at setting a framework and standards for business student skills and success, Rhew et al. (2019) explored knowledge and skill gaps between the education and business sectors through content analysis of 200 job advertisements between 2014 and 2017 in the United States. Rhew et al. narrowed findings and identified 41 skills and attributes grouped into 15 competency categories "relevant and valuable to business" (p. 365). To assess curricular priorities, Rhew et al. also conducted a content analysis of 51 AACSB-accredited program learning goals. While the study indicated some alignments, it also highlighted the mismatch between educational practices and employer-expected outcomes. The findings showed employers' top five most frequently mentioned skills and attributes were self and time management, teamwork and relationship building, communication beyond presentations, leadership, and influencing and persuading. In identifying gaps, researchers noted that business education programs put less value on influencing and persuading, leadership, work experience, operational

efficiency, innovation, and teamwork than did employers, with the most significant gap (88 points) being the importance of self and time management. If students are inclined to list institution-important skills and qualifications on their resumes and employers are screening for a distinct set of skills, attributes, and qualifications, how is the selection process fair and equitable?

Employer Perceptions of Distance-Only Candidates

As evidenced by the study above by Baird and Parayitam (2019), employers are essential stakeholders in students' college completion. They are the recipients of the knowledge, skills, and abilities of new talent that can potentially add value to their organizations. Their decisions impact the lives of candidates and shape the conceptual indicator of “success” as they make selections for interviews and build on talent and competencies during employment (Presti et al., 2022). Roberto and Johnson (2019) conducted a qualitative study of employer perceptions of MBA degrees for traditional and online delivery modes. Researchers concluded that although education is considered a signal toward employability, the employer’s perspective of candidates can be impacted by delivery mode. This section explores factors influencing employer perceptions and decisions as they review candidates for employment. The next section starts with a revisit of the concept of information asymmetry from when signaling theory was derived. That concept segues to employer decision-making and sentiment regarding distance education institutions and credentials.

Information Asymmetry and Decision-Making

Koivunen et al. (2019) explored the hiring decision of 21 human resources and headhunting personnel in Finland. The qualitative study involved interviews that included

gathering reactions to scenario-based fiction to assist participants in expressing their current practices and challenges in acquiring talent. Findings revealed employee recruitment in four stages: establishing requirements for a match, identifying and attracting alternatives, comparing alternatives, and selecting the most optimal match. In listing participant experiences and reactions to scenarios, researchers noted that participants expressed the challenge of matching candidates when applicants did not always share pertinent information, stating that their potential was not evident in their names, titles on resumes, or minimal information provided through an HR system. This is an example of information asymmetry, as Spence (1973) described in his signaling theory.

To further illustrate the existence of information asymmetry in the hiring process, Mai (2021) responded to 6,000 job postings for marketing, sales, and administrative assistant roles with fictional freelancer profiles in the Northeast, Midwest, South, and West regions of the United States. Mai followed up this field study with semi-structured interviews with 42 employers to inquire about their perception of freelance candidates. Along with feedback on positive attributes they assign to this type of candidate, employers expressed hesitation and concern with their lack of certainty about the candidate's experience. After all, they were looking for a job, so their *business* must have failed. Employers were also inclined to show concern about training. Beyond the freelancer's school credentials, how could the employer assume that the candidate's previous *project* offered upskilling and training that would benefit their organization? This could be why employers in the field study preferred full-time candidates who may have more firm experience and the opportunities that circumstance affords. With

information asymmetry demonstrated here, the employers are not provided the complete picture of the candidate's capabilities as they are left to their assumptions. In addition, researchers from Texas A&M University conducted a study of recruiters responsible for hiring college graduates of computer science in the United States (Stepanova et al., 2021). Researchers used an eye-tracking device to collect qualitative data as participants reviewed resumes. Participants responded to a prompt to conclude their thoughts on each candidate's position and next hiring steps. Participants indicated deciding signals in their review of resumes, citing that real-world experience, GPA, projects outside of school, and software skills were categories they looked for in their scan to decide on the next steps in the hiring process (i.e., phone screen, send to the manager, job offer, etc.).

Contrary to its name, information asymmetry is not one-sided from the employer's perspective. Both employer and employee candidates are only privy to information provided or made available. It is not only the candidate who sends signals but the employer who also sends signals out to prospective employees (Campion et al., 2017; Campion et al., 2019; Koivunen et al., 2019). Also, the existence of information asymmetry does not have to be a given.

As demonstrated in their research on practice tests in recruitment, Campion et al. (2019) proposed that asymmetry could be reduced. Researchers pose that based on signaling theory, hiring expectancy and applicant decision to apply have increased potential when an organization can minimize asymmetry by easing the difficulty of assessments. Researchers reviewed practice tests and actual tests from applicants. Practice tests were found to have multiple purposes beneficial to employers and applicants. Those with a high practice score had a higher probability of applying to the

organization and scoring high on the actual test. Further, Employers are provided additional information beyond the resume and credentials to assess candidacy and from a potentially better pool.

These studies show that employers have the information provided to them by the candidate to make hiring decisions. In the screening process, before interviews, the information provided on the resume serves as signals and indicators of employability. These signals are presented in the form of higher education credentials, listed skills, and the degree-providing institution – along with its perceived reputation, to name a few. Considering employer expectations and the skill gaps mentioned thus far, the added layer of distance education complicates the selection and hiring dynamic.

Traditional Acceptation. Deming et al. (2016) conducted a field experiment on employer perceptions about business and health credentials acquired through public, for-profit, and online sectors. Researchers submitted demographically configured applications and resumes to vacant entry-level positions from five large labor markets in the United States posted on an online job website. Results relevant to this review indicated higher callbacks for business degree candidates at public institutions versus local for-profit institutions and lower callbacks for candidates from online for-profit institutions. Key to the overall results is the indication by employers of the institution itself as a signaler for resume quality for candidates with a business bachelor's degree—public institutions held in higher regard.

Comparably, a researcher studying the prospects of an online undergraduate degree found comparable results (Lennon, 2021). Lennon (2021) submitted 1800 applications using fictional profiles of candidates with traditional and online bachelor's

degrees from the business, IT, and medical fields. Lennon made a targeted effort to denote, for every fictional profile, earned credentials from an established four-year nonprofit institution that offered multiple delivery modes of instruction, including traditional and online. Candidates with traditional degrees had a higher callback rate (15.9%) than candidates with online degrees (8.3%).

Likewise, Engel (2016) conducted a quantitative comparative study to assess the acceptability and likelihood of recruiting entry-level business accounting professionals by public and private CPA organizations in Kansas, United States. Engel used the education delivery mode and the employment setting as variables in assessing 104 surveys from licensed CPAs participating in the recruiting and hiring process. Employers from public firms were more accepting of candidates from online programs than employers from private firms, although the overall preference leaned toward candidates from traditional institutions. The implication that entry-level business accounting candidates from online institutions are less likely than traditional candidates to be considered for employment by private practice warrants exploration since this is an indication that the setting or sector of the receiver of the signal (institution and delivery mode), can also impact perceptions of employability and adds yet another layer of complexity to the hiring dynamic.

Conditional Acceptation. While the above studies trend toward a preference by employers for candidates from traditional institutions, that does not mean there is an overall reluctance to hire online learners. Online program attendance is accepted on some conditional grounds (Bruan, 2020; Grossman, 2017). In recognizing that CPAs in the U.S. are involved in most entry-level recruiting activities for business accounting professionals, Braun et al. (2020) assessed a survey of 546 CPAs across 49 states (and

D.C.). Respondents indicated that if around 45% of candidates' course credits were earned online, they would perceive a lower evaluation of the candidate (with no specific courses indicated). Taking the results of this first phase, Braun et al. conducted Phase 2 with a sample of 286 respondents showing that 45% of B.S. Accounting course credit was acquired online and asked participants to rate the likelihood of recruiting a candidate: following up with questions regarding other scenarios such as non-accounting or non-business credits taken all online. The employers had a less favorable perception of candidates with all accounting courses online versus those with just all non-accounting and non-business courses online. Additionally, employers in the Braun et al. (2020) study perceived the candidates with all accounting courses online as having inferior soft skills needed for an entry-level position, such as communication and interpersonal skills. Bruan et al. (2020) purport that the lack of employers' access to the institution's preparation of the student for workplace fit may contribute. They also suggest that employers perceived those taking all online courses as weak in soft skills, finding comfort in taking online courses instead of traditional ones. Hence, this exercise illustrates that the levels of the online delivery mode also serve as signals by which employers assess and select candidates.

Grossman and Johnson (2017) also explored perceptions of delivery modes using a survey of 130 participants from Kentucky, finding that employers exceedingly preferred business accounting candidates from traditional programs, followed by an acceptance of candidates from hybrid learning models and indifference to pursuing candidates from fully online programs. Furthermore, Grossman and Johnson also assessed the weight of importance employers put on the institutions and delivery mode or educational

environment. Employer hiring decisions place more importance on the reputation of the candidate's institution than the delivery mode. Also, on the perception of quality or acquired skills needed for the workplace, technical and soft skills (such as oral and written communication), team-building, and interpersonal skills were perceived by employers as lacking for candidates with online education.

Experiential Learning and Internships

Experiential learning can be extrapolated as a theme from the skills and competencies expressed by students and employers in this paper. Some researchers have explored the impacts on employability and outcomes based on student exposure to experiential learning and internships (Burns et al., 2018; Fede et al., 2018; Raymond et al., 2021; Vander et al., 2022). Experiential learning is also part of Standard 4 of the criteria for the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (2021). Standard 4 highlights the need for students to possess skills in current technologies, the importance of experiential learning opportunities for connection with professional experiences, and pedagogy that includes varied delivery modes and class configurations such as online and flipped classes. Vander et al. (2022) surveyed the undergraduate student experience of a Senior Business Consultant Project that paired a marketing capstone course (taught synchronously online) with an introductory business administration course (taught asynchronously online). The project was designed to assign the capstone students as marketing consultants with the directive to advise their clients, the introductory course students, during the marketing portion of the initial class. The two courses were aligned for the marketing activity, so consulting meetings were possible. Among some survey items, 38 capstone students were asked to gauge their self-expansion and competencies in

the business career at two points of the program. The post-project results indicated that overall, the students expressed a positive change in their career competencies, such as teamwork, organization, and relationship-building skills. The client students were also surveyed and found the project applicable to their learning.

Reverse mentoring is another way to implement experiential learning to build students' real-world experience, skills, career competencies, and readiness. Raymond et al. (2021) provided this evidence in their survey of former undergraduate business marketing students who participated in a student-employee mentoring exercise with willing companies. Students were asked to rate how the training prepared them to align with or perform in the capacity of the following competencies: critical thinking/problem solving, teamwork/collaboration, professionalism/ work ethic, and oral/written communications. The students agreed with high ratings, confirming that the experience contributed to career success.

Another example of the efficacy of experiential initiatives was demonstrated by Fede et al. (2018) in a program with no specific major-to-activity homogeneity. Internship credit was offered to undergraduate students representing more than 28 different program majors to participate in a paid work experience sponsored by the university and the Rhode Island Department of Human Services (DHS), through which outreach project roles were made available. Fifty-nine survey respondents answered 46 question items and open-ended questions that assessed measures of success throughout and beyond the program: traditional success markers, transferable skills; civic engagement indicators; societal values and attitudes; and analytic strategy. Regarding transferable skills, 85% of respondents rated their participation in the program as

impacting the improvement of their abilities in empathy and communication. In qualitative responses, 66% frequently mentioned three top progressed skills, with communication being dominant, empathizing with others, and problem-solving.

Burns et al. (2018) evaluated data from a questionnaire administered to 61 senior-level undergraduates in industrial technology and agricultural systems technology. Burns et al. aimed to inquire about student participation in engagement activities for learning. Students rated internship as having the highest impact on various skills: Skills used or applied, daily job duties, workplace culture, applicable course work, and learning about a potential employer. Overall, internships, tours, and guest speakers were perceived as most effective in learning daily job skills. These types of research on experiential learning activities provide the students' perspective and their success based on the experience.

As indicated previously, several researchers (Deming et al., 2016; Engel, 2016; Grossman & Johnson, 2017; Lennon, 2021) who set out to investigate whether there was a difference in the acceptability of business professionals from different education settings found that employers were generally less accepting of candidates with predominantly distance education courses or programs. However, there needs to be more literature on the preferences and perceptions of employers from the private business sector. Of interest in this study is how the employer perceives those experiences. Specifically, how a private sector employer perceives or accepts a student from a distance-only institution or program. Engel (2016) suggested investigating employment settings and different program majors. This study will investigate whether business industry employers from the private sector accept candidates from distance institutions.

Summary

At the onset of this chapter, Signaling Theory by Spence (1973) was used to establish the theoretical framework of this paper. This framework set up the premise of information asymmetry and the signals employers and candidates use during job-seeking and hiring. The signaling concept is woven through the literature to emphasize those things that trigger acceptance or a favorable perspective in reviewing applications, resumes, and other available information on a candidate. Higher education is generally motivated to address challenges in student success and match student-acquired skills with the demands of the ever-growing and demanding labor market.

The studies reviewed herein indicate an attempt to call out and identify those factors that positively benefit students in their pursuit of job placement by delving into the demands of the labor market and workplace expectations. The signaling theory framework can guide the assessment of many results showcased in this study. Overall, the attributes applied to undergraduates as candidates for employment serve as signals of acceptance and employability according to employers.

Recall that stakeholders in student success are students, educational institutions, and employers. In this literature review, I have uncovered salient skills and attributes identified by stakeholders as outlined in Table 1. The columns are divided by skills as determined by an institution of higher education (IHE), student perspectives, or employer perspectives. The related research follows the column titles in the row below them. The left column starts with USDE research and serves in Table 1 as the benchmark by which other skills across each row align with the USDE skills. The note below the table defines the acronyms that are listed in the table.

Table 1*Skills Expectations According to Stakeholders*

Institutional		Students	Employers	
USDE, (2021)	AACSB, (2021)	Caballero et al., (2021); Krikorian et al., (2021)	Anderson & Tomlinson, (2020); Baird & Parayitam, (2019); Engelhart & Mupinga, (2020); McGunagle & Zizka, (2018); Stephanova et al. (2021)	ACT, (n.d.)
Effective relationships (interpersonal skills, personal qualities)		Networks Self-confidence Work ethic Professional attitude	Organization fit Work ethic Listening skills Professionalism Personal motivation Psychological factors Interpersonal skills/works well with others/team player	Personal skills People skills
Applied knowledge (applied academic skills, critical thinking)		Critical thinking Ability to improve skills through extra-curricular activities	Time management Active listening Critical thinking Projects outside of school Problem-solving skills Extended back stories such as experiences and extra-curricular activities	Applied knowledge
Workplace skills (resource management, information use, communication skills, systems thinking)	Importance of experiential learning Connection with professional experiences Skill in current technologies	Perception of opportunities and finding a job Oral/verbal communication Accounting software skills	Software skills Work-related experience Real-life applications in class / Real world experience Oral/Verbal communication Written communication	Workplace skills
	Varied delivery modes and class configurations	Confidence in university	College credentials	

Note. AACSB = Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. ACT = Nonprofit organization, best known for the ACT test. USDE = United States Department of Education.

In the literature, there is an evident reoccurrence of communications skills and experiential learning or work experience as important skills and qualifications from both the higher education and business industry perspectives. In evaluating preferences and perceptions of higher education programs, the literature also reveals a stronger employer preference in the selection of business candidates from traditional education programs over distance education programs. However, there is also consideration or acceptance of candidates for hire who attended a lower level of online courses, such as hybrid, but not full online degrees.

In some cases, the credential or degree itself was a base signaler for employer consideration and it was the institution and/or its reputation that impacted preference for candidates from traditional/public or hybrid over candidates from fully online programs. This means that the achievement and credential can qualify the student, but the credential-granting institution also matters. Some of the rationales for hiring decisions from participants in the literature also pointed to low confidence in communication and interpersonal skills of the online graduate candidates in their readiness to perform in the workplace.

Participants across the literature regarding online perceptions and acceptability also pointed out the need for evidence of the candidates' workplace experience. Therefore, from both an overall employability perspective and considering the educational environment from which candidates come, if there were strong signals for interpersonal and communications skills, along with experiential and real-life work experience, it is possible to see improvement in employer acceptability for the business undergraduate from an online institution as a pursuable candidate.

Based on the research studies presented in this review a qualitative study would best provide the insight needed for my inquiry. Because there is limited literature on the perceptions of the business private sector, that would be the prime target audience for the proposed study. This pursuit is justifiable because information on business private sector hiring practices and preferences can inform students considering professions in the business industry private sector and help distance-only Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) strategize the development or improvement of programs and communication, internship, and outreach efforts in the job market. As covered in this chapter, the potential earnings of college undergraduates following graduation are of interest to students and families, college and university administrators, and policymakers (Dougherty et al., 2016; Dougherty & Natow, 2019; Kelchen, 2021; Johnson & Stage, 2018). Accepting new graduates into the labor market matters when perceptions about their education delivery impact the potential for employment.

The gap found in the literature is that the research lacks insight into the perception and preferences of the private business sector. Specifically, studies that explore employer perception of college students enrolled in online colleges and courses lack focus on whether those schools are distance-only and whether the organizations in the study are public or private. The theoretical framework is based on signaling theory. As posited by Spence (1973), this theory establishes that employers cannot directly observe all qualities nor the productivity of potential candidates and only have access to information provided by the candidate such as education, school attended, work experience, if any, and credentials. These attributes or signals are controlled by the signaler (candidate) through the information they provide to employers.

Research Questions

The purpose of this case study is to understand the perceptions of private-sector employers regarding the selection of candidates with a distance-only higher education degree for job placement in the United States. With qualitative inquiry, researchers do not aim to measure but to understand and find meaning within a phenomenon (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). A qualitative study can allow the researcher to investigate the perspectives, opinions, and experiences of participants to better understand how they interact within the context of that phenomenon (Merriam, 1998). Recall that the phenomenon of interest here is the employability of distance education students in the business private sector. To close the gap in the literature, research will address the limited attention to business private-sector employer opinions and perceptions and focus on acceptance of distance-only education. To address gaps and the intention of the research, a central research question will guide this study:

Central Question

What are the perceptions of business private-sector employers regarding the employability of candidates from distance-only higher education institutions in the United States?

The central question of this study is in direct alignment with the need to explore the specific hiring preferences and perceptions of recruiters, human resource leads, and hiring managers in the business private sector of candidates from distance-only institutions. Subsequent probing questions guided by the central question will help capture an overall preference and focus on the employer selection of candidates. Based on synthesized evidence from the literature that expressed favorable skills and attributes

(signals) of college graduates as candidates for jobs, these probing questions can also aid in calling out any signals that may surface to gain insight into business private-sector employer preferences.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

This qualitative study aimed to understand private-sector employers' perceptions regarding selecting candidates from distance-only higher education institutions for job placement in the United States. Because of the lack of research on employer perceptions of undergraduates from distance-only institutions seeking employment, the findings of this study can be used to understand whether bias exists with business employers as stakeholders of distance education. The level of in-depth understanding and meaning is not possible through quantitative methods. Therefore, quantitative methodology will not be conducted in this study because the data for this study will not be analyzed quantitatively and there were no hypotheses developed. The remainder of this chapter contains the research approach, environment, participants, instruments and tools, design of the research, limitations, and anticipated outcomes.

Qualitative Research Approach

Multiple qualitative methodologies are available for researchers to understand and explore experiences and meaning with participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) listed three notable research designs for qualitative research. This list included grounded theory, ethnographic, and narrative research. Edmonds and Kennedy (2017) posed a similar list of four popular approaches or perspectives to the qualitative method.

The nonexperimental research for this study was conducted using a case study design. Edmonds and Kennedy (2017) list case study design among several qualitative designs such as hermeneutic, descriptive, and explanatory, to name a few, and with the

description of a case study as being used to investigate individuals or phenomena under a certain context. Yin (2018) considers the application of the case study relevant when the research seeks to explain the “how” or “why” of a phenomenon. Case study as a research method allows for flexibility in utilizing a variety of evidence as part of the investigation including interviews, document analysis, observations, and artifacts (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019; Yin, 2018). Qualitative research through case studies also provides an uncontrolled study for insight into private business sector employers’ perspectives in hiring decisions (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). Where participant behavior cannot be controlled or manipulated, as in some experimental research where there is a control group and a treatment group set to observe the behavioral effects of treatment, case studies are ideal for investigators seeking depth of meaning concerning individuals, activities, events, and process (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017). For this study, the “case” involved more than a single individual. The case is a make-up of a group of several individuals (employers) who were interviewed separately on their perspective of distance-only institutions (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019). According to Creswell and Gutterman (2019), research such as this focuses on a single or central phenomenon and calls for the researcher to consider what factors influence or shape that phenomenon.

This study closely followed an approach by Yin (2018) for planning and analyzing private sector business owners’ perceptions of hiring candidates from distance-only institutions. As an investigator of the inquiry for this study, I interacted with participants and gathered data from what I had access to, physically, through discussion, questions, observations, and documentation. From these things, I was able to gather

understanding and find meaning from the phenomenon. Finally, the case study can be leveraged to bring the desired theoretical concept of signaling to light (Yin, 2018).

Therefore, a case study is a proper fit for the pursuit of understanding the perceptions of a group of professionals responsible for hiring students from distance-only institutions of higher education.

This study required one-on-one interviews (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) with human participants to capture the perceptions of employers about candidates. I conducted the one-on-one interviews separately with each individual identified as an employer. Interviews included open-ended questions that were built upon and explored participant assessment of credentials and skills as fit for hiring candidates. The use of interviews is supportive of the case study design.

Upon IRB approval of the research proposal, I began collecting data on business employer perception using several data collection procedures: surveys, interviews, and document analysis. The use of such tools allowed for confirmation and triangulation to form a deeper meaning and understanding of participants' sentiments. I followed Creswell's process using five suggested steps for qualitative data collection: (a) identify participants and sites as well as a sampling strategy, (b) obtain permissions for gaining access to individuals and sites (c) consider types of data that address research questions, (d) designing protocols and instruments, and (e) collect data (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

Participants

The target population for this study was a small pool of business industry employers in the United States. The population included six individuals from private

sector business corporations and small private business owners. When researchers target and select their participants to investigate a central phenomenon, it is considered purposeful sampling (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A nonprobability purposive sampling strategy called criterion sampling (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017; Fink, 2017) was used to recruit employers with the following desired criteria.

1. Currently active employers as defined for this study: A person responsible or tasked with acquiring new workforce talent in an organization. Includes the firm, recruiter, human resource, or manager.
2. Organization of employment is in a business industry under the private sector.
3. Conducts work in the United States.
4. Willing to interview virtually with audio recording.

The employers from the business private sector industry were selected for this study based on personal association, profile reviews, invitations using social media platforms like LinkedIn, and from the research site, Call for Participants (n.d.). The age range of the participants at the time of this study was 25 to 64 years.

Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative research allows flexibility for multiple types of data or information to be collected for addressing research questions including observations, interviews, questionnaires, documents, and audiovisual materials (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). An interview protocol modeled and validated by Hodgman (2017) and based on research questions in this study was used as the primary instrument for data collection. Permission to use the Hodgman interview protocol was granted by the author of the original research

for that study (See Appendix A). The Hodgman interview protocol includes central and main questions and follow-up or probing questions to participants. The investigation for that research through the interview was to explore employer perceptions of For-Profit Higher Education (FPHE) and the employability of business graduates. The key criteria that qualified the interview protocol for this study were that the question outputs fit and aligned with my central research question and objectives (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Yeong et al., 2018).

I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to collect data. For this study, the Hodgman interview protocol was modified toward asking the main questions, with supplemental questions asked as needed for probing, and question items geared specifically toward distance-only Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). Therefore, where FPHE is indicated, the terminology was exchanged with Distance-Only IHE (see Appendix B). Otherwise, the protocol was followed as originally established with confidence that data would be useful in analysis along with other methods to triangulate and establish trustworthiness. The modification of the instrument was to declutter the protocol from the extraneous subset of questions and maintain the high-level questions with the intent to leverage the remaining questions through probing if needed. To ensure the trustworthiness of the modified version, I consulted two credentialed experts in the field of education research.

While interviews were the primary source of data for this study, I collected documentation from business sources such as business websites, business social media presence, and business job postings on job boards and the like when helpful toward addressing the research questions. Data collected this way was gathered into three

sections: company overview, 10 to 15 most frequently listed colleges and universities reported as attended by employees, and internship or entry-level positions posted. This data was influential in confirming the preferences of organizations, not just individuals in employer hiring roles. Information from documents can be valuable to researchers conducting qualitative studies (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Also, documents can be a rich source of information because they are independent of the researcher (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015).

Procedures

The implementation of procedures carried out for data collection and analysis are outlined in the following steps:

1. Submitted study proposal to IRB
2. Obtain IRB approval to conduct research
3. Letter of Participation and Survey
 - a) Leveraged purposeful sample for recruitment - I leveraged the criterion sampling and solicited participants from online and social sources using an interest letter in the form of both an email and a posted letter. The initial target number of participants was between 15 and 20, with a minimum of 10 participants. Since this study is qualitative, there was no desire to investigate cause and effect or comparisons, and generalizations are not paramount to the interpretation of results (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Therefore, a large sample was not necessary for this type of study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Because, through the initial recruitment of

participants, the sample size was lower than expected, I submitted an amendment to IRB to adjust the maximum number of participants to 10, I extended the time for a survey response, and I also used snowball sampling as a method to obtain more participants. Snowball sampling uses a referral method with experienced or existing participants whereby they refer or recommend additional participants for the study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

- b) Letter and Survey – The participation letter included an email address and survey link for those interested in answering preliminary questions as qualifiers and fit for the study. Demographic information such as age, gender, and ethnicity were collected as well as the type of business and role participants serve in their organizations. The survey (see Appendix C) window was extended from 2 weeks to 4 weeks to allow for exposure of postings to social sites and email receipt. This time frame was necessary to garner more participants but posed a risk to the timeline expectation toward completion of the dissertation.

4. Qualify Sample of Participants

- a) Eighty-four people were contacted with a participation letter of interest along with a link to the interest survey. Twelve interested parties responded to the survey.
- b) Survey responses were reviewed to assess participant fit for the study. Because the interview process was to be conducted virtually, no permissions were needed for site access.

- c) The response rate of 14% was calculated for this study. Of the 12 responses, six participants were selected for the study based on criteria for participation.

5. Participant Acceptance and Invitation

- a) Participants who were selected received notification of their acceptance to the study and instructions on the next steps.
- b) Each qualified employer participated in an interview. A convenient time was arranged for each participant to be interviewed.

6. Provided Informed Consent

- a) Participants signed an informed consent form and submitted it according to the timeline provided to them.
- b) Collected signed informed consent forms.

7. Conduct Interviews via Zoom Video Conferencing

- a) The established interview protocol (see Appendix B) was followed with questions geared toward employer perceptions of distance-only Institutions of Higher Education (IHE).
- b) Participants received the interview questions before the interview so that they could prepare for the conversation and establish where they may want to elaborate ahead of time.
- c) The duration of the interviews ranged between 30 minutes to one hour with an average of 40 minutes.
- d) Interviews were conducted virtually using the Zoom web conferencing platform with video and audio recording features. Participants were

provided the opportunity to opt out of video recording and were free to turn their cameras off for an audio-only interview.

8. Document Analysis

- a) In parallel to interviews, this researcher prepared for document analysis by collecting data from public documentation available on business websites and social platforms. I targeted businesses associated with the participants' businesses. Information was gathered information from career pages and job postings.

9. Prepared and Stored Data

- a) Interview recordings and notes were leveraged for review confirmation and coding of responses during analysis.
- b) Data gathered from document sources was used to confirm conclusions drawn from interviews regarding employer preference.
- c) To ensure the security of all digital data collected, the researcher's computer stored digital files, and all data was secured and maintained under password-protected protocols. All non-public hardcopy materials are locked in a file storage container at the researcher's location where the key is stored in a different and undisclosed area. Data will be stored for three years and properly deleted, shredded, and discarded afterward.
- d) Participant identity was protected by providing each participant with a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

10. Shared Interview Transcripts with Participants (Member-Checking)

- a) Participants were provided the opportunity to review transcripts from their interviews for accuracy and desired representation of the essential intent of their responses.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected from interview transcripts, documentation from business web and social media, and business job postings were reviewed for analysis and interpretation. Data analysis followed six steps of analyzing and interpreting qualitative data as outlined by Creswell and Guetterman (2019). Those steps were:

1. Preparing and organizing the data for analysis.
2. Engaging in an initial exploration of the data through the process of coding it.
3. Using the codes to develop themes.
4. Representing the findings through narratives and visuals
5. Interpreting the meaning of the results by reflecting personally on the impact of the findings and on the literature that might inform the findings.
6. Conducting strategies to validate the accuracy of the findings.

The data retrieved was organized in digital form for assessment and manipulation on a computer. Participant responses to interviews were analyzed using MAXQDA software to manipulate the data and manage emerging themes. MAXQDA is a qualitative data analysis software program that allows for the analysis of text as well as imported audio data that can be converted to transcription. Documents and transcripts were loaded into the analysis software and coded using the available software features. MAXQDA was used in subsequent steps using (a) the code statistics feature to chart frequencies of

the desired skills, (b) the memo tool to capture notes and thoughts during analysis, and (c) file organization features to organize documents, transcripts, and data for comparison and alignment of participant interviews and organization practices. Codes established in the analysis tool were applied to transcripts and documents.

Personal reflection included the use of analytic memoing taking account of my subjectivity throughout the study with the intent to separate myself from the influence of the phenomenon of study (Castillo, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This approach, called bracketing (*epoche*), is an important component of a qualitative study (Castillo, 2018, Moustakas; 1994). To do this, I implored analytic memos captured within the data analysis software (Saldaña, 2021) and with the use of reflexivity through journaling any bias identified as well as my authentic reactions while processing the data in this study (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019; Yin, 2018).

Finding patterns is a second cycle of gathering material from the first cycle and categorizing coded data into meaningful units as an initial analytic strategy (Saldaña, 2021). Themes differ from categories in that they can be the result of assessing coding, categories, and one's own reflective or analytic memos during or after initial data analysis (Saldaña, 2021). They are also posed as phrases rather than one-word codes (Saldaña, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

This research did not require institutional permission since the researcher did not conduct the study within an institution or with those participants. The research explored employer perspectives about students from distance-only institutions, therefore the participants were contacted in the realm of their roles as individuals that play a part in

hiring talent into their organizations. While institutional permissions are not needed, general Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board IRB standards were followed in gathering consent and ensuring confidentiality for the participants.

Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained through methods such as storage and protection of participant identities. All records are kept private and locked in an undisclosed location and stored offline. The files associated with the research will remain undisclosed and have password protection and encryption to prevent digital access. Records and participant names were protected and not included in research presentations or publications. Instead, pseudonyms were used in place of the participants' real names to provide anonymity.

IRB standards are placed to protect myself as well as the participants of the study. Ethical standards and research protocol for this study follow Nova Southeastern IRB procedures for approval. Also, the presence of a dissertation chair and committee member(s) provided oversight and feedback for my methods, conduct, and efficacy of the study.

Trustworthiness

As prompted by Creswell & Guetterman (2019), the accuracy of researcher interpretations must be checked during data collection and analysis. In the pursuit of trustworthiness, I address constructs proposed by Guba (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2017) as criteria for conducting a trustworthy qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. In addition, to trustworthiness, these other mechanisms, hailed from other qualitative research recommendations (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) were considered: member-checking, triangulation, auditing, and

quality of data. Through member-checking, participants had the opportunity to review their interviews for accuracy and desired representation of the essential intent of their responses. They were also offered the opportunity to request adjustments. Enhancing the study's credibility, triangulation was employed (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) by cross-verifying participant responses and sentiments, aligning them with themes and codes identified through interviews, as well as analyzing job descriptions, company websites, and overviews.

Potential Research Bias

As an investigator of any inquiry, I interact with participants and gather data from what I have access to, physically, through discussion, questions, and observations. From these things, bracketing and reflective journaling ensured that bias was acknowledged and removed from the influence of analysis. I gathered understanding and remained reflexive by consciously acknowledging my bias, prior experience, knowledge, and assumptions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Yin, 2018). As a doctoral student and learning professional with experience in both the public and private sectors, I have had continued interest and curiosity in distance education and its implications in the workforce. I have conducted my work in the past 20 years both through in-person and virtual means as I engaged with clients and collaborated with and managed teams globally. I have taught in both K-12 and higher education environments with little delivery through distance education methods for a cumulative 8 years.

My investigation into this topic was prompted by my experience in a private corporate setting where I was asked to assist in the recruitment of talent to the organization. I noticed that our recruitment was limited to local universities and not

expanded toward distance education institutions. My curiosity led me to investigate other private corporations and explore what schools they targeted and what schools their employees came from. Because I have a natural curiosity, I have had no assumptions going into this research and used this study to discover and uncover the perspectives of employers. I have journaled my journey of information gathering during the recruitment phase and as I researched documentation for this study. I stayed active in reviewing my reflection journal to be aware of any biased themes that may be present and adjusted to avoid the influence of bias on my interpretation of data or my interaction with participants.

Limitations

Because the design of this research is primarily based on interviews, researcher bias must be recognized and controlled where possible in the interpretation of results. While the chosen approach provides helpful and comprehensive processes for conducting analysis, I, being human, may harbor unconscious bias and opinion toward the subject matter of online education that could potentially skew data interpretation. These biases were explored where possible and called out for reader consideration. It is apparent that qualitative results are not easily generalizable, however, they are informative to the research body at large. To that end, there is also a geographical limitation in generalizing and adapting results since this study was conducted with participants from the United States of America. However, this does afford some insight and commonalities in employer perceptions in the region with potential for comparison to other regions. Another limitation could be that, although participants and their organizations will remain anonymous, they could hesitate and hold back their true perceptions and bias toward

candidates due to the nature of their roles, some of them potentially housed in the Department of Human Resources where the expectation of equal opportunity is influential and monitored.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of business private-sector employers regarding the selection of candidates from distance-only higher education for job placement in the United States. This chapter presents the results and findings derived from the data analysis. It begins by revisiting the research question and approach, followed by an exploration of interviews and document findings toward significant categories and the main theme identified in the study. Finally, it delves into an examination of participant responses and document analysis.

Central Question and Approach

The central question for this case study follows: What are the perceptions of business private-sector employers regarding the employability of candidates from distance-only higher education institutions in the United States? The study closely aligned with the imperative to investigate the distinct hiring preferences and perceptions held by recruiters, human resource leaders, and hiring managers. Through targeted follow-up questions stemming from the central inquiry, the research aimed to encompass a comprehensive understanding of employer preferences and emphasize the criteria for candidate selection. The specific questions employed during interviews are detailed in the Interview Protocol (see Appendix B).

The nonexperimental research employed a case study design, with the *case* extending beyond an individual to encompass a group of several individuals (employers). In this study, each member of the group was interviewed separately to gather their perspectives on distance-only institutions (Creswell & Gutterman, 2019). Six professionals participated in this study. Along with their working roles in the business

private sector, the participants performed duties within the hiring process. Data were collected from six semi-structured interviews and public documentation of their associated companies, including company overviews, colleges attended by company personnel, and sample job postings for internships and entry-level positions.

Participant Demographics

The participant group in this study consisted of six professionals comprising two males and four females, spanning ages 30 to 64. Each person was assigned a pseudonym to establish deidentification. The names shared in this paper are fictional and identities are secured with the researcher. These individuals were employed in the business support and logistics industry, holding various occupational titles related to change management, project management, training and facilitation, business development, and talent management. Their roles involve guiding companies through intricate changes, implementing new systems and processes, nurturing client relationships, and overseeing the financial and operational aspects of the business. Four of the participants have undergraduate or graduate degrees while two participants did not complete college. One participant went to a distance-only school. One participant went to a traditional school that offered an online graduate program. No others indicated that they went to online schools or participated in online degree programs. On average, these participants have accumulated several years of experience in their respective roles and careers at their current organizations.

Interviews

The interviews conducted for this study were guided by a crafted series of interview questions, designed to delve into various aspects of the research focus. During

the subsequent analysis phase, as the interview transcripts were scrutinized, segments conveying perceptions, sentiments, or recurring themes were transformed into in Vivo codes, organized as question codes. In Vivo coding is a qualitative coding technique whereby the actual words of the participants are used as codes (Saldaña, 2021). The coded excerpts were then subjected to a comprehensive review, and a holistic summary of each in Vivo code was encapsulated in a memo. These memos served as condensed repositories of insights, facilitating efficient retrieval and assessment during subsequent cycles of coding and analysis. In Table 2 the question codes are presented alongside a cumulated summary and overarching perceptions provided by the participants.

Employers predominantly associated online programs with traditional schools that offered online courses or programs rather than institutions specifically known for distance-only education. Perceptions of distance-only institutions varied among employers, with some emphasizing the potential for providing high-quality education while others questioned the effectiveness of the institutions. Most felt that the focus of the institutions should be on the quality of experience and the development of key workplace skills. Employer perceptions of candidate credentials from distance-only colleges were influenced by the candidates' experiences during their education. Further, while, overall, employers felt that distance-only institutions cover necessary topics, there is a perceived need for the programs to enhance engagement, incorporate innovative technologies, and address either the operations or work expectations in corporate settings. Part of candidate readiness included the potential to navigate the environment and culture of the organization.

Table 2*Interview Question Topics and Cumulated Summary of Perceptions*

Question Code	Summary of Perceptions
Knowledge of distance institutions	Employers named more traditional schools with online programs than institutions known for being distance-only.
Opinion of DOIHE	Varies. Some believe DOIHEs can provide high quality while others question effectiveness. Focus should be on quality of experience and key skills for the workplace.
Employee candidate credentials	Perception varies depending on the experience candidates are exposed to while in school.
School covering topics	Schools cover necessary topics for the field but need to focus on engagement, innovative technologies, and navigating corporate settings.
Quality of instructors	Varied viewpoints. May have less expectation of academic rigor. The pandemic possibly pushed high-quality instructors to desire online opportunities. Good instructors engage and facilitate interactivity.
Distance meeting mission	May offer candidates with more diverse experiences and backgrounds. Important for DOIHE schools to market to organizations.
Hiring process	Varies. Third-party service to manage volume. Job posts, resume review, screening, standard and behavioral interviews, portfolios, etc.
Assess credentials	Credentials are verified through background checks, portfolios, and review of accreditation. Experience is valued over credentials.
Disadvantage or favor distance students	No clear disadvantage or advantage was identified. However, familiarity with the school or candidate, and employer alumni affiliation with traditional institutions were potential factors.
Distance-only career ready?	Key factors that indicate career readiness are GPA, standardized test scores, work history, and demonstration of skills.
Partner with DOIHE?	Employers are open to partnering with DOIHEs. A benefit to the company would be an increased diversity pipeline to talent.

Note. DOIHE = Distance-Only Institution of Higher Education

Instructor quality was subject to varied viewpoints, with one employer feeling that distance-only instructors may have lower expectations of academic rigor and others assuming a potential shift of high-quality instructors to online opportunities during the pandemic. Some employers believe that distance-only education can offer candidates with diverse experiences and backgrounds, highlighting the importance of effective marketing by these institutions. The hiring processes of the employers in this study exhibit some variance but only to the degree that each organization had situational circumstances that prompted the implementation of different hiring modes. For instance, if Kyle's company posted a position that would get hundreds of responses, a third-party service would be tasked to wrangle candidates based on criteria. Therefore, the processes overall could include third-party services, background checks, portfolio reviews, interviews, and accreditation assessments. In evaluating candidates for open positions, employers valued experience over credentials, and no clear advantage or disadvantage was identified for distance-only students. However, factors such as familiarity with the school, candidate, and employer alumni affiliation to traditional institutions were seen as influencers to perceptions. Also, in assessing candidates entering the workforce, the key indicators of career readiness as perceived by the employer's included GPA, standardized test scores, work history, and demonstrated skills. The interviews with employers revealed frequencies in specific skills when screening candidate resumes or engaging in employment interviews during the hiring process. The top three skills were teamwork and collaboration, computer skills, and interpersonal relationship skills. Those skills were followed by adaptability, problem-solving, presentation skills, verbal communication,

motivation and drive, critical thinking, written communication, working independently, data analytics, and storytelling. Table 3 incorporates items from Table 1, specifically focusing on skill expectations from stakeholders.

Table 3

Skills Expectations According to Stakeholders – Employer Participants

Institutional		Students	Employers	
(USDE, 2021)	(AACSB, 2021)	(Caballero et al., 2021; Krikorian et al., 2021)	(Employers From Current Study-Gaines, 2023)	(ACT, n.d.)
Effective relationships (interpersonal skills, personal qualities)		Networks Self-confidence Work ethic Professional attitude	Professionalism Personal motivation Interpersonal skills / works well with others / team player / adaptability	Personal skills People skills
Applied knowledge (applied academic skills, critical thinking)		Critical thinking Ability to improve skills through extra-curricular activities	Critical thinking Projects outside of school Problem-solving skills Extended back stories such as experiences and extra-curricular activities	Applied knowledge
Workplace skills (resource management, information use, communication skills, systems thinking)	Importance of experiential learning Connection with professional experiences Skill in current technologies	Perception of opportunities and finding a job Oral/Verbal communication Accounting software skills	Data analysis Storytelling skills Software skills Work-related experience Real-life applications in class / Real-world experience Oral/Verbal communication Written communication	Workplace skills
	Varied delivery modes and class configurations	Confidence in university	College credentials from an accredited institution	

Note. AACSB = Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. ACT = Nonprofit organization, best known for the ACT test. USDE = United States Department of Education.

In Table 3, the expectations of employers from this study replace those of employers from previous studies, while retaining all other elements from Table 1, including Institutional, Student, and ACT expectations.

Recall that, from the perspective of employers, the National Network of Business and Industry Associations, a network of groups from business and industry sectors, compiled a Common Employability Skills (CES) model that is represented through ACT (n.d.). The model intended to provide workplace-relevant skills and common terminology for employers, employees, and educators. The business private sector employer expectations in this study fall into the groupings from both ACT (People skills, applied knowledge, and workplace skills) and the USDE (Effective relationships, applied knowledge, and workplace skills) and were aligned with many of the detailed skills found in previous studies with other employers that were mostly identified as public sector or not distinctively identified as from the private sector.

Document Analysis

Social media and organization websites for companies associated with participants were scanned for overviews, college attendance of employees, and job postings for internship and entry-level opportunities. These employment levels were chosen to focus the analysis on potential opportunities for undergraduate candidates. Overviews of five companies associated with participants revealed a range of specialties in application development, training, consulting services in audit, financial advisory, risk management, tax services, clinical development, and research services, consulting in technology, data analytics, governance, AI technologies, and digital consulting.

In the review of social media company profiles, of the schools listed as attended by employees of the companies, the most common U.S. alma maters were institutions

most known as traditional institutions of higher education: a) Georgia Institute of Technology b) Penn State University c) University of North Carolina d) Texas A&M and e) University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Although these schools are not known as distance-only institutions of higher education, Penn State University (World Campus), Texas A&M (Distance Degrees), and Illinois Urbana-Champaign (Illinois Online) offer a selection of undergraduate degree programs fully online for their learners.

Internship and entry-level job qualifications for various positions across different companies associated with participants include a strong academic background, critical thinking ability, effective communication skills, proficiency in relevant technical skills, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, analytical skills, and passion or motivation for growth. Education requirements included a bachelor's or advanced degree in relevant disciplines such as Accounting, Finance, Information Systems, Management Information Systems, Human Resources, Project Management, Supply Chain, or other Business majors. Strong academic credentials with extracurricular activities were also preferred. Some positions also listed acceptance of an equivalent combination of education, training, and experience. I noted the additional factor of extracurricular activities and the acknowledgment of training and experience, along with education or credentials, in the qualifications mentioned in the job descriptions. This information was incorporated into the existing data coding, which had been established from interviews focused on expectations for experience.

Categories

Initial or open coding in data analysis was done by reading the transcripts to identify themes, and then re-reading the transcripts to pick up more themes (Creswell &

Gutterman, 2019). Patterns and recurring concepts derived from codes in the initial data analysis led to three categories: *experience*, *school*, and *skills*. All three categories showed up in interviews as well as document analysis. This illustrates some level of alignment between the participants' perceptions and preferences and what companies generally look for. The school category surfaced in the form of credentials, accreditation, and school notoriety or alumni familiarity. The category of skills frequently occurred anecdotally through questions on the hiring process or as sections on job postings.

Two salient themes emerged from an assessment of the categories in this study: (a) Experience is Important and (b) The Academic Degree And More. The analytic memos captured during the assessment of transcripts were reviewed in addition to categorizing. Analytic memoing is a common part of qualitative analysis activities and occurs alongside the coding process (Saldaña, 2021). The analytic memos were an important part of the data analysis process and served as an aid in making connections between categories.

Theme 1: Experience is Important

The theme of experience is important and permeates through all interviews. It is tied to documentation and job postings that accept experience in conjunction and lieu of credentials. Experience is seen as a crucial factor in making hiring decisions and determining job qualifications. It showed up as a preference in a few forms, including practical experience, internships, previous work experience, or extracurricular activities. Each participant expressed that they were looking for some level of experience even coming straight out of school.

Participant Bev, who is a chief transformation officer in the 45 to 54 age group, commented:

I'm skimming to see if you know how to do the work. If you know how to do the job that I'm asking you to do, or if there is going to be some type of gap...I need to know if you've even had exposure.

Participant Kyle, who is a leader at a training consulting firm in the 35 to 44 age group, replied:

Professional experience is helpful and important because it gives you the perspective of what it's like to work in a professional setting. And so, whether you are coming out of an online program or a traditional program, having some of that experience, I think it is going to be helpful. Honestly, probably I would say, in my opinion, it might be more important for somebody who's going through an online-only program.

Participant Oscar, who is a senior manager at a consulting firm in the 35 to 44 age group, stated:

[For the interview] They would talk a little bit more about their experience. They would delve into their background. You know, what they've learned. I'm sure that's probably where, you know, education might come up. What have they taken away from that as well as any internships or experiences that they've had? And that's mostly to figure out what opportunities are available, what roles are available and will they be able to fill those.

Participant Marly, who consults in various firms and staffs talent, is in the 45 to 54 age group explained:

Well, I still consider them to be educated individuals. I think they have a different experience than traditional institutions would provide, but they are still educated professionals, qualified based on the degrees that they've earned. They put in the work. Hopefully, they have some internship opportunities and things of that nature to get real-world experiences. So, I don't discredit online degrees or online programs.

Theme 2: The Academic Degree And More

The theme of the academic degree more and is a conceptual combination of the experience, skills, and school categories because participants consistently expressed skills and experience as support of academic degrees, with the caveat that the school was properly credentialed.

Participant Haven, in response regarding the perception of candidates with credentials from distance-only schools, stated:

I don't, to me it's less about where they got their degree from, as it is, number one, they had the tenacity to even attain the degree. And number two, do they have the skills and the qualities, you know, that I'm looking for? Because what I'm finding, you know, within my organization, is that the pandemic created some streams of work that we never would have identified before. And so, what you're looking for, you know, is there a degree that will train you know, somebody to do this work? Yes, in that it will give them the basics that they need, give them the foundation that

they need, and then they become, you know, employable and adaptable. I guess it's best to put it this way, can they be adaptable to learn this new stream of work? So, just in my opinion, somebody with a fully online degree is just as valuable as somebody with a Harvard degree.

Participant Bev, in response to the same question of students with degrees from distance-only schools, said:

I don't pay it any mind. I wouldn't pay any mind because I am more hung up on experience. If you have the ability to do the job at hand, more so than the particular college you came from, I think.

Participant Kyle, in discussing hiring procedures and assessing the value of distance-only credentials, shared:

For an online-only program, there's something that indicates that they have some formal training in that [field]. But then, outside of that, again, I think it's going to be a lot more about, you know, maybe the portfolio, or the challenge, the interview process, the references, and the experience. Those are going to weigh more heavily than, you know, a specific credential.

Participant Viola, a program and training consultant in the age group of 35 to 44, provided her opinion of distance-only schools:

I think it's comparable to a traditional setting. I think one of the things that really put that to the test would be the pandemic where everyone was online. Even those who were traditionally in the school. They ended up

having to, at least for a semester or two. So, I still think that it's effective as long as it's planned out strategically.

The themes gathered from the analysis illustrate an overall perception of business private sector employers about the employability of candidates from distance-only institutions. Employers view candidates as employable if they have evidence of experience to accompany their credentials.

Summary

This study sought to understand the perceptions of employers from the business private sector. This chapter on findings from data analysis provided categories and themes associated with the central research question. One salient theme was that experience was a key factor when reviewing employee candidates from distance-only Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). Another theme was that the acquisition of the degree and the surrounding knowledge acquired were complementary to the necessary real-world experience, soft skills, and hard skills for navigating business or corporate environments. These were some of the factors that participants believed supported candidates' ability to be better equipped and ready to start work on projects or fill the gaps needed to conduct existing business functions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

At the beginning of this study, I introduced some historical context around higher education policy regarding the GE rule and definition established by the Department of Education (Federal Register, 2014). As recent as 2022, this rule garnered attention from the Secretary of Education with the intent to ensure employment opportunities for students completing college. With students and families incurring debt from school attendance (Kelchen, 2021), assurances of a return on investment (ROI) through gainful employment are essential. This brings us to a focus on students from distance education institutions of higher education entering the workforce where employers seek qualified candidates to fill positions. In this study, I referred to the employer as someone responsible for acquiring new workforce talent in an organization. This includes the firm, recruiter, human resource, or manager. Employers that participated in this research played a part in the hiring process at their organizations.

The phenomenon of interest here was the employability of distance education students in the business private sector. To close the gap in the literature, research was set to address the limited attention to business private-sector employer opinions and perceptions with a focus on acceptance of distance-only education. Specifically, studies that explored employer perception of college students enrolled in online colleges and courses lacked focus on whether those schools were distance-only and whether the organizations in the study were public or private. With a theoretical framework based on signaling theory (Spence, 1973), the purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the perceptions of private-sector employers regarding the selection of candidates from distance-only higher education for job placement in the United States. This last chapter of

the research provides a discussion of the findings, implications, relevance, and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

I shared findings from interviews and document analysis in the previous chapter. Here, I present an interpretation of the findings associated with the central research question: What are the perceptions of business private-sector employers in the United States regarding the employability of candidates from distance-only higher education institutions?

Two salient themes were extrapolated from the data: (a) experience is important and (b) the academic degree and more. The experience is an important theme that supports perspectives of experience as a critical factor when reviewing employee candidates from distance-only Institutions of Higher Education (IHE). The academic degree and themes endorse the perspective that acquiring the degree and the surrounding knowledge were complementary to the necessary real-world experience, soft skills, and hard skills for navigating business or corporate environments.

Interpretation of Findings

Theme 1: Experience is Important

Experiential Preference. The preferences of employers are toward candidates who have had some level of exposure related to the position; this can be in the form of guidance of a mentor, some type of apprenticeship, a practicum, service experience, extra-curricular activities, or some level of interaction or community of practice with a network and peers. The prominent perception is that for the learner to be “ready” to perform in the workforce, they will need practical and substantive exercise in their

cognitive and social development – proof of this seems to be a necessity, especially for those coming from a distance-only program. Hence, experiential learning has emerged as a desired aspect of a candidate’s profile to substantiate a candidate’s process of learning and provide a context toward acquired experience in their program.

This study’s theoretical framework, anchored in signaling theory (Spencer, 1973), established that signals occur during the job-seeking and hiring process. The concept of signaling can involve those factors that trigger favorable perception while reviewing candidate information. Recall that, in Chapter 2, the literature indicates that a business undergraduate from an online institution can enhance employer acceptability of them as a viable candidate by exhibiting strong signals of interpersonal and communication skills, coupled with practical work experience, both of which contribute to overall employability. Based on the findings of this study, and in review of the top skills and dominant theme of experience that surfaced, the business private sector employers who participated in the interviews mirrored much of the perspectives from previous studies. Employers in this study consistently expressed the preference for experience when considering candidates and the top three skills expected of candidates were teamwork and collaboration, computer skills, and interpersonal relationships skills. The sentiment in this study overall circulates the theme of experiential learning captured in the literature review.

Rooted in situated theory which purports that learning is intertwined with doing, experiential learning moves the learner toward ownership of learning that leads to behavioral change (Merriam, 2018; Morris, 2020). The learner can make an informed decision on how to act on and apply what they know. The setting for learning can be

formal as a concerted effort and element of the college program such as work-based or project-based courses, internships, practicums, training, study abroad, service learning, work-study, etc. (Becker & Bish, 2017; Bruni-Bossio & Delbaere, 2021; Fede, 2018; Kuh, 2008). The setting can also be informal and, the learner participates in communities of practice and cognitive apprenticeships or networking with mentors and leaders (Becker & Bish, 2017; Gross & Rutland, 2017). With more informal opportunities for experiential learning, the physical presence of the instructor is not necessary and does not limit the learner under this concept. However, in both face-to-face and online courses the instructor (and at times classmates) can set up opportunities for discussion and act as a mentor and coach toward the cognitive development of the student, pushing them toward deeper learning and critical thought or expression of thought, and possibly confidence and ownership of knowledge in a particular field. This is especially useful when training or instructing for subject or field-specific outcomes or in applying practical knowledge and skills. The strategy, not the technology, can inform the design of a good program.

Experiential learning holds undeniable significance in the context discussed. As highlighted in Chapter 1, it emerges as a tangible and identifiable element integral to the college experience, playing a pivotal role in facilitating a smooth transition to the labor market. Notably, opportunities such as internships and practicums have the potential to substantially contribute to this transition (Zhou, 2023). Zou evaluated transcript data to explore experiential learning from work-based college courses. The resource found a positive association between work-based course taking and the likelihood of employment following graduation from two-year and four-year programs. The results also revealed a positive association with post-degree earnings among four-year completers.

The Bridge to The Labor Market. In interviews with employers in this study, conversations surrounded the importance of schools establishing relationships with corporations for career services. Participant Bev indicated that she wouldn't know where to start or go to retrieve or target the talent from these schools, so she suggested that schools put their best foot forward to showcase their school, program, and students. The employers in this study indicated that the responsibility for marketing and career planning initiatives lies with the schools, and they should make efforts to be seen by corporations and build an alumni network. When asked about the relationship or use of distance-ed toward their company's mission, all recognized that there would be benefits to a partnership. The conversations emphasized the need for schools to plant their flag and establish end roads with companies for successful career services.

The employer expectation as pointed out earlier in this section, is that candidates combine prior exposure or real-world experience with their credentials. They assume that distance-only institutions are responsible for connecting students to the community and workforce, emphasizing career services. The perception is that not only should they ensure students are prepared to do the job, but they should ensure that business, community, and students are well aware of one another and can leverage what each has to offer for all to benefit. The sentiment of employers in this study is supported by literature.

In thinking of preparation, recall that as part of the discovery in the literature review, Kuh (2008) promoted high-impact practices (HIPs) that engaged college students to ensure student preparation and career outcomes. Further support comes from Stableton and Diamond (2019) who assert that first-year student's exposure to high-impact practices such as career development and exploration, along with stakeholder involvement, sets

them up for success. Chin (2019) also contended that institutions should explore the possibility of incorporating career exploration into their course curricula rather than relying solely on career services offices to bear the complete responsibility for students' career-related outcomes. In thinking of bridging connections, Lee and Patel (2020), explored a business model platform that enabled an ecosystem of stakeholders for workshops, training, mentorship, and more as opportunities part of the career center's network. This included leveraging the experience of stakeholders (teachers, community, peers, field experts, etc.) and engaging employers in mutually beneficial relationships.

Theme 2: The Academic Degree and More

As revealed in the introduction of this paper, there is continued growth in student interest and utilization of online programs and distance-only schools. Employers in this study appeared open to candidates from these institutions, however, they prioritized skills and experience over or in combination with a specific degree or credential.

Open to Distance Credentials. It is possible that events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the commonality of traditional schools having online degree programs supports openness to distance education overall for these participants. The fact that employers from this study recognized local and national schools that offer online programs shows recognition and awareness, even though most couldn't readily (but eventually) name many distance-only schools. In the document analysis, the review of colleges attended by employees of participant organizations were majorly traditional schools, with a few that offered online programs. One of our participants, Viola, expressed her personal journey through the hiring process at her organization and encountered an online application that listed her fully online school as an option which

surprised her. She felt the addition of online schools in the application was acceptance of that mode of learning.

Distance Degree and More. This promising aspect of the journey from student to employee offers a positive outlook for post-graduation employment and underscores the return on investment for both students and their families. However, although employers in this study were open to accepting candidates from distance-only institutions, they expected a certain level of acquired skills, real-world experience, or field exposure to accompany the degree or credential. This was possibly a prominent preference because employers in this study were professionals in business and corporate settings with high expectations of productivity. Simply having the degree was but a step in what was expected to be an all-around process that included built hard and soft skills that aided in better navigation of the work environment.

Implication of Findings

From a college readiness perspective, according to SREB (n.d.) most jobs, specifically two out of three, will necessitate education beyond high school by the year 2025. There are efforts to ensure high school students are ready to attend and survive the college journey through to the completion of a degree. From a career readiness perspective, which is more aligned with this study, the employers are adamant about the need for specific skills and some level of exposure or real-world experience in concert with the degree. Students are adamant about acquiring skills and credentials that ensure employment and financial security.

The findings of this study imply that the perceptions of employers from the business private sector about distance-only education institutions and candidates are

similar to that of employers from various or unspecified sectors in previous studies in the assessment of online schools, programs, and courses. There is a consistent indication that students entering the workforce from distance-only institutions must showcase key signals during the hiring process to trigger their readiness such as key interpersonal and technological skills and experiential learning.

It would be irresponsible for this research to ignore the influence of the pandemic on people warming up and being immersed in the virtual learning world. Rof et al. (2022) explored this very trend where schools and people throughout America shifted to virtual learning, telecommuting, etc. during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers pointed out that schools are in a digital competition to innovate learning experiences. Even though there may be more adoption and awareness of online learning, assurances that students are employable and possess field or practitioner expertise and competency are dependent on certain variables that occur in and out of the classroom. Institutional career services exploration of employment opportunities that cultivate partnerships among distance-only higher education institutions, the community, and the business private sector can yield benefits not only for the university but also for the community, organizations, and students.

Limitations of the Study

While preparing and conducting research for this study there were several obstacles and challenges. While some of those challenges were resolved, one major challenge contributed to some limitations of this study. Recruitment of participants took longer than expected due to no responses to the initial interest survey in the first weeks of recruitment. This impacted (a) the number of participants for the study and (b) the pool of

participants without any human resources representation, even though they were part of the hiring process and made hiring decisions. There were compromises in the normal grooming of transcripts etc. where the focus of some corrections (i.e., repeated, or misspelled words) was solely on those passages that were planned to be excerpted into the research paper. The absence of human resource personnel as participants limited the insight into company policy on hiring practices. The research was left to rely on anecdotal personal accounts from participants on (a) how the participant receives, reviews, and interviews candidates that they review as a part of their organization's hiring process and (b) how the participant either perceives the hiring process from their perspective or how they experienced the process as a candidate of employ at their respective organizations.

Recommendations for Future Research

Now that more traditional schools are offering degrees and programs online, the sprawl of these conventional institutions into this space serves as competition and saturation in the distance learning market, so to speak, to the point that, as we see in this study, people don't have a distinction between a traditional school's online program and a program from a popular distance-only IHE (i.e. Walden University, University of Phoenix, Capella, etc.). While traditional schools and distance-only schools compete for enrollment seats, online learning platforms like Coursera have entered the scene with the offer of something both employers from this study and students desire; targeted, marketable skills for the real world with no real value or emphasis on school brand vs profitable skills (Diaz-Infante et al., 2022). This highlights the findings in this study regarding the theme of the academic degree and more. Employers in this study valued

skills and experience over school or credentials and suggested a combination. Diaz-Ifante et al. indicated that students valued the opportunity to learn high-demand skills over a program or institution's brand.

As a result, one research recommendation would be the comparison of key avenues of higher education and their ability to provide opportunities for gainful employment to degree or skill seekers: traditional institutions, for-profit higher education, distance-only institutions, and online platforms. Another research recommendation would be to explore the role of career service in experiential learning for distance-only students. Lastly, research similar to this study with a larger sample group would be of benefit to the higher education landscape to garner more input from a vast number of business private sector employers.

Conclusion

This study was not conducted with the intent to compare distance-only schools with traditional schools. Interviews were targeted to get perspectives on distance-only schools and the talent pool generated from them. Participants derived comparisons on their own as they elaborated on points made and referenced the juxtaposition of traditional versus distance-only institutions. The focus was on their perceptions of the employability of employee candidates from distance-only institutions. It was important to distinguish the industry and sector from which the employers came as well as the core delivery format of the institutions. Therein may lie the significance of the study. The findings from the research can inform institutional and business program strategies for administrators of distance-only institutions.

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College, Columbia University

Appendix A
Interview Protocol Permission

Re: Interview Instrument Request from NSU Student

Matthew <hodgman80@hotmail.com>

Wed 4/6/2022 1:09 AM

To: Tanacha Gaines <tg1116@mynsu.nova.edu>

NSU Security WARNING: This is an external email. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know that the content is safe.

Tanacha,

Thanks for your interest in my work. Great dissertation topic, important work here. Please feel free to make use of the appendix items in my dissertation to assist your data collection process. I am traveling for some time and unable to provide you with the additional documents you requested but please feel free to include the protocol in your dissertation appendix. I'd love to read your dissertation upon completion.

Best wishes,
MRH



Tanacha Gaines

Hello Matthew, I wanted to touch base again as a reminder that I am leveraging/adapting your interview inst...

Fri 4/21/2023 7:12 PM



Matthew <hodgman80@hotmail.com>

To: ○ Tanacha Gaines



Fri 4/21/2023 7:38 PM

NSU Security WARNING: This is an external email. Do not click links or open attachments unless you recognize the sender and know that the content is safe.

Hi Tanacha,

I hope all is well. Sure, please utilize the more high-level questions to your liking. Best wishes on your work.

MRH

Appendix B

Adapted Interview Protocol and Question Instrument

Adapted Interview Protocol and Question Instrument*

Introduction

Explanation-1: Explanation of study, confidentiality procedures, and securing statement of consent to record. [Vocally state the following to the participant: Please do not divulge your name or any other identifying information during the recorded interview. In the event that you do provide such information, the researcher will remove this data prior to data analysis.]

Background Questions

- 1) Background-1: What is your current occupational title? What are your main responsibilities within the organization?
- 2) Background-2: Please share your educational training, including your postsecondary education and the institutions from which you received these degrees.
- 3) Background-3: How long have you been in your current position? What previous positions have you held?
- 4) Background-4: What Distance Education IHEs are in the United States? Can you please share the names of some of them?

Quality

- 5) Quality-1: What is your general opinion of the quality of Distance-Only IHEs?
 - a) What are your perceptions of employees with Distance-Only IHEs credentials?
- 6) Quality-2: What is your opinion of the academic quality at Distance-Only IHEs?
 - a) To what degree does the curriculum at Distance-Only IHEs sufficiently cover topics and skills relevant to business?
- 7) Quality-3: What is your opinion of the instructor quality at Distance-Only IHEs?
- 8) Quality-4: How do you view the future role of Distance-Only IHE in meeting your organization's mission?

Hiring Procedures

- 9) Hiring-1: What are the main stages or steps involved in the hiring process in your organization?
 - a) Please briefly walk me through the stages from identifying the need for a position through the hiring of a new employee. [Probes: ask about important hiring processes steps such as recruitment and interviewing]
- 10) Hiring-2: How are job applicants' educational credentials assessed within the hiring process in your organization?

- 11) Hiring-3: During the hiring process, how do you approach the subject of job applicants' completed postsecondary education coursework? [Probes: what written or unwritten policies exist surrounding the hiring and interviewing of Distance-Only IHE graduates? Are there hiring practices at your organization that deviate from practices stated in the policy manual in ways that may favor or disadvantage graduates from Distance-Only IHEs?]

Employability

- 12) Employability-1: What hiring procedures and practices are in place at your institution in terms of assessing the value of Distance-Only IHE credentials during the hiring process?
- 13) Employability-2: How do you perceive the career readiness of Distance-Only IHE baccalaureate business graduates?
- a) What factors contribute to your assessment of Distance-Only IHE baccalaureate business graduates' career readiness?
 - b) What are your perceptions of the work-related skills possessed by Distance-Only IHE baccalaureate business graduates? [Probes: hard v. soft skill sets/soft skills include teamwork skills, work ethic, and problem-solving skills and hard skills include computer skills, data analysis skills, and foreign language skills]
 - c) To what degree or in what capacities would you be willing to partner with Distance-Only IHEs to increase the career readiness of Distance-Only IHE baccalaureate business graduates?

*Permission granted (Hodgman, 2017)

Appendix C
Interest Survey

Participation Interest Survey Questions

1. Name
2. Email
3. Phone (optional)
4. Age
5. Gender
6. City and State
7. Job Title
8. Industry
9. Are you interested in participating in an audio-recorded interview lasting 30mins-1hr over a virtual conference application (such as Zoom, Skype, or Teams)?
10. Do you know the researcher, Tanacha Gaines, personally?
11. Do you work in the private business sector? (The private sector consists of companies that primarily seek to generate profit. (McKinsey, Bloomberg, Deloitte, Uline, and PwC are examples)
12. Are you currently responsible for or tasked with acquiring new workforce talent in your organization or part of the hiring process? (i.e., human resource professional, hiring manager, recruiter, people manager)
13. Do you physically work or conduct your tasks within the United States of America?